Imagined Interaction and Interpersonal Communication

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Imagined interactions are cognitive representations of conversation experienced as internal dialogues with significant others. Results of an investigation confirm four hypotheses. The self talks more in imagined interactions, imagined interactions primarily involve intimate partners and personal topics, they are more likely to occur before an actual communication event than after it, and they are less functional for lonely individuals.

Although "internal dialogue" has been discussed by contemporary communication theorists (Hikins, 1981), the concept can be traced back to Plato. Recently, interpersonal communication scholars have taken great interest in the relationship between communication and social cognition (Roloff & Berger, 1982). Nevertheless, little systematic attention has been given to explicitly intrapersonal communication processes like "internal dialogues.'

Our purpose in this paper is to extend and report research concerning internal dialogue, what we have in other places called "imagined interactions" (Edwards, Honeycutt, & Zagacki, 1988; Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards, 1989). Imagined interaction is a process of social cognition, whereby actors imagine and therefore indirectly experience themselves in interaction with others. Imagined interactions are a form of intrapersonal communication in which talking activity is directly related to the achievement of some intentional, social communicative goal. The term imagined interactions was first used by Rosenblatt and Meyer (1986), who applied a general understanding of the concept to counseling situations. These authors based their notion of imagined interaction in symbolic interaction theory (see Manis & Meltzer, 1978). Mead (1934) for example, discusses the "internalized conversation of gestures" in which actors cognitively monitor social action by reviewing alternative endings of any given act in which they are involved. Mead adds that such mental activity is important to the development of the self, since internal conversations give cues for how the self might respond and would be perceived by others in real social conduct.

We have proposed that imagined interactions may allow actors to solve communication problems. They afford actors the opportunity to envision the act of discoursing with others, anticipating their responses, and even adjusting to their roles.

In general, then, the study of imagined interactions partially addresses a major question posited by Arnold and Frandsen (1984) and Duck (1980):

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How does an actor experience him/herself qua communicator and as an other prior to, during, and after attempting communication?

The present paper seeks to extend an emerging paradigm and to address further the role of imagined interactions in communication by testing several hypotheses that were suggested initially by post hoc analyses of data collected with an early version of a survey of imagined interaction. The purpose of this research is to use an elaborated instrument to test them.

The first hypothesis stems from the theoretical foundations of imagined interactions in symbolic interactionism. Because of their importance to the construction of self, we posit:

H1: The self talks more than the other in imagined interactions.

The second hypothesis focuses on the interpersonal nature of imagined interactions. We agree with Duck (1980) that many important relational processes occur in the thoughts of the partners; we suggest that they occur in the form of imagined interactions. Hence:

H2: Imagined interactions are more likely to occur with intimate relational partners and on personal topics than with non-intimates or on impersonal topics.

The last two hypotheses concern the communicative functions of imagined interactions. We contend that imagined interactions are not irrelevant constructions, but that they serve important planning and review functions for communicators. First, earlier research suggests that planning is a more important function than review (Edwards et al., 1988), and that imagined interactions are more likely to occur before than after an important encounter. Second, we hypothesize that individuals with deficient communication competencies will manifest problematic imagined interactions. Research has found that lonely persons, for example, have poorly developed communication skills that may be a function of inadequate cognitive scripts for interaction (Bell, 1985; Bell & Daly, 1985). Because we speculate that imagined interactions activate or instantiate scripts, we hypothesize that lonely persons will have less functional imagined interactions. We propose:

H3: Imagined interactions occur more frequently prior to rather than after actual communication.

H4: Imagined interactions are less functional for lonely individuals.

METHOD

The Survey of Imagined Interaction

This study used a substantially developed and refined version of the Survey of Imagined Interaction (Zagacki, Edwards & Honeycutt, 1988). The instrument first presents respondents with a moderately detailed written introduction. Imagined interactions are defined and described for respondents. The remainder of the questionnaire is divided into two major sections.
Section 1 includes 44 statements about imagined interactions to which subjects respond on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very strong agreement" to "very strong disagreement." Five variables that are relevant to the present study are proactivity (whether imagined interactions occur before interacting with others; Cronbach's alpha = .73), reactivity (whether they occur after interacting with others; alpha = .80), discrepancy (whether they are different from actual interactions; alpha = .84), specificity (how detailed the imagined interactions are; alpha = .73), and variety (how varied they are in topics and partners; alpha = .67).

