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Ambivalent Elements of Social Communication in Social Worker-Client Interactions

Accepted for publication on May 13th, 2025.

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Abstract

OBJECTIVES: This paper aims to advance the understanding of the ambivalent elements of social communication used by social workers in client interactions. **THEORETICAL BASE:** The theoretical framework of ambivalent elements of social communication is grounded in the scholarly knowledge of social communication, with the transactional model serving as its foundational principle. **METHODS:** The research was conducted using a qualitative study design, incorporating various data collection methods such as recording social worker-client interactions, making observations, and interviewing social workers. **OUTCOMES:** The research findings indicate that ambivalent elements of social communication are present in every interaction between social workers and clients, constituting an integral component of the communication process. These elements operate on both conscious and subconscious levels. **SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS:** Incorporating supporting elements into communication does not inherently ensure a positive communication outcome, nor is it directly proportional to communication effectiveness. Some supporting elements of communication exhibit ambivalence. These findings carry significant implications for social work practitioners, particularly in enhancing the effectiveness of social communication, in which integration of client feedback and continuous development of communication skills serve as guiding principles. Concurrently, there is an effort to raise awareness of the ambivalent elements inherent in social communication.

Keywords

social work, social communication, ambivalent elements, transactional model, recording analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The ambivalent elements of social communication represent a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can emerge within interpersonal interactions. These elements are associated with conflicting emotions, thoughts, or reactions that can significantly influence the communication process. Ambivalence in communication can manifest in various forms, including discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal cues, mixed emotions, uncertain expectations, and divergent values or viewpoints. These ambivalent elements can be present in close interpersonal relationships, professional interactions, and other social contexts. Effective management and comprehension of these elements are essential for achieving effective communication and preventing potential conflicts or misunderstandings. The ability to recognize, identify, and skilfully manage the ambivalent elements of social communication can enhance mutual understanding between communicating parties and improve the overall communication process.

THEORETICAL BASE

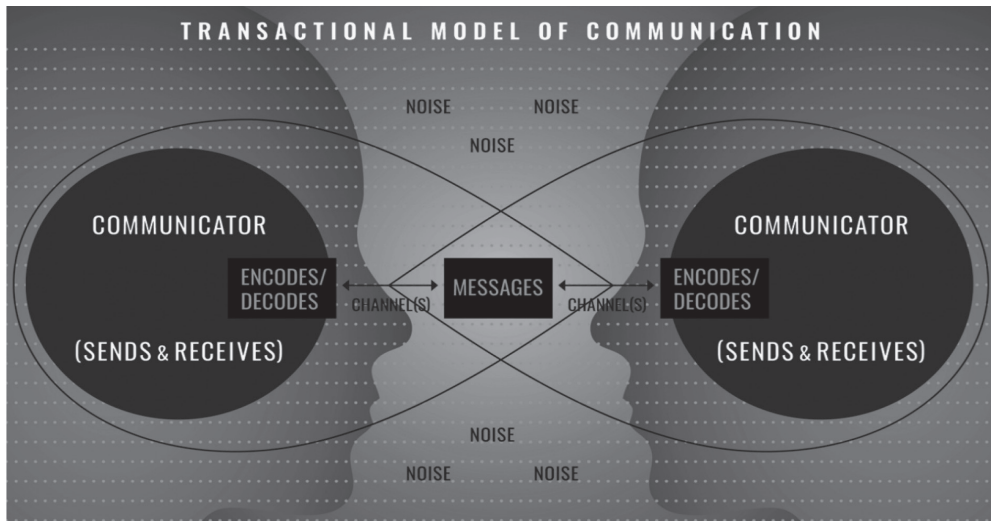
The definition of communication does not derive from a singular origin, as is often the case with other concepts, but represents an amalgam of ideas that have evolved over several decades across various disciplines, including communication studies, psychology, and sociology. The development of communication theories and definitions is a multifaceted process that cannot be attributed to a single author. Numerous scholars have significantly contributed to the contemporary understanding of communication. Prominent figures from the last century include Harold Lasswell (1948), Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949), Charles Egerton Osgood and D.K. Berlo (1960), Paul Watzlawick (1964), and Robert K. Merton (1977), among others. In the present context, notable contributions to the field of communication theory include Denis McQuail (1981), Gabura (2004), Sullivan (2016), Beesley, Watts, and Harrison (2017), Joseph A. DeVito (2017), among others, who continue to advance the understanding of communication within scientific frameworks. An established framework widely employed in communication research and theories defines communication as the transfer of information, ideas, emotions, or knowledge between two or more entities, such as individuals, organizations, or systems. This process typically involves a sender initiating the communication, a message being conveyed across a communication channel, and a receiver who interprets the message, with the aim of ensuring comprehension as intended by the sender. Dictionaries provide analogous definitions of communication. According to The Oxford English Dictionary (2023), communication is *“the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium.”* The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2023) specifies that communication includes not only the transmission of information but also denotes personal rapport, aligning closely with the concept of social communication. The Britannica Dictionary (2023) offers a comprehensive definition, describing communication as the process through which individuals exchange meanings using a collectively understood system of symbols. **Communication**, originating from the Latin word *“communicare”* meaning to share, is a complex process involving more than mere information transfer, as noted by Mikuláščík (2010). Information must be processed, analysed, comprehended, and subsequently communicated. Rovetta and Rovida (2018) further assert that communication entails the transmission of signals, emphasizing its role not only as a pathway but also as a facilitator of interaction between individuals. Wallace (in Kreutzer, DeLuca, Caplan, 2018) defines **social communication** as follows: *“Social communication involves social interaction, social cognition, pragmatic language (verbal and non-verbal), as well as receptive and expressive language processing. Social interaction is sometimes also referred to as social reciprocity and can include behaviours such as code switching, rules for linguistic politeness, cooperative play, and accessing peer groups.”* Nakonečný (2000) describes social communication as an interactive process where information is encoded by the communicator, decoded by the recipient, and exchanged



