

Collaboration in Human Services: Skills Assessment for Effective Interpersonal Communication

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Deficiencies in current social service delivery systems have been documented (Bruner, 1991; Hare, 1995; Kirst, 1991; Morrill, 1992). Services may be fragmented, duplicative, uncoordinated, and inflexible (O'Looney, 1994). Practitioners may be isolated from each other, and clients may encounter a bureaucratic maze of forms and eligibility processes in diffracted systems.

Collaborative delivery systems, which integrate programs and coordinate professional practices, may offer "client-friendly" services more efficiently than single-discipline models of practice (Briggs, 1997; Corrigan & Bishop, 1997; Franklin & Allen-Mearns, 1997; Morris, 1992). Service goals in collaborative delivery systems are achieved, frequently, through the use of groups or teams — collectivities that include practitioners who represent multiple disciplines and synchronize their work in an effort to develop integrated plans and services for clients.

To maintain cohesion and coordination in service delivery, collaborative systems depend on extensive and effective communication among practicing professionals (Fatout & Rose, 1995). Such communication is complex and challenging. Practitioners may be underprepared in terms of communication skills needed for successful collaboration (Briggs, 1997). The human resources development and quality practices literatures related to human services suggest numerous strategies and schema for improving interpersonal and group communication (Ellis & Whittington, 1981; Gaucher & Coffey, 1993; Lippitt, 1982; Long, 1996; Radelet, 1986). Marginal attention is given, however, to assessing the communication attitudes and abilities of interactants. Careful assessment, we posit, is a requisite for systems maintenance and improvement, and essential in the design and development of in-service and continuing education learning opportunities.

The purpose of this study is to examine a range of skills needed for effective collaboration, as well as related assessment constructs associated with effective interpersonal communication. Alternative assessment measures are reviewed, and implications for training are suggested.

Communication in Social Service Practice

Communication may be defined as a social process through which individuals create and share interpretations of reality. In organizational settings, common understandings about professional practice, values, and ethics emerge through communication (Deetz, 1992; Mumby, 1988; Senge, 1990). Where work is accomplished through collective action, in this case by collaborative social service teams, communication constitutes a basic process out of which all other functions derive (Bavelas & Barrett, 1951). Effective practice and service delivery may depend on the quality of interaction among social service professionals.

Interpersonal communication skills have been acknowledged as valuable assets in human services practice (Ivey & Authier, 1978; Keefe & Maypole, 1983; Zastrow, 1992). Formal training in collaborative skills has become an integral part of many professional preparation programs (Bailey, 1996; Forest, 1995). Utilization of related assessment strategies, however, has been less extensive. Such strategies, as components of in-service training programs, can enable identification of skill deficits and suggest areas of need in terms of professional development.

The human services literature suggests specific skills associated with effective collaboration in teams (Briggs, 1997; Fatout & Rose, 1995; Pence & Wilson, 1994).

Collaborative skill constructs and their associations with social service collaboration are elaborated below. Then, related interpersonal skills assess-

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ment alternatives are discussed.

Empathy

Empathy refers to efforts to conceptualize oneself in the role of another (Authier, 1986). Empathic communicators attempt to identify and understand the perspectives of others, even when they disagree with them (Long, 1996). Abilities to empathize may enable more accurate perceptions of others' behaviors and intentions (Dymond, 1949; Gudykunst, 1993).

Collaborative efforts may be more successful where team members demonstrate empathy. Research suggests that empathy is a major determinant of altruistic and cooperative behaviors (Batson & Coke, 1981; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Empathy may facilitate higher levels of interaction among colleagues, as team members feel that others are open to their ideas and insights. Here, empathy may enhance the quality of decisions reached by social service teams, as problems are viewed from multiple perspectives and members are able to assess critically and clarify their thinking (Hirokawa, Erbert, & Hurst, 1996).

Empathy may also be associated with higher levels of interpersonal trust (Jourard, 1971; Lewis, 1980). Trust enables team members to develop cohesive work relationships. Where members strongly identify with their colleagues, the team becomes a force for improvement of performance (Coch & French, 1958; Homans, 1951). Trust may be particularly important in multidisciplinary teams, where interdisciplinary and interagency rivalries may interfere with team productivity (Briggs, 1997).

