THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION IN DIALOG PROCESS

DİYALOG SÜRECİNDE EMPATİK İLETİŞİMİN ÖNEMİ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ЭМПАТИЧЕСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ДИАЛОГА

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ABSTRACT

When we observe today's world, we can safely say that tensions and clashes still continue and that some of them arise from interreligious and intercultural conflicts. In search of a safer future world, man, naturally, looks for a solution. In this context, it is thought that **empathic communication** model will contribute greatly to the reduction of prejudices and to the formation of a healthy interreligious and intercultural dialog process. The aim of this study is to draw attention towards the importance of learning and teaching of empathic communicaiton skills as a procedural method in interreligious and intercultural relations. In this study, emphasis was placed upon communication conflicts and prejudices and contributions that empathic communication can make in the reduction of prejudices were outlined.

Key words:

Empathic communication, interreligious dialog, intercultural dialog, prejudices, communication conflicts.

ÖZET

Bugün dünyamızda yaşananları gözlemlediğimizde gerilim ve çatışmaların devam ettiği ve bunların bir kısmının da dinler ve kültürler arası anlaşmazlıklardan kaynaklandığı söylenebilir. Doğal olarak, gelecekte daha güvenli bir dünyada yaşamayı isteyen insanların bu sorunu çözmek için yöntem arayışları içinde oldukları bilinmektedir. Bu bağlamda, dinler ve kültürlerarası iletişim sürecinde, önyargıların azaltılmasında, dolayısıyla diyalog sürecinde sağlıklı bir iletişim kurulmasında, **empatik iletişim** modelinin önemli katkılar sağlayabileceği düşünülmektedir. İşte bu çalışmanın amacı, empatik iletişim becerilerinin öğrenilmesi ve öğretilmesinin, dinler ve kültürlerarası ilişkiler açısından çok önemli bir yöntemsel süreç olduğuna dikkat çekmektir. Çalışmada iletişim çatışmaları ve önyargılar üzerinde durularak, bu olumsuzluğun azaltılmasında empatik iletişimin yapabileceği katkılar, dayanaklarıyla birlikte ana hatalarıyla ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Empatik iletişim, dinler arası diyalog, kültürler arası diyalog, önyargılar, iletişim çatışmaları.

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Следуя за событиями в мире, наблюдаются продолжительные противостояния и напряжения. В некоторых случаях причиной этого является разногласие между разными культурами и религиями. Естественно, для проживания в более безопасной среде в будущем, люди ищут разные методы. В этой связи, в период соотношения между культурами и религиями, для уменьшения предубеждений и с целю установления нормальных отношений, предполагается, что в этом значительную роль может сыграть модель эмпатических отношении.

Цель этой статьи, уделить должное внимание изучению и преподаванию навыков эмпатических отношений, отношениям между разными культурами и религиями. Обращая внимание к предубеждениям и конфронтациям в разных отношениях, изучены его основные причины и роль эмпатических отношений для уменьшения противоречивости.

Ключевые слова:

эмпатическиее отношения, диалог между религиями, межкультурный диалог, предубеждение, конфронтация в отношениях.

"It is impossible to talk about the necessity of nations thinking the same,
they should only know of each other,
they must understand…"
Goethe

"When a dispute arises, put yourself in your opponent's shoes."
An Indian proverb

Introduction

In platforms where religions and intercultural issues and problems are discussed, "dialog", a communication concept, is often used. In the context of this paper, "dialog" is defined as "the process of communication, of people coming together, who have different religious beliefs, traditions or convictions, in order to learn more about the Absolute Truth (Creator) and to learn from each other" (Aydın 2008: 22).

That people come together and talk does not always necessarily mean that dialog has taken place. When and if every speaker believes that his or her words are the truth,and when, for various reasons, he or she does not want to hear the opponent's words, ideas or thoughts, then nature of the communication ceases to exist being a dialog and becomes a monologue. Such a communacication can be non-confrontational (non-conflicting) where opponents just air their ideas and ignore each other, where there is no exchange of ideas, knowledge and insight. However, when he or she forces his/her beliefs and opinions upon

others, it becomes confrontational. In this type of communication, there may be an exchange of ideas, albeit limited, but since there is no compromise, each side continues to consider each other as "the other". Consequenty, with this type of communication, I do not believe the goal can be achieved in dialog process. For this reason, I think empathic communication model will contribute to dialog process in reaching its goal.