through a specific communication channel. In international scientific literature, personal (social) communication is often referred to as “*human communication*” (Ijeoma, Ngozi, 2019). Social communication, primarily studied within the humanities, is a social phenomenon involving the exchange of information through verbal or non-verbal mediums, facilitating interpersonal relationship development (Klincková, 2008). Within social work, social communication serves as a vital tool for practitioners in their interactions with clients (Flinkfeldt et al., 2022). The significance of communication in the context of social work is also emphasized by Day (1972).

The model of social communication comprises transcript of interactions involving multiple participants. Among the foundational models of communication is the Linear Model, characterized by its straightforward, one-way transmission of information. The Interactive Model introduces reciprocity, where both sender and receiver roles are fluid, enabling feedback loops in communication exchanges. In contrast, the Transactional Model allows for simultaneous encoding and decoding of messages by both parties, emphasizing the interconnectedness and mutual influence of all components within the communication process (Morreale, 2007; DeVito, 2021).

Figure 1: Transactional Model of Communication



Source: Mahoney, Tang (2016:11)

Figure 1, extracted from a specialized publication on marketing and social media, provides a graphical representation of the communication process. This model is applicable in social work by substituting the roles of communicators with those of a social worker and a client. Here, the social worker encodes the intended message for transmission through a communication channel to the client, who then decodes and processes the received message (Paige et al., 2018). Central to the transactional model depicted in *Figure 1* are the inherent communication elements that permeate the entire process. These elements are inherent to both the communicator and the whole communication process. The diagram highlights barriers such as noise, a concept originally introduced in Shannon and Weaver’s mathematical model of communication (1949) (cf. Al-Fedaghi, 2012). In the realm of social communication, where information exchange occurs, the challenge of ineffective communication frequently emerges. This can manifest in various forms, including intrapsychic issues affecting the communicator, interpersonal conflicts between communicators, external factors such as noise (as depicted in *Figure 1*), or limitations



within communication channels through which information is conveyed. These manifestations are categorized as communication obstacles or barriers (Gabura, Gabura Jr., 2015).

