Patterns of Interactional Confirmation and Disconfirmation

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The "interactional view" of human communication can trace its roots at least to the publication of Ruesch and Bateson's *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* in 1951. Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland's (1956) classic article, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," provided impetus to further work utilizing this view. By 1967, the perspective had emerged further; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson published *Pragmatics of Human Communication* and John Weakland edited a special issue of *The American Behavioral Scientist* devoted to the "new communication," a concise summary of the interactional view. In 1969, Evelyn Sieburg initiated speech communication research at the University of Denver to examine "interpersonal confirmation," a relational construct derived from the interactional view and discussed in a general way by Watzlawick *et al.*, (1967). During the decade since Sieburg's initial work, a body of research literature has grown up about the confirmation construct in an attempt to refine it conceptually and study it empirically in a variety of settings. Because current research in
human communication reflects an increasing concern with relational communication (Parks, 1977) and the interactional view (Wilder, 1979), the concept of confirmation is receiving renewed attention from scholars in various disciplines. It is the purpose of this chapter to integrate what is known about confirmation by (a) explicating its theoretical bases, (b) describing specific observable behaviors associated with confirming/disconfirming response, and (c) reviewing confirmation research and considering implications for future study.

BACKGROUND

Until the last decade the term "confirmation," as it applies to human interaction, was too imprecise to form a basis for empirical study. Nevertheless it has long been regarded by many as a significant feature of human communication and has provided a useful perspective for examining social acts in terms of their impact upon other people.

The term "confirmation" was first used in an interpersonal sense by Martin Buber (1957), who attributed broad existential significance to confirmation, describing it as basic to humanness and as providing the test of the degree of humanity present in any society. Although Buber did not explicitly define confirmation, he consistently stressed its importance to human intercourse:

The basis of man's life with man is twofold, and it is one — the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow men in this way.... Actual humanity exists only where this capacity unfolds (p. 102).

R. D. Laing (1961) quoted extensively from Buber in his description of confirmation and disconfirmation as communicated qualities which exist in the relationship between two or more persons. Confirmation is the process through which individuals are "endorsed" by others, which, as Laing described it, implies recognition and acknowledgment of them. Though Laing developed confirmation at a conceptual level more thoroughly than anyone prior to him, his focus remained psychiatric: he was concerned with the effects of pervasive disconfirmation within the families of patients who had come to be diagnosed as schizophrenic.

In such families, Laing noted, one child is frequently singled out as the recipient of especially destructive communicative acts by the other members. As Laing explained it, the behavior of the family "does not so much involve a child who has been subjected to outright neglect or even to obvious trauma, but a child who has been subjected to subtle but persistent disconfirmation, usually unwittingly" (1961:83). Laing further equated confirmation with a special kind of love, which "lets the other be, but with affection and concern," as contrasted with disconfirmation (or violence), which "attempts to constrain the other's freedom, to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's own existence or destiny" (1967:58). This theme of showing concern while relinquishing control is common in psychiatric writing and is an important element in confirmation as we understand it. Although Laing stressed the significance of confirmation, he made no attempt to define it in terms of specific behaviors, noting only its variety of modes:

Modes of confirmation or disconfirmation vary. Confirmation could be through a responsive smile (visual), a handshake (tactile), an expression of sympathy (auditory). A confirmatory response is relevant to the evocative action, it accords recognition to the evocative act, and accepts its significance for the other, if not for the respondent. A confirmatory reaction is a direct response, it is "to the point," "on the same wavelength," as the initiatory or evocative action (1961:82).

In 1967, Waclawicz, Beavin, and Jackson located confirmation within a more general framework of human communication and developed it as a necessary element of all human interaction, involving a subtle but powerful validation of the other's self-image. In addition to its content, they said each unit of interaction also contains relational information, offering first, a self-definition by a person (P) and then a response from the other (O) to that self-definition. According to Wacilawicz et al., this response may take any of three possible forms: it may confirm, it may reject, or it may disconfirm. The last, disconfirmation, implies the relational message, "You do not exist," and negates the other as a valid message source. Confirmation implies acceptance of the speaker's self-definition. "As far as we can see, this confirmation of P's
view of himself by O is probably the greatest single factor ensuring mental development and stability that has so far emerged from our study of communication" (p. 84). The descriptive material provided by Watzlawick et al., to illustrate disconfirmation includes instances of total unawareness of the other person, lack of accurate perception of the other’s point of view, and deliberate distortion or denial of the other’s self-attributes.

Sieburg (1969) used the structure provided by Watzlawick as well as the concept of confirmation/disconfirmation to begin distinguishing between human communication which is growthful, productive, effective, functional, or “therapeutic,” and communication which is not. She developed measurement systems for systematically observing confirming and disconfirming communication (1969, 1972), she devised the first scale which allowed for measurement of an individual’s feeling of being confirmed by another person (1973). She has continued to refine the basic theory of confirmation (1975), and has recently used the concepts to describe both organizational (1976) and family (in preparation) communication systems. During this time, a growing body of theoretical development and empirical research has attempted to explore these important concerns (cf. Cissna, 1976a, 1976b).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONFIRMATION: RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Gregory Bateson (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951:179-181) first used the concepts of “report” and “command” to distinguish two different “sorts of meaning” in communication. Watzlawick et al., (1967:51-54) interpreted these dimensions as equivalent in human communication to the “content” and “relationship” “levels of communication.” The content is the “information,” the “data,” the “what is being talked about.” The relationship level of communication provides information on what sort of message this is, how this communication is to be taken, which ultimately describes the nature of the relationship between the interactants. Both of these types of “information” are essential parts of human communication — perhaps even more than we need to know “what we’re talking about,” we need to know “who we’re talking to” and “who the other believes us to be.” The relationship level of communication involves communication about communication, and functions then as metacommunication. It provides people with information about the way in which messages are to be interpreted, and hence provides information about the current state of their relationship. Thus, the second axiom suggested by Watzlawick et al., provides the beginning point of our analysis: “Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication” (p. 54, emphasis omitted), alternately phrased by Watzlawick and Beavin (1967), “there are many levels in every communication, and one always pertains to the relationship in which the communication occurs” (p. 5).

