ABSTRACT
        Spurred by the impetus of the antipoverty programs of
the 1960's, social science researchers and human service
practitioners have focused upon the need for effective communication
with the American urban poor. To this end, both groups have attempted
to describe the context within which the urban poor receive and
process messages in the hopes of drawing from these descriptions some
guidance for communicating. In this paper the literature which
describes the communications system of the urban poor is reviewed.
The "information poverty" thesis prevalent in this literature is
discussed. The manner in which social service agencies operate is
examined in the context of the information network described. It is
stated that the "information poverty" thesis has been of little help
in bettering communication with the urban poor. The assumptions
inherent in the thesis are shown to reinforce a "we to them", rather
than a "we with them" approach. A number of weaknesses in this
approach are pointed out. The most recent work, which appears to be
offering a more helpful perspective and more helpful data, is
summarized. In this literature, interests and situational perceptions
are emphasized. This perspective is seen as providing a more positive
and unified approach to communication with the urban poor.
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COMMUNICATING WITH, NOT TO, THE URBAN POOR

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Under the impetus of the antipoverty programs of the 1960s, numerous well-meaning people--both practitioners of human service delivery and social scientists--turned their attention to the problem of communicating helpfully to the U.S. urban poor.* The concerns were many but fit within two central questions: (1) Why aren't we reaching the urban poor now? (2) How can we reach the urban poor better? [1]

The focus, then, has been on effective communication. To this end, both researchers and practitioners have attempted to describe the context within which the urban poor receive and process messages in the hopes of drawing from these descriptions some guidance for communicating.

While in the mid-sixties it could be said that there were relatively few research results available that focused on the problem of communicating to the urban poor, [2] the same cannot be said for the mid-seventies. A substantial body of literature had accumulated. [3] The volume is so great, in fact, that one would expect to find a lot of guidance for the practitioner interested in improving the

*The issue of who the "poor" are will be discussed in some detail later in this paper. For the moment, the consensually accepted definition of "those with low incomes" or those who are "economically deprived" is used. The number of individuals who are "poor" varies, of course, depending on the baseline used for economic deprivation. The term is not synonymous with the term "minority," but given the comparative economic advantage of racial/ethnic minorities, it is generally agreed that a larger proportion of these subpopulations--Asians, blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans--are poorer than white Americans. Because of their high correlations with income, education and socioeconomic status are other frequently used indicators. See the following references for more discussion of the economically based definition of poverty: Childers, 1973; Hsia, 1973; Harrington, 1962.

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effectiveness of his communication attempts to the poor. Yet, if anything, the

current literature suggests that the entire issue of "how do we reach the poor"

is in a state of almost spontaneous combustion. On the one hand, we appear

to know a lot about the context within which the poor receive and process mes-

sages. On the other hand, we seem to know very little. The recent literature

documents failure after failure in attempts to communicate to the urban poor.

The literature even shows the beginnings of an upheaval in the accepted way of

looking at the whole issue. In the meantime, the practitioner--the well-meaning

professional or agency representative who wants to help--is left with relatively

little guidance for his attempts.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature which describes the

communication systems of the urban poor, to assess why that literature has not been

more helpful, and to summarize the most recent work, which appears to be offering

both a more helpful perspective and more helpful data.

The Current Focus: Information Poverty

It is generally agreed that the important commodity of communications is informa-

tion. As Schramm wrote in a recent undergraduate textbook on communication,

"Information is the stuff of communication" (1973, p. 38). Yet, if one had to choose

one single statement that best sums up what the literature, to date, has said about

the communication systems of the urban poor, that statement would be: The poor are

caught in a vicious cycle of "information poverty." [4] The poor have less developed

information-processing skills than the nonpoor. They live in a homogeneous

environment. Their daily contacts are people like themselves. The media they use

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are high in entertainment value and low in information value. They have few organizational ties. Their contacts with helping agencies are for crisis-only purposes. They do not trust and do not rely on expert resources. In short, they are extremely hard to reach.*

This portrait of information poverty applies to all levels of communication amongst the poor--intrapersonal, interpersonal, mass, and organizational. Each of these areas will be reviewed in turn below.