Today, when we observe what goes on in our world, we can better understand just how much we need empathic communication. With the increasing of world population, the natural recources, once thought would never expire, has started to dwindle; the world, once thought nothing could harm it, is facing serious problems. The number of people who feel safe and secure is starting to decrease because of war and terror. Since our problems are getting globalized as well, no person or community can say "This is none of my business. It is not my problem". There is no other world we can escape to. As a result, if we want to live in a safe and peaceful world, we have no choise but to enter into a communication process whereby we can understand each other. This communication process must encompass all areas including economics, politics, culture and religion.

Communication Process and Its Importance

Religious and cultural area, where communication proceeds with difficulty and affects other areas, is vital. The aforementioned areas have the power to shape attitudes and policies of people and societies in other areas. For that reason, in a communication process that got started in religios and cultural areas, there are politicians, scientists, educators, philosophers, experts and entellectuals in various fields, as well as clerics. Consequently, the methods to be adopted in interreligion and intercultural communication process become very important.

When mentioning the communication and its importance, I would like to explain briefly the process and the concept. Communication is defined as "putting across our feelings, ideas and knowledge by any means imaginable" (Eren et al. 1988: 696). Communication process is explained as "conveying of a message (a situation or a finding) after coding and sending it through a channel or a medium by the individual who is the source or sender; resending of the coded feedback (whether or not the message is understood) by the receiver (targeted individual or mass) after receiving (by hearing, reading) and decoding the message" (McQuail and Windahl 1993:5). As can be seen, communication is realised in a short or a long process and depends upon many factors. This makes it clear that not every contact means communication.

The modern times are described as the age of information, technology and communication. Today, the dizziyingly fast development of mass communication media has rendered the physical and spatial distances obsolete. In that sense, our world has indeed become a "global village", as McLuhan (1964) put it. But we come face to face with a paradox here: *Non-communication.* While we try to communicate with a person thousands of kilometers away via the internet, we may be facing problems communicating with the members of our family or neighbours. One of they most important problems that today's people have is the lack of communication and this threatens our quality of life and mental health. Because where there is no communication; feeling of loneliness, alienation or conflict surfaces.

Cüceloğlu (1993) also draws our attentions to this negative outcome. According to him, people have to communicate in order to resolve their problems, no matter what the content may be. In order to democratically solve the individual or societal problems, a communication based on mutual talk and disscussion is needed. Otherwise, an interaction that was started for solving a problem may become a platform for conflict and violence in a short time. Providing an opportunity for contact among groups may not always lead to desired outcome and may pave the way for new conflicts. However, avoiding contact for fear of such a risk means we don't have any room for problem resolution. For this reason, it will be a much more rational approach to think about the reasons and solutions of communication conflicts.

The Reasons of Communication Conflicts and Prejudices

The following can be considered among the reasons of communication conflicts:

personal factors (stereotyped and rigid ideas, prejudices, over generalizations, polarization, an effort to change the other person, negative perceptions, communication failures, gender, physical appearance etc.),

cultural factors (societal rules, language, social roles etc.),

social and physical environment (metropol, village, crowded, noisy, relaxed, intellectual, aesthetical etc., positive or negative environments) and *quality of the message* (wrong information, erroneous codes etc.) (Budak and Budak 1995: 61-62, Dökmen 2008: 82).

The resolution of communication conflicts depends on knowing the pyshco-social processes that lie beneath these problems (Cüceloğlu 1993:15). We need to spend more time on prejudice, one of the most important factors that cause communication problems. However it impossible to claim that this awareness has reached a point where it can be useful in solving the conflicts.

In fact, prejudice is a natural human inclination and is the result of some broad generalizations caused by social classification. When a person does not change his/her perception towards another person, group or object even if he/she encounters with evidences to the contrary, then it shows that the person is acting with prejudice (Allport 1954: 7-8). Prejudices form emotional aspect of group hatred; whereas stereotypes form cognitive aspect and discrimination indicates behavioral aspect. It must be pointed out, however, that every notion has a relationship with cognitive, emotional as well as behavioral aspects (Taylor, Peplau and Sears 2007: 179).