At any given point in a communication sequence it is possible to identify the relationship-oriented metacommunication of one communicator as implying “This is how I see myself (in relation to you in this situation)” (Watzlawick et al., 1967:54). Human beings are always and everywhere offering self-definitions to others and responding to the self-definitions of others. These self-definitions which we offer to one another, as noted earlier, may be responded to in any of three different ways: confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation. Confirmation communicates an acceptance of the other’s definition of self. Rejection of the other’s definition of self implies at least a limited recognition of the person being rejected. Disconfirmation involves negating the other as a valid source of any message.

The process of offering and responding metacommunally to self-definitions is apparently continuous (though there appears to be some disagreement on this issue), and occurs in both “pathological” and “normal” relationships. Perhaps, it is when these self-definitions are not accepted that most people become consciously aware of them — a process Carl Larson (Dance & Larson, 1976:78-79) describes as an “orientational shift” away from the content of communication and toward the relationship, especially toward the self-image which has been rejected (the term rejection as used by Larson seems to include both rejection and disconfirmation, as Watzlawick et al., use these terms).

We must recall also that these relationship messages are only very rarely coded in the digital language of communication content. It is the analogical or metaphorical use of human language through which the self-definitions are both offered and responded to (Bateson, 1972). Seldom does one person say to another, “I see myself as dependent on you.” And seldom, too, do human beings respond to one another by overtly saying “I agree with how you see yourself in relation to me,” “I disagree with how you see yourself,” or “You are not a valid message
source." The behaviors which we have identified as confirming or disconfirming are those that call out in the other person, relational messages which “say” “You exist,” “You do not exist,” “We are relating,” “We are not relating,” and so on. These are the covert messages which seem to have implications for how the individual sees him or her self.

**BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF CONFIRMATION/DISCONFIRMATION**

Our work with confirmation was strongly influenced by John Weakland’s (1967) discussion of the “new communication.” Its chief feature is a concern with the study and understanding of communication as it evolves in naturally occurring human systems, rather than with some ideal of what communication should be. Its primary focus is on features that characterize the interaction of pairs or groups of persons, rather than on properties of single messages or single individuals. Further, this view emphasizes that communication is central in influencing individual behavior, that it is ubiquitous, and especially that research should focus on directly observable behavior, with little if any concern about intentionality. It was this view of communication that we followed in systematizing the confirmation concept in subsequent research. The following section will explain how particular behavioral indicators of confirmation and disconfirmation were selected and systematized.

**Dimensions of Confirmation**

In the few direct allusions in the literature to confirmation and disconfirmation, several different elements are suggested. Confirmation is, of course, tied by definition to self-experience; our first problem, therefore, was to identify the specific aspects of self-experience that could be influenced positively or negatively in interaction with others. Four such elements seemed significant for our purpose:

1. The element of existence (the individual sees self as existing)
2. The element of relating (the individual sees self as a being-in-relation with others)
3. The element of significance, or worth
4. The element of validity of experience

Thus, it was assumed that the behavior of one person toward another is confirming to the extent that it performs the following functions in regard to the other’s self-experience:

1. It expresses recognition of the other’s existence
2. It acknowledges a relationship of affiliation with the other
3. It expresses awareness of the significance or worth of the other
4. It accepts or “endorses” the other’s self-experience (particularly emotional experience)

Each unit of response is assumed to evoke relational metamessages with regard to each of the above functions, which can identify it as either confirming or disconfirming:

**Confirming**

“To me, you exist.”

“We are relating.”

“Your way of experiencing your world is valid.”

**Disconfirming**

“To me, you do not exist.”

“We are not relating.”

“To me, you are not significant.”

“Your way of experiencing your world is invalid.”

In attempting to find behavioral correlates of these functions, we acknowledge that it is not possible to point with certainty to particular behaviors that universally perform these confirming functions for all persons, since individuals differ in the way they interpret the same acts; that is, they interpret the stimuli and assign their own meaning to them. Despite this reservation about making firm causal connections between the behavior of one person and the internal experience of another, we have followed the symbolic interactionist view that certain symbolic cues do acquire consensual validation and therefore are consistently in-
interpreted by most persons as reflecting certain attitudes toward them on the part of others. Such cues thus have message value and are capable of arousing in the receiver feelings of being recognized or ignored, accepted or rejected, understood or misunderstood, humanized or “thingified,” valued or devalued. This assumption was borne out in a very general way by our research to date (Sieburg & Larson, 1971).

Systematization of Behavioral Indicators

Although the psychiatric literature abounds with clinical illustrations of interaction that is damaging to the self-concept (especially as it occurs between parent and child), no systematization of particular forms of response according to their confirming or disconfirming power has heretofore been attempted. The primary question we set out to answer is: What specific, observable, behaviors influence others in such a way that they feel confirmed or disconfirmed? A second question (only partially answered) is: In real interaction, do these behaviors occur in recognizable clusters? A third question, not yet undertaken, must be: (a) Can these clusters be arranged along a continuum (or a hierarchy) from most to least confirming, or (b) Does confirmation comprise a distinct dichotomy, or (c) Is this construct best defined by the three states described by Watzlawick et al.? The descriptive material used in systematization of confirmation and disconfirmation was derived from many sources, each of which seemed to relate to one or more of the four functional criteria noted earlier.