Intrapersonal communication. If it is true, as many suggest,[5] that information is "power" and that people cope better when they have access to information, then by external standards of society, the poor are "information poor" indeed. The literature concurs in presenting a portrait of the poor as having fewer and less sophisticated information-processing skills. Study after study shows that those with the lower educational, socioeconomic, and income levels are less informed generally, less likely to be information seekers, and less able to find information in the rare instances when they make attempts.[6] It is in the context of such findings that recent research has posited and confirmed a "knowledge gap" phenomenon which suggests that the poor get information-poorer as the rich get information-richer. Thus, as the mass media and other channels infuse more and more information into the social system, those segments of the population with higher socioeconomic

*In order to limit the number of citations necessary for this review, citations will be made only to the comprehensive literature reviews which document points discussed here (i.e., Childers, 1973; Dervin and Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970; Dervin, 1976e; Hsia, 1973; Hurwitz, 1975). Other citations will be referenced when they are not listed in these available reviews.

status tend to acquire information at a faster rate so that the gap in knowledge increases rather than decreases.[7]

These findings are additionally supported by a complex of findings dealing with the motivations and aspirations of the poor. The poor are described as not only being less able to deal with the information-processing demands of urban life but also as less willing. Studies show the poor as seeing less value in information than the nonpoor. Many attribute this to the vicious cycle of poverty marked by alienation, resignation, and fatalism.[8]

Interpersonal communication. The portrait of the low "information potential" presented by research that has focused on the information-processing skills of the poor is complemented by research that has focused on the interpersonal communication systems of the poor.[9] The core finding is one that describes the poor as having homogeneous interpersonal networks. Studies show the poor as interacting with and seeking help from people who are essentially like themselves--friends, relatives, neighbors. The main topics of conversation are personal and focus on children, family, and jobs. The style of communication is described as being more emotional and nonverbal and less factual. While there are some indigenous organizations such as church and family organizations that serve as a focus of leadership, membership in organizations is described generally as low, as is the availability of indigenous leadership.

The picture that emerges, then, is one that shows the poor as being locked into interpersonal subcultural enclaves which carry with them very little information that might make a difference in their lives. Some commentators have even labeled the interpersonal communication environments of the urban poor as "urban villages" [10]

because of the similarities they see to the peasant villages of nonurban societies.
In particular, they are concerned about the lack of interpersonal contact the poor
have with the major society.

Mass communication. If the poor have little interpersonal contact with the
major society, the literature suggests that the opposite is true for their media con-
tact. The amount of media contact is large. The average urban poor adult, for
example, spends half a waking day on the media. Most of this time is spent on
electronic media, television in particular.

The poor, then, are not media-poor. Since in a highly urban and technologi-
cal society the media are one means of providing connections between citizens, it
is not unexpected that in the early years of the "war on poverty," the media were
seen as a tool for breaking through the "information void" of the poor. The brunt
of the evidence, however, suggests that the ways in which the poor make use of
media simply add to the information vacuum.[11]

The urban poor are described, over and over again, as high users of television
and low users of newspapers and magazines. The average low-income adult spends
4 to 6 hours a day on television and less than 1 hour per week on newspapers and
magazines; in contrast, general population adults spend 2 to 3 hours a day on tele-
vision and 1/2 to 1 hour a day on print media.[12]   The evidence further shows that
the poor, in contrast to other citizens, are more likely to believe that television
presents an accurate portrayal of reality and "lessons" that can be usefully applied
to their own lives.

Thus, the evidence shows that the poor use and rely most on the very mass
medium which, according to considerable evidence and commentary, has the least

information potential. While television presents a great deal of information on approved societal ends (e.g., having a good home, being healthy), it is the print media which present information on alternative means (e.g., ways of getting a good home, ways of being healthy).[13] Further evidence confirms that it is the high-print-media users who are better informed on a wide variety of topics, better able to obtain information, and better able to resolve their problems.[14]

What begins to accumulate in the literature, thus, is evidence of a kind of "Catch 22." The interpersonal contacts of the poor are homogeneous and lacking in diverse informational content. But the media contacts of the poor are also homogeneous and lacking in informational content. The one exception to this pattern is the emphasis in the media selections of the poor on "subculturally relevant" materials.[15] A number of studies have found that the poor consistently show a preference for media presentations designed to meet their special subcultural needs. In the same manner that classical music devotees show consistent use of classical music radio, low-income blacks, for example, show more use of black-oriented radio. The evidence suggests, however, that this specialized media selection increases contact only within the various subcultures of the poor and not between the poor and the major society.

