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The specific nature of communication in the family system

Specyfika komunikacji w systemie rodzinnym

Abstract: Communication and family are issues that feed the curiosity of many researchers. The family, which is the most important environment of every human being, is also a community that unites itself through mutual, continuous and psychological relationships. Communication is the decisive factor of both the type and quality of these relationships. The aim of the article is to present considerations on the specifics of communication in the family system, including the marital and parental ones as well as between sibling subsystems.
Key words: interpersonal communication, family, family relations

Abstrakt: Komunikacja i rodzina to zagadnienia, które podsycają ciekawość wielu badaczy. Rodzina, będąca najważniejszym środowiskiem życia każdego człowieka jest także wspólnotą, która jednoczy się przy pomocy wzajemnych, ciągłych i psychologicznych relacji. Czynnikiem determinującym zarówno rodzaj, jak i jakość tych relacji jest komunikacja. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie rozważań, dotyczących specyfiki komunikacji w systemie rodzinnym, z uwzględnieniem podsystemu małżeńskiego, rodzicielskiego oraz między rodzeństwem.
Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja interpersonalna, relacje w rodzinie, rodzina

Introduction

Communication is an integral part of an individual's life in society. As a social being, a person develops and shapes up with the help of stimuli that flow from the external environment. The environment requires establishing interpersonal relationships, the mastery of which allows you to feel the satisfaction that comes from life. Communication processes in the family system play a particularly relevant role.

1. Family - definition considerations

The family is a question that does not lose value over the years. It arouses the interest of not only educators and psychologists but also sociologists, theologians, lawyers and scientists of many other fields. Identifying a single universal definition of family is a challenging task. This difficulty may result from a large variety of its forms, changes that take place in its life and a large number of disciplines exploring this issue. It should be noted

that the definitions contained in the literature on the subject are not exclusive but complementary which results in a more comprehensive picture of this social cell.

Smyczyński (2005) defines the family as the oldest social group that occurs at every stage of social development and in all forms. According to him, it is a natural element of the social structure that cannot be replaced by anything else. For Szczepański (after: Burkacka, 2017), an outstanding sociologist, the family is a group defined by sexual relations (properly regulated and permanent) in order to ensure the procreation and upbringing of children. Moreover, the family is considered to be an institution that involves appropriate norms that regulate sexual behavior, child rearing and relationships among different groups. Tyszka (1974) defines a family as a community of people interrelated by a bond of marriage, affinity, kinship or adoption. In the literature on the subject, we can meet a similar definition by Zaborowski (1980) in which the family is a natural group based on blood, marriage or adoption ties. Additionally, he emphasizes that this group assumes the character of a community performing the function of maintaining the biological continuity of society. A family can also be defined as a marriage between a woman and a man, their offspring and/or other closest relatives. It is also the basic and most important element of a child's bond with society. It is explained by the fact that the members of a given family system are the closest and most significant environment to a person (Gałęska, 2015).

Researchers for whom the family is an institution mainly deal with relations between its members. According to Przetacznikowa (after: Wilk, 2016) the family is the most important primary group characterized by close and direct contact between their members. Close emotional relationships are established in family. There also occur lasting and personal ties. In the light of the Ziemska's definition (1977) in turn, the family is a small social group that consists of spouses as well as their children and is subject to dynamic transformations. Cudak (2000) perceives the family as the basic and primary care environment of each individual from birth. It is also an internal world which is affected by the influence of the external environment and translates into the individual system of values and norms of behavior (Zalewska, 2017). It should also be mentioned that the family is of interest to representatives of the Catholic Church. In a letter to families Pope John Paul II defined it as a community of people, the smallest social unit and the basic institution for all societies (John Paul II, 1994).

The analysis of above-mentioned definitions allows us to notice that the family is obliged to fulfill many functions, both in relation to the family and to society. Tyszka (1974) divides the functions of the family into four categories. The first one includes biopsychic functions, or reproductive and sexual functions. The second one involves the socio-determining functions, i.e.: social stratification, legalization and control. The third category embraces the economic functions, which include the material-economic function and the care-securing function. And the last one the socio-psychological functions, which

include socio-educational, cultural, religious, socio-recreational and emotional-expressive functions. Each family system implements the mentioned functions to a different extent and on different levels. It should be added that the changes that have taken place in recent years have left a mark on the fulfillment of the family function, especially in the sexual sphere. What is more, the emotional and expressive function has gained in importance due to the increase in the value of higher feelings – the family more and more often ensures the emotional homeostasis of the individual (Bereźnicka, 2014). It should be mentioned that communication plays an important role in fulfilling the functions of the family because it enables its members to get to know each other, their needs, preferences and views. It is also the key to turning conflict into agreement.

