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ANTONELLA CARASSA\*

## PSYCHOLOGY IN EDUCATION AT USI-COM: THE ROLE OF RESEARCH ON INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The theme of intersubjectivity is dealt with in courses in the area of Psychology at both the Bachelor and the Master levels. Two main directions can be taken in the study of intersubjectivity: on one side, if a cognitive perspective is taken, the investigation regards the socio-cognitive capacities at the heart of human social interaction. On the other side, a more socially oriented research is deeply interested in studying how people engage in interactions within socially and culturally defined activities; in this case, the main research focus is in qualitatively analyzing how these interactions naturally unfold, acknowledging the intersubjective nature of interaction.

The two perspectives, the former more focussed on individual's mind functioning, the latter on situated social phenomena are developed in USI-Com courses, with the collaboration of Chiara Piccini and Maria Zaccagnino.

### 1. Socio-cognitive Bases of Human Communication

The Bachelor course of "Psychology of communication" is aimed at presenting a conceptual framework on interpersonal communication, mainly derived from gricean theories, that consider it as constitutive of human interaction and of joint activities in particular.

As explained in the thematic Section's Editorial, gricean theories conceive of communication as a mental phenomenon, more precisely, as a form of social action rather than a form of mere information transmission. This implies that Psychology has a central role in communication research: in fact, an understanding of how human beings interact with others through

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communication has to be framed in a broad conception of the nature and functioning of the human mind and of agency, social agency in particular.

Psychology gives its main contribution by introducing subjects in the study of interaction. A theory of subject primarily demands an investigation of cognitive architecture, namely the innate mental capacities that shape interaction with the physical and social world. The account of architecture allows us to understand the nature of communication, grounding on empirical evidence about cognitive, emotional and relational aspects of the human mind.

As intersubjectivity, namely how individuals come to mutually understand each other, plays a pivotal role in social action, the first part of the course is devoted to clarify how intersubjectivity is enacted in communication at different levels of complexity, with a special reference to the work done by Michel Tomasello (1999, 2008).

The interdisciplinary author's perspective, presents evidences about the main differences between human and other primates' communication in relation to their intersubjective abilities. To appreciate these differences is a privileged path for understanding the very nature of human communication.

In his seminal book "The cultural origins of human cognition" (1999), Tomasello argues that human beings are different from any other species for their ability to "identify" with conspecific, which leads to an understanding of them as intentional/mental like the self. This single adaptation is extremely powerful as it enables special forms of cultural learning through which humans create cultural traditions, values, norms and artefacts that can "ratchet" up in complexity over generations.

The concept of cultural learning is central for explaining the development of human communicative abilities in terms of both the individual's innate cognitive features (i.e. cognitive architecture) and her social participation in joint activities in a given cultural environment. A rich experimental literature allows students to understand how communicative acts are comprehensible to the extent to which they appear to be integrated in and functional to the whole activity in which participants are involved and also acknowledge that a single joint activity is, in its turn, grounded in systems of culturally situated activities. These last aspects are addressed in depth in other courses, as described in the following paragraph.

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## 2. Common Ground, Joint Activities and Working Practices

(*Chiara Piccini*)

Beside cognitive approaches to the study of intersubjectivity – aimed at clarifying which skills and processes are constitutive of it – human intersubjectivity can be taken as point of departure in order to study those activities in which it is enacted, such as joint activities.

A set of courses in the curriculum of communication sciences focus on the study of joint activities, and in particular on the study of working practices through which professionals carry out joint activities in workplaces. Reference is made to the courses of “Workplace studies,” “Interpersonal relationships and cooperative work,” and to a section of “Social Psychology.”

In joint activities (Carassa, Colombetti & Morganti 2008) multiple participants operate in mutual presence, fine-tuning and coordinating their own individual actions on the basis of a common ground made of the epistemic and deontic knowledge they are mutually aware to share. Human beings can create and use a common ground thanks to their intersubjective abilities, such as sharing beliefs and taking joint commitments.

The notion of common ground (Stalnaker 1978; Clark 1996) is a subjective one, since subjects – as part of their global representation of the situation – have their own representation of what is shared with others, and individual representations are continuously re-arranged in social interaction.

Individual representations of the situation and of common ground are not accessible to external observers; however, internal representations are continuously reified into linguistic concepts, narrations and symbolic descriptions; such descriptions are used as point of reference during the action, human beings reflect on them and develop their internal

representations through them. Material representations also mediate the relationship between oneself internal world with the internal worlds of others.