Organizational communication. It is within the context of the highly homogeneous intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mass-communication contacts of the urban poor that the various social service agencies attempt to deliver their "help." There is little doubt that most of these attempts are well-meaning. It is recognized that in mass, urban societies most resources are controlled and provided by large-scale organizations and that those who are not in the mainstream and who lack

influence in these organizations need assistance both in having their voices heard and in obtaining the resources they need.

Despite well-meaning intent, however, the evidence confirms a two-way break-down in communication between poor clients and their human service agency "care-takers." [16] The poor little use and do not trust the very agencies designed to help them. The evidence across studies shows that the poor use intimate sources rather than expert sources. Agencies and professionals, in fact, are used as a last resort, for crisis situations. Agencies are often viewed as confusing, manipulating exploiters rather than as helpers. Agency attempts to personalize their communication efforts by using local intermediaries often fail because the intermediaries are seen as having "sold out." The data, in fact, show that in a very brief time these agency-appointed opinion leaders take on values and perspectives closer to those of agency personnel than those of the poor.

Analysis of how the human service agencies operate does not improve this picture. Considerable evidence suggests that the agencies do little to alleviate built-in barriers to agency use by the poor. While it is acknowledged that the poor are not trained in handling the red tape and technical language of bureaucratic mazes, these obstacles still remain. Evidence also shows agency personnel as stereotyping their clients and basing their programs on one-way messages rather than two-way give-and-take. This charge is particularly applied to the issue of how agencies show they are accountable to their poor clients. Most accountability measures are based on institu-tionally-relevant measures rather than on measures that would be either of interest or understandable to the poor. [17] There are also charges of secrecy and attempts to withhold service from difficult cases so that year-end service records can list more

successes.

Finally, even when effective help is delivered, the evidence shows that it is done so in a human service delivery system beset with inefficiency and rampant duplication of services. Studies show, for example, that finding the "right" helper for a given client often requires several attempts through the agency maze. While many agency personnel are highly specialized, they often end up providing assistance in areas outside their speciality because of the difficulty in making the system accessible to those it is supposed to serve.

The Failure of the Current Focus

Given the portrait presented above, what is the practitioner-communicator to do? The guidance available in the literature is meager and inferential. Mandates are made: Use relevant role models, embed your message in entertaining appeals, find local intermediaries and remember to change them often. At base, though, the most common prescription for the communicator remains now as it has been since communications research began to come into its own.[18] The communicator is told: You cannot expect to get through easily. Use simple messages and use them often. Redundancy is your best bet.

These prescriptions turn out to be of little help, particularly when one is faced with the almost overwhelmingly circular nature of the "information void" within which the poor are seen as residing. While the available research may provide descriptions of the communication environments of the poor as seen by outsiders, it provides very little understanding of how to communicate helpfully. In fact, the sane practitioner who accepts these findings should probably just give up.

It is at this point, however, that the question should be asked: Should we accept the findings? True, the findings are internally consistent. If one stands in the shoes of an agency practitioner who wants to get a message through to the poor, the findings hang together well and suggest the impossibility of the task. If, on the other hand, one steps into the shoes of one of "them"--a poor person--one might not feel as uninformed and undiverse and uncoping as the literature suggests.

Communications researchers are just now coming to grips both with their failure to provide guidance for communicating and with the overwhelmingly -dismal picture they have developed of communication potential. The result, in the most recent literature, is a kind of chaotic tension. What begins to emerge is a series of challenges, not so much against the available research as against the premises and assumptions that have guided both that research and the design of human service delivery agencies in Western societies.[19]

These assumptions can best be summarized as "we to them" rather than "we with them." It is assumed, for example, that we, external observers, can designate groups of people as relatively homogeneous audiences. It is assumed that we can then communicate to those audiences as if they were members of a community. It is assumed that income is a relevant criterion for audience designation. It is assumed that we have something of value-- information--to offer to members of these audiences. It is assumed that be- cause our information is valuable the transfer of it to members of this audience should in itself be helpful.

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In the context of such assumptions, it is not surprising that both communications researchers and practitioners appear, in retrospect, to have beaten a dead horse into the ground. Upon finding evidence of failure, the question has been: "How can we do it better?" not "Are we asking the wrong questions?" The time has now come for asking better questions.