2.   Communication - psychological analysis of the construct

"Communication" is a term that comes from the Latin language – communico – and literally translated means "to connect, convey a message" (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2002). It started to be used in the fourteenth century and it meant joining the community and maintaining a relationship with someone. Today, it is assumed that interpersonal communication is a determinant of a certain standard of human functioning because it allows defining goals such as: expressing thoughts and feelings and the ability to convey the message in such a way that the recipient has no problem with its interpretation. It turns out that the right choice of words allows you to agree on views and make changes in behavior – not only in your own but also that of others (Adamska, 2013).

So what is the discussed construct? There is also no single universal definition. The literature on subject offers a wide range of definitions. For example, Walery Pisarek (2008) calls communication of mental content – intellectual and emotional – by unit A to unit B. This definition is extended by Dobek-Ostrowska (2002, p. 13) – according to her communication is a process of coming to an understanding between individuals, groups or institutions to exchange ideas, knowledge and information. It takes place at different levels and has various effects. The author adds that this process is:

–   social because it is determined by the character of the participants of this process and runs against the background of interpersonal relations;

–   creative as it builds new concepts and knowledge about the world;

–   dynamic due to the fact that it is related to the continuous interpretation of information that comes from the external environment;

–   interactive because there is relationship building taking place.

In the psychological definition of communication the emphasis is put on the exchange of information between individuals entering into interpersonal relations (Dudka, 2020). More specifically, Nęcki (2006) sees the exchange of verbal and non-verbal signals under the term

of communication which is undertaken in a specific context in order to improve the quality of collaboration. He also points out that this process requires four links: sender, code, channel and receiver. Similarly, the discussed construct is defined by Okoń (1998, p. 176). According to him, it is also an exchange of information by means of a message between individuals, one of which is the recipient and the other the sender. Interpersonal communication is a process that conditions the transmission and reception of both verbal and non-verbal signals (Chmielowska-Marmucka, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, many different definitions can be found in the literature. However, it cannot be said that one is better than the other. The definitions presented above refer to various aspects of human functioning. The main topic of this work is communication in the family system which will be discussed later in this article.

3.   Communication in the family system

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that each family system has its own and unique way of communicating, which is influenced by the external environment and shaped up over the years. Members interact with each other and face various conflicts that cannot be resolved by acting alone. Writing about communication, many experts emphasize its importance in the context of the family system. It can even be said that it is a variable that defines the relationships between individual family members (Wysota, 2019). The significance of communication is noticeable in the systemic approach to the family. A member in this approach is called an element of the system – its functioning depends on other people and relations that exist between them (Białek, 2015).

Proper communication is the basis of family happiness. Thanks to it, members have the opportunity to avoid conflicts, express their needs, present views, etc. However, in order for communication to be called "good", specific conditions must be met. First, it must be based on kindness and honesty – there is no room for envy, deception and impure intentions. The messages should be direct and people involved in the communication process should show some similarity (Sypniewska, 2015). It is also important to express feelings because delaying the expression of emotions to another moment can result in the accumulation of anger. According to Grzesiuk and Trzebińska (1978, after: Warych-Czajka, 2018), "expressing one's own experiences directly enables the release of tension that accompanies many situations experienced by a person". The elimination of communication barriers also plays an important role. The family should embrace an atmosphere of honesty, joy and peace which will additionally strengthen the individual's sense of security and increase self-esteem. Moreover, it should be the reason for the successful implementation of tasks set by the family (Duda, 2017).

Koerner and Fitzapatrick (2002) distinguished principles which direct the communication process in the family – dialogue and conformism. The first principle relates to the degree of sympathy and openness of the family to discuss various issues of everyday life. Families that are oriented towards dialogue have loose, frequent and spontaneous interactions. They are also free of subject and time constraints. Family members believe that communicating with each other makes family life enjoyable and valuable. In a family system with a low orientation to dialogue contact is extremely rare. The second principle, i.e. conformism orientation, refers to homogeneity, consistency of attitudes and beliefs. In highly conformist families, individuals seek harmony, do not engage in conflicts, value mutual dependence and obedience. Likewise, low-conformist family members base their communication on independence and partnership (Koerner and Fitzapatrick, 2002). Bearing in mind these principles, four types of families can be distinguished:

– Consensual families characterized by a high commitment to dialogue and conformism. The communication process reflects the tensions in striving for agreement and maintaining the hierarchy;

– Pluralist families, i.e. high dialogue orientation and low conformism. Communication is open in them, there are no restrictions, with all family members participating;

– Protective families, i.e. with a low orientation towards dialogue and high on conformism – characterized by the fact that communication emphasizes obedience to authorities. There is also a limited exchange of thoughts and feelings;

– Families with a low focus on both dialogue and conformism are systems in which everyone does what they want, and in the communication process, commitment to the relationship is not noticed. There is also the individualistic nature of the in the decision-making process.

