

# THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION IN COMPETITION AND CONFLICT

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**Abstract :** The society is made up of individuals and mirrored by the relations between them. The society is not a simple sum of people, but a network of connections among them, the resources they use and the results of these interactions. The social interaction is based on social exchange. The object of the individuals' exchange can be: information, material objects, activities, psychological support, emotional feelings etc. When people share information or show support they are actually communicating. Therefore people need to communicate in order not to feel isolated. Transmitting and receiving information makes them know, analyze, make decisions and, especially, feel accepted. The quality of interpersonal communication is given by the way individuals are able to code and decode the messages they send and receive. Sometimes, when there's a misinterpretation of a message, the natural cooperation between individuals turns into competition. The competition is conducted according to certain rules and competitors must comply. The reason is that the rules justify the respect for certain values which are superior to the interests of those who compete. But when competition gets rough it can easily turn into conflict. In this particularly case, using communication can solve the conflict.

**Key words:** interpersonal relationships; communication; competition; conflict; incongruity

## 1. Interpersonal Relations

Interpersonal relationships arise in the context of interaction between individuals and are based on common goals and interests. Therefore, society is made up of individuals and mirrored by the relations among them. Society is not a simple sum of people, but a network of connections among them, the resources they use and the results of these interactions. Interpersonal relationships are, in fact, "those types of interactions between individuals which lead to an exchange, an "understanding" between two or more people, a "transaction", as American psychologists call it. The object of the individuals' exchange can be: information, material objects, activities, psychological support, emotional feelings etc. "Depending on the duration, intensity and the

specificity of the interaction, interpersonal relationships engage people in varying degrees”<sup>1</sup>.

Interpersonal relationships can be random and fleeting, and therefore they have a secondary role in developing social life of society. This category includes interactions between supporters in sports competitions. But interpersonal relationships can also be sustainable. The latter are carried out according to certain formal or informal rules, comply with certain codes and customs that make individuals assume certain statuses and roles. The individuals also consent on the behavior admitted and not admitted.

The fact is that social interaction arising in interpersonal relationships is the fundamental way of existence and functioning of individuals and social groups. And, essentially, is a way of existence for the society itself. The influence of interpersonal relationships and society is not unidirectional, the two shaping each other. Interpersonal relationships determine the way society works, but the society, in turn, has a word to say in shaping individuals who interact with each other. In this matter, interpersonal relationships are divided into two categories<sup>2</sup>:

1. Interpersonal relationships based on modifying the characteristics of the interaction partners. It is about the processes of mutual adaptation, assimilation of other characteristics, but also the stratification in which every social subject involved acquires a certain set of roles and statuses on which he occupies a particular place in the hierarchy of social partners.

2. Interpersonal relationships in which the partners’ characteristics suffer a minimal alteration. Here are considered the relations of cooperation, competition and conflict, the last two being the two relationships referred in this material.

What is noteworthy in interpersonal relationships’ dynamics is that they are always the subject to possible changes in strategy. In consequence, switching from one to another type of personal relationship becomes a natural thing. If we consider, for example, competition and conflict, it was found that when the first way of relating turns out not to be profitable, social actors being unable to reach their goals, they can move on to the second way of interaction. Thus, the transition from cooperation to competition and then to conflict is more than natural.

And the more interesting fact is that, despite appearances and prejudices, all these forms of relationships have both positive and negative aspects. What should not be ignored, however, is the fact that for individuals to enjoy the

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<sup>1</sup> (Zamfir, 1997: 184)

<sup>2</sup> (Milcu, 2005 a: 29)

beneficial effects of these relationships, "the social environment subordinates cooperation, competition and conflict to a set of rules and conventions, institutionalizing, to a certain extent, these interpersonal relationships, keeping them under control, sanctioning the unwanted ones and gratifying the desired ones<sup>1</sup>".

## 2. Interpersonal Communication

From a communicational perspective, the interaction processes are those forms of communication through which the social actors swipe information. "A communicative act, either verbal or nonverbal, once perceived by the other, will affect his perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and motivations. It is an axiomatic fact that social influence and communication processes are closely related"<sup>2</sup>.

In simple words, communication is the process of information transmission (this category comprising ideas, opinions, moods, emotions) from a social entity (which may be a social actor, group or community) to another social entity through what we call "the message". From the Latin "comunico" (action of achieving or sharing something), communication involves the transmission of messages (generally speaking) both verbal (by spoken or written words) and nonverbal (gestures, attitudes). The way it is interpreted, transmission of information (by word or not) depends on how the social interaction evolves. The role of communication emerges from the functions it performs within relationships:

1. The function of transmission. The messages that contain certain information are transmitted by language. It can be an informational content (ideas, descriptions, concepts) or an emotional one (affective transmission of feelings).