Who are the poor? The available literature on the communication systems of the poor is in agreement that the poor are persons with low income, education, and socioeconomic status. Obviously, there are contexts within which such a designation is useful. One example is in creating fairer distribution of resources in society. The important issue now being raised in the literature, however, is whether this externally imposed creation of a public on the basis of such demographic descriptors is useful in communicating.[20] The assumption behind this creation is that one can somehow plan communication attempts to the poor as if the members of society so designated form a unified public. Concessions are made to various ethnic/racial differences in designating various subgroups of the poor, but the pattern of isolating subgroups based on demographic characteristics is standard.

On the surface, the practice looks useful. It allows agencies, for example, to demand that the poor speak in a unified voice, and thus reduces the number of voices agencies must listen to. It allows for the development of unified messages and thus reduces effort.

The problem, however, is that the designation of the poor as a unified audience is externally imposed. While the concept "poor" is relevant to agencies who must meet mandates, it may or may not be relevant at a given moment in time to individual recipients of agency messages. The act of communicating has symbolic consequences.

Thus, the impact occurs within the individual who communicates (e.g., thinks, reads, views, pays attention) in the process of making personal sense out of his world. [21]   The process of making sense is time-space bound. Each individual must create his own sense for his own unique situation at particular moments in time, for it is that individual who has to cope with self as he continues to move through time-space.

Given this reality, to plan and try to understand communication based on externally imposed across-time-space attributes such as demography can be nothing more than stereotyping. Increasingly, one finds literature that concurs. A common charge is that communication attempts to reach the poor are designed to impose programs based on external values rather than to help individual members of the "poor" meet their own objectives. [22]

The use of across-time-space attributes as predictors of communication behavior is not a weakness of poverty research alone. The approach pervades communication research and practice in all areas. It is part of the communicator's attempt to achieve control in communication situations. If one can describe the poor as usually being this way or that, then control is seen as more easily obtained.

Perhaps the most common manifestation of this approach is the emphasis in the literature on the "culture of poverty." Here the poor are described, supposedly on the basis of large quantities of empirical evidence, as being caught in a vicious cycle of alienation and fatalism. [23]   Often the "culture" is used as an explanation for why the poor are not information seekers. Then, the fact that the poor are not information seekers is offered as another reason why they are caught in the "culture." And so the circle goes.

Social scientists have just begun to catch on to the tautology of this line of reasoning. If the poor are studied primarily in the context of the normative goals of agencies, then the poor will not, of course, be active information seekers. If the poor do not achieve on normatively defined standards of success, by definition they become alienated. The results, even though backed by a great deal of quantitative evidence, support a myth. Some observers even accuse the entire research approach as being designed to promote and maintain the status quo of keeping the poor poor.[24] They charge that positing a psychologically based culture of poverty takes the onus off the system. Instead, they assert that the so-called powerlessness of the poor has tangible, real-world roots that the major society creates and imposes.[25]

Beyond this specific challenge is a general call for situationally based research.[26] This alternative approach says that the poor are not all alike and that the only effective way of understanding their communication behaviors is in the context of the real-world situations in which they see themselves. There may well be subgroups of "poor" who have similar situational orientations. These orientations, however, cannot be inferred from demographic or personality attributes imposed by outsiders. Rather, situational assessments can only be made by participants.

One of the most unfortunate outcomes of the use of externally applied definitions of poverty is that we have no more understanding today than we did 10 to 15 years ago of how to use communication to intervene usefully in individual attempts to make personal sense while coping with or trying to change the situational conditions that constitute poverty. Because we have not looked at situational orientations, we can draw few generalizations from research focusing on one societal subgroup that are

useful for another group. In the process, we have missed the fact that virtually

everyone at some time finds himself in situations to which he responds fatalisti-

cally.[27]   No matter who is participant, studying human response to these

situational conditions can provide us with lessons about communication.

How communication helps?   The assumption that when communicating it is

useful to define audiences on the basis of externally imposed across-time-space

attributes is but one of the assumptions that has hindered the ability of communica-

tions research to be helpful not just in the poverty arena but in other arenas as well.

Essentially, communications research and the practitioner arts it serves (e.g.;

journalism, public relations) have taken on a transmission mentality. The source

is seen as someone who has valuable information to "transmit."[28]   The problem

is defined as one of getting that valuable information to designated receivers. Re-

ceivers, unfortunately, appear recalcitrant, so a large body of data has developed

indicating that the problem is getting the message around all the formidable barriers

that receivers raise. The assumed intent is usually one of persuasion. In the poverty

research arena, the persuasive intent is not one of selling products. Rather, it is one

of selling an assumed better-way of life.

