A Handbook for the Study of Human Communication: Methods and instruments for observing, measuring and assessing communication processes
C. H. Tardy (ed.)

This is a handbook containing a series of disconnected chapters which together give an account of the methodology and instrumentation available for study of interactive oral communication. The book focuses on methodological issues in the study of interpersonal, interactive encounters (discussion of communication apprehension, for instance, doesn't include writing apprehension). Each chapter outlines the problems and possibilities in its area of research. Sometimes this entails an emphasis on instruments; sometimes the emphasis is on problems in conceptualization, or on problems of reliability and validity in various of the approaches current in a field.

The writers in the book represent the rationalist rather than the naturalist school of thought. Readers of the latter persuasion may not be as impressed as those of the former one with mentions of communication 'scientists' and manipulation of subjects in controlled lab experiments, or so sure that 'truth' in these matters lies midway between the rationalist and naturalist paradigms (128).

However, given the problems of self-report data and the consequent need for triangulation, and given the trend to disambiguation, instrumentalization and proceduralization evident in much new paradigm research, this handbook is likely to prove as useful for naturalists as for rationalists. Discussion of the methodological disputes in each research area covered effectively provides a rapid survey of conceptual as well as of procedural and evaluative issues. Brief outlines of its constituent chapters follow.

Chapter 1 surveys cognitive complexity: it's largely focused on the rôle category questionnaire measure. Chapter 2 surveys cognitive processes: it issues a call for greater precision and specificity in the models underlying studies of cognitive processes/capacity. Chapter 3 surveys communication competence: the uncertainties involved in measuring perceived effectiveness are well discussed. Chapter 4 surveys communication networks: it provides a balanced review of the measurement procedures available, and of the problems yet to be dealt with.

Chapter 5 surveys communication style: it provides a discussion of behavioral approaches, and of statistical methods for measuring stability of style during social interaction, with guidelines on fitting measurement procedures to researcher interests. Chapter 6 surveys conversation analysis: it argues that there's a need for debate on methodological issues of generalizability/ universality in conversational structures, especially in cross-cultural research. Chapter 7 surveys dyadic interpersonal relationships: it concentrates on the three types of relationship measures, employing insider reports of the relationship, most frequent since 1978.
Chapter 8 surveys group communications: its express purpose is "to facilitate the appropriate and sophisticated use of interaction analysis as a method for studying small group interaction." Chapter 9 surveys group decision making: it relates the failure to develop integrative theories to the outcome attributes concentrated on, and argues that adoption of the 'appropriateness' concept, for all its inherent problems, should serve as such an integrator.

Chapter 10 surveys interpersonal evaluations: it provides a review of the methods for measuring attraction and trust in the development of interpersonal relations. Chapter 11 surveys systems for coding interpersonal interactions. The aim here is to enable readers to make an informed selection among the most promising systems available for coding interaction in close personal relationships (NOT including coding small group interactions), with attention drawn to the 'Marital Interaction Coding System' and the 'Couples Interaction Scoring System'.

Chapter 12 surveys language variables: the focus here is on the consequences of language variation; an attempt is made to conceptualize and operationalize 'language variation' and to detail its important variables; "for want of space" structuralist approaches are not discussed - in a discussion which deals with contextual and holistic approaches. Chapter 13 surveys self-disclosure: it provides an extensive review of a wide range of procedures for study of the various conceptual domains involved.

Chapter 14 surveys social support: it provides a systematic review of the conceptual and measurement issues/problems in this relatively new field, which is developing higgledy-piggledy at a rapid rate. There is some criticism of its dominant assumption (that received social support is what's important) - but no mention of the downside of social support groups. Larger societal issues tend to escape the net of rationalist approaches. One misses reference to the conceptual insights and arsenals provided by, for instance, Anne Wilson Schaef in her When Society Becomes an Addict, Harper & Row, 1987 and Schaef and Diane Fassel, in (too recent for the Tardy edition) The Addictive Organization, Harper & Row, 1988.

Chapter 15 surveys socially based anxiety: it gives a review and critique of commonly used methods, and a survey of promising new methods, of assessing social anxiety. The focus is on interactive interpersonal encounters of all kinds (rather than on specific situations) where measurement of state or trait anxiety, or examination of affective, cognitive or physiological aspects of anxiety, is involved.

This is an invaluable handbook: its chapters are crammed with information on conceptual and methodological issues. It is well conceived and well executed. Possibly brief abstracts of the main thrusts in each chapter, given at the beginning of each, would have made it easier for a reader to access specific information in its teeming abundance.

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