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Psychological Mechanisms of Interpersonal Communication in Conditions of Emotional Stress

Abstract:

The article is devoted to a theoretical analysis of the psychological mechanisms of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension arising in situations of increased stress load and social instability. The relevance of the study is determined by the need for a systemic understanding of the transformation of communicative processes under the influence of emotional factors. The research problem is associated with the absence of a holistic theoretical model explaining how emotional tension affects the structure and effectiveness of interpersonal communication. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the systematisation of the psychological mechanisms of communication as a multilevel system comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural components. The object of the study is the processes of interpersonal communication, while the subject of the study is the psychological mechanisms that determine the specific features of communication under conditions of emotional tension. The study aims to identify, systematise and theoretically substantiate these mechanisms. The methodological basis of the study consists of methods of theoretical analysis, generalisation, classification and comparative analysis of psychological concepts. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the works of Paul Watzlawick, Richard Lazarus and Daniel Goleman. As a result of the study, it was established that interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension is characterised by the distortion of cognitive interpretations, the intensification of emotional responses and changes in behavioural strategies of interaction. It was found that cognitive mechanisms determine the perception and interpretation of the communicative situation, emotional mechanisms regulate the intensity of responses, and behavioural mechanisms implement communicative strategies. It is substantiated that the interaction of these mechanisms forms the systemic nature of communicative processes. The article concludes that interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension should be considered as a dynamic system of interrelated psychological mechanisms. The results obtained clarify existing theoretical approaches and expand their interpretative potential. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of applying the results in psychological counselling, communication skills training and the management of interpersonal interactions.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, emotional tension, psychological mechanisms, communicative distortions, emotional regulation, cognitive processes, behavioural strategies.

Introduction

In the context of contemporary social dynamics and the increasing impact of stressogenic factors, the problem of interpersonal communication acquires particular scholarly significance. Emotional tension arising in situations of uncertainty, conflict or increased psychological load substantially affects the nature of interaction between people, changing both the content and the form of communicative processes.

Contemporary research in the psychology of communication and stress demonstrates a wide range of approaches to the analysis of interpersonal interaction. In particular, the works of Paul Watzlawick reveal the structural features of communication as a system of interaction; Richard Lazarus's concept emphasises the role of cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation; and Daniel Goleman's studies underline the importance of emotional regulation in the process of interpersonal interaction. However, existing approaches generally consider these aspects in isolation and do not form a holistic understanding of the mechanisms through which communication is transformed under conditions of emotional tension.

In this regard, a research gap can be identified, namely the absence of an integrative theoretical model explaining the interrelationship between cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms in the process of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension.

The scientific novelty of the present study lies in the systematisation and theoretical substantiation of interpersonal communication as a multilevel process in which different psychological mechanisms function in interrelation, forming a holistic system of interaction.

The research question is formulated as follows: how do psychological mechanisms transform interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension?

The object of the study is the processes of interpersonal communication, while the subject of the study is the psychological mechanisms that determine the specific features of communication under conditions of emotional tension.

The study aims to identify, systematise and theoretically substantiate the psychological mechanisms of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been defined:

- to analyse theoretical approaches to understanding interpersonal communication and emotional tension;
- to clarify the conceptual field of the key categories of the study;
- to identify and classify the psychological mechanisms influencing communication;
- to systematise communicative strategies and distortions under conditions of emotional tension;
- to interpret interpersonal communication as a systemic psychological process.

The theoretical significance of the study lies in clarifying the conceptual apparatus of the psychology of communication and in developing an interpretative model of interpersonal interaction under conditions of emotional tension.

The practical significance of the study consists in the possibility of applying the results obtained in psychological counselling, communication skills training and the management of interpersonal interactions under stressful conditions.

The results of the study are addressed to psychologists, specialists in the helping professions and researchers in social psychology, and may also be used in educational practice.

Methods

The study has a theoretical and analytical research design and is aimed at identifying and systematising the psychological mechanisms of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension. Within this approach, interpersonal communication is considered as a complex multilevel process comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural components that function in interrelation.

The research material consists of scholarly publications in the fields of communication psychology, stress theory, emotional regulation and interpersonal interaction. The analysis includes both classical theoretical works and contemporary studies reflecting the development of scholarly views on communicative processes. The theoretical basis is formed, in particular, by the approaches of Paul Watzlawick (1967), Richard Lazarus (1984) and Daniel Goleman (1995).