Section 2 of the instrument examines the topics and relational partners of imagined interactions, and focuses on the characteristics of a specific imagined interaction provided by the respondent. First, subjects list general topics of their imagined interactions. Next they list the general relational partners with whom they imagine interactions. Then they are told to think of a specific imagined interaction they have experienced, to indicate the topic, the relational partner, and to identify when and where they experienced it. Subjects are asked to reconstruct the imagined interaction they recalled, and write out sample lines of dialogue from it. They then are asked if they re-experienced the imagined interaction as they wrote it down, and they indicate if the feelings that accompanied the imagined interaction were positive, negative, neutral, or a mixture of positive and negative. Subjects respond to 12 scaled items that explore imagined interaction functions and satisfaction. Three functions have been identified. Catharsis (Cronbach's alpha = .51) is the extent to which the imagined interaction is reported to relieve tension and stress (the low reliability for this function suggests a need for further research on this function). Increased understanding (Cronbach's alpha = .70) involves clarifying thoughts and feelings to the self. Rehearsal (Cronbach's alpha = .75) involves practicing a message for an anticipated encounter. The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980) was also attached to the survey instrument (Cronbach's alpha = .90).

Subjects and Administration

The instrument was administered to 290 students enrolled in a multi-section basic course in interpersonal communication at a large southern university. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 52 with 20.0 as the mean age. The sample consisted of 44 percent males and 56 percent females.

Content Analysis

Responses to the open-ended questions in the Survey of Imagined Interaction were content analyzed by three undergraduate coders. Categories were taken from the earlier research by Edwards et al. (1988), which used an identical population and procedures. The categories were derived from the data in the earlier research by two coders who were representative of the population from which the data were drawn. Several variables of interest to this study were coded from the data:
1. General Topics. Subjects listed topics they discuss in their imagined interactions. They were coded into 11 categories: conflicts/problems, family, friends, dating, school/class, work/job, activities, money, ex-partners, small talk, and miscellaneous. Topics concerning conflicts/problems, dating, family, friends and ex-partners were considered to be “personal” topics, while those concerning school/class, work/job, activities, money and small talk were considered to be “impersonal.”

2. General Imagined Interaction Partners. Subjects listed the relational partners with whom they have imagined interactions. Responses were coded into 10 categories: romantic partner, family member, friends, work related, roommate, authority figures, ex-partners, strangers, prospective partners/acquaintances, and miscellaneous. The categories of romantic partner, family member, friends, roommate and ex-partner were considered to be “intimates,” while those of work related, authority figures, strangers, and prospective partners/acquaintances were considered “non-intimates.”

3. Dialogue Partner. Subjects were asked to identify the partner with whom they had the imagined interaction that they reported. Dialogue partner was coded into the same categories as general imagined interaction partner.

4. Reported Topic. Subjects listed the topics they discussed in their dialogue protocols. Responses were coded into the same 11 categories as for General Topics.

5. & 6. First Line and Last Line. Coders identified whether the first and last lines provided in the dialogue protocol were spoken by the respondent (Self) or interaction partner (Other).

7. & 8. Self Lines and Other Lines. Coders counted the number of lines of dialogue spoken by the respondent (Self) and the dialogue partner (Other).

9. & 10. Self Words and Other Words. Coders counted the number of words spoken by the respondent (Self) and dialogue partner (Other).

11. & 12. Self Questions and Other Questions. Coders counted the number of questions asked by each interactant.

13. Observed topics. Coders categorized the topics they observed in the dialogue protocols, and coded them into the same categories as for General Topics.

Intercoder reliability for the three coders was tested using a subset of the data prior to the coding by computing Scott’s pi, a conservative test that compensates for initial probabilities of occurrence, and by computing correlations on the interval data (e.g., self words). Reliability estimates were as follows: topics, .71; relationships, .86; first line, 1.00; last line, 1.00; self lines, 1.00; other lines, .90; self words, 1.00; other words, .98; self questions, 1.00; other questions, .90. Post-coding reliabilities were also assessed; all were comparable to the initial estimates.
Results

H1: Self- Versus Other-Talk

Evidence of levels of talk is derived from comparisons of self and other in the number of lines, words and questions spoken in the dialogues. The contrasts presented in Table 1 reveal that the self spoke more lines and words than the other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self-lines</td>
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<td>3.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other-lines</td>
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<td>.000</td>
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<td>Other-words</td>
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<td>18.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-questions</td>
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<td>1.01</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-questions</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.96</td>
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Further support for the hypothesis is found by examining the source of the first line of the dialogue protocols: selves began the interactions nearly twice as often as others (binomial probability < .001).

H2: Personal Significance

Analysis of the general topics and partners, and of the dialogue topics and partners reveals that imagined interactions concern close personal relationships and topics (all binomial probabilities < .01). General topics were 1.2 times more likely to be personal than impersonal (n = 328 and 268, respectively), and general partners were 2.5 times more frequently personal intimates (n = 359 vs. n = 133). In the dialogue protocols, personal topics (reported topics) were 1.4 times more common than impersonal topics (n = 233 vs. 165, respectively), while intimate partners were 3.15 times more common than non-intimate partners (n = 227 vs. n = 72).