The human social reality is full of material representations that reify individual representations of common ground. In particular, in the case of workplace interactions, the common ground is structured by a complex institutional framework made of deontic elements such as goals, roles, norms and procedures that must be followed. Those elements are material and external, so that they can be observed, and highlighted by a researcher.

On the basis of the idea that common ground can be investigated by considering material representations, an interesting perspective on the study of workplace interactions is proposed to the students.

In particular, in the course of “Social Psychology” – after a presentation of classical approaches to the life of groups – students are introduced to the concepts of work practices, communities of practices (Wenger 1998), and professional visions (Goodwin 1994). The history of interactions within an institutional framework has two complementary outcomes; from one side it comes into being a set of working practices that cannot be completely drawn from the institutional description of operational models and procedures. From the other side, the interactions’ history has an impact on people’s professional visions, i.e. on the professional processes of codification, highlighting and material representations. Professionals modify and develop their visions by participating in activities systems; in particular, they change and enrich their visions by assimilating and enacting the institutional operational models. In the course of time, individual professional visions tend to converge and align, and a shared knowledge space is created.

In the course of “Workplace Studies,” the focus is on one kind of material representations, i.e. technological artifacts, with particular reference to communication and information technologies. The course is grounded on the idea that technologies modify working practices and that working practices – in turn – modify technologies. That means, technologies are developed in the framework of activities’ systems and ongoing interactions. As a consequence, designing a new tool to be integrated in an organizational context should be understood as activity design, and the

success in introducing new tools is critically dependant from the analysis of those professional activities that will be re-shaped.

In the course of “Interpersonal relationships and cooperative work,” the focus is on a kind of joint activity, that is talking work, i.e. any segment of work that professionals accomplish through discursive acts, such as collective decision making processes, planning sessions, or evaluation meetings. Students are provided with a set of dimensions to analyze talking work and are invited to reflect on the interrelation between the quality of interpersonal relationships and the quality of the institutional framework, that are two crucial conditions for the success of any joint activity. In fact, interpersonal relationships are partially shaped by elements that belong to the personal organization of people who participate into a joint activity; however, also the structure of joint activities has an impact on relationships, since – for example – problems in the organization of roles, in the definition of tasks, in the descriptions of operational models people are supposed to follow, can be reflected in the suffering situations at the level of interpersonal relationships.

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## 3. Interpersonal Relationships

(*Maria Zaccagnino*)

Since relation is a constitutive dimension of human life, any activity in which the individual is involved with similar others contains also a relational aspect. This is also valid for communication and that is what some



social scientists, that separate aspects of content and relationship in human communication, refer to. It is impossible, in fact, to communicate without giving a definition of ourselves, of the speaker and of the ongoing interaction: every communication has an aspect of content and an aspect of relation. The cognitive competence of capturing the relational aspects of an act of communication requires an understanding of ourselves and the others as intentional beings like themselves, and it allows for a more effective communication: communication constructs the relationship and relationship constructs the communication.

The knowledge of some key factors for the formation of appropriate and functional relationships in several relational contexts that are present in everyday life – for example, within working groups, social contexts, school – is therefore crucial.

For this reason, in our courses an important aim is to investigate and deepen specific aspects of the relationship, such as patterns of interaction (complementary or symmetrical), cooperation or conflict and the punctuation of sequences of events.

In Master courses, we introduce some more complex models, such as Interpersonal Motivational Systems and Reflecting Functioning. In order to cite some examples, “cooperation” is particularly important in a working group as it assumes the existence and recognition of a shared purpose and the creation of joint commitments. On the contrary, in “conflict” the existence of contrasting interests, defence of personal interests and attack to the others’ ones may undermine team cooperation: the risk is not to achieve the objective that the group had proposed. In this regard, the study of “the punctuation of sequences of events,” which is represented by different points of view of the actors involved in the relationship, becomes extremely important because disagreement on punctuation is at the root of relational conflicts. It becomes important, therefore, to grasp our and the others’ punctuation of events and to imagine some others in order to open new possibilities for interaction.

Finally, for the purposes mentioned above, it is interesting to deepen the concept of “Reflective Functioning” that refers to the different ways and levels of understanding, observing and reflecting on one’s own and others’ mental states and to explain and predict one’s own or others’ actions in terms of them. Reflective Functioning is one of the main determi-

nants of the interpersonal relationships established during joint activities, and can enhance or disrupt cooperation. As a matter of fact, without a good level of reflection on mental states, communication might be seriously limited. It is clear therefore that within any form of interpersonal relationship, it is of extreme importance to be familiar with these concepts for a greater and more appropriate awareness on how communication is unfolding in shared activities, this being a crucial factor for the development of truly collaborative practices.

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