The criteria for selecting sources included the theoretical significance of the works, their contribution to the development of the problems of interpersonal communication and emotional tension, and their representativeness for various areas of contemporary psychological science. The analysis includes sources that make it possible to examine communicative processes from different methodological perspectives. The limitations of the material are associated with the theoretical nature of the study and the absence of empirical data.

The chronological scope of the study covers the development of scholarly views on interpersonal communication and stress from the classical concepts of the second half of the twentieth century to contemporary research, which makes it possible to trace the evolution of approaches and identify stable theoretical tendencies.

The analytical procedure involves the sequential application of theoretical analysis, comparative analysis and the systematisation of scholarly data. At the first stage, key concepts of interpersonal communication and emotional tension are analysed. At the second stage, different theoretical approaches are compared to identify similarities and differences in the interpretation of communicative processes. At the third stage, psychological mechanisms are classified and integrated into a unified theoretical model.

The methodology of the study includes general scientific methods, such as analysis, synthesis, generalisation and classification, as well as specialised methods, namely comparative and interpretative analysis. The choice of these methods is determined by the need to identify the structural and functional characteristics of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension.

The validity of the study is ensured by reliance on recognised scholarly concepts and by the logical consistency of the stages of analysis. Reliability is achieved through the consistent application of the selected methods and the transparency of the research procedure.

Literature Review

The study of interpersonal communication and its transformation under conditions of emotional tension occupies a significant place in contemporary psychological science and is developing within several interrelated theoretical directions. An analysis of the scholarly literature makes it possible to identify several key lines of research: the communicative, the stress-cognitive, the coping-resource, the emotion-regulatory and the resilience-oriented lines. Each of them

contributes to the understanding of the problem under consideration, while remaining limited in terms of its explanatory completeness when considered in isolation.

The first line of research is associated with the analysis of interpersonal communication as a system of interaction. Within this approach, communication is regarded not only as the transmission of information, but also as a complex process involving the interpretation of messages, the context of interaction and the mutual influence of participants. In the work of Watzlawick et al. (1967), it is emphasised that communication possesses structural regularities and that any interaction includes both a content level and a relational level. This approach is important for understanding how communicative acts are embedded in systems of interpersonal relations and how misunderstandings may arise not only from the content of messages, but also from the relational meaning attributed to them.

This communicative perspective is further developed in broader theories of interpersonal and intercultural communication. Burleson (2010) conceptualises interpersonal communication as a multidimensional process involving message production, interpretation, relational coordination and social influence. Gudykunst (2005), in turn, demonstrates that communicative interaction is shaped by uncertainty, cultural expectations and the interpretative frameworks through which participants perceive one another. These approaches are significant because they show that communication is always mediated by context, expectations and subjective interpretation. However, they do not fully explain how acute or prolonged emotional tension modifies the internal psychological mechanisms underlying communication.

The second line of research is represented by theories of stress and cognitive appraisal, within which the influence of psychological tension on human perception and behaviour is analysed. According to the approach developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the subjective appraisal of a situation plays a key role in the response to stress, determining subsequent cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions. This model is particularly relevant to the analysis of interpersonal communication, since communicative signals are interpreted through the prism of perceived threat, available resources and expected consequences. Under conditions of emotional tension, neutral or ambiguous messages may therefore be appraised as hostile, critical or threatening.

The physiological and neurobiological foundations of stress also provide an important basis for understanding communicative transformation. McEwen (2007) shows that stress and adaptation are associated with complex neurobiological processes that affect cognition, emotional reactivity and behavioural regulation. From this perspective, emotional tension may influence communication not only at the level of conscious appraisal, but also through changes in attention, arousal and self-regulatory capacity. Bryant (2021) further demonstrates, in the context of post-traumatic stress, that prolonged exposure to stressors may alter threat perception, emotional processing and interpersonal functioning. These findings are relevant for explaining why communication under conditions of emotional stress may become more defensive, reactive and conflict-prone.

The third line of research concerns coping strategies and resource-based approaches to stress. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) show that coping is closely connected with personality characteristics and determines how individuals respond to stressful situations through problem-focused, emotion-focused or avoidance-oriented strategies. In interpersonal communication, these coping patterns may be manifested in attempts to clarify the situation, seek support, withdraw from

interaction or react aggressively. Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory also contributes to this field by interpreting stress as a threat to, loss of or insufficient gain in valued resources (*Hobfoll, 1989*). In communicative situations, emotional tension may therefore be intensified when interaction is perceived as demanding, resource-depleting or threatening to social, emotional or personal resources.