Although confirmation has long been identified as crucial in forming and maintaining any human relationship, it has received the most attention in clinical or psychotherapeutic settings, particularly family therapy, and such writings provided the bulk of our material. Of particular value were the contributions of the Bateson group in Palo Alto, of Buzszenyi-Nagy and Framo in Philadelphia, of the Wynne group in Bethesda, and of Laing in London. These clinical accounts of disturbed family interaction seemed at least potentially applicable to any human interaction. It was our hope that interpersonal confirmation would prove to be another aspect of human interaction where transfer of knowledge about a disturbed population could ultimately be made to a normal one.

Systematizing Disconfirming Behavior

It should be noted that the categories of “rejection” and “disconfirmation,” as used by Watzlawick et al., (1967) have both been included under our heading of “disconfirmation,” thus forming a dichotomy of confirming-disconfirming acts. There are other possible “shapes” of confirmation, several of which have been used in empirical studies, as will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

A variety of specific acts and omissions have been noted by clinicians and theoreticians as being damaging to some aspect of the receiver’s self-view. We have arranged these behaviors into three general groupings, or clusters, each representing a somewhat different style of response:

1. Indifferent response (denying existence or relation)
2. Impervious response (denying self-experience of the other)
3. Disqualifying response (denying the other’s significance)

These clusters include verbal/nonverbal and vocal/nonvocal behaviors. Since they encompass both content and process features of interaction, it meant that scorers must be trained to evaluate each scoring unit in terms of its manifest content, its transactional features, and its underlying structure. In either case, no single utterance stands alone since it is always in response to some behavior or another, and is so experienced by the other as having implications about his or her self. A summary outline of the disconfirming behavioral indicators is included in Appendix A.

Disconfirmation by Indifference. To deny another’s existence is to deny the most fundamental aspect of self-experience. Indifference may be total, as when presence is denied; it may imply rejection of relatedness with the other; or it may only deny the other’s attempt to communicate.

1. Denial of Presence
The absence of even a minimal show of recognition has been associated with alienation, self-destructiveness, violence against others, and with psychosis. Laing used the case of “Peter,” a psychotic patient of 25 to illustrate the possible long-term effects of chronic indifference toward a child who may, as a consequence, come to believe that he has no presence at all — or to feel guilty that he does, feeling that he has no right even to occupy space.
Peter... was a young man who was preoccupied with guilt because he occupied a place in the world, even in a physical sense. He could not realize... that he had a right to have any presence for others... A peculiar aspect of his childhood was that his presence in the world was largely ignored. No weight was given to the fact that he was in the same room while his parents had intercourse. He had been physically cared for in that he had been well fed and kept warm, and underwent no physical separation from his parents during his earlier years. Yet he had been consistently treated as though he did not "really" exist. Perhaps worse than the experience of physical separation was to be in the same room as his parents and ignored, not malevolently, but through sheer indifference. (Laing, 1961:119)

That such extreme indifference is also devastating to an adult is evident in the following excerpt from a marriage counseling session (Sieburg, personal audiotape). It is perhaps significant that throughout his wife's outburst, the husband sat silent and remote:

Therapist: ...and is it okay to express emotion?

Wife: Not in my house.

Therapist: Has he [the husband] ever said it's not okay to talk about feelings?

Wife: But he never says anything!

Therapist: But he has ways of sending you messages?

Wife: [loudly] Yes! And the message is shut out — no matter what I say, no matter what I do, I get no response — zero — shut out!

Therapist: And does that somehow make you feel you are wrong?

Wife: Oh, of course not wrong — just nothing!

Therapist: Then what is it that makes you feel he disapproves of you?

Wife: Because I get nothing! [rears] If I feel discouraged — like looking for a job all day and being turned down — and I cry — zero! No touching, no patting, no "Maybe tomorrow" — just shut out. And if I get angry at him, instead of getting angry back, he just walks away — just nothing! All the time I'm feeling shut out and shut off!

Therapist: And what is it you want from him?

Wife: [quietly] Maybe sometimes just a pat on the back would be enough. But, no — he just shrugs me off. Where am I supposed to go to feel real? [rears]

2. Avoiding Involvement

Extreme instances of indifference like those above are presumed to be rare because even the slightest attention at least confirms one's presence. Lesser shows of indifference, however, still create feelings of alienation, frustration, and lowered self-worth. Although recognition is a necessary first step in confirming another, it is not in itself sufficient unless accompanied by some further indication of a willingness to be involved.

The precise ways in which one person indicates to another that he or she is interested in relating (intimacy) are not fully known, but several clear indications of unwillingness to relate or to become more than minimally involved have emerged from research and have been included in our systematization of disconfirming behaviors. Of particular significance are the use of:

- Impersonal language — the avoidance of first person references (I, me, my, mine) in favor of a collective "we" or "one," or the tendency to begin sentences with "there" when making what amounts to a personal statement (as, "there seems to be...")

- Avoidance of eye contact

- Avoidance of physical contact except in ritualized situations such as hand-shaking

- Other nonverbal "distancing" cues
3. Rejecting Communication

A third way of suggesting indifference to another is to respond in a way that is unrelated, or only minimally related, to what he or she has just said, thus creating a break or disjunction in the flow of interaction.

Totally irrelevant response is, of course, much like denial of presence in that the person whose topic is repeatedly ignored may soon come to doubt his or her very existence, and at best will feel that he or she is not heard, attended to, or regarded as significant. Perhaps for this reason Laing called relevance the “crux of confirmation,” noting that only by responding relevantly can one lend significance to another's communication and accord recognition (Laing, 1961:87).

The most extreme form of communication rejection is monologue, in which one speaker continues on and on, neither hearing nor acknowledging anything the other says. It reflects unawareness and lack of concern about the other person except as a socially acceptable audience for the speaker’s own self-listening. A less severe communication rejection occurs when the responder makes a connection, however slight, with what the other has said, but immediately shifts into something quite different of his or her own choosing.

