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THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATION AS A BASIC SKILL OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE IMPACT IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Social work is a profession that helps people to help themselves. According to Pincus and Minahan (1973) social work is concerned with the interaction between people and their social environment which affect the ability of people to accomplish their life tasks, alleviate distress and realize their aspirations and values. Therefore, the focus of social work practice is on the interaction between people and systems in the social environment. People are dependent on systems for help in obtaining the material, emotional or spiritual resources and the services and opportunities they need to realize their aspiration and to help them cope with their life tasks. Thus, the need for communication as a basic skill of social workers in working with the clients cannot be over emphasized. The social workers work with the clients and not for the clients in solving their individuals, groups and communities problems. The medium for such work and is communication. Hence, the need for examination of communication as a basic skill of social workers and the impact in social work practices in this work.

NATURE AND MEANING OF COMMUNICATION

Communication has to do with transmission of information between a source and a receiver. The word communication was drawn from a Latin word "communicare" and this means to establish commonness of ideas, understanding between two persons, one side called the source and the other the receiver. According to Ohuche, Osakwe, Uzoezie et al (1996:620) communication simply means a systematic way of formulating information, knowledge, ideas, opinions, feelings etc and passing it over to an audience who successfully interprets (decodes) it and reacts to it. They emphasized that language with its accompanying body movements and gestures is the most developed and most efficient system of communication.

Compton and Galaway (1977:193) stressed that communication can be defined as an interactional process which gives, receives, and checks out meaning and occurs when people interact with each other in an effort to transmit messages, receive transmitted messages, and check out meanings. For instance, interviewing is a specialized form of communication which is contextual, purposeful, and limited and which involves specialized role relationships.

Newcomb (2005) states that "Every communicative act is viewed as a transmission of information, consisting of discriminative stimuli from a source to a recipient. Thus, in the simplest possible communicative act, one person, A, transmit information to another person, B, about something, X. Mead (1934) discusses emphatic responses in relation to good communication, making the point that clarity of communication is enhanced when people like one another.

Berelson (2007) describes communication as that body of meanings through symbols (verbal, musical, pictorial, and plastic, gestural) which makes up the message itself. He gives what we describe as the classic sentence identifying the process of communication: who says what to whom, how, with what, effect.

Communication can be between one person and another person. It can also be between a person and a group of people. It can be between a group and a group. It can equally be between institution and institution or between organization and organisation. It can be between a nation and a nation or one international organization and another international organization.

Communication between a person and a person is known as interpersonal. Group to Group is known also as group communication while communication within oneself alone is called intra-personal communication. Consequently, communication is a two way process-shared experience. In other words, there has to be a feed back mechanism and a source mechanism.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

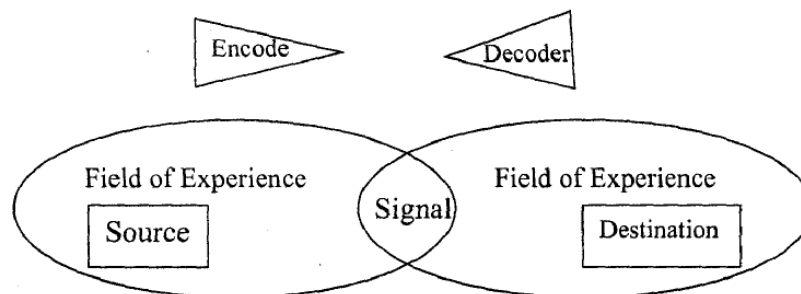
According to smith, Williams, Simons etal (2001) communication is of two major types, namely verbal communication and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication is usually defined as message behavior in which words are used as symbols to represent objects and ideas. Non verbal communication includes all other forms of message behavior, such as sign language, space and time. Sign language is used when a gesture, such as a "V" made with two fingers, is used to communicate an idea like peace. A nod of the head may mean "yes". Action language is the language of the body, such as facial expression and posture, which communicate unintended or at least unconscious messages. Object language is the display of tangible items such as hair styles, cars, clothes, and jewelry, which communicate roles and status. The use of time, especially punctuality or tardiness, communicates, as does space-how close or far away we choose to be when we talk to another person. Finally, silence communicates. For example, if you have a friend, and you do not call or write for a long period of time, you are probably communicating either that you do not care about the relationship or that you are so sure of its stability that you do not feel it necessary to send periodic messages. Non verbal messages are critical, and often actions do speak louder than words.

PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION

When people communicate, they do more than exchange mutually intelligible words. According to Goodenough (2003) and important purpose of communication is to share experience, or to enlarge the area of mutual understanding between persons whose experiences differ. When the degree of such difference is slight and the desire to share is strong, as with well adjusted married couples, communication is almost automatic, requiring little conscious attention. The words and gestures of each partner are familiar to the other, immediately revealing to each the changing moods of the other. Hollis (2004:190) observed that a significant aspect of interaction is communication- the extent to which two people are able to convey their feelings and opinions to each other, either verbally or nonverbally.

THE MAJOR ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

According to Ohuche Osakwe, Uzoezie etal (199) communication process requires at least three elements: a source, a message and destination: The source does the encoding and transmitting. The message is the image or sign that is transmitted. Destination designates the recipient of the message, but the destination the message must be decoded and interpreted. The following diagram below is a graphic exposition of the process as given by schuramm (2004):



Schramm (2004) comments that it is obvious that each person in the communication process is both an encoder and a decoder. He receives and transmits. Communication process is an opened system. The diagram illustrates this by the over lapping areas designated "field of experience".

COMMUNICATION THEORY

According to National Teachers' institute (1990) communication theory posits an open-ended system through which "messages", "receptions" and "responses" constantly flow from sender to receiver and back. The theoretical formulation of this system makes use of such descriptive terms as input, output, encoding, decoding, interpretation, feeding back, and signal.

ENCODING

This refers to all those activities employed by the communicator to formulate the message or signal that is to be transmitted. INTERPRETATION and DECODING: refer to those actives required to make sense out of the message on the part of the recipient. All these factors are conditioned by the life experience of the recipient, in terms of readiness to receive or understand the signals sent.

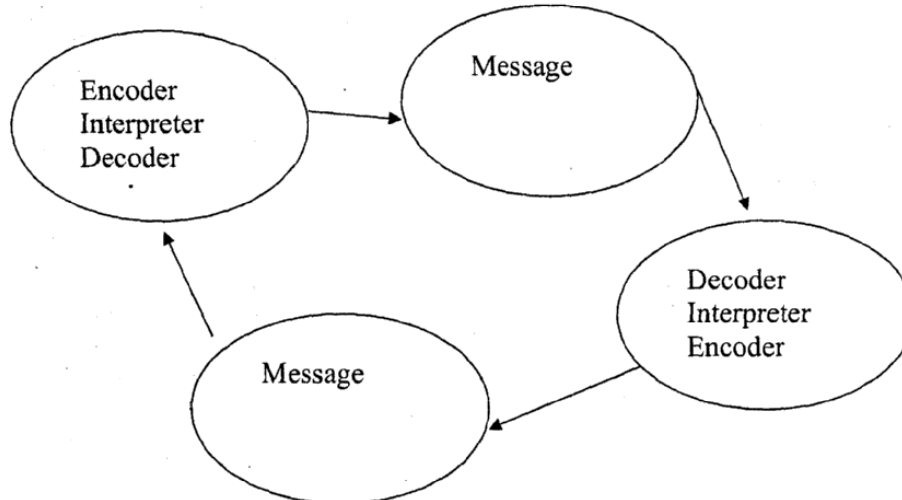
MESSAGES:

These are made up of signs, and a SIGN is a signal that stands for something in experience.

FEEDBACK

This refers to both the manifest and Latent responses to the signal received.