In the family system, interpersonal communication is a factor on the basis of which it is possible to determine whether the family is healthy or if there are numerous abnormalities in its functioning which affects the course of information processes between family members (Chodkowski, 2017) Family relationships are the background of communication. Paradoxically, it is both an indicator of the quality of these relations and its building material (Jagoszewska, 2015). Communication in the family system is interactive, which means that the behavior of each individual in the system is a broadly understood message – both verbal and non-verbal – for others. In such a situation, this unit is simultaneously the sender and receiver of messages that reach and form other members of the system (Celińska-Miszczuk and Wiśniewska, 2014).

Talking about communication in the family system, it should be noted that everything that happens in a given subsystem has an impact on the functioning of all elements (Śniegulska, 2016). For example, the quality of communication in a parent-child

relationship depends on the quality of communication manifested in the marriage. Braun-Gałkowska (1992), writing about these dependencies, distinguishes two directions:

1) The dominant style of communication in the marriage leaves its mark on communication behavior at the parent-child level;

2) The model of communication presented by parents is a kind of social model that is often copied by children.

There is a reason it is said that the family is a communication system. Regardless of the type of family, members interact with each other and are considered as one. The literature on the subject provides information on the features that shape the way members of the family system communicate. The first is the dependence of the elements, which means that the feelings and actions of one person do not go unnoticed and have an impact on the functioning of the entire family system. The second, in turn, is related to the fact that the family is more than the sum of certain elements because family members display different behaviors in the system and externally. If you want to understand the entire system, you need to look inside it and take into account a wide spectrum of behaviors. The third feature that shapes communication are subsystems created within the family system. The last one is the environment that influences the family (McKay, Davis, Fanning, 2001).

4. Communication in family subsystems

According to Harwas-Napierała (2008), communication can be distinguished, among others, in the marital subsystem, parental subsystem and between siblings. She emphasizes that communication in each of these subsystems differs, and its structure is specific.

At the very beginning, it is worth answering the question what marital communication is? It is defined as the exchange of information related to feelings, needs, plans and life experiences. It consists of combining the family into one integrated subsystem, aimed at satisfying its needs (Harwas-Napierała, 2008). It is considered a special form of interpersonal communication because it is a factor that determines the quality of the bond between spouses (Lulek, 2014). In addition, it is a kind of mirror of emotions dominating in a marriage and the degree of commitment to the relationship. Numerous studies emphasize that communication in the husband-wife system is primarily determined by the clarity of the message. It consists of precise, understandable and unambiguous expression of one's feelings – both verbally and non-verbally (Harwas-Napierała, 2008).

Plopa (2006, p. 111), describing the communication between spouses, points out that every kind of behavior is a form of self-expression. He also focuses on non-verbal speech because gestures, body movements, position or distance can be used to read a lot – in the light of the literature on the subject these are symbols that facilitate understanding of each other and relationships. A vital role in marital communication is that of crises. It turns out

that periods of instability, i.e. stressful events, rob a couple of their ability to communicate indirectly. Then the form of communication becomes direct and tends to follow the rules. Marriage is a dynamic whole, devoid of any signs of permanence. More specifically, various types of interactions change depending on the stage in which the family system is and the changes that take place in people who build it (Harwas-Napierała, 2008).

An open relationship determines the development of the bond in marriage – it makes it possible to deepen the bond between the spouses. M. Ryś (1999) reports that marital communication, right after sexual intercourse, is the most important factor connecting the bond between partners. Communication between husband and wife determines the nature of the interaction throughout the family system, for marriage is the so-called "base system". The duration of the family and the quality of relations in its subsystems depend on it (Harwas-Napierała, 2008, pp. 60-61).

Another subsystem is the parental one, which includes parents and children. It should be mentioned right from the outset that this relationship also bears the hallmarks of a dynamic one. In the initial phase, the parents are responsible for their children and the bond with them, which translate into the style of communication. Watzlawick (after: Sikorski, 2013) calls it a complementary style. It is characterized by an imbalance of power – parents formulate orders that the children follow. In addition, messages are formulated to express love, sympathy and tenderness. Communication is also an element that builds self-esteem and a sense of security. Later, as children mature, the communication style in the family changes – a balance of power appears which is manifested, among others, in initiating interactions. Parents should treat their child as a discussion partner – this is key to developing and deepening the bond. Conversely, the relationship between the child and parents becomes loosened, and the child may turn out to be maladjusted and incompetent to bond with people outside the system (Aleksiejuk, 2015), as parental communication styles influence the quality of interpersonal future relationships. Stepulak (2013, p. 65) distinguishes three styles. The first is the permissive style, characterized by a low level of communication and requirements. Its opposite is the authoritative style – a high degree of communication and requirements. The last one is the authoritarian style, which shows low self-esteem of the child, high level of aggression and difficulties in control. Additionally, Tyszkowa (after: Karmolińska-Jagodzik, 2018) distinguishes factors that may affect communication in the parent-child subsystem. These are: the level of maturity, degree of parental development, needs, value system, characteristics of the sender and recipient, social norms and patterns, sex, social and economic conditions of the family.