Disconfirming by Imperviousness. The term “imperviousness” as used here follows Laing's usage and refers to a lack of accurate awareness of another's perceptions (Watzlawick et al., 1967:91). Imperviousness is disconfirming because it denies or distorts another's self-expression and fosters dehumanized relationships in which one person perceives another as a pseudo-image rather than as what that person really is. Behaviorally, the impervious responder engages in various tactics that tend to negate or discredit the other's feeling expression. These may take the form of a flat denial that the other has such a feeling (“You don’t really mean that”), or it may be handled more indirectly by re-interpreting the feeling in a more acceptable way, (“You’re only saying that because . . .”), substituting some experience or feeling of the listener (“What you’re trying to say is . . .”), challenging the speaker's right to have such a feeling (“How can you possibly feel that way after all that’s been done for you?”), or some similar device intended to alter the feeling expressed.

Some elements of what we are now calling imperviousness (including Laing's concept of mystification) are difficult to score empirically because they are socially approved behaviors and may be easily missed if one is attending to the content of the interchange rather than to its structure. For example, reassuring another or trying to minimize self-doubts is often thought to be useful, appropriate, and even helpful behavior, without recognizing that the self-experience of the other person is being questioned. Laing noted this problem and provided the following example of a conversation between a mother and her fourteen-year-old daughter:

**Mother:** You are evil.

**Daughter:** No, I’m not.

**Mother:** Yes, you are.

**Daughter:** Uncle Jack doesn’t think so.

**Mother:** He doesn’t love you as I do. Only a mother really knows the truth about her daughter, and only one who loves you as I do will ever tell you the truth about yourself no matter what it is. If you don’t believe me, just look at yourself in the mirror carefully and you will see that I’m telling the truth.

The daughter did, and saw that her mother was right after all, and realized how wrong she had been not to be grateful for having a mother who so loved her that she would tell the truth about herself. Whatever it might be.

This example may appear somewhat disturbing, even sinister. Suppose we changed one word in it: replace “evil” by “pretty.”

**Mother:** You are pretty.

**Daughter:** No, I’m not.

**Mother:** Yes you are.

**Daughter:** Uncle Jack doesn’t think so.

**Mother:** He doesn’t love you as I do. Only a mother really knows the truth about her daughter, and only the one who loves you as I do will ever tell you the truth about yourself no matter what it is. If you don’t believe me, just look at yourself in the mirror carefully, and you will see that I’m telling you the truth.

The technique is the same. Whether the attribution is pretty, good, beautiful, ugly, or evil, the structure is identical. The structure is so common that we hardly notice it unless the attribution jars. We all employ some recognizably similar version of this technique and may be prepared to justify it. I sug-
gest that we reflect upon the structure of the induction not only the content thereof (Laing, 1969:121-123).

Many of us might identify the former as disconfirming and the latter as helpful, even confirming; however, the structure of the interaction process is a disconfirming one regardless of the content.

A slightly different form of imperviousness occurs when a responder creates and bestrides another an inaccurate identity, and then confirms the false identity, although it is not a part of the other's self-experience at all. Laing calls this pseudo-confirmation (1961:83). Thus a mother who insists that her daughter is always obedient and "never any trouble at all" may be able to interpret her daughter's most rebellious aggression in a way that fits the placid image she holds of her daughter, and the parents of even a murderous psychopath may be able to describe their son as a "good boy." Such a false confirmation frequently endorses the fiction of what the other is wished to be, without any real recognition of what the other is or how he/she feels. As noted earlier, this form of disconfirmation also appears as simply a well-meaning attempt to reassure another who is distressed, which too is usually motivated by the speaker's need to reduce his or her own discomfort.

"Don't be silly — of course you're not afraid!"

"You may think you feel that way now, but I know better."

"Stop crying — there's nothing the matter with you!"

"How can you possibly worry about a little thing like that?"

"No matter what you say, I know you still love me."

Such responses constitute a rejection of the other person's expression and often identity, raising doubts about the validity of his/her way of experiencing by suggesting, "You don't really feel as you say you do; you are only imagining that you do."

A subtle variation of the same tactic occurs when the speaker responds in a selective way, rewarding the other with attention and relevant response only when he or she communicates in an approved fashion, and becoming silent or indifferent if the other's speech or behavior does not meet with the responder's approval. This may mean that the speaker limits response to those topics initiated by self, ignoring any topic initiated by the other person.

Imperviousness is considered disconfirming because it contributes to a feeling of uncertainty about self or uncertainty about the validity of personal experiencing. Imperviousness occurs when a person is told how he or she feels, regardless of how he or she experiences self, when a person's talents and abilities are described without any data to support such a description, when motives are ascribed to another without any reference to the other's own experience, or when one's own efforts at self-expression are ignored or discounted unless they match the false image held by some other person.

The consequences of imperviousness have received considerable attention in the literature under a variety of labels. Laing (1965) described "mystification," meaning the substitution of a speaker's motivation as a way of exploiting the other while expressing only benevolence. Boszormenyi-Nagy (1965) described disturbed family interaction in which the "autonomous otherness" of certain family members is ignored when another member speaks for them, interpreting their motives and describing their feelings. Buber (1957) expressed it somewhat more poetically when he said, "If we overlook the 'otherness' of the other person... we shall see him in our own image and not as he really is in his concrete uniqueness."

Disconfirmation by Disqualification. According to Watzlawick (1964) disqualification is a technique which enables one to say something without really saying it, to deny without really saying "no," and to disagree without really disagreeing. Certain messages, verbal and nonverbal, are included in this group because they (a) disqualify the other speaker, (b) disqualify another message, or (c) disqualify themselves.