When it comes to applying the results of such research to the here-and-now

demands of communicating, one finds relatively little help. The problem, of course,

is that the normative model doesn't fit the way communication really works. People

are not recalcitront receivers rejecting helpful messages.[29]   Rather, they are

individuals bound into unique time-space contexts. They are coping the best they

can. They cope on the basis of the understandings they have. When these understand-

ings no longer work,[30] they create (by thinking, for example) or seek (by reading,

viewing, asking, for example) new understandings. Since life is "inherently

unmanageable," [31] they understand--often, it seems, better than researchers

do--that they must make their own sense. External information may be helpful

but if so it is because they made it so. Since circumstances are ever-changing,

no amount of external information can ever give absolute answers in the arena

of living.

This perspective on communication holds up to view myriad weaknesses in

the accepted approach to attempts to understand how the poor receive and pro-

cess messages. The current approach assumes a one-way communication process

instead of acknowledging the active individual--the receiver--who by virtue of

his ability to pay attention or not has ultimate control of himself. The approach

ignores the fact that in order for an individual to make use of messages, the

individual must inform himself within the context of his own experience. This

informing process requires behavior--not just attending, but thinking, interpret-

ing, questioning, applying. The approach ignores the fact that attitude change

and arbitrary information gain are not the only possible consequences of communi-

cating and may, indeed, be less useful consequences to focus on. Individuals

will find themselves informed helpfully not because they gained knowledge or

changed attitudes but because they gained understandings, reasons, reassurances,

motivations, instructions, clarifications, visions, possibilities, dreams.

Perhaps most important of all, the approach has essentially ignored the fact

that if a charge of "information vacuum" is to be put forth, the charge can apply

to agencies as well as to the poor. Commentator after commentator agrees that as

much as the poor need "information," the system needs "communication invention." [32]

What is needed is ways in which diverse people can speak and be heard, partici-
pate and have impact, ask questions of individual importance and become informed.
These are all meaningful places of focus for communication researchers and practi-
tioners alike.

Some Alternative Approaches

A number of researchers have begun the slow and sometimes painful process of
breaking out of the information poverty tautology. Since most of the work is recent
in origin, progress is slow. Despite this, there have already emerged some important
findings--findings which begin to dispel some illusions about the poor.

One important set of studies confronts directly the notion that it is only better-
educated, more well-to-do individuals who are active information seekers.

Genova and Greenberg (1977) found that interest was a far better
predictor of knowledge of two news events than education. In-
terest in this case was measured in terms of the impact the event
had on the individual's own life and relevance to the interpersonal
networks the individual considered important. Education did not
correlate to interest. Further, the correlation between interest
and knowledge was strongest for the kind of knowledge which fits
better the notion of being informed--structural knowledge or
knowledge about the whys and hows of the events in contrast to
factual knowledge.

Clarke and Kline (1974) charged that the studies that show that

education affects learning while media use does not are spurious

because educators ask only about the kinds of learning which

they think are important. Further, they said, media use is usually

measured in a vacuum rather than in the context of topics of

interest to the respondent. Clark and Kline measured "message

discrimination" in the media, or the extent to which the citizen

had unearthed media messages pertaining to his own interest in

problems he thought the government should solve. Their correla-

tion of message discrimination to learning (information holding)

was considerably larger than the correlation of education to

information holding.

Donohue et al. (1975) pinpointed a number of conditions under

which the knowledge gap closes. One of these was in the case

of crisis issues involving all members of a community. Another

was in the case of issues involving local conflicts.

Edelstein (1974) found that some of his illiterate adults became

literate when they found a need to read want ads in order to get

a job.

This particular research emphasis pits education (one indicator of poverty) against

individual respondent orientations and situational perceptions and asks the question

"Who wins?" To date, the unique respondent with his unique interests has won.

Another line of research has explicitly sought to unearth information showing differences within homogeneous poverty samples.

Dervin (1971) found a high degree of diversity in the complexity of knowledge about consumer credit that her low-income black respondents had.