The next subsystem involves siblings. In the early years of an individual's life, hierarchical dominance can be seen in the style of communication – usually the oldest child sets the course and tone of the conversation. This is an important moment because, thanks to it, siblings, after reaching maturity, can switch to the partnership style. Moreover, the way,

for example, how brother and sister communicate mirrors the style that dominates the parental subsystem at a given time (Harwas-Napierała, 2008). There are five styles of relations occurring in the described subsystem (Fig. 1):
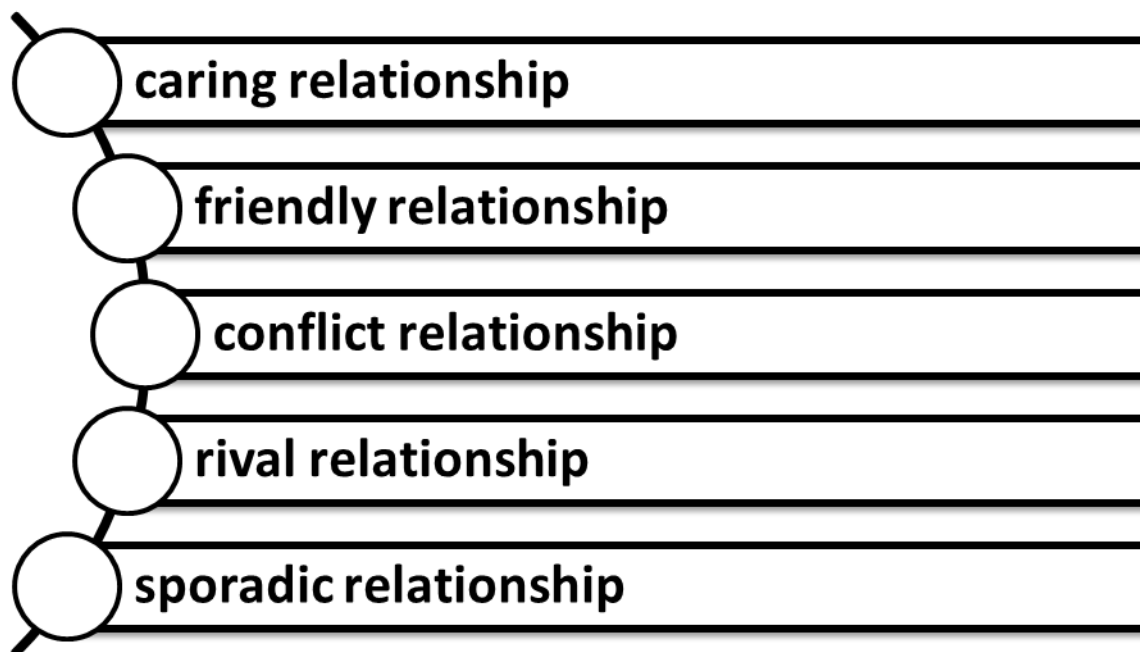

Fig. 1 Styles of relations between siblings
Source: Own elaboration based on H. Bee (2004, p. 306).

A caring relationship is when one of the siblings acts as an adult and takes care of brothers and sisters. The second, i.e. friendly, relates to becoming similar to each other and establishing joyful relationships. The next one, called conflict relationship, is characterized by the fact that one of the siblings is dominant and shows aggressive behavior. The last ones, i.e. a rival and sporadic relationship, are characterized by low communication between siblings and remarkably brief contacts (Bee, 2004, p. 306).

There is a reason why the considerations emphasize the role of parents. The ability to conduct conversations is acquired in the process of socialization (Juszczyk-Rygałło, 2016) which indicates that they are communication teachers. If communication is correct in the family system, it can be predicted with high probability that such communication will not be a problem in the future. Communication in the sibling subsystem is still being explored. At the moment, there are no detailed studies.

Conclusion

The subject discussed in this article seems to be significant because the family is the most important environment in every individual's life. It is constantly present in one's life because it is impossible to leave it completely (Kołażyk, 2020). For this reason, relationships

between family members must be nurtured at every stage. It is possible thanks to interpersonal communication, which is unique because of the frequency and the persistence of the relationship that occurs between members of the system. However, the diversity of relations prevailing in individual subsystems should be emphasized, which translates into various forms and specifics of communication.

Undoubtedly, proper and healthy communication helps to strengthen the bonds between the people who are part of a family system. This applies to both newly emerging families and those that are already at higher stages of relationship. The methods of communication between relatives are a valuable source of information about their relationships. We can even venture to say that communication is a reflection of what is happening in the system.

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