Barrier elements in social communication warrant nuanced interpretations across various perspectives. Shannon and Weaver (1949) originally conceptualized barriers as manifestations of noise. Vymětal (2008:37) defines communication barriers as obstacles that hinder effective communication processes and necessitate resolution. Frączek (2012) similarly characterizes communication barriers as obstacles that negatively impact communication, hindering or distorting the communication process. Building upon the works of Anderson and Dillard (2006), Berlo (1960), Knapp and Daly (2002), Machalová (2018), Stacks et al. (2019), and Vašková and Lovašová (2021), a comprehensive conceptual framework for barrier elements of social communication has been developed. This framework encompasses the following dimensions:

1. Language differences: Variances in languages or dialects that hinder mutual understanding between communicators
2. Physical limitations: Conditions such as hearing impairments or speech impairments that affect verbal communication, as well as other physical factors that impact non-verbal communication
3. Emotional barriers: States of fear, anxiety, anger, or other emotional conditions that hinder the communicator's ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships through communication
4. Behavioural barriers: Disruptive behaviours such as interruptions, ignorance, aggression, inappropriate humour or innuendos, or lack of attentiveness that disrupt the smooth flow of communication
5. Perceptions and attitudes: Barriers stemming from the communicator's personal beliefs, opinions, and attitudes, including prejudices, stereotypes, rigid viewpoints, or a reluctance to consider alternative perspectives
6. Experience and skills: Barriers arising from differences in social, cultural, economic, educational backgrounds, or other factors influencing communicators' abilities and competencies
7. Cultural barriers: Differences in cultural norms, religious practices, customs, traditions, and values that shape communication behaviours and contribute to potential misunderstandings
8. Technological barriers: Limitations and malfunctions with technology, such as sound issues, lack of internet access, hardware or software failures, which hinder effective communication
9. External factors: These encompass a range of elements that can impact the communicator or the transmission of information, including noise, lighting conditions (both light and darkness), and physical distractions such as time shifts and altitude changes. Additionally, temperature variations, odours, and the physical environment—such as the presence of tables and walls—can significantly influence communication dynamics
10. Information barriers: Obstacles related to the absence of information, lack of clarity, or inaccuracies within the message, as well as information that is biased, misleading, or deceptive, hindering effective communication

Some of these barriers can be further integrated or elaborated upon. The first six barriers pertain to the communicator and are categorized as internal barriers since they can be directly influenced and managed by the communicator. Conversely, the remaining four barriers are considered external, as they are not typically within the control or influence of the communicator and may originate outside of them. These external barriers affect the smooth flow of information and are conceptualized in the Transactional Model (*Figure 1*) as noise.

Supporting elements of social communication are defined with various perspectives. Scholars such as Gabura and Gabura Jr. (2015) and Bormann (1996), characterize these elements as integral to effective communication. Conversely Villa (2020) conceptualizes supporting elements



as manifestations of prosocial interactions among individuals. Within the communication process, these elements serve as strategic tools that enhance communication flow and promote mutual understanding among communicators (Bormann, 1996). Littlejohn (2002) underscores the critical importance of supporting elements in social communication, highlighting their contribution to overcoming barriers and enhancing communication effectiveness by ensuring clarity and comprehensibility. Drawing on insights from Knapp and Daly (2002), Littlejohn (2002), Littlejohn and Foss (2011), DeVito (2017), and Stacks et al. (2019), a comprehensive conceptual framework for supporting elements in social communication has been formulated:

1. Empathy: Defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, empathy involves recognizing and appreciating emotional states and responding to them
2. Active listening: Involves attentively listening to the speaker both emotionally and informatively, demonstrated through eye contact, avoiding distractions, and asking clarifying questions
3. Clarity: Expressing oneself clearly and succinctly involves using direct, simple, and easily understandable language, while avoiding ambiguity
4. Non-verbal communication: Utilizing body language, eye contact, tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions to convey emotions or meaning significantly enhances communication and provides additional insights into thoughts and feelings
5. Context: Understanding the situation and context in which communication occurs is crucial for effective communication. This includes awareness of cultural, historical, and social factors that may influence communication, and considering them during interaction
6. Self-expression: Confidence in expressing thoughts and ideas is essential for effective communication. This may involve assertiveness and self-assuredness in communication, speaking clearly and directly, and being open to feedback and constructive criticism
7. Open-mindedness: Being receptive to different perspectives and ideas is important for effective communication, facilitating the exchange of new and diverse information and potentially leading to more creative and innovative thinking
8. Trust: Trust in the honesty and reliability of others is vital for building strong relationships and effective communication. Trust allows individuals to be open and honest in communication, leading to more meaningful and productive conversations
9. Feedback: Receiving and providing constructive feedback to improve communication is a crucial aspect of every relationship, whether personal or professional. Feedback helps identify areas for improvement, enhances understanding, and fosters more productive and positive communication
10. Flexibility: Adapting one's communication style to different situations and individuals is important for effective communication. This may involve adjusting tone of voice, body language, and word choice to best fit the situation and the people with whom you are communicating

Ambivalent Elements of Social Communication

Social communication unfolds interactively within interpersonal contexts. However, employing supporting elements does not guarantee a favourable response from the recipient of the interaction. Communicators may utilize supporting elements with the intention of achieving effective communication. Nevertheless, recipients interpret these signals through their own lenses of abilities, capacities, and experiences. Consequently, the response to a specific communicative element, even when intended as supportive, may not always elicit a positive reaction. Ambivalent communication behaviours arise from diverse circumstances. According to Błażek and Nadrowska (2023), ambiguous communication pertains to situations lacking definitive answers or characterized by insufficient information to clarify events. In the study by Bambúch (2022), it was concluded that no singular element reliably ensures a positive response, and the presence of barriers does



not necessarily lead to communication failure. Additionally, elements initially categorized as “dichotomous” in prior studies are referred to as ambivalent within this framework. Ambivalent elements of social communication manifest at three distinct levels (refer to Figure1): the use of ambivalent elements by clients (Chang, 2014; Błażek, Nadrowska, 2023), the communication channel or technology employed (Strømhaug, Halvorsen, 2023), and the utilization of ambivalent elements by social workers. DeVito (2021) explores fundamental ambivalent elements of social communication, which include irony, sarcasm, ambiguity, metaphors, and non-verbal cues. This study aims to investigate ambivalent elements attributed to social workers and those related to communication channels. Given the limited exploration of this topic, particularly within social work, the principal objective of this research is to examine the utilization of ambivalent elements in social communication during interactions between social workers and their clients.

Research Question

Aligned with the research objective, the primary inquiry is formulated as follows: “What ambivalent elements of social communication employed by social workers can be identified within the context of communicative interactions during counselling sessions with clients?” This research centres on the dynamics of communicative interactions, particularly within the framework of counselling sessions between social workers and their clients.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This paper employs a qualitative research design, facilitating a thorough exploration of the subject matter and enabling the discovery of novel insights. While the primary focus is on a deep investigation of the specific issue at hand, a holistic approach is acknowledged as essential (Floersch, Longhofer, Suskewicz, 2012). The research utilizes grounded theory to identify ambivalent elements of communication present in interactions between social workers and clients. Methodological triangulation involved counselling sessions/interviews, observations, and audio/video recordings (Gavora, 2006; Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, Morales, 2007; Creswell, Plano-Clark, 2007).

Participants

The research involves seven participants selected based on specific criteria (Creswell, 2009; Hendl, 2016; Slettebø, 2021):

- Social workers holding a master’s degree in social work in accordance with Act No. 219/2014
- Counselling sessions between social workers and clients lasting approximately ten minutes
- Active participation by the clients

The decision to limit the participant count to seven was guided by the observation of code repetition, a criterion considered sufficient by Hendl (2016) for achieving data saturation.