The role of social support is also essential for understanding the adaptive potential of interpersonal communication. Taylor (*2011*) emphasises that social support may reduce the negative impact of stress and contribute to psychological well-being. This indicates that communication under stress is not only a potential source of tension, but also a mechanism of adaptation and recovery. At the same time, when emotional tension distorts perception and reduces communicative accuracy, the supportive function of interaction may be weakened or transformed into conflict. Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrate that stress and coping are strongly shaped by uncertainty, social isolation and the availability of interpersonal resources (*Polizzi et al., 2020*), which further confirms the importance of analysing communication in socially unstable conditions.

The fourth line of research is associated with the study of emotional regulation and emotional intelligence as factors influencing the quality of interpersonal communication. Goleman (*1995*) emphasises the importance of recognising, understanding and managing emotions for successful interpersonal interaction. Gross (*2015*) develops this perspective by analysing emotion regulation as a set of processes through which individuals influence the intensity, duration and expression of emotional states. These approaches are particularly important for the study, since emotional tension directly affects the regulation of communicative behaviour. Insufficient emotional regulation may lead to impulsive responses, escalation of conflict and reduced capacity for constructive dialogue, whereas effective regulation may preserve the stability and functionality of interaction.

The fifth line of research is connected with resilience-oriented approaches. Contemporary resilience studies consider resilience not as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic process involving adaptation under adverse conditions. Southwick et al. (*2022*) emphasise the conceptual complexity of resilience and the need to consider biological, psychological, social and contextual factors. Kalisch et al. (*2021*) propose deconstructing resilience in order to identify specific mechanisms that enable individuals to maintain or restore functioning under stress. Chmitorz et al. (*2021*) also underline the importance of population-based resilience research, showing that resilience should be analysed in relation to social context, exposure to stressors and adaptive functioning. These approaches are relevant because they make it possible to interpret stable communication under emotional tension as an outcome of coordinated cognitive, emotional and behavioural regulation.

A comparison of the analysed sources shows that each theoretical direction explains only a particular aspect of interpersonal communication under emotional tension. Communication theories reveal the structural and relational organisation of interaction; stress and appraisal theories explain how situations acquire subjective significance; coping and resource theories clarify behavioural responses to stress; emotion-regulation theories describe the management of affective reactions; and resilience theories make it possible to understand the preservation of functioning under adverse conditions. However, these approaches are often developed separately and do not

provide a fully integrated model of how cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms interact within the communicative process.

Thus, the literature review reveals a research gap associated with the insufficient integration of communicative, stress-cognitive, emotion-regulatory and resilience-oriented approaches. Existing studies provide important theoretical foundations, but they do not fully explain how emotional tension transforms interpersonal communication as a systemic psychological process. This circumstance determines the need for the present study, which aims to systematise the psychological mechanisms of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension and to interpret them as interrelated components of a dynamic communicative system.

Results

1. Cognitive Mechanisms of the Transformation of Interpersonal Communication under Conditions of Emotional Tension

The study established that, under conditions of emotional tension, interpersonal communication undergoes substantial changes at the level of cognitive information processing. It was found that the key mechanism is the transformation of the processes of perception, interpretation and appraisal of the communicative situation. Under increased emotional tension, there is a tendency towards the selective perception of information, whereby attention is focused primarily on negative or potentially threatening aspects of interaction.

It was established that the cognitive interpretation of communicative signals under conditions of tension becomes distorted: neutral or ambiguous statements are interpreted as critical, hostile or evaluative. This leads to the formation of stable cognitive schemas that intensify the subjective perception of conflict and reduce the accuracy of understanding the interlocutor's intentions.

In addition, it was found that under conditions of emotional tension, the capacity for cognitive flexibility decreases, which is manifested in the limitation of alternative interpretations and a tendency to become fixed on the initial appraisal of the situation. This complicates the correction of communicative behaviour and hinders constructive interaction.

The analysis showed that, in this context, cognitive mechanisms perform not only an interpretative function, but also a function of intensifying emotional tension through the repeated processing of negative stimuli, namely rumination, which creates a closed cycle of cognitive-emotional interaction.

Thus, under conditions of emotional tension, cognitive mechanisms form a distorted interpretative model of communication, reducing its adequacy and creating preconditions for the further destabilisation of interpersonal interaction.

2. Emotional Mechanisms of Regulation and Destabilisation of Interpersonal Communication

The results of the study show that emotional mechanisms play a key role in determining the dynamics of interpersonal communication under conditions of tension. It was established that an increase in the level of emotional arousal leads to an intensification of affective responses, which directly affects the content and form of communicative behaviour.