The combined processes of transmittal and feedback are reflected in the following elliptical diagram below as given by schramm (2004):



This is the process in which individuals are constantly engaged. They are constantly decoding signs from the environment, interpreting these signs, and encoding something as a result. Infact, it is misleading to think of the communication process as starting somewhere and ending somewhere. It is really endless.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS IN COMMUNICATION.

According to Ferrer and Whalley (1990) communication theory postulates certain conditions for success in communication. Most basic of these are the following:

- a. The message must be so designed and delivered as to gain the attention of the intended destination.
- b. The message must employ signs which refer to experience common to source and destination, so as to get the meaning across.
- c. The message must arouse personality needs in the destination and suggest some ways to meet those needs.
- d. The message must suggest a way to meet those needs which is appropriate to the group situation in which the destination finds himself at the time when he is moved to make the desired response.

FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

According to Akukwe (1988:48) communication serves a number of key functions in social work:

- a. It serves as a means of establishing contact with the people (clients).
- b. It is a means of learning more about their customs and values. A solution that is in accordance with the culture of individuals, groups and communicates is more likely to be embraced by them.
- c. Communication is a means of providing the people information about what is going to happen and helping the clients solve their problems and of giving the social worker a feedback on how his effort is received and the outcome of his work with the client(s).

CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

According to Akukwe (1988:46) there are many channels of communication in social work and they include the following:

- a. **LOCAL LANGUAGE:** By learning or speaking the local language or dialect, the social worker impresses the people favourably, by indicating that he takes their custom seriously.
- b. **FORMAL ADDRESS:** this is done through gathering people in assemblies, village squares, churches, colleges, and schools, and speaking to the, about the changes to be introduced or about the problems to be tackled. Through this method, large numbers (clients) are reached within a short time and at a little cost.
- c. **MASS MEDIA:** This kind of communication channel refers to the transmission of information by means of mass contact aids such as pictures, posters, radio, television and films. These are used to influence public opinion. Like the formal address, mass communication has the advantage of reaching a large audience with minimum cost and effort. They also share the same disadvantage –the feedback is rare and superficial. Some forms of mass media like newspaper require certain amount of literacy and education to be appreciated. But like formal communication (or Address), its primary function may lie in initial dissemination of information. After this, other forms of communication may take over.
- d. **DEMONSTRATION:** Most people are pragmatic and need to be convinced that what they are about to undertake will be successful. It is said that nothing succeeds like success. In demonstration, the social worker tries to show, through setting a simple goal and working with the client on it that this ideas skills, and techniques can produce positive results. If this is done successfully, he will get ready cooperation from the client (s).
- e. **INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:** This is a face-to-face communication between two people. it may be between a social worker and a client or it may be between the social worker and groups or a whole community.
- f. **INTRAGROUP COMMUNICATION;** In this type of communication the social worker stays outside, unless he has been well accepted by the individuals, groups or a whole community. But he may have had a hand in initiating it. Ordinary people call this intergroup communication channel gossip". Gossip is powerful in influencing decision, but this is often over looked. Gossip may be positive or negative to the work being done. It is useful the social worker try spreading information through intragroup communication. Information can be fed to children to bring back to their homes. It may be passed through gossip leaders and gossip centres – market women, taxi drivers and other road transport workers, barbers, midwives, beer parlours, salons, club houses, meetings, age grade rallies etc.

Good communication system helps to highlight, analyse and harmonize needs and facilitate work with the clients

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication using any language involves acquisition and functions use of skills. According to Williams, Smith and Simons et al (2001:62) the user of a language such as English, should be able to: a. Master how to pronounce all the speech sounds used in the dialect of the language he uses or is learning to use

- b. Put these sounds together into words and sentences and be able to pronounce them readily and correctly
- c. Master how to grammatically combine words to achieve desired meanings and unity of spoken words.
- d. Master the use of verbal and non verbal strategies to compensate for any possible communication breakdown, or to make communication between speaker and listener (or social worker and client) easy and interesting,
- e. Master the use of different prosodic features: syllable, structure, loudness, rise and fall of voice, stress, etc in speech, and
- f. Speak fluently the dialect of the language that has been chosen as a target or that suits each speech occasion.