Adaptability

Adaptive communication involves capacities accurately to read interaction contexts and develop situationally-appropriate verbal and nonverbal messages (Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980). Each interaction is deemed unique, and communicators enact flexible responses. Adaptive interactions are per-

ceived as tactful, timely, and somewhat tentative, in that communicators do not offer definitive explanations, but instead consider the communication goals of others (Hart & Burks, 1972).

Adaptability may be a critical component in effective interactions. Studies have found that the timing and placement of verbal and nonverbal behaviors differentiates skillful from less skillful communicators (Fischetti, Curran, & Wessberg, 1977; Peterson, Fischetti, Curran, & Arland, 1981). Skilled communicators, in general, appear to be more responsive to situational and environmental variations.

The multiplicity and variety of situations encountered by social service professionals suggest that communication adaptability skills may be high-level utilities in collaborative practice. Social service teams may include members from several professional disciplines, each with its own knowledge base, practice norms, and terminology. Where practitioners appropriately adapt communication to enhance consistencies with the attitudes, perspectives, and predispositions of their colleagues, higher levels of cohesion may be obtained (Briggs, 1997).

Adaptive communication, moreover, may facilitate conflict management in teams. Adaptive communicators understand that an idea may be expressed in many ways; they tend to avoid communicative rigidity and seek to integrate individual and team goals (Eadie & Paulson, 1984; Hart & Burks, 1972). The adaptive communicator is likely to be considerate of multiple perspectives and may be active in efforts to bridge the hiatus between conflicting parties.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety refers to a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to potential interactions. Socially anxious individuals tend to avoid interpersonal communication, or feel apprehensive in situations where avoidance is not possible (Watson & Friend, 1969). Their communication may be constrained by limited cognitive construct systems (Sanz, Avia, & Sanchez-Bernardos, 1996),

low self-esteem (Ingram, 1989), and greater than chance incidence of depression (Sanz & Avia, 1994).

Collaboration becomes difficult where team members are socially anxious. Leary (1983) found a negative correlation between social anxiety and sociability — the preference for being with others rather than alone. Team performance can be constrained by members who would rather work by themselves (McKinney, 1982). Such members avoid taking risks and sharing insights with colleagues, particularly if they believe that it will lead to negative evaluations of their capabilities.

Socially anxious individuals may indicate tendencies toward conformity, where compliance serves to reduce anxiety and remove the need for future interaction (Watson & Friend, 1969). Preferences for conformity, however, may be incompatible with successful team performance. Team members may fail to examine goals and basic assumptions; problem-solving alternatives are not analyzed critically, as members seek a premature consensus. Janis (1972) labeled this phenomenon “groupthink,” and documented its negative effects in decision-making groups.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness involves “the propensity for or tendency to pursue one’s goals through interaction appropriate to the interpersonal context” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989, p. 83). This conceptualization differs from aggressiveness which may be characterized as “win-at-all-cost” behavior. Assertive individuals tend to initiate and maintain conversations effectively and are at ease when meeting new people (Lorr, Youniss, & Stefic, 1991).

Assertive behaviors, such as explaining and taking a stand, tend to be viewed cautiously by social service professionals who associate such actions with authority-centered approaches (Brown, 1986). Although concerns for client-centered models of practice mitigate against the general utility of assertiveness in all situations, the construct remains useful in collaborative team environments where interaction maintenance and goal-directed behav-

iors are critical factors in performance (Fisher & Ellis, 1990; Henkin & Paramasivam, 1995; Mintzberg, Dougherty, Jorgensen, & Westley, 1996). The accomplishment of social and interpersonal tasks may require, in fact, assertive behavior (Rathus, 1973). Assertive members may help teams by “breaking the ice” during team formation, or by monitoring progress toward task completion (Harrington-Mackin, 1994).

Social Skill

Social skill refers to the constellation of abilities individuals utilize to “act wisely in human relations” (Thorndike, 1920, p. 228). The construct is frequently equated with effective interpersonal collaboration (McGuire & Priestly, 1981; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Socially skilled individuals are deemed competent and credible by their peers (Riggio, 1986); their behaviors reflect complex and diverse interpersonal repertoires (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982).