It was found that under conditions of emotional tension, the effectiveness of emotional regulation decreases, which is manifested in difficulties in controlling emotional expression, increased impulsivity and a tendency towards affective responses. This leads to a shift in

communication from the rational-cognitive level to the emotional-reactive level, thereby reducing its constructiveness.

It was established that negative emotional states, such as anxiety, irritation and frustration, increase the perceived significance of communicative signals and contribute to their exaggeration. This, in turn, leads to the escalation of communicative tension and the formation of conflictual scenarios of interaction.

In addition, it was found that emotional mechanisms may perform both a destabilising and an adaptive function. In cases where the capacity for emotional regulation is preserved, a reduction in the intensity of negative responses and the maintenance of the relative stability of communication can be observed. Otherwise, interaction becomes disorganised.

Thus, under conditions of tension, emotional mechanisms determine the degree of stability of interpersonal communication, acting either as a factor in its destabilisation or as a condition for preserving its functionality.

3. Behavioural Mechanisms and Communicative Strategies under Conditions of Emotional Tension

The study established that the behavioural level of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension is characterised by changes in interaction strategies and the formation of specific models of communicative behaviour. It was found that these changes are manifested in a transition from constructive forms of interaction to defensive and reactive strategies.

It was determined that, under conditions of tension, the most common strategies are avoidance, aggression and communicative distancing. These forms of behaviour are aimed at reducing subjective tension; however, at the same time, they decrease the effectiveness of interaction and impede the achievement of mutual understanding.

It was established that inconsistency between cognitive interpretations and emotional responses leads to the emergence of contradictory behavioural models, in which external behaviour does not correspond to the internal state. This intensifies communicative distortions and reduces the predictability of interaction.

In addition, it was found that adaptive behavioural strategies based on conscious regulation and an orientation towards constructive interaction are implemented significantly less frequently under conditions of high emotional tension, which indicates a decrease in the overall effectiveness of communicative processes.

A generalisation of the results showed that behavioural mechanisms act as an external manifestation of deeper cognitive and emotional processes, reflecting either their coherence or, conversely, their disintegration.

Thus, under conditions of emotional tension, behavioural mechanisms indicate the degree of disorganisation or adaptiveness of communication, serving as an indicator of the coherence between cognitive and emotional processes.

Discussion

The results obtained are of considerable scholarly relevance in the context of contemporary research on interpersonal communication and the psychology of stress. Under conditions of increasing emotional load and social instability, communication is increasingly considered not only

as a process of information exchange, but also as a complex system of psychological interaction subject to internal transformations.

The study conducted shows that the influence of emotional tension on communication is not episodic, but systemic in nature. This makes it possible to expand existing understandings of the nature of communicative disturbances and to regard them not as accidental failures, but as a regular outcome of the functioning of psychological mechanisms under stressful conditions.

The analysis of the results indicates that interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension is transformed at all levels of psychological organisation. Cognitive mechanisms distort the perception and interpretation of communicative signals; emotional mechanisms intensify reactivity and reduce control; and behavioural mechanisms implement defensive or maladaptive strategies of interaction.

A key result is the identification of the systemic interrelationship between these mechanisms. Their interaction forms a closed cycle: cognitive distortions intensify emotional tension; emotional responses influence behaviour; and behavioural strategies reinforce the initial interpretations. This makes it possible to consider communication under conditions of tension as a self-sustaining system.

The results obtained make it possible to refine and expand existing theoretical approaches to interpersonal communication and stress. In particular, they develop understandings of cognitive appraisal as a central mechanism in the perception of a communicative situation, showing that its influence is intensified and transformed under the impact of emotional tension.

In addition, the results of the study complement concepts of emotional regulation by demonstrating that emotional processes in communication should be considered not only as internal states of the subject, but also as factors that directly influence the structure of interaction. Thus, the proposed model contributes to the integration of different theoretical directions and to the formation of a more holistic understanding of interpersonal communication.

The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of applying the results obtained in psychological counselling and communication skills training. Understanding that communicative disturbances are associated with cognitive and emotional mechanisms makes it possible to develop more effective strategies for correcting interpersonal interaction.

The results may also be used in professional fields characterised by a high level of emotional load, such as medicine, education, management and social work. In these contexts, the proposed model may serve as a basis for developing programmes aimed at increasing the stability of communication and reducing the level of conflict.

A comparison of the results obtained with existing studies shows that most scholarly approaches focus on individual aspects of interpersonal communication, whether cognitive, emotional or behavioural. At the same time, the integration of these aspects into a unified model remains insufficiently developed.