1. Speaker Disqualification

This may include such direct disparagement of the other as name-calling, criticism, blame, and hostile attack, but may also take the indirect form of the sigh of martyrdom, the muttered expletive, addressing an adult in a tone of voice usually reserved for a backward child, joking "on the square," sarcasm, or any of the other numerous tactics to make the other appear and feel too incompetent or unreliable for his message to have validity. This creates a particularly unanswerable put-down by evoking strong metamessages of insignificance or worthlessness. The following examples are spouses' responses from conjoint counseling sessions:

Confirmation and Disconfirmation 267
- "Can't you ever do anything right?"
- "Here we go again!" [sigh]
- "We heard you the first time—why do you always keep repeating yourself?"
- "It's no wonder the rear axle broke, with you in the back seat!" [laughter]
- "Why do you always have to get your mouth open when you don't know what you're talking about?"

2. Message Disqualification
Without regard to their content, some messages tend to discredit the other person because of their irrelevance — that is, they do not “follow” the other's prior utterance in a transactional sense. (This is also a tactic of indifference and may serve a dual disconfirming purpose.) Such disjunctive responses were studied by Sluski, Beavin, Tarnopolski, and Veron (1967) who used the term “transactional disqualification” to mean any incongruity in the response of the speaker in relation to the context of the previous message of the other. A relationship between two successive messages exists; they noted, on two possible levels: (a) continuity between the content of the two messages (are both persons talking about the same subject?), and (b) indication of reception of the prior message (what cues does the speaker give of receiving and understanding the previous message?). If a message is disjunctive at either of these levels, transactional disqualification of the prior message is said to have occurred.

A similar form of message disqualification occurs when a speaker reacts selectively to some incidental clue in another's speech, but ignores the primary theme. Thus the responder may acknowledge the other's attempt to communicate, but still appears to miss the point. This “tangential response” was identified and studied by Jurgen Ruesch (1958), who noted that a speaker often picks up on a topic presented, but then continues to spin a yarn in a different direction. The response is not totally irrelevant because it has made some connection, although perhaps slight, with the prior utterance. Because it causes the first speaker to question the value or importance of what he or she was trying to say, the tangential response is reported to affect adversely a speaker's feeling of self-significance, and is therefore included as a form of disconfirmation.

3. Message Disqualifying Itself
A third way in which a speaker can use disqualification to “say something without really saying it,” is by sending messages that disqualify themselves. There are many ways in which this may be done, the commonest devices being lack of clarity, ambiguity, and incongruity of mode. These forms of response are grouped together here because they have all been interpreted as devices for avoiding involvement with another by generating the metasentence “I am not communicating,” hence “We are not relating.”

Systematizing Confirming Behaviors

Responses that confirm are less clearly defined than disconfirming behaviors because there has been less motivation to study them. In fact, identification of specific acts that are generally confirming is difficult unless we simply identify confirmation as the absence of disconfirming behaviors. More research in this area is clearly needed, but, in general, confirming behaviors are those which permit people to experience their own being and significance as well as their interconnectedness with others. Following Laing (1961), these have been arranged into three clusters: recognition, acknowledgment, and endorsement.

The Recognition Cluster. Recognition is expressed by looking at the other, making frequent eye contact, touching, speaking directly to the person, and allowing the other the opportunity to respond without being interrupted or having to force his or her way into an ongoing monologue. In the case of an infant, recognition means holding and cuddling beyond basic survival functions; in the case of an adult, it may still mean physical contact (touching), but it also means psychological contact in the form of personal language, clarity, congruence of mode, and authentic self-expression. In other words, confirmation requires that a person treat the other with respect, acknowledging his or her attempt to relate, and need to have a presence in the world.

The Acknowledgment Cluster. Acknowledgment of another is demonstrated by a relevant and direct response to his or her com-
This section will consider several aspects of confirmation research: measurement problems and implications, the relationship between agreement/disagreement and confirmation/disconfirmation, the possible "shapes" of a confirmation model (whether it is more accurately described as a continuum, a dichotomy, a trichotomy, or a hierarchy), and generalizations from the confirmation research.

Implications for Measurement

Two primary approaches to measuring interpersonal confirmation have been used. One approach involves determining the extent to which one individual exhibits confirming/disconfirming behaviors toward another individual; the second approach involves measuring the extent to which one person feels confirmed or disconfirmed by another individual. While other approaches have been used on occasion (especially experimental manipulation of confirming/disconfirming responses as an independent variable), we will, in this chapter, concentrate on the two major strategies. As many have noted, the interactional view contains constructs that are difficult to operationalize and measure (Wilder, 1979), and this has been especially true of confirmation research.

Observation of Behaviors

Consistent with Waskland's (1967) explication of the "new communication," confirmation research has frequently focused on observable behaviors in human interaction. The earliest such observational system was developed by Sieburg (1969) and was later refined (1972). This initial effort, called the "Interpersonal Responsiveness Category System," contained five "dysfunctional" categories and two "functional" categories of response. Using expert judges, she was able to achieve a high reliability after two four-hour training sessions (Sieburg, 1969; summarized in Cissna, 1976b). She then had the judges listen to audio recordings of actual group sessions, scoring frequency of occurrence of various response types.

Sundell (1972) employed a category system based on Sieburg and Larson's (1971) response forms using the behaviors that were described as typical of most preferred and least preferred partners (these were later identified as confirming and disconfirming behaviors). More recently,
Aveyard (1977) used only the seven "disconfirming" behaviors identified by Sieburg and Larson in an observational coding scheme. Mathews (1977) created and used a confirmation/disconfirmation observational system specific for librarian-patron interaction, and Hull (in progress) used a variation of Mathew's system, based on Sieburg's (1973) clusters.