Unless a user of a language is proficient in the above skills, he will from time to time, betray himself as an incompetent communicator in the language. Communication skills are learnt and are called the core of effective human relationship.

BASIC PRINCIPLES IN COMMUNICATION

According to Compton and Galaway (1977) communications occur simultaneously on many levels and the basic principles for good communication are similar for all ages except minor variations due to cultural differences. Therefore it is imperative for social workers to have a critical ear for observation, internalizing and interpreting it. These principles include:

- a. The social worker should see that he does not deny another person's genuine feeling: Try not to scold another person because it produces instant emotional block to further dialogue or communication.
- b. The worker is to understand unconditional positive regard for human feelings.
- c. The worker communicates that he is going to do with that client because he is a whole person. The worker accepts his words regardless of whom he is and work with situation he brings to him. The worker accepts the client and his feelings.
- d. There should be congruence. The worker's action and body language and words should be evidence. What he says should be put into behavior or he behaves it and acts it. He should be able to say things clearly and sincerely. He has to consider or include the client's inner feelings and what he is talking about.
- e. The worker should show empathy. He puts himself in the client's position. Even though the worker puts himself in the client's shoes, he should not be emotionally involved and being misled by the feeling with the client.
- f. The worker should reach inside of the silent of the client.
- g. The worker should clarify goal
- h. The worker should support the client's strength.

COMMUNICATION AND INTERVIEWING

Social work interview is a set of communications with four special characteristics. According to Compton and Galaway (1977:194).

These characteristics include:

- 1. It has a context or setting
- 2. It is purposeful and directed
- 3. It is limited and contractual and
- 4. It involves specialized role relationships.

The context setting for the interview will usually be that of a particular agency offering defined services to clients bringing specified problems to the agency. The context, of course, provides a limit to the communications and becomes a basis for the elimination of extraneous material, that is, material not related to the particular context.

Social work in the sense that they are conducted to accomplish specific goals (a legitimate purpose may certainly be the definition of the goals of furthering worker – client communications). Conversely,

interviews are not casual exchanges of information or informal conversations. The purposes of interviews provide a basis for limiting communications and eliminating extraneous material. Interviews are limited and contractual in the sense that the interviewer and the interviewee come together in a specific context for defined purposes and that their communications are limited to meeting those purposes.

Finally, interviewer and interviewee occupy specialized roles and interact with each other on the basis of those roles. The client –worker interactions will usually be confined to the expected behaviours of the specialized roles.

Interviewing is a specialized form of communication which is contextual, purposeful, and limited and which involves specialized role relationships. Interview according to Kahn and Connell (1957: 16) is a specialized pattern of verbal interaction initiated for a specific purpose, focused on some specific content area, with consequent elimination of extraneous material.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

According to start (2005) a number of factors can operate to hamper, blur, or prohibit communication. Most notable of these are such things as culture barriers, differences in language systems, marked differences in role and status, and defensiveness or resistance. It should be noted that the impact of any one or a combination of these factors can be operative between the client and his social matrix, his significant others, and, in the interchange between worker and client.

CULTURE BARRIERS: The literature of the social sciences and of social work is replete with reference to the impact of culture on communication. In this context, culture is defined as the composite of specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting which differentiates one group from another. It includes such factors as mating patterns, modes of family organization and structure, ceremonial styles of marking the beginning and end of life, dietary peculiarities, religion etc. Because of difference in culture between one society and another, like Hausa and Igbo communication between a client and a worker from different cultures will not be an easy task. Where such differences in values and expectations exist, distortions in communication are inevitable. The worker who would open up viable channels of communication must find a way to recognize and accredit the values of the client without necessarily relinquishing or imposing his own.

DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGES SYSTEMS

Since language is an integral part of culture, and we have acknowledged that cultural difference is a major obstacle to effective communication, it follows logically that differences in language systems (the primary medium of communication) complicate the communicative task. Where language systems are different, the onus is on the worker to find a way to reduce or reconcile the differences so that he may enter into the client's world and find him where he is. This is not a simple task, for this reason, differences in language systems remain a major hurdle to be surmounted in the achievement of effective communication. As a result of difference in language between the social worker and the client, they cannot communicate effectively.

