

THE INTERPERSONAL GAP

You cannot have your own way all the time. Your best intentions will sometimes end in disaster, while, at other times, you will receive credit for desirable outcomes you didn't intend. In short, what you accomplish is not always what you hoped.

The most basic and recurring problem in social life is the relation between what you intend and the effect of your actions on others. The key terms we use in attempting to make sense of interpersonal relations are "intentions," "actions," and "effect." "Interpersonal gap" refers to the degree of congruence between one person's intentions and the effect produced in the other. If the effect is what was intended, the gap has been bridged. If the effect is the opposite of what was intended, the gap has become greater.

Let us look more closely at the three terms.

By "intentions" I mean the wishes, wants, hopes, desires, fears that give rise to your actions. I am not referring to underlying motives of which you are unaware.

It is a fact that people can tell you after an action has produced some results, "that wasn't what I meant to do. That outcome wasn't what I intended." Or, "yes, that's what I hoped would happen." We look at the social outcome and decide whether it is what we intended.

Apparently, we can compare what we wished prior to acting with the outcome after we have acted and determine whether they match.

Here are some examples of interpersonal intentions:

"I want him to like me,"

"I want him to obey me,"

"I want him to realize that I know a great deal about this subject,"

"I don't want to talk with him,"

"I wish he would tell me what to do."

Intentions may also be mixed:

"I want her to know I like her, but I don't want to be embarrassed,"

"I want her to tell me I'm doing a good job, but I don't want to ask for it,"

"I would like her to know how angry it makes me when she does that but I don't want to lose her friendship."

Intentions are private and are known directly only to the one who experiences them. I know my own intentions, but I must infer yours. You know your own intentions, but you must infer mine.

"Effect" refers to a person's inner response to the actions of another. We may describe the other's effect by openly stating what feelings are aroused by his actions. However, we are often unaware of our feelings as feelings. When this happens our feelings influence how we see the other and we label him or his actions in a way that expresses our feelings even though we are unaware of them.

How B may talk about
A's Actions

A lectures to B...
Interrupts B...
does not respond to
B's Comments.

Effect in B

B feels hurt,
Put down, angry

the effect of A's actions

*Describing his feelings, "When
A acts like that I feel inferior
and resent feeling this way."*

*Expressing his feelings by
labeling A: "A is smug and
arrogant."*

Here are some other examples showing how the same effect may be talked about as a description of ones own feeling or by labeling the other as an indirect way of expressing one’s feelings.

Describing feelings: “What he just did makes me feel closer and more friendly towards him.”

Expressing feelings by labeling other: “He’s certainly a warm, understanding person.”

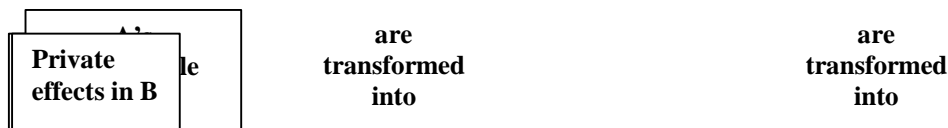
Describing feelings: “When she acts like that I feel embarrassed and ill at ease.”

Expressing feelings by labeling other: “He’s crude and disgusting.”

In contrast to interpersonal intentions and effects which are private, *actions* are public and observable. They may be verbal (“good morning”) or non-verbal (looking away when passing another), brief (a touch on the shoulder), or extended (taking a person out to dinner).

Interpersonal actions are communicative. They include attempts by the sender to convey a message, *whether or not it is received*, as well as actions that the receiver responds to as messages, *whether or not the sender intended them that way*.

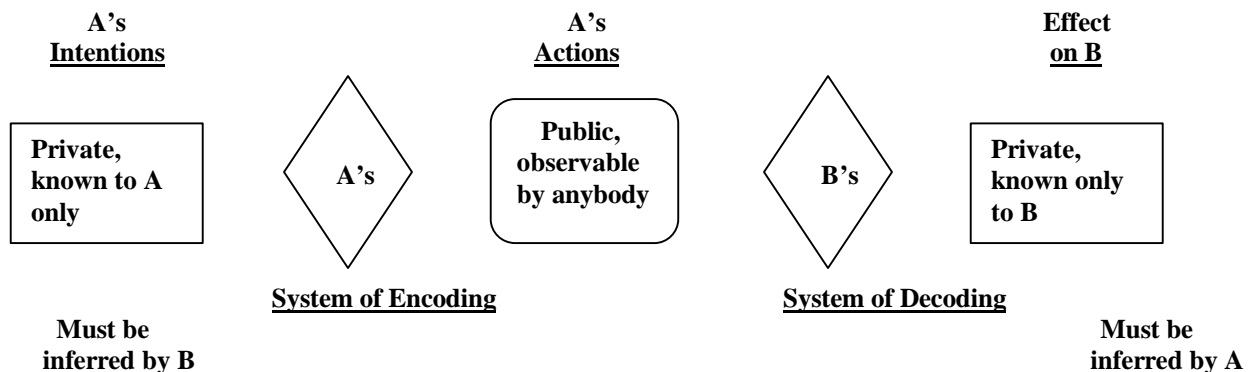
Here is a schematic summary of the interpersonal gap:



The interpersonal gap, thus, contains two transformations. I shall refer to these steps as coding and decoding operations. A’s actions are a coded expression of his inner state. B’s inner response is a result of the way he decodes A’s actions. If B decodes A’s behavior in the same way that A has coded it) A will have produced the effect he intended.