2. Cognitive function. This function expresses the relationship between communication and thinking. Language is the tool of thought because its operations are conducted through verbal means

3. The regulatory function. Impulses can be controlled through internal language. Also, a particular form of manifestation of this function is persuasion, which seeks to change the behavior of others, inducing emotional states, beliefs, ideas.

4. Emotional – expressive function. By language and especially through its specific means (chosen words, rhythm, and intonation) the transmitter reveals his emotional states.

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<sup>1</sup> (Milcu, 2005 b: 32)

<sup>2</sup> (Berger; Burgoon, 1995: 7)

5. Symbolic function. Verbal symbol replaces objects, phenomena. This feature is most common in literary works, especially poetry.

6. Cathartic function. By speaking, individuals are downloading their inner tensions in discussions with others.

7. Playful function. This is done through games and word associations.

8. Dialectic function. Thanks to this feature, through language, one individual formulates and resolves conflicts and problematic situations.

Therefore people need to communicate in order not to feel isolated. Transmitting and receiving information makes them know, analyze, make decisions and, especially, feel accepted. In connection with the latter, accepting and finding an identity in the community provides mental and emotional balance for individuals. Discussing with others, confession, self-disclosure "maintain the mental health of the individual. Self-disclosure helps the individuals express themselves, therefore it is an expressive function. It also has a self-clarification function. We confide to others to clarify our own thoughts and feelings"<sup>1</sup>.

The interesting and challenging part of interpersonal communication is given by the way individuals encode and decode messages. Regarding the coding, the more stable the relationship is, the easier communication becomes. Individuals who know each other well have common jokes ( "inside jokes"), similar ways of explaining various situations. Instead, individuals who relate spontaneously and accidentally may find it difficult to codify certain messages. Wishing to be understood and to please the other, individuals can send unclear, incomplete or even erroneous messages. Decoding messages follow the same pattern. Two people who know each other better will understand more easily an, either verbal or nonverbal, exchange of messages. Instead, individuals who relate by accident may have difficulty understanding what the other wanted to convey. Therefore, "communication is based on message exchanges, creating an understandable and an exchange of meanings between two individuals"<sup>2</sup>.

Depending on a variety of features related to the cognitive-emotional and previous experience perspective, each individual has a personal way of interpreting the messages. Consequently, each individual reacts differently to the message. Here's the place where the discussion related to feedback comes along. The receiver's reaction (the one who receives the message) to the information sent by the transmitter (the one who sends the message) gives rhythm and direction to one interpersonal relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> (Boncu, 2005: 75-76)

<sup>2</sup> (Hartley, 1999: 24)

Jean Claude Abric identifies four functions<sup>1</sup> that feed-back should comply in order to ensure an effective communication that has minimal chances to lead with conflict:

1. The correct understanding of the message.
2. Flexibility in decoding. Otherwise, a precipitate feedback may jeopardize the relationship.
3. Ensuring stability and security for individuals who are in an interpersonal relationship.
4. Avoiding preconceptions, overreacted susceptibility and dubious thoughts about the message.

In communication, people who reunite and strengthen their personal relationships will take into account their previous information exchange. Therefore, communication is a process of corroborating information. It is important that individuals have access to this corroboration because, in time, it will help to outline an accurate profile for those involved in a stable relationship. Based on this profile, the individuals will know what and how to communicate.

In social interaction, communication mediates psychological states of social actors. Therefore, disruption of communication determines the disruption of interpersonal relationships. In conditions of poor communication, knowledge of others becomes impossible and determinates a state of disbelief. In these circumstances, each social actor thinks that they need to manage the situation on their own so the cooperative relationship ends and passes to a false competition or even conflict level.

### **3. Theories about competition**

The competition can be defined as a "form of interaction between two or more social actors, consisting in their efforts to achieve a goal (to get a benefit) which is indivisible or believed as such"<sup>2</sup>. It is considered that individuals competing are oriented more towards the finality of the action than to the behavior of rivals. Or, as the Morton Deutsch notes, a competition is an opposition of purposes (or, rather, a simultaneously search for the same purpose) which, at one point, make one's probability to win to be higher, while the probability that the other party will gain to become smaller.

The competition is conducted according to certain rules and competitors must comply. The reason is that the rules justify the respect for certain values

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<sup>1</sup> (Abric, 2002: 32)

<sup>2</sup> (Zamfir; Vlăsceanu, 1993: 120)

which are superior to the interests of those who compete. In other words, competing is not just about winning and doing everything for it. Competition entails rules that make the whole game to be a fair one and finality to reflect an objective ranking of competitors.