H3: Occurrence Before or After Actual Interaction

This hypothesis was tested by contrasting the mean scores of the proactive and retroactive dimensions. Subjects reported that their imagined interactions occurred more before an anticipated meeting (M = 5.53) rather than after one (M = 4.85; t[287] = 10.19, p < .001), supporting the planning function. This notion was further tested by dichotomizing two items from Section 2 of the instrument that asked if the reported dialogues were used for planning or review (all agree answers were recoded as "yes;" disagree responses were recoded as "no"; neutral responses were treated as missing). Analyses revealed that 83% of the reported dialogues were used to plan for a future interaction, and 57% were used to review a preceding encounter. Crosstabulation of the items suggested that 54% of
the reported dialogues served both planning and review functions; 33% functioned for planning, but not review; 7% were review with no planning; and only 6% did not function in either capacity.

H4: Less Functional for Lonely Communicators

This hypothesis was also supported. Loneliness was associated with discrepancy between imagined and real interactions (r = .30, p < .001). Furthermore, loneliness has a negative correspondence with the tendency to have imagined interactions that are detailed and specific (r = —.25, p < .001), and with the catharsis function (r = —.16, p < .007). There also was a low negative correlation between loneliness and variety in imagined interactions (r = —.17, p < .006).

Discussion

The purpose of this research was extended examination of relationships suggested by our earlier research (Edwards et al., 1988). Each hypothesis was supported. First, the self talks more in imagined interactions than does the other. This is evidenced in the dialogues in which the self spoke more lines, more words, and was more likely to initiate the conversation than the other. Thus by enacting covert roles during imagined interactions, individuals obtain information, albeit sometimes distorted, about how others might perceive them as well as how they might communicate with others. In this sense, imagined interactions are self-reflective mechanisms—they provide individuals with ways of scanning both private and public dimensions of self, dimensions that might not otherwise be accessed during actual communication.

The second hypothesis was also supported. Individuals have imagined interactions most frequently with intimate relational partners and about topics concerning personal relational matters. There were a few instances of having an imagined interaction with a prospective or ex-partner. Apparently, imagined interactions allow individuals to engage in “covert dialogue” with their relational partners (Knapp, 1984). This further supports Duck’s (1980) notion that individuals spend time alone analyzing relational encounters, even replaying them and imagining potential outcomes.

For most individuals imagined interactions play an important rehearsal or planning function, as evidenced by the strong support for the third hypothesis. Imagined interactions are used proactively more frequently than retroactively. This suggests that imagined interactions serve primarily as rehearsal or planning devices in which interlocutors test message strategies on prospective audiences.

Our analyses indicate that imagined interactions may also be used to review earlier conversations, although this function is somewhat less common than rehearsal. Fifty-seven percent of the reported dialogues were used both proactively and retroactively; another 7% were used retroactively only. These findings suggest that communicative encounters “imprint” themselves into actors’ cognitive structures, so that actors carry
around images of conversations and actively imagine them after the fact. Actors probably use imagined interactions to evaluate their participation during real conversations. For example, actors imagining especially emotional/adversarial past exchanges might formulate conclusions to these encounters that address the proposition that “if I had responded to him/her in this fashion, then I would have achieved this effect.”

In regard to the fourth hypothesis, we found that imagined interactions are less functional for lonely individuals. Imagined interactions are more discrepant from real interaction episodes for lonely individuals than for non-lonely individuals. These discrepant imagined interactions may fail to prepare individuals adequately for actual interaction.

In general then, imagined interactions appear to be an integral part of interpersonal communication. Though their direct behavioral manifestations are difficult to quantify, imagined interactions do allow for exploration of self, for the retrieval and inspection of information regarding personal topics and partners, and for the planning and rehearsal of real communicative encounters. In some instances, imagined interactions also function to review past communicative episodes, and the information processed here may form the basis for future interaction. Communication researchers should continue to profit by exploring the connection between cognition and communication. Most promising is work on the impact of cognitive structuring (e.g., schemas, scripts, prototypes, behavioral heuristics, etc.) on the ways in which actors process information relevant to interpersonal relationships, and the subsequent impact on interpersonal communication behavior. It is in this area that research on imagined interaction may provide fresh insights into the communication process. For such research and theorizing begins with the basic recognition that, as Jerome Singer (1985) argues, the influences upon our thought and action of cognitive structures “are not permanently unretrievable but . . . recur regularly as part of the ongoing conscious stream in the form of fleeting thoughts, fantasies” (p. 3), and, we would add, imagined interactions.

REFERENCES