Riggio (1989) suggested that social skill is manifest in six interpersonal dimensions. Emotional expressivity refers to skill in nonverbal encoding. Emotionally expressive individuals are perceived as animated, energetic, and inspirational. Emotional sensitivity involves nonverbal decoding. Emotionally sensitive individuals are particularly aware of others’ emotions.

Emotional control concerns abilities to regulate nonverbal behavior. Snyder (1974) referred to this skill as moderation of emotion. Social expressivity refers to verbal encoding skill. Socially expressive individuals are articulate and able to engage others in interaction. Social sensitivity involves verbal decoding abilities. Socially sensitive individuals tend to be good listeners and demonstrate knowledge of social norms. Social control concerns abilities to regulate verbal behavior. Social control reflects self-confidence, and is regularly demonstrated through tactfulness.

Applications to social service teams appear axiomatic, given the high levels of interpersonal interaction necessary for interdisciplinary collaboration. Social skill appears to encompass a number

of behaviors — nonverbal communication, opening and closing interactions, reinforcement, self-disclosure, listening — associated with effective collaboration (Hargie, 1986).

Group Process Skills

Group process skills may constitute a particularly important professional utility for practitioners engaged in collaborative practice. Collaborative decision-making effectiveness, for example, can often be attributed to the quality of group communication processes (Hackman & Morris, 1975; Simon, 1976; Steiner, 1972). More specifically, effective collaboration appears to be associated with the extent to which group communication fulfills certain functional requisites of decision-making (Cragan & Wright, 1993; Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996).

Group interaction research has identified a number of decisional functions which independently account for variance in collaborative performance. Prominent among these functions is problem analysis — the process through which the group identifies and defines the decision-making situation. Hirokawa (1988) suggested that thorough problem analysis involves an understanding of “(a) the nature of the problem, (b) the extent and seriousness of the problem, (c) the possible cause(s) of the problem, and (d) the possible consequences of not dealing effectively with the problem” (p. 489). Related studies reveal associations between vigilant problem analysis and high quality collaborative decisions (Hirokawa, 1985; Hirokawa & Pace, 1983).

Collaborative decision-making may be more effective when members are skilled in the development and analysis of criteria for acceptable decision choices (Hirokawa, 1988; Hirokawa & Pace, 1983). By setting decision criteria, members define the boundaries of realistic problem-solving alternatives. Goals, objectives, and standards for performance become more clearly defined, as desired futures are elaborated through discussion. Effective teams assess the feasibility and desirability of potential solutions in light of the criteria they establish.

Effective collaborative decision-making may

also depend on the extent to which group members evaluate potential alternative solutions. Groups which assess the positive and negative qualities of alternatives tend to produce higher quality decisions than groups which fail to analyze critically proposed solutions (Hirokawa, 1985; 1987; 1988). Here, groups may more readily recognize flaws in logic or identify unexamined benefits of proposals, as the “pros and cons” of each alternative are identified and discussed.

Assessing Interpersonal Communication

Empathy, adaptability, social anxiety, assertiveness, and social skill can be assessed through self-report instruments. Table 1 identifies some widely utilized measures of these constructs. Acceptable reliability and validity were reported for each.

The primary advantage of using self-report instruments is that individuals know more about their own behaviors than others. Self-reports may reflect a comprehensive, consistent evaluation of one's abilities (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Such measures, however, do possess certain limitations. Overly positive or excessively negative perceptions of self, for example, may confound scores on such instruments (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Here, self-reports of skill differ from those rendered by others.

Information derived from self-reports may be augmented by findings from third party observations of interpersonal behavior. Group process skills, for example, have been assessed using verbal interaction analysis, a technique whereby trained observers categorize communication behaviors according to the functions they perform in group interaction (Bales, 1950; Bales & Strodtbeck, 1951; Fisher, 1970; Gouran, Hirokawa, Julian, & Leatham, 1993). Applications of verbal interaction analysis to educational settings have been extensive since the 1960s (Amidon & Hunter, 1966; Flanders, 1960; Marshall, Green, & Lawrence, 1976; Ober, Bentley, & Miller, 1971; Shachar & Sharan, 1994). Table 2 identifies some widely utilized verbal interaction coding schemes.