ROLE AND STATUS OBSTACLES:

In terms of effective communication, role and status differentials pose a danger to the worker. It is all too easy for the insecure worker to hide manner, and talk down to the client. This approach increases the client's anxiety about his status and creates more defensiveness and resistance in the communication process.

By the very nature of their work together, as a result of the kind of life circumstances that bring them together, there is a difference in the role and status of the worker and the client. This fact has to be recognized and accepted by both. On the worker's part in order to open up the most free channels of communication between them, he must constantly work at reducing the gap caused by this difference, without to one of buddies or of antagonist and protagonist.

DEFENSIVENESS/ RESISTANCE:

Resistance is a barrier to effective communication. For example, potential client may fear rejection his inadequacies because of his inadequacies and he will not open up. This resistance affects his work with the worker because of lack of communication. According to Pincus and Minahan (1973:147) several forces that may lead individuals, groups, organization and communities to resist change efforts include:

- a. Reluctance to accept help
- b. Fear of loss of position or resources,
- c. Belief that change is impossible,
- d. Reluctance to devote time,
- e. Practical barriers to participation and
- f. Uncertainty. All these factors will lead to resistance and affect the communication between the client and the worker. These barriers may be thought of as resistances on clients against centering into a problem –solving process. Resistance may be considered as a specialized kind of defense utilized by the client to ward off the worker and to protect himself from any discomfort involved in participating in a problem –solving process (Compton and Galaway: 1977:198).

According to Compton and Galaway (1977:196) barriers to communication may occur at any phase in the communication process –encoding, transmitting, many of these barriers are obvious, namely: inability to conceptualize and use symbols (encoding problems), speech impediments, hearing or receptor impediments, failure to understand the concepts received (decoding problems) and environmental influences (noise which interferes with the messages or prevents them from traveling clearly from the transmitter to the receiver).

Furthermore, Compton and Galaway (1977) emphasized six barriers to communication caused by workers

These six worker barriers to communication include: anticipation of the other, the assumption of meaning, stereotyping, confusion of purpose, the urge to change and inattentiveness.

ANTICIPATION OF THE OTHER:

This occurs when the worker cannot hear the client because he assumed for sure in advance that he had heard and known what the client is going to say. The worker assumed that he had heard what he has already decided that the client is saying. It is a prejudice the worker has about what the client will communicate to him and it impedes affective communication.

THE ASSUMPTION OF MEANING:

The assumption of meaning occurs when a worker receives an ambiguous message, fails to check out its meaning with the client and proceeds on the basis of a meaning which the worker has read into the client's message. The words themselves may be ambiguous, the way in which they are uttered may convey unclear feelings or thoughts, or the client's behavior may be communicating messages inconsistent with the words.

WORKER STEREOTYPES OF CLIENT:

This barrier relates directly to the problems of classification and categorization of the clients. It exists when clients are seen as members of groups and action is taken without permitting the client's individuality to transcend to stereotype of his group. Stereotyping can be very subtle, after experience with several similar clients, workers may note similarities on the basis of which they begin to develop a stereotype of that particular kind of client. The stereotype then interferes with the worker's perceptions of new clients and well serves to block out communications.

CONFUSION OF PURPOSE

Failure on the part of the worker to make explicit the purpose of an interview may lead to a condition in which the worker and client hold differing, perhaps contradictory purposes. Given such confusion of purpose, both client and worker will then interpret their own and each other's communications in light of their particular understanding of the objective of the interview. As these subtle distortions continue, the client and the worker will be going in two entirely different directions.