In this context, the present study does not refute existing approaches, but complements them by offering a more comprehensive understanding of communicative processes. At the same time, it reveals the problem of the fragmentation of scholarly knowledge, which requires further theoretical and empirical consideration.

The main limitation of the study is its theoretical nature, which does not allow the proposed model to be directly confirmed at the empirical level. The results obtained are interpretative in nature and require further verification using empirical methods.

Additional limitations are associated with the selection of research material and the generalised nature of the analysis. Interpersonal communication may vary substantially depending on the context, which limits the universality of the proposed conclusions and determines the boundaries of their application.

A promising direction for further research is the empirical verification of the identified psychological mechanisms of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension. Of particular interest is the study of their manifestation in different social and professional contexts.

It would also be appropriate to investigate the influence of individual personality characteristics, such as the level of emotional intelligence, stress resistance and communicative competence, on the specific features of the transformation of communication. This would make it possible to refine the proposed model and expand its applied potential.

An additional direction is the development of practice-oriented programmes aimed at developing effective communication skills under conditions of emotional tension, which is of considerable importance for psychological practice and education.

Conclusion

The study conducted made it possible to establish that interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension is not merely a more complex form of interaction, but a qualitatively transformed psychological process. The main result is the identification of the systemic nature of the transformation of communication, determined by the interrelated operation of cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms.

It was established that cognitive mechanisms form a distorted interpretation of the communicative situation, emotional mechanisms intensify the strength of responses and reduce the level of their regulation, while behavioural mechanisms consolidate these changes in the form of communicative strategies. Their interaction leads to a decrease in the accuracy of understanding, an increase in tension and a higher probability of communicative failures.

Thus, the key result of the study is the substantiation of the view that interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension functions as a dynamic system of interdependent psychological processes, rather than as a linear exchange of information.

The aim of the study, which consisted in identifying, systematising and theoretically substantiating the psychological mechanisms of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension, was achieved. Within the framework of the study, it was possible not only to identify the key mechanisms, but also to demonstrate their interrelationship and functional role in the structure of the communicative process.

The achievement of the aim is confirmed by the fact that the proposed interpretation makes it possible to move from a descriptive level of analysis to an explanatory model that reveals the internal regularities of the transformation of interpersonal interaction.

The research objectives were consistently implemented in the structure of the article. The analysis of theoretical approaches made it possible to identify the existing fragmentation of

scholarly views on interpersonal communication and emotional tension. The clarification of the conceptual field ensured the categorical definiteness of the key terms used in the study.

The classification of psychological mechanisms made it possible to structure them according to functional levels and to determine their role in the transformation of communication. The systematisation of communicative strategies and distortions made it possible to identify typical forms of change in interaction under conditions of emotional tension. The interpretation of interpersonal communication as a systemic process ensured the integration of the results obtained into a unified theoretical model.

Thus, the fulfilment of the research objectives is not only descriptive, but also analytical and synthetic in nature, which confirms the internal logical completeness of the work.

The author's contribution lies in the development of an integrative approach to the analysis of interpersonal communication under conditions of emotional tension, based on the unification of cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms into a single system. Within the framework of the study, a model is proposed that makes it possible to explain not only individual communicative distortions, but also their interrelationship and dynamics.

The author also contributed to the clarification of the conceptual apparatus related to the research problem and to the systematisation of disparate theoretical approaches existing in contemporary psychological science.

The overall contribution of the article consists in the development of a theoretical understanding of interpersonal communication as a psychologically determined process that changes under the influence of emotional tension. In contrast to traditional approaches, the article proposes considering communication not as a static form of interaction, but as a dynamic system in which internal psychological mechanisms determine its structure and effectiveness.

The results obtained expand the interpretative potential of existing theories, create a basis for further research, and may be used in the development of applied models of psychological support and communication skills training. Thus, the article contributes both to the development of scholarly discussion and to the practical application of psychological knowledge.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares the absence of any conflict of interest capable of influencing the objectivity of the study conducted, the interpretation of the results obtained, or the editorial perception of the present work. The study was carried out independently, without external funding and without the involvement of organisations or individuals interested in specific research outcomes.

The author confirms that, in the process of preparing the article, there were no factors of financial interest, institutional dependence, or personal and professional relationships that could have influenced the scholarly position, the choice of research methodology, or the manner in which the results were presented. All conclusions presented in the article are the result of independent theoretical analysis and reflect the author's scholarly interpretation of the research problem under consideration.

Thus, this declaration confirms compliance with the principles of academic integrity, publication transparency and academic ethics, in accordance with the requirements of international editorial practice and the standards of scholarly journals.

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