Psychosocially speaking, there are some factors and conditions<sup>1</sup> that make two or more entities engage in a competition:

1. Motivation shows that each participant involved is oriented towards its goal without being interested in the behavior of the adversary if that behavior doesn't bother him.

2. Attitudinal plan which involves the position that each of the competitors has during competition, most times this is a position that discourages the opponent and emphasizes its own potential.

3. Mutual perception is the way competitors see each other. However, the mutual interests of the competitors make social perception less objective. They tend to accentuate the differences and diminish the similarities. Also, the attention is all focused on personal interest rather than on the others' interests.

4. Power is the maximum possible influence of a social actor over another. This concerns both the induced force and the resistance force. In order to have a positive power the induced force has to be higher than the resistance power.

5. Emotions drawn into competition can determine the entire course of the competition. Depending on how the emotions are controlled, competitors can win or, conversely, may lose.

6. Aggression can also be present when the evolutions and the chances of winning are comparative. It is not a case of physical or verbal aggression but rather the effort involved in tense situations.

#### **4. Transforming competition into conflict**

When each of the above factors takes hold, it can distort competition and it could turn into conflict. Conflict is defined as "a fight between values and statuses claims, power and resources, the aim being to neutralize opponents, injure or eliminate rivals"<sup>2</sup>.

It is not imperative that a conflict should be the exclusively result of a failed competition. There are situations where conflict erupts, surpassing the competition stage, which, in those cases, is only a fake. But most often, the

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<sup>1</sup> (Milcu, 2005 c: 45)

<sup>2</sup> (Cosser, 1967: 8)

conflict is preceding the competition and, therefore, depends heavily on how the forces were conducted during the competition in order to know how conflict will take place.

For a long time it was considered that there was no difference between conflict and competition and the terms were, therefore, synonymous. "Like the competition, the conflict involves hoarding of rare resources. From a linguistically point of view, it is absolutely right to say that groups with conflicting interests are competing for power"<sup>1</sup>. However, the literature of more recent date makes a distinction between the two concepts. There is a definitive break between competition and conflict. So one cannot say it is fair to equate the two terms. Some sociologists believe that the distinction between competition and conflict is visible through the concept of power.

Seen as a party's ability to influence and / or control the conduct of the other party, power has a small role in the competition, while it is very evident in the conflict. Also, affection and motivation shows that if, in competition, prevails the rather positive emotions and active orientation towards goals, in the case of conflict, emotions become negative, increase frustration and lose goals' intensity. It is worth mentioning that during the competition goals are well established and each entity engages in a race on their own. Conversely, if conflict arises a factor called divergent interests that move the focus from the goals to adjacent issues that are sometimes real and sometimes only imagined. From this we can conclude that, while the competition is a real fact, in conflict the purpose may be missing or be a simple matter of subjective thinking. Therefore, the conflict is not always a rational one, dictated by well-established purposes but can also be an emotional one that involves affective influences. Depending on the starting base, the expectations the involved subjects have, conflicts can be<sup>2</sup>:

1. True conflict is a form of real and objective conflict in which all parties perceive the situation correctly. This kind of conflict is difficult to be mediated because both sides want to take advantage at the same time.

2. Contingent conflict arises when none of the parties to the conflict sees or accepts other than the momentary gains that were the original reason of conflict.

3. Shifted conflict is that conflict in which the attention of the parties involved moves from initial conflict situation to other matters not related to it.

4. Award conflict arises when the parties are set incorrectly.

5. Latent conflict is that conflict does not occur but is repressed.

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<sup>1</sup> (Dahrendorf, 1959: 209)

<sup>2</sup> (Deutsch, 1973: 11-15)

6. False conflict refers to the appearance of a conflict when there is a real basis for such a situation. Very often, a false conflict reveals emotions and attitudes that end up being a base of a true conflict.

The issue of conflict resolution must start from a new and perhaps unique approach. Namely, we could start by considering the conflict as a normal social phenomenon or even a positive one. Conflict is, we must admit, an unavoidable fact in a society operating in a free and fair manner. Why is it inevitable? Because people are different entities who bring their cognitive and emotional particularities within the communities they belong to and, there, they meet with the particularities of other individuals. In some cases, this meeting creates a conflict. This is not necessarily bad. A conflict, as long as it is being kept within the limits of physical and mental safety of those involved, may raise to creative disputes, ideological repositioning and general attitude changes. Therefore, the conflict is a factor of progress. J.S. Bruner says that differences of opinion or incongruity lead individuals to actively engage in conflict resolution. He believes that, in order to become positive, a conflict must provide a volume of incongruity large enough to attract the interest, but small enough to avoid frustrations. Or, once the conflict is surmounted, it occurs a state of contentment related to conflict management skills and optimized interaction with others.

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