Several measurement problems have been identified. Some behaviors, although noted frequently in psychiatric writings, simply did not occur often in these normal populations, especially those behaviors having to do with mystification, impersonal response, and self-disqualifying messages. Noting that these categories occurred so infrequently in the populations used, Sieburg (1969) speculated that these response forms may, in fact, be indicative of psychopathology.

Using the interactional view, the minimal unit of analysis is always the interaction — a statement and its response — which is usually operationalized as the relation of a verbalization to the immediately prior utterance. This is a useful restriction for most purposes, especially when the concern is with relevance of one utterance to the one just prior. For research purposes, it produces a simpler scoring system and increases reliability by making the unit of analysis and categories as narrow and specific as possible. However, confirming acts, and especially disconfirming ones, do not always come neatly packaged in such statement-response units. Like double-binds (Sluski & Ransom, 1976), other kinds of disconfirming acts are not always evident in one sentence, and considerable expertise is required to recognize the often-lengthy patterns that comprise a disconfirming "act." Even if recognized, these patterns are difficult to score because scoring rules and unit of analysis often do not admit them. Further, some of the behaviors we identified above (e.g., messages which disqualify themselves or the speaker, monologue, or reliance on impersonal language, among disconfirming behaviors) do not require an "interact" for their observation at all. These can be and are observed from one person's utterance only. The interactional quality of these "messages" comes from the fact that they are experienced interactionally — participants perceive these behaviors as being related to their own behaviors and hence experience them as having something to do with their own identity. I perceive the other as responding to me, even if my utterances are not required for scoring the act as confirming/disconfirming.

An additional problem occurs because some individuals have difficulty recognizing forms of disconfirmation that are common in their own experience. An instance of this occurred in Sieburg's initial study in which one of her categories, "mystification," had to be dropped from the observational system because a coder could not agree with the others on what mystification was and when it happened. Several years later, Sieburg heard again from that rater, who had undergone a long period of personal psychotherapy. She reported that in the course of the therapy, she had come to realize that the mystifying response which she had been unable to identify earlier was a response form regularly employed in her childhood family — one that she had come to expect and see as "normal" interactional behavior. Similarly, some freshmen students in Jacobs' (1973) study reported being not in the least disturbed when confronted with professors who were role-playing indifferent behavior — commenting that it was about what they had come to expect from teachers.

Two additional issues regarding measurement emerge from the research. One concerns whether all communication events contain the power to confirm or disconfirm or whether confirming and disconfirming events occur only occasionally. That is, whether confirmation is continuous or discontinuous. Most studies have followed Sieburg (1969), assuming that all utterances contain a response to the other's definition of self and hence have confirming or disconfirming properties (Aveyard, 1977; Hull, 1979; Mathews, 1977; Sundell, 1972). Waxwood (1976), on the other hand, seems more consistent with Larson (Dance & Larson, 1976) in viewing human communication as opportunities for confirming and disconfirming events to occur — from time to time. This issue may be more a conceptual and theoretical one that can reasonably be resolved through reference to empirical research.

A second issue is whether the coding — the determination of whether any piece of behavior is confirming or disconfirming — should be done by an outside observer or by the participants themselves. Most of the confirmation research has followed the positivistic assumption of objective and external observers who have received extensive training to perform their rating task reliably. John Stewart has suggested that the participants themselves may be the more appropriate ones to define these behaviors. Waxwood (1976) used simulated recall interviews, asking participants individually to view the videotapes of themselves interacting and to identify confirming and disconfirming behaviors as well as remark on behaviors the investigator suspected might be experienced as confirming or disconfirming. Stewart suggested that the genuinely relational way to proceed with measurement is to ask participants to discuss the interaction sequences together and to agree among themselves regarding which behaviors were confirming and which disconfirming.
Measuring Feelings of Being Confirmed/Disconfirmed

Scholars interested in measuring the extent to which an individual feels confirmed by another have generally used the Perceived Confirmation Scale (PCS) developed by Sieburg (1973). The PCS is a six-item Likert-type summated scale. Jacobs (1973) assessed construct validity for the PCS through finding high item-total correlations for each of the six items with three target persons, and by finding that subjects do distinguish between target persons in their PCS scores. The interesting findings the PCS yielded (Cisna, 1975, 1979; Clarke, 1973; Jacobs, 1973; Keating, 1977; Sutton, 1976) also support its validity. Though the PCS is rather brief, its reliability seems adequate. Clarke (1973) reported test-retest (three-week interval) reliability of \( r = .70 \) (married couples) and Cisna (1976b) found \( r = .74 \) and .92 for samples of day and adult evening students describing their parents (four-week interval), though this sample produced lower test-retest reliability coefficients for same sex friends (\( r = .59 \) and .50, for day and evening students respectively). The lower values for same sex friends can be accounted for in large measure because some students simply didn’t remember which friend they used a month earlier. In addition, the phenomenon itself may be changed somewhat during this interval, as student friendships can change fairly rapidly. Internal reliability was assessed through the International Communication Association Committee on the Status of Women’s 1978-1979 Research Project (see Cisna, 1979). They studied 980 students and non-students from a variety of sites around the country measuring (among other things) their feelings of being confirmed by three specific people in their lives: (a) a past or present work supervisor, (b) a lover or person with whom they were or had been involved in an intimate or dating relationship, and (c) a same sex friend. The Cronbach alpha statistics were \( \alpha = .82 \) (supervisors), .78 (lovers), and .75 (friends).