To be specific, let’s imagine that I feel warm and friendly toward you. I pat you on the shoulder. The pat, thus, is an action code for my friendly feeling. You decode this, however, as an act of condescension. The effect of my behavior, then, is that you feel put down, inferior, and annoyed with me. My system of coding does not match your system of decoding and the interpersonal gap, consequently, is difficult to bridge.

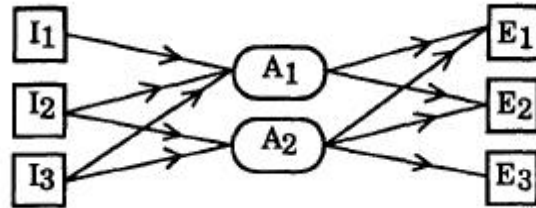
We can now draw a more complete picture of the interpersonal gap as follows:



You may be aware of the ways you code your intentions and decode others’ actions. In fact, you may have been unaware that you do. One of the important objectives of this study of interpersonal relations is to help you become aware of the silent assumptions that influence how you code and decode.

If you are aware of your encoding operation, you can accurately describe how you typically act when you feel angry, affectionate, threatened, uneasy, etc.

If you are unaware of your method of decoding behavior of others, you can accurately describe the kinds of distortions or misreadings of others you typically make. Some people, for example, respond to gestures of affection as if they were attempts to limit their autonomy. Some respond to offers of help as if they were being put down. Some misread enthusiasm as anger.

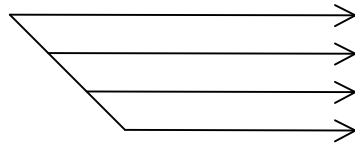


Because different people use different codes, actions have no unique and constant meaning, but are substitutable. As the diagram below shows, an action may express different intentions, the same intention may give rise to different actions, different actions may produce the same effect, and different effects may be produced by the same kind of action.

The same intention may be expressed by different actions.

Intention

To show affection



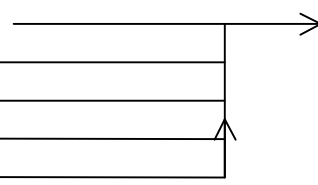
Actions

- take them out to dinner.
- buy them a gift.
- show interest in what they say.
- don't interrupt them when they are busy and preoccupied.

Different intentions may be expressed by the same action.

Intentions

- To put them in your social debt
- To sweeten up a business deal
- To repay a social obligation
- To get closer to the other
- To impress the other



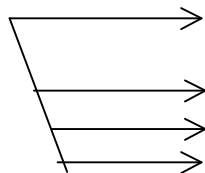
Action

take them out to dinner.

The same action may lead to different effects.

Action

A takes B out to dinner



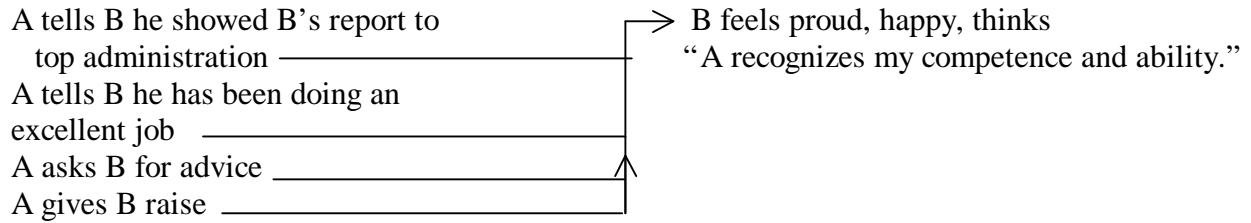
Effects

- B feels uneasy, thinks, "I wonder what A really wants of me?"
- B enjoys it; thinks, "A really likes me."
- B feels scornful; thinks, "A is trying to impress me."
- B feels uncomfortable, ashamed; thinks, "I never did anything like this for A."

Different actions may lead to the same effect.

Actions

Effect



It should be obvious that when you and I interact, each of us views his own and the other's actions in a different frame of reference. Each of us sees his own actions in the light of his own intentions, but we see the other's actions in the light of the effect they have on us. This is the principle of partial information—each party to an interaction has different and partial information about the interpersonal gap.

Bridging the interpersonal gap requires that each person understand how the other sees the interaction.

Jane hadn't seen Tom Laird since they taught together at Brookwood School. When she found that she would be attending a conference in Tom's city she wrote to ask if she could visit them. Tom and his wife, Marge, whom Jane had never met, invited her to stay with them for the three days of the conference.