Bishop and McMartin (1973) divided their low-income, low-educated respondents into types based on their orientations on two dimensions. One dimension focused on the degree of contact the individual had beyond his immediate family. The other dimension focused on the degree to which the individual's opinions were person-oriented (i.e., based on moralistic judgments of people) or issues-oriented (based on judgments of specific failures in the system). On the basis of these two dimensions, Bishop and McMartin arrived at four respondent types: "traditional" (low outside contact, person-oriented); "parochial" (high outside contact, person-oriented); "localite" (low outside contact, issues-oriented); "modern" (high outside contact, issues-oriented).. Using this typology, these researchers found considerable differences in media use and information seeking. Their modern respondents, for example, used more print media and paid high attention to news content. In contrast, their traditional respondents preferred radio and looked for entertainment content. Localites also preferred radio but focused on local news. Bishop

and McMartin concluded that their respondents picked and chose

their media and their media content to satisfy specific life-style

demands.

While these studies serve the purpose of beginning to show diversity within the

so-called poor, their shortcoming is the lack of a respondent-defined and thus

respondent-relevant focus.   Dervin arbitrarily imposed consumer credit as an issue

while Bishop and McMartin imposed an across-time-space-belief measure.   Another

line of relevant research has not looked at poor respondents per se but has developed

situationally based typologies which have the ring of an analog to the "culture of

poverty" notion.

Grunig (Grunig, 1976; Grunig and Disbrow, 1977) developed a

situational typology based on two dimensions.   One dimension--

problem recognition--focused on the extent to which a person

recognizes that something is lacking in a situation so that he stops

to think about it. The second dimension--existence of constraints--

focused on extent to which a person perceives a situation as allow-

ing him a choice free from constraints which he, acting alone, can

control. The juxtaposition of these two dimensions created a

typology of four types, labeled in terms of whether individuals who

fit the type will process and/or seek information. The juxtaposition

of high constraint with high problem recognition was labeled "con-

strained"; high constraint with low problem recognition, "fatalistic";

low constraint with high problem recognition, "problem-facing"; and

low constraint with low problem-recognition, "routine habit."
Thus, Grunig expects differences in communication behavior
to depend on whether individuals see themselves in situations
that require movement and whether they see themselves as free
to move. As an example of his numerous findings, his early
studies in this line of work showed that individuals in fatal-
istic situations were least likely to seek or process informa-
tion while individuals in both problem-facing and constrained
situations were most likely. Individuals in constrained situa-
tions were of interest because they actively communicated in
order to seek information on how to eliminate the constraints
that blocked them. Whether the individual who saw himself
in a routine habit situation communicated or not depended on
whether he had a rule-of-thumb for the situation-based on past
experience. If he did, he was more likely to communicate in
order to reinforce previous evaluations of similar situations.

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Dervin et al. (1976) developed a related situational typology
based on individual perceptions of situational movement. A
"decision" situation is one in which the individual sees him-
self as having to choose between two or more options for move-
ment. A "barrier" state is one in which the individual has a
goal but something (a barrier) stands between him and his goal.
A "worry" state is one in which the individual has no direction

for movement and sees himself as out of control. A "problema-
tic" state is one in which the individual is moving in a direction
but the choice is out of his control and he has accepted this lack
of control. Finally, a "comprehension" situation is a detour from
movement at a point when the individual has seen a need to in-
form himself, learn things, or get a new understanding prior to
continuing movement. Results of this work to date show that as
an individual moves through time-space he moves in and out of
these different situational states. A troublesome event may start
out like a worry, turn into a decision, and suddenly become
problematic. The situational types have been shown to be good
predictors of the quality of communication behaviors. As examples
of the findings: People who see themselves at a given point in
time in decision situations ask more questions about options. In
contrast, those who see themselves in barrier situations ask more
questions about ways to get around barriers, while those in
problematic situations ask more questions about reasons, causes,
and motives. People in worry situations ask about how to control
self. People in comprehension situations ask more questions about
the nature of the system.

Both these approaches are entirely situationally bound. Both are attempting to
construct a way of looking at situational perceptions which will provide here-and-
now predictability of communication behaviors. [33] In both these approaches,

while one readily sees the analog to some of the notions used to describe the culture

of poverty, one also can readily see that any individual--rich or poor, educated or

not--moves, as life circumstances move, from one of these situation types to another.

One day on one issue an individual might be fatalistic or worried. On another day

and another issue, the same individual may be constrained or blocked by barriers.

The kinds of questions the individual asks, the things that will help him become in-

formed, the communicating he does, all will depend on where he sees himself in

time-space.

Only one study was found that explicitly applied the situational approach to a

comparison between low-income and general population respondents.