TABLE 1
Self-Report Measures of Interpersonal Communication Skill

Empathy	Sample Items
Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972 Emotional Empathy Scale 33 items Davis, 1983 Interpersonal Reactivity Index 28 items	"It makes me sad to see a lonely stranger in a group." "I get very angry when I see someone being ill-treated." "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective." "I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel."
Adaptability	
Duran, 1983 Communicative Adaptability Scale 30 items Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980 Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale 40 items	"I enjoy socializing with various groups of people." "I disclose at the same level that others disclose to me." "One should not be afraid to voice his or her opinion." * "One should keep quiet rather than say something which will alienate others." *
Social Anxiety	
Watson & Friend, 1969 Social Avoidance and Distress Scale 28 items Leary, 1983 Interaction and Audience Anxiousness Scales 24 items	"I try to avoid talking to people unless I know them well." "I usually feel uncomfortable when I am in a group of people I don't know." "I get nervous when I speak to someone in a position of authority." "When I speak in front of others, I worry about making a fool out of myself."
Assertiveness	
Rathus, 1973 Assertiveness Scale 30 items Gay, Hollandsworth, & Galassi, 1975 Adult Self-Expression Scale 48 items Herzberger, Chan, & Katz, 1984 Assertiveness Self-Report Inventory 25 items	"I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers." "When I am asked to do something, I insist upon knowing why." "Do you express anger or annoyance to your boss or supervisor when it is justified?" "Do you have difficulty asking a close friend to do an important favor even though it will cause them some inconvenience?" ** "If someone makes loud noises when I am studying at the library I will express my discontent." "If I were stood up on a date I would tell the person who stood me up that I felt angry."
Social Skill	
Riggio, 1989 Social Skills Inventory 90 items Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988 Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire 40 items	"I usually take the initiative and introduce myself to strangers." "People often tell me that I am a sensitive and understanding person." "Being an interesting and enjoyable person to be with when first getting to know people." "Being a good and sensitive listener for a companion who is upset."
* High scores reflect the middle response option, "sometimes true." ** Reverse-scored item.	

Third party observational assessments tend to mitigate potential subjective biases associated with self-reports (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Such procedures are limited, however, in that communicative behaviors are often assigned to a single category (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). Since communication may perform multiple functions in an interaction, competencies across multiple dimensions may be underestimated. Findings may be supplemented by self-report instruments which examine individual skill dimensions in more depth.

The limitations of third party observations may be addressed, in part, by the complementary use of self-report instruments; limitations of self-reports, involving self-bias, may be mitigated by supplemental findings of third party observation. Selection of measurement constructs and assessment techniques should reflect a balance of the skills needed to function appropriately in social service teams. Single-construct assessments may provide incomplete profiles of respondent skills. The measurement of multiple constructs using a variety of assessment techniques may provide more comprehensive information regarding respondents' collaborative skills, and may facilitate the design and development of individualized skill development and continuing educational opportunities for human services professionals engaged in collaborative service enterprises.

Skillful communicators frequently demonstrate greater facility in managing change and may readily recognize functional benefits of task interdepen-

dence (Briggs, 1997). Effective implementation and maintenance of collaborative delivery systems may depend, in part, on carefully designed efforts to identify deficiencies and improve the communication skills of social service professionals. Continuing education programs may target significant needs where useful and usable diagnostic and assessment approaches are understood and appropriately employed.

TABLE 2
Third-Party Skill Observation, Selected Coding Schemes

Coding Scheme	Focus of Study
Bales, 1950 Interaction Process Analysis 12 categories	group decision-making, group discussion
Fisher & Ellis, 1990 Interaction Analysis: Decision Making 6 categories 4 sub-categories	group decision-making
Hirokawa, 1982 Function-Oriented Interaction Analysis System 4 categories 12 sub-categories	group decision-making
Ralph & Johnstone, 1992 Verbal Interaction Analysis System 8 categories	conversational competence
Shachar & Sharan, 1994 Classroom Interaction 20 categories	collaborative learning

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