THE URGE TO CHANGE:

One of the more serious barriers to communication arises from prematurely urging clients to change. This is a very easy pitfall for the social worker. Change is a common word in the social work profession, by and large social workers are committed to being change agents, both to improve the conditions of the community and to assist individuals to utilize the available resources of the community more effectively. Difficulties occur, however, when change efforts are attempted without sufficient data on which to base an assessment of the problem. To urge change at the early stage of

work between the client and worker may create a barrier to communication – a barrier which limits the availability of essential information that could influence decision making

INATTENTIVENESS: A very potent worker barrier to communication is inattentiveness. A worker whose mind wanders during an interview, who is thinking about other clients or planning future activities creates barriers for continued client –worker communication. Clients can reasonably expect the worker to give undivided attention to their current communications, and the worker has a responsibility for establishing a time frame that will enable him to attend to other matters that require attention without diverting attention from the work of the moment.

Also Young (2005:134) stressed that the barriers to communication are not differences of language and of culture merely, but more particularly of self consciousness, race consciousness and consciousness of kind, not physical distance merely, but social distances.

SOME WAYS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

It is the onerous onus of the social worker to insure that lines of communication are open between him and the client. According to Stark (1959) four approaches can be used to improve communication in worker and client interaction and working relationship. They are:

- a. Questioning as opposed to telling
- b. Empathic response
- c. Cutting through and
- d. Reaching out to the language system. These approaches may be used in combination rather than discretely.

QUESTIONING;

Questioning is important in any work with the clients. It is an approach used to facilitate communication. When the client has only to listen to the admonitions of the worker, we have little opportunity to assess his expectations. On the other hand, when the client has to respond to questions, he has to struggle to develop a response, he must order his thought processes and he is forced to an evaluation of his own situation. Quite often, in the midst of such a process, the client will pause to acknowledge feelings or relationships of which he had been unaware before, because he had not had this type of struggle to put his own situation in perspective. A skillful social worker is a good listener and a good questioner.

EMPATHIC RESPONSE:

Empathy according to Eze, Ezah and Aniche (2000:86) requires the worker to put himself in the shoe of his client by feeling for the client on the client's problem but he should not be enslaved by such feelings. He should come out of such feelings and work with the client maintaining objectivity in his work with the client. Empathy is often loosely and somewhat simply defined as the capacity to put oneself in the other fellow's boots.

Communication is enhanced when the worker does understand the situation of the client and can convey verbally, in manner, and in other non-verbal responses some understanding of the problems with which the client must cope. When this occurs, the client is freed to discuss his situation in dimensions which would be avoided if he felt the worker could not understand.

CUTTING THROUGH:

Cutting through requires the social worker to move beyond presenting problem of the client to the real problem of the client. Communication is enhanced when the worker is able to recognize unexpressed problems or concerns that have more bearing on the difficulty of the situation of the client than these which the client is expressing: to "cut through" to these latent levels is one of the surest ways of conveying understanding of the situation. Once this has happened and without catastrophe, the client's apprehension and resistance is diminished, and he is freed to fully discuss and dialogue his situation.

REACHING OUT TO THE LANGUAGE SYSTEM:

When a person is burdened with problems and suffering under the added pressure of a language barrier, nothing is more likely to reduce tension and increase self esteem than an honest effort on the part of the worker to bridge this barrier without all of the giving being by the client. At a point where the worker does

not understand the client's expression, it would be appropriate to stop and acknowledge and discuss the lack of understating. At this time similarities and differences in language style might also be discussed. It should be noted that such a situation offers the possibility of role reversal, for teacher and the worker is the learners. Such a temporary shift in roles could be repaid by a subsequently strengthened relationship. Using the client's input as a base, the worker would quicken his effort to reduce the gaps in verbal communication and comprehension between him and the client through learning and catching up with the client's language

CONCLUSION

Communication involves the application of knowledge skills, and techniques in problem solving process and improving social communication leads to the detriment families work groups, organizations nations, and the total work of man. Communication can be defined and classified in many ways. Communication is dependent upon the degree to which we open ourselves to others and to national development. The responsibility for viable and effective communication rests on the social workers. Social workers are communication practitioners and the clue to the real help the clients and national development needs is communication.

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