Serious philosophical questions can be raised, however, concerning our ability to measure perceived confirmation. Confirmation, as we have interpreted it, is derived jointly from immediately observable behaviors as well as from the existential and phenomenological reality of one’s own experience. While behaviors are readily observable, confirmation as an internal experience is more difficult, deriving its validity from each individual’s perceptions. Again, disconfirmation by “mystification” or imperviousness is a case in point. Laing’s (1961) notions were derived from his work with the families of schizophrenic pa-
tients. He found his patients to be highly mystified (1965) and highly disconfirmed within their families (Laing & Esterson, 1964). However — and this is crucial — the very fact of mystification may cause the recipient's perceptions to become confused. Because they are mystified in a false self, they may experience disconfirmation as confirming (Laing, 1967). Since this kind of disconfirmation is schizogenic (Laing, 1961), it might well confound research findings since the observable behavior reported as disconfirming would not be expected to be congruent with the internal experience reported by the "victim." In other words, some forms of disconfirmation may not necessarily be available to phenomenological introspection. Further, if Laing is correct that mystification and alienation pervade our society, then perhaps many people would experience disconfirmation as confirming and would experience confirming behavior as threatening. The research problem is obvious: if disconfirmation is experienced as confirming, then measurement of the person's experience of feeling confirmed may only provide another echo of mystification.

Confirmation and Agreement/Disagreement

The confirmational effects of agreement and disagreement have been another source of confusion for researchers and theorists. Buber (1957) and Laing were clear that agreement was not necessary for confirmation. Laing (1969) wrote: "A partially confirmatory response need not be in agreement. ... Rejection can be confirmatory if it is direct, not tangential, and recognizes the evoking action and grants it significance and validity" (p. 99). Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967) claim that disagreement at the relationship level (rather than disagreement about content) is disconfirming. The early research of Sieburg and Larson (1971) found that "agreement about content" was characteristic of their predominantly male subjects' descriptions of their "most preferred" persons, although "disagreement about content" was not part of the response pattern of "least preferred" targets. Further empirical investigation of agreement and confirmation has been limited and directed strictly to agreement and disagreement about the content of the discussion. Sundell (1972) found agreement about content to be the most frequent response of the more confirming teachers in his sample, and the response which best distinguished the confirming teachers from the disconfirming ones. Sutton (1976) trained interviewers either to agree or to self-disclose in response to students. Contrary to her hypothesis, self-disclosure was not experienced as more confirming by the females than by the males, and agreement was not experienced as more confirming by the males than by the females. Kearing (1977; Cisna & Kearing, 1979) studied frequency of agreement and disagreement in discussions between married couples and found a significant negative association between frequency of disagreement and his/her spouse's level of perceived confirmation. S. Leth (1977a), although purporting to measure confirmation and disconfirmation, actually appears to have been measuring various forms of agreement and disagreement. We conclude from his findings that both clear direct agreement and clear direct disagreement are both appropriate and useful (perhaps even confirming) responses in same-sex friendships.

It may be that agreement about content is irrelevant to confirmation despite confused findings. Certainly it is pleasant to have another express agreement with our opinions. So, also, is confirmation usually experienced as pleasant. We should take care, however, that these separate findings do not lead us to create a faulty syllogism: Agreement is pleasant; Confirmation is pleasant; therefore Agreement is Confirmation. Until more data are available, we must conclude that agreement/disagreement about content is not related to confirmation/disconfirmation. Agreement or disagreement about another's self-view is quite another matter, and denial, rejection, or disagreement with regard to another's self-description must always be regarded as disconfirming. "You are wrong in the way you see yourself" is clearly an impervious response.

Implications for the Nature of Interpersonal Confirmation

There are many different views of the appropriate shape of the confirmation construct. Sieburg at one time (1972) described the hierarchy of confirming responses, building on a base of recognition of the other's existence; Cisna (1976b; Cisna & Kearing, 1979) explained confirmation as a continuum from highly confirming to highly disconfirming; Larson (Dance & Larson, 1976:73-90) described two states, acceptance and rejection, both of which had implicit as well as explicit forms, and a neutral area in which the orientational shift from content to relationship did not occur; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) described three distinct response forms: confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation. All of these views seem to have been offered somewhat premature-
ly. A confirmation-disconfirmation dichotomy seems now to oversimplify the phenomenon. For example, the troublesome "impervious response" is qualitatively different and is experienced differently from other disconfirming forms. To view confirmation/disconfirmation as a single continuum raises the problem of weights to assign to various forms of disconfirmation — a question that research has not yet even considered. There are, of course, behaviors that we can distinguish as confirming or disconfirming, and the extent to which individuals exposed to these forms actually feel confirmed may well range from high to low. The notion of a hierarchy, while reasonable, is still not verified with research data available. The "indifference" cluster of behaviors which totally denies the existence of the other person seems logically to be the most disconfirming; however, imperviousness is more frequently associated with severe pathology. Although we elected to use a dichotomous model of confirmation-disconfirmation, it may be that the three response forms described by Watzlawick et al., confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation, come as close as any other system to representing the phenomenon as it exists. We still believe that there are distinguishable levels of interpersonal confirmation, but caution that available evidence has not identified them precisely.

Generalizations from Confirmation Research

Confirmation and disconfirmation have been studied in several ways using a variety of different measurement procedures. In spite of a lack of an essential operational definition of confirmation/disconfirmation, the findings are provocative. These findings, from the speech communication discipline concerning "ordinary" interpersonal relationships, should be considered alongside the considerable body of evidence from psychiatric studies of pathological communication processes (summarized by Sieburg, 1969, 1973, 1975).