Dervin et al. (1976) did an in-depth analysis of how low-income

Asian and black respondents and general population respondents

informed themselves as they moved through recent troublesome

situations. Each respondent defined his own situation. The ques-

tionnaire then asked for respondent reports on situation perceptions,

situation facing, and information seeking. The results were most

remarkable in their lack of differences. There was little difference

across samples in whether respondents saw resolutions and informa-

tion as accessible to them. There was little difference in how they

faced their situations. The most consistent pattern of differences

was quantitative. The low-income respondents articulated fewer

situations, saw fewer people as involved in their situations, saw

fewer connections between their situations and other events, used

fewer tactics for coping, and sought less information. While the

quantitative differences were consistent, the study still unearthed

a great deal of information seeking on the part of low-income

respondents. The low-income respondents placed different empha-

sis on the kinds of questions they wanted answers to in their situa-

tions. They were more likely than general population respondents

to want to know the reasons and causes behind events. The low-

income adults also evaluated whether information found or tactics

tried were helpful on different criteria than did the general popu-

lation. The low-income adults more often assessed whether some-

thing helped in terms of whether it provided social support and

encouragement. They were less likely than general population

respondents to evaluate in terms of whether they were helped in

planning strategies. Low-income blacks were also much less like-

ly to evaluate on the basis of whether a situation was resolved or

progress was made toward resolution. Further analysis of this data

supports the notion that these differences in question types and

evaluation bases are more strongly related to situation perceptions

than to race or income.

In sum, recent studies are making a helpful dent in the dismal picture developed

of the noninformation-seeking poor. Interests and situational perceptions are better

predictors of information seeking than education. The information-seeking behaviors

of the supposedly undiverse poor can be differentiated if one asks better questions.

If one focuses on situational perceptions, one sees patterns of communicating that

make sense in terms of these perceptions. People with problems to solve and barriers

in front of them try to get around them. People who see an outsider's problem as irrelevant, and the barriers the outsider sees as nonexistent, do nothing. People embedded in situations important to them do a lot of communicating. With a situationally based approach, an approach that does not assume that the trans- mission of information is what communication is all about, we can learn a lot that is helpful to the well-meaning practitioner.

As communication researchers attempt to expand on the gains made in these recent studies, practitioners may be impatient for answers. In this context, it is wise to recall that the assumptions about the poor and the assumptions about the nature of communications which current research is trying to beat down are not merely the inventions of researchers. Rather, they are long-held, pervasive assumptions of Western society. They are assumptions that have guided the design of most human service delivery institutions in the United States. There is much, therefore, for both practitioner and researcher to learn. And, there is much to do as we face the full implications of these long-held assumptions. As we begin to fully understand that we communicate with people and not to them, we will find the need to invent new procedures for communicating, procedures which acknow- ledge how people actually communicate rather than how fantasy wishes they did.

FOOTNOTES

1. A number of authors raised these questions explicitly. See, in particular, Midura's (1971) Why aren't we getting through? The urban communication Crisis.

2. This point is documented in Greenberg and Dervin, 1970.

3. For comprehensive literature reviews, see: Childers, 1973; Dervin, 1976e; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970.

4. The term "information poverty" is Childers (1973). Many social scientists have referred to the "information void" within which the poor are seen as living. See, in particular, Greenberg and Dervin 1970, and Dervin and Greenberg 1972 for reviews.

5. The idea that information is valuable for coping is common. The idea is presented quite explicitly by Childers, 1973; Dervin, 1976e; Dahl, 1970; Hurwitz, 1975; Schramm, 1973. The assumptions behind this idea are challenged in a later section of this paper. For a detailed challenge of the assumptions, see: Dervin, 1976a; Dervin et al., 1976.

6. These findings are widely supported. See: Childers, 1973; Dervin and Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970; Hurwitz, 1975; Warner et al., 1973.

7. The "knowledge gap" hypothesis was presented and confirmed in this form by Tichenor et al., 1970. Tichenor and his colleagues (Donohue et al., 1975; Tichenor et al., 1973), as well as other researchers (Genova and Greenberg, 1977), have done research modifying the hypothesis. These developments are discussed in a later section of this paper.

8. See Childers (1973) and Greenberg and Dervin (1970) for reviews relating to these points.

9. For references focusing on interpersonal communications amongst the urban poor, see: Childers, 1973; Dervin and Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970; Hsia, 1973; Hurwitz, 1975; Warner et al., 1973.

