

Learning Outcome

1. Understand the importance of interpersonal skills related to health care practice

1.1 Analyse the appropriate use of interpersonal skills in three health care scenarios

The Shannon Weaver Model of Communication Theory Script

When you think about communication issues in the field of health and social care, it is helpful to break down the different components of the communication process. This way, you can think about all the different steps that take place in every interaction between you and a service-user or colleague, and about all the possible barriers or difficulties that might lead to a breakdown in communication.

There are many models and theories that analyse the communication process. Here, we are going to look at one of the best-known: The Shannon-Weaver model. This model was first published in 1948, and it has been adapted, modified, and developed in many ways since. Claude Shannon was a mathematician and Warren Weaver was a scientist. They were primarily interested in “machine translation”, and how early computers, radios and televisions transmit information. However, the theory equally applies to human communication, and it remains hugely influential in modern social sciences. It is the foundation of most current communication theories, and for this reason, it is sometimes referred to as “the mother of all models”.

The Shannon-Weaver model introduces 5 key stages to the communication process:

- The sender
- The encoder
- The channel
- The decoder
- The receiver

The **sender** is the person, group or organisation that first thinks of the message that they want to communicate.

The **encoder** takes this message and turns it into signals. In other words, this is the language we use to express our thoughts. It could be written or spoken, or equally could be through signing or body language. Even using gifs and emojis is a form of encoding!

The **channel** refers to how the message is sent. This could be sound through the airwaves in a spoken conversation, or binary data transmitted electronically in an email or text. Of course, depending on the channel, the sender and receiver may need equipment such as phones or computers.

When the message arrives, it must be **decoded**. This stage describes how the receiver interprets the message and converts it to language. Again, this could be a machine that does this electronically using binary data, or it could be our brains, when we pick up on all the language and communication data, including words, visuals, intonation and so on that form a communication transaction.



Finally, the **receiver** has the message, interpreted by their brain into something meaningful.

Of course, we all know that the process is not always that simple, and there are often obstacles to communication. Therefore, the Shannon-Weaver model introduces the concept of “noise”. Noise refers to anything which interferes in the channel stage of the model. This could literally be background noise which makes it hard for a receiver to hear a message, or it could be distractions which prevent them from focussing on the communication. If you imagine you are talking to a service user who is in a great deal of physical pain, or perhaps stress or emotional anguish, then all those feelings would constitute noise, which would limit their ability to focus on, and interpret the message.

Because the Shannon-Weaver model was initially designed for electronic communication, it does not really focus on the additional human factors that could also influence how a receiver decodes their message. Factors such as language or cultural differences could apply here and are separate to the “noise” that might exist in the communication channel. These are all important factors that you will need to consider, so please make sure you watch the separate video on this course all about barriers to communication.

Criticisms of the model

The Shannon-Weaver model is not perfect. As well as not focussing on differences in human interpretation, it has also been criticised for over-simplifying the process, and making communication seem linear and one-way. It also struggles to support modern multi-media communication with mass audiences accessing information at different times. However, the fundamental principles are still relevant, and it has served as the building block for many other modern models and theories of how we communicate.

References

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