The degree of presence or absence of confirming behaviors seems to make a difference in various kinds of human relationships — small groups (Sieburg, 1969), supervisor-subordinate (Jablin, 1977), teacher-student (P. Leth, 1977; Sundell, 1972), and friendships (S. Leth, 1977). The degree to which an individual feels confirmed as a person also is related to success in various relationships — marriage (Clarke, 1973; Cisna, 1975), health professions (Dangott, Thornton & Page, 1979), and teaching (P. Leth, 1977). Confirming communication is experienced as pleasant and is preferred by individuals over disconfirming communication (Sieburg & Larson, 1971). Patterns of confirming and disconfirming communication are reciprocated — individuals seeming to receive what they send (Sundell, 1972). Confirming and disconfirming behaviors are identifiable by interactants (Waxwood, 1976), and experienced differently by them (Jacobs, 1973). Predominantly confirming individuals have different values than individuals who are less confirming (Mathews, 1977). Confirmation/disconfirmation is the only pattern common to participants' perceptions of their own and others' communication in marriage, father-son, supervisor-subordinate, and counselor-juvenile delinquent relationships (Ross, 1973). Confirming communication patterns may be related to development of high self-concepts (Leth, 1977).

While these findings are only exploratory and should be regarded tentatively, initial research seems to affirm the significance early theorists gave to the confirmation construct.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the theoretical foundations of interpersonal confirmation as an aspect of relational communication. Specific behavioral indicators of confirming and disconfirming communication have been proposed; completed research has been reviewed and conclusions have been drawn regarding the confirmation construct and the interactive view on which it is based.

It has been said that one's answers are generally limited by the horizon of one's questions. The behaviors and processes with which we have been concerned here are vital ones. Our goal now is to ask even better questions.
APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF DISCONFIRMING BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

I. Disconfirmation by Indifference
   A. Denial of Presence
      1. Silence when reply is expected; refusal to respond
      2. Looks away while other is speaking
      3. Withdraws physically; leaves the scene
      4. Engages in unrelated activities while other is speaking
   B. Denial of Involvement (relation)
      1. Avoids eye-contact
      2. Avoids touch, uses nonverbal “distancing” behaviors
      3. Impersonal language; avoids “self” data, feeling statements or disclosure of any kind
   C. Rejection of Communication
      1. Monologue, repeated interruption, “talking over” other
      2. Interjects irrelevant comments

II. Disconfirmation by Imperviousness
   A. Denial, distortion, reinterpretation of other’s self-expression
   B. Pseudo-confirmation

III. Disconfirmation by Disqualification
   A. Messages that disqualify the other person
      1. Direct disparagement: insult, name-calling
      2. Indirect disparagement: verbal or nonverbal
   B. Messages that disqualify another message
      1. Transactional disqualification
      2. Tangential response
   C. Messages that are self-disqualifying
      1. Unclear, incomplete, messages
      2. Ambiguous messages
      3. Incongruity of verbal-nonverbal modes

NOTES

1. We believe that the interactional view addressed by this volume and symbolic interactionism are complementary, and both have influenced the development of this work. Though symbolic interactionism will not be explicitly identified in the remainder of this chapter, the informed reader will notice its influence at several points. See Sieburg (1973) and Leth (1977).

2. The first author will provide a current chronological review and summary of this literature to the interested reader.

3. Stewart made this recommendation in remarks for a “Lunch Panel” on confirmation and disconfirmation at the Asilomar Conference from which this volume originated, February 17, 1979. The authors of this chapter also participated in this panel, chaired by Phil Salem.
4. Cushman's comments were made during the ensuing discussion at the Lunch Panel mentioned above.

5. P. Leth (1977) also seems to us to have assessed perceived confirmation, though in a very different way. She asked students in an introductory speech communication class to react to their instructors' written critiques of their speeches according to five pairs of bipolar adjectives (unclear-clear, irrelevant-relevant, unrealistic-realistic, atypical-typical, and unhelpful-helpful) and one Likert-type question ("In general, I agree with my perception of myself as a public speaker") to which they could indicate the extent of their agreement/disagreement. These six items were summed to produce a score on the "Interpersonal Perception Scale." While the PCS asks subjects to indicate the extent to which they feel confirmed by another in general, Leth appears to have asked subjects to indicate the extent to which they feel confirmed by one specific message of the other.

6. The issue centers around the definition of confirming and rejecting behaviors. S. Leth's (1977) study involved two separate designs, both of which share common definitions of confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation. In the experimental design, one individual is asked to self-disclose regarding a particular attribute of self and the other is taught to respond with clear, relevant agreement (called confirmation), clear, relevant, disagreement (called rejection), or a response which is neither clear, relevant, nor agreeing/disagreeing (called disconfirmation). In the descriptive, field study design, subjects are asked to indicate how they think their friends would respond to a self-disclosure by them regarding various aspects of their self-concepts using the same categories and definitions used in the experimental study. We do not believe the concepts of confirmation and rejection have been defined and operationalized in ways consistent with the definitions given by Warshawski, Beavin, and Jackson (1967). For Warshawski et al., as well as ourselves, the self-definitions and subsequent confirming, rejecting, and disconfirming responses are implicit metacommunications, rarely explicitly coded in the digital language. In fact, it is precisely their subtle and out-of-awareness nature that gives these messages their power. S. Leth has tried to take responses to the self-concept out of the fuzzy territory of the analogic and into the clear-cut domain of the digital. His subjects have overtly disclosed an aspect of their self-concept which the other has overtly responded to. Rather than measuring confirmation and rejection as he had intended, we believe those judgments and disagreements have been measured (the operationalization of disconfirmation makes more sense to us as it is in the implicit analogic language of metacommunication). That it is the individual's self-concept which is being agreed and disagreed with is interesting and perhaps important but not sufficient to make the study into one of confirmation and rejection. When one reconceptualizes his interpersonal responses as we have done here, and regards both clear, relevant agreement and clear, relevant disagreement as confirming in contrast to the responses which lack these and are classified as disconfirming, we make different predictions than S. Leth on nine of his twenty-six hypotheses. As it turns out, all nine of these are ones in which S. Leth's predictions were not upheld. We have no difficulty whatsoever seeing rejection (as operationalized in this study as disagreement) as a valid and appropriate form of interpersonal response (cf. Leth 1978: 26).
RIGOR & IMAGINATION

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