10. The term "urban village" is Gans (1962) applied to a low-income enclave of Italian Americans.

11. For comprehensive reviews of studies dealing with media behaviors of the poor, see: Childers, 1973; Dervin and Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970; Greenberg, 1971; Hurwitz, 1975; Kassarjian, 1973. Recent studies not mentioned in these reviews include: Bogart, 1972; Hsia, 1973.

12. These findings come from Greenberg, 1971; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970.

13. For a discussion of this specific point, see Dervin, 1971; Dervin and Greenberg, 1972.

14. This finding is tautological, however. It is better educated citizens who use print media. It is also better educated citizens who more frequently solve their problems. For a recent study focusing on these relationships, see Tan and Vaughn, 1976.

15. A number of researchers have focused specifically on the use of "sub-cultural" materials. See, in particular: Greenberg and Dervin, 1970 Kassarjian, 1973; Surlin, 1972.

16. The term "caretakers" is Gans (1962). References used to develop the portrait of "organizational" communication include: Childers, 1973; Dervin, 1976e; Dervin and Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg and Dervin, 1970; Hurwitz, 1975; Mann, 1973.

17. This is a general problem of human service delivery. For a discussion of the issue in the context of information services, see Dervin, 1977; Zweizig and Dervin, 1977.

18. The problem of why messages do not get through has plagued communications research. For relevant discussions, see Bauer, 1971; Dervin, 1976d; Klapper, 1960.

19. The most articulate statements of the assumptions that have hindered communications research are available in the work of Carter. See citations in references. For a recent detailed discussion of these assumptions, see Dervin, 1976a.

20. A number of observers are making this argument. One eloquent argument comes from Hanson (1971) who suggests that officials are using geographically based definitions of publics based on a social order that has not existed since 1910.

21. The perspective on communication offered in this paper rests heavily on the situational approach to communicating being developed at the University of Washington School of Communications. A particular debt is owed to the theoretical work of Richard Carter. See citations in References, particularly Carter (1973) which focuses on communication as behavior. See also citations for Dervin, Edelstein, and Stamm.

22. This point is made in particular by Hsia, 1973; Mann, 1973.

23. Rogers (1976) suggested that this focus is part of the U.S. penchant for blame-laying (i.e., blame the victim).

24. See, in particular: Elliott, 1974; Hsia, 1973; Mann, 1973; Mathiason, 1969; Nordenstreng, 1977; Roling et al., 1976; Rogers, 1976.

25. It is interesting that most of these challenges come from non-American researchers who have attempted to apply American-style communication approaches in efforts to help their countries' underprivileged or peasantry. See, for example: Beltran, 1976; Diaz Bordenave, 1976; Nordenstreng, 1977; Roling et al., 1976. Several studies suggest that there is purposive avoidance of "establishment" media and experts not because of a lack of interest in being informed but because of ideological conflicts (E. Greenberg, 1970; Tan and Vaughn, 1976).

26. The call for situationally based communication research is a growing movement: Cappella, 1977; Davis, 1977; Dervin et al., 1976; Edelstein, 1974; Grunig, 1973a, 1973b. Interestingly, there is also a growing call for situationally based psychological theory (Rotter et al., 1972).

27. Grunig (Grunig, 1976; Grunig and Disbrow, 1977) has developed a situation-orientation typology which specifies the conditions under which an individual responds "fatalistically." This research is discussed in the last section of this paper.

28. The term is Freire's (1970).

29. This brief perspective on not-so-recalcitrant receivers comes from an in-depth study of how people use information in coping with everyday troublesome situations. See Dervin et al., 1976.

30. A number of researchers suggest that individuals seek new sense only when circumstances are such that they see their old sense as no longer working. Carter (1973, 1974a, 1974b, 1975a, 1975b, 1976) refers to this as the need to bridge gaps. Given what he calls the common condition of discontinuity, making new sense is frequently required. See also: Davis, 1977; Dervin, 1976c; Grunig, 1973b; Stamm et al., 1976.

31. Kopp (1976) uses this phrase.

32. The need for the invention of viable two-way communication systems is emphasized by a number of recent works. See, in particular, Grunig, 1973a; Hanson, 1971.

33. Carter (personal communication, 1976) points out the need for the development of then...then theory in communication rather than if... then theory. The former is theory that focuses on the here-and-now realities of communicating. Situational structures and behaviors are the predictors. The latter theory focuses on such across-time-space predictors as demography, personality. Dervin discusses the distinction in some detail (Dervin, 1976b; 1977).

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