Traditional prejudices are often learned at very early stages in life. Children learn their prejudices against strangers from the ages of 5-6. Factors such as the area where they grow, the level of the parent's education or religious convictions of the parents contribute to this process (Taylor, Peplau and Sears 2007: 185).

Mass communication media are another possible social learning source, and play an important role in increasing of prejudices (Arslan 2001) (for instance, cartoons published in some Danish and then in some other European newspapers against the prophet of Islam, frequent usage of the notion "Islamic terror" or "Muslim terrorists" and counter statements and actions from Islamic countries).

Depending on the person's religious perceptions and way of life, in other words in the process of formation of religious identity, religious beliefs can play a role for increasing or decreasing the prejudice. For instance, the advice "love others" can be a factor in decreasing the prejudice, and "principles regarded as indispensable and unquestionable in forming different denominations and communities" can be effective in increasing prejudices (Yıldız 2006).

It is more important than ever to decrease prejudices in the dialog process. This subject must be considered with its many aspects, since any one approach will not be able to solve the problem alone. These principles should be taken into account in decreasing prejudice:

An interdependence (interaction and sharing of gains) based on cooperation towards mutual goals must be developed;

The position of parties must be equal or accepted as equals;

The frequency and intensity of interaction process must be adjusted well in order to form friendships.

These contact efforts must be supported by institutions (Allport 1954).

At this point, I am of the opinion that empathic communication model will make considerable contributions in reducing prejudice and consequently forming a healty communication towards dialog.

The Role of Empathic Communication in Social Relationships

As Dökmen (2008) mentioned, empathy is an important buzz word today in psychology and psychiatry. Empathy is generally described as "a person's understanding of other's thoughts and feelings by putting himself in their place" (Rogers 1983, Irving and Dickson 2004). The way a person percieves and understand himself or his environment is unique and subjective. Hence, if we are to understand a person, we need to try and perceive the world and events from his/her perspective. In order to empathize, we need to know and accept the fact that this person is a being like us, and that he has different values and beliefs. With this acknowledgement, the person being communicated with must not be deemed right/wrong or good/bad, but only an effort must be exerted to understand the situation the person is in. In this context, just hearing our opponent is not enough in the realization of empathic communication. We need to be an effective listener in order to understand what the person says. Empathic communication is needed to give room and create an environment for expression of feelings and thoughts. In order to complete the process of empathy, we need to state to the person that we understand his/her feelings and thoughts (Davis 1983, Mehrabian, Young and Sato 1988, Dökmen 2008: 134-137). In this regard, it can be said that empathic communication is a very effective way to solve the problems arising from individuals' misunderstanding each other.

In fact, we have existential grounds to make empathic communication possible. In the process of human existence, there are very special stages such as birth and death. Even though they look like the opposites, they, in actuality, are related and complimentary of each other. Death starts at birth, but how we die as a human being is determined by our lives till death. As is known, a person does not have the freedom to chose birth place, parents and the environment he/she grows up in. For that reason, it is important to

remember that family and socio-cultural environment in which the child will grow up will have a very important and decisive effect on forming the child's religious and other beliefs. According to psychologists and educators, the effects of childhood years are undeniable on forming the individual's personality, attitudes and beliefs. And it is exceedingly difficult to change them in later years. We can judge from ourselves just how difficult it is to change or give up one's religious believes. We need to consider and realize that the meaning of changing our religion is the same for the other person as well. In that case, this psycho-social reality alone is a very important source of motivation for those with different religious beliefs not to impose their religion on other person and to treat them with utmost tolerance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, empathic communication helps form and establish a democratic culture. An individual in communication process does not have to adopt the other person's beliefs and thoughts, but he must adopt and use a rational method for a healthy communication. Use of a method that is based on rationale and one that is not emotional, subjective, defensive, condescending and judgemental, is more important than with "what kind of content" the communication is realized. Hence, empathic communication model may fulfill the demand for desired method. Learning and teaching of empathic communication skills is a very important methodical process in terms of intercultural and interreligious dialog.

It must be remembered that, today, a variety of groups in some modern democratic societies can live together and cooperate in considerable harmony and tolerance, and that we are together in Noah's ark. This should be enough motivation for us all (Taylor, Peplau and Sears 2007: 209).

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