Social/Interpersonal Context
SPHSC 308 Winter 2010

Context
- Situational
- Social/Interpersonal
- Cultural

Professor Olswang
Social/Interpersonal Context

• The manner in which interpersonal relationships influence communication
  – Structure of relationship
    • Family, friends, professional, etc.
  – Nature of the relationship
    • Roles of the individuals in the relationship
      – Oldest, youngest, clown, responsible one etc.
      – How you regard each other
    • Personality type
      – Shy, outgoing, talkative, etc.

Why is this important?

• The structure of the relationship will impact the way people communicate. Examples?
• The nature of the relationship will impact the way people communicate. Examples?
Social/Interpersonal Context

Two main topics:
• **Systems Theory** – our framework for examining social context (i.e., relationships)
• **Phenomenology – Interviewing** – our methodology for examining social context

Systems Theory

• A framework by which one can analyze and/or describe any group of “objects” that work in concert to produce some result.
  – This could be a single organism, any organization, or any electro-mechanical or informational artifact.
A system has interrelated parts. If parts are related in an orderly way, the system is said to be highly organized or predictable.

Usually thought of as a group of people (e.g., nuclear family, extended family, roommates)
- Systems could apply across species (e.g., ants)

Views systems as purposeful and goal-directed
- Purposeful--remaining viable--self-regulating, self-directing, self-organizing
- Goal Directed--maybe not logical or rational, but discernible and based on internal rules
• Understanding a system will lead to insight about communication
• So how do we analyze systems?

Systems – What’s yours? What’s theirs?

• Writing Assignment #1
• In-class example:
Systems Defining Properties

How do you know a system is a system?
Five Defining Properties
• Organization
• Mutual Causality
• Constancy
• Spatiality
• Boundary

Defining Properties

Organization-defined by
• Participants
  – functional roles
  – psychological/emotional roles
• Goals shaped by values, beliefs
• Rules defined by how participants behave in order to implement goals

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• Systems and Subsystems
Organization - Simpsons

- Participants: Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, Maggie
  - system/subsystem
  - functional roles
  - psychological/emotional roles

- Goals:
- Rules:

Defining Properties

- Mutual Causality-interdependence of parts*: events that happen to one part of a system influence all parts, directly or indirectly

*parts refers to people, events, etc.
Mutual Causality - Simpsons

Constancy

- Systems endure even though they may experience change
Spatiality

- Systems are concrete phenomena rather than abstractions
- They take up physical space and can be observed
  - family of origin
  - nuclear family

Constancy and Spatiality - Simpsons
Boundaries

- Perimeter of the system
- Sets off the system from other systems and from environment
- **Individual has boundaries**
  - Consider your boundaries
- **Systems have boundaries**
  - Consider the boundaries of your family system

Boundaries

- Systems' boundaries should be viewed along a continuum:
  - Rigid = Completely Closed System - Accepts No Input - Gives No Output
  - Diffuse = Completely Open System - Accepts and Gives All
- **Ends of Continuum**
  - Dysfunctional
  - Middle of Continuum -- Healthy
Boundaries

- Boundaries -- Closed to Open ultimately determine whether a system takes in new information, lets out information.
- Boundaries -- Closed to Open ultimately determines nature of systems.

Open Systems and Healthy Boundaries

- Healthy Boundaries-protect without isolating, contain without imprisoning, and preserve identity while permitting external connections.
Besides the five defining properties – other concepts to consider:

- Communication
- Hierarchical structure
- Change
Communication

• Within the system
• Outside the system
• Consider openness and intensity (handout)

Hierarchical Structure
( Organization & Constraints)

Organization
• Systems are arranged in order of inclusiveness (or ranks) of organization
• Higher levels include and are more complex than lower levels
• Applies to different systems
• Applies to systems and their subsystems
(See handout)
Hierarchical Structure (Organization & Constraints)

Constraints
• The hierarchical structure by definition creates possibilities of constraints.
• Systems above influence (may constrain) systems below.
Example:

Change in Systems

• **Desire for homeostasis**
• Initiation of change
  – Emergent properties
    • individual vs. systems coupling
• Source of change
  – Normative - life cycle
    (time)/developmental vs. crises
• Type of change
  – First vs. second order
Initiation of Change: Emergent Properties

• Cultural and social phenomena that emerge from the interactions and exchanges of the members of a social system AND exchanges between systems
• (e.g., group roles, goals, rules, vocabularies, and viewpoints, etc.)
  – Example:

Source of Change: Normative vs. Crises

• Normative – change that is expected as one develops – life changes that typically occur
  – (e.g., walking, talking...how do these change a system?)
• Crises – change that is unexpected
  – (e.g., major illness...how might this change a system?)
Type of Change: First vs. Second Order

- First Order---behavioral---impact on the individual
  - (e.g., oldest child goes off to college – middle child is left at home)
- Second Order---analog---impact on the system
  - (e.g., shift in roles-older child now more independent, middle child now in role of responsibility)

Change Requires

- Adaptation-process
- Adjustment-outcome
- Energy
Writing Assignment #1
Consider Your System

• Who are the members of your system?
• What are your roles in your system (functional and psychological/emotional)?
• What are the goals of your system?
• What are the boundaries of your system? Are they open?

Consider Your System

• What is the communication like between members of your system? (consider intensity of involvement)
• What other systems influence your system?
Examining Social Context

• Recall – Qualitative (vs. quantitative) approach
  – Human behavior is viewed in context – understanding behavior is based on how humans interact and how context influences the interaction

Qualitative Tools and Methods

• **Observation** – Field Notes (primary method of Ethnography) – situational context
• **Interviews** (primary method of Phenomenology) – social context
  – Why would interviewing be a better methodology for examining social context than observation?
  – Does observation have a place?
Reading - Phenomenology

• Yorkston, Klasner, & Swanson (2001), Communication in context: A qualitative study of the experiences of individuals with Multiple Schlerosis

This article utilizes the elements of phenomenology to document the insider's view of having MS

Yorkston, Klasner & Swanson
Discussion Questions

• What was the purpose of the study?
• What was the methodology?
• Why was this a good methodology?
• What were the procedures for collecting and analyzing data?
• What did you learn about MS?
Phenomenologic Interview

- Opportunity to learn about person’s beliefs, values, expectations, that goes beyond observation
- Insider’s view of a phenomenon
- Emphasizes the human experience and meaning

Interview

(A technique commonly applied to Phenomenology)

Start Open-ended—Become More Specific

- “Grand Tour” questions – open ended questions
  - What is it like to live with Huntington’s Disease?
- Follow-up Questions – discrete questions
  - Tell me about your family.
  - How have your relationships changed?
Interview

• Transcribe what is said—objective
  – Note: the order of the questions allows you to follow the interviewee’s perspective (insider’s perspective) – starting with his/her own words. As you become discrete in your questioning, your perspective emerges

• Interpret the comments-look for themes (similar to ethnography)

• Reach conclusions about the phenomenon

Interview

• Interview may be the only way of gathering certain types of information
  – Social system’s information

• Interview is often an ideal way of substantiating, validating observational data
Interviewing

• Challenges (as with observational data)
  – Controlling biases
  – Avoiding “leading” the interviewee and what he/she says (“Do you like therapy”)
  – Noticing important information
  – Verifying interpretations and conclusions

Summary – Social Context

• Described through systems theory
  – How people relate to each other
  – How this relationship influences communication

• Discovered through interviewing
  – Open-ended but system directed
  – Following interviewee lead