After dinner the first night, Jane was the one who suggested that they clean up the dishes so they could settle down for an evening of talk. She was feeling warm and friendly to both of the Lairds and so grateful for their hospitality that she wanted to show them in some way. As she began carrying the dishes to the kitchen, Marge and Tom at first protested but when she continued cleaning up they began to help. In the kitchen, Jane took over only allowing Marge and Tom to help in little ways and to tell her where to find or store things.

When they had finished in the kitchen, Jane commented, "There now, that didn't take long and everything's spic and span." Marge responded, "It was very helpful of you. Thank you."

When Tom and Marge were preparing for bed later that evening, Tom was startled to hear Marge burst out with, "I was so humiliated. I just resent her so much I can hardly stand it."

"You mean Jane? What did she do that upset you so?"

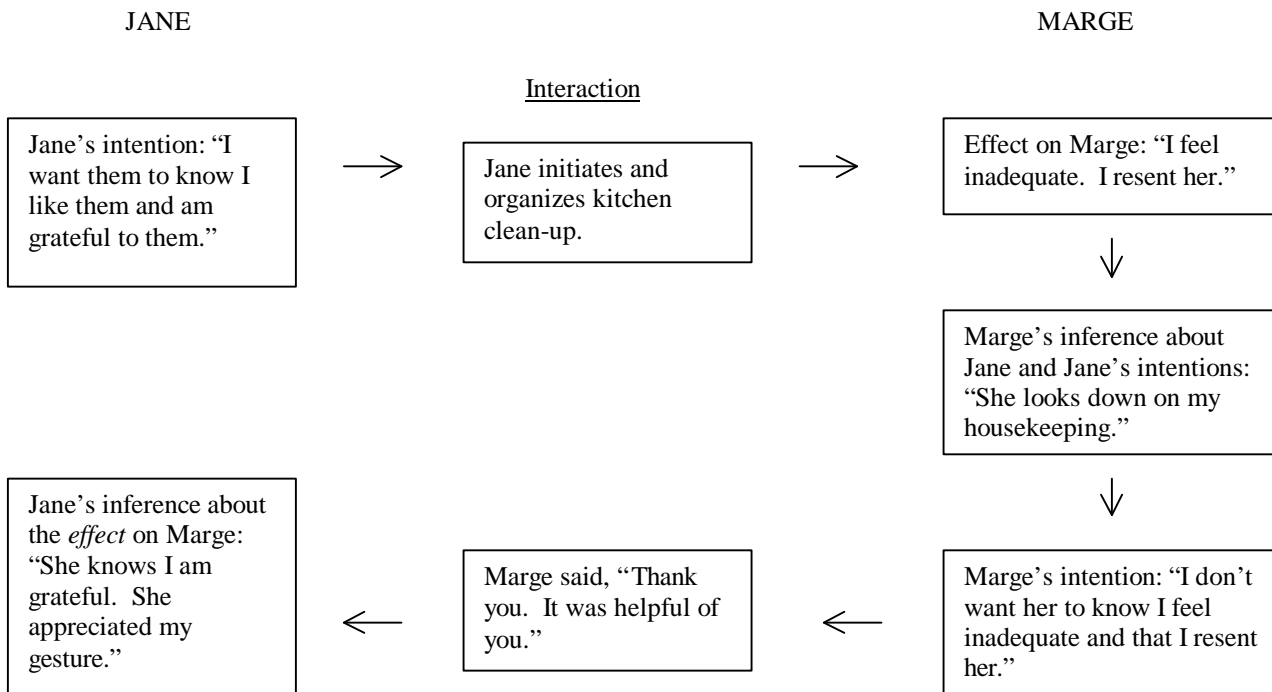
"The way she took over. She's certainly a pushy, dominating person. To come into my home as a visitor and then the moment dinner is over, organize the whole clean-up. It's easy to tell that she thinks I'm not a very good housekeeper. At first I felt inadequate and then I felt angry. I'll keep house anyway I like. Who is she to show me up? After all, she's a guest and you'd think she'd be grateful for our putting her up."

"Aw, c'mon, Marge, Jane was just trying to be helpful."

"Well, it wasn't helpful. It was humiliating. It's going to be hard for me to be nice to her for three days."



Let's diagram the interpersonal gap for the interaction between Jane and Marge.



Note the gap between Jane's intention and Marge's inference about Jane's intention. They do not match. In fact, they are almost opposites.

Note the gap between the effect of Jane's action on Marge and Jane's inference about the effect on Marge. Again they are almost opposite.

However, within each person the situation is balanced. Jane's intention is congruent with the effect she believes occurred in Marge. Likewise, the inferences Marge makes about Jane fit with her feelings as a result of Jane's action.

The action code that Jane used to convey her friendly feelings was decoded quite differently by Marge.

Why did Marge tell Jane she had been helpful if she really resented it?

Wallen, J. (1968). The Interpersonal Gap. In Readings in communication skills. (2001). Maple Valley, WA: School for Innovative Leadership.