Table 1: Research Participants

Participant	Institution	Specialty	Years of Professional Experience
P1	Local Administration (Social Services and Health Department)	Professional counselling to clients in need of material assistance.	9
P2	State Administration (Citizen Services Department)	Maintenance of job seekers’ records	6



P3	State Administration (Counselling and Education Department)	Development of Personalised Action Plan in collaboration with clients	3
P4	State Administration/Detached Branch (Counselling and Education Department)	Professional counselling to groups of long-term unemployed clients, aimed at promoting entrepreneurship	14
P5	State Administration (Counselling and Education Department)	Working with jobseekers who have been registered for over one year	2
P6	Non-governmental organisation Diecezjna Charita (Low-threshold Facility)	Standard and specialized counselling for unhoused individuals	4
P7	State Administration (Citizen Services Department)	Maintenance of job seekers' records	

Research Ethics

Each stage of this research process received prior written approval from representatives of relevant institutions and organizations. Social workers were informed of the opportunity to participate in the research and provided with detailed verbal explanations regarding the research procedures. Similarly, clients of the social workers were informed about the research, explicitly consenting to their participation. They were made aware that audio recordings would be conducted without video capture. Clients also consented to the researcher's presence during the session with social workers, in accordance with Act No. 18/2018 and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council. A fundamental ethical principle guiding this research is the protection of human rights and the minimization of potential psychological or physical distress to participants. Additionally, maintaining respect for participants and avoiding any actions that could undermine their confidence or self-esteem throughout the research process are paramount considerations (Flick, 2006; Carey, 2012).

Data Collection Methods

The adoption of a qualitative research design in this paper was driven by its focus on exploring complex human interactions and communication dynamics within the context of social workers and their clients. Qualitative research provides a suitable framework for delving deeply into these interactions, emphasizing qualitative aspects such as emotional responses, verbal and non-verbal communication cues, context, and the subjective perspectives of participants. This approach facilitates the exploration of nuanced and intricate communication dynamics that are challenging to capture through quantitative methods alone. Moreover, qualitative research allows for engagement with the diverse viewpoints of participants, which is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of social work communication. This methodological choice enabled a focused exploration of the research problem, leading to the acquisition of rich and contextually nuanced data necessary for thorough analysis and interpretation. The paper utilized a range of research methods that collectively support a comprehensive approach to data collection, enabling exploration of various dimensions of communicative interaction:

1. Audio Recording of the Counselling Session Between the Social Worker and the Client
2. The decision to employ audio recording in this study was motivated by its capacity to capture direct communication between social workers and clients in their natural setting. Audio recordings offer a detailed record of verbal exchanges, nuances in tone, emotional expressions, and the substance of conversations. This methodological choice aims to facilitate a deep understanding of real-time communication dynamics, allowing for the nuanced analysis of specific communicative interactions (Flick, 2006; Creswell, Hanson,



- Clark Plano, Morales, 2007; Carey, 2012; Savin-Baden, Howell Major, 2013; Hendl, 2016; Slettebø, 2021)
3. Semi-Structured Interview with a Social Worker
 4. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with social workers to explore their perspectives on interacting and communicating with clients. These interviews focused on specific inquiries related to the social workers' practices, challenges encountered, and strategies employed in client communication. This methodological approach was chosen to gain insights directly from practitioners who play a critical role in communicative interactions within social work contexts (Flick, 2006; Carey, 2012; Savin-Baden, Howell Major, 2013; Hendl, 2016; Weaver-Hightower, 2018; Hickson, Hickson, 2019)
 5. Observation
 6. The observation method was utilized to observe and record real-time communicative interactions between social workers and clients. This method enabled the capture of non-verbal communication cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and other subtle signals exchanged during interactions. By focusing on these dynamics, the approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the interactional process that might not have been fully discernible through verbal exchanges alone (Flick, 2006; Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, Morales, 2007; Savin-Baden, Howell Major, 2013; Hendl, 2016; Slettebø, 2021)
 7. 4. Analysis of Audio Recordings
 8. After completing the fieldwork phase, the recorded data underwent systematic organization and analysis using a qualitative, non-numerical approach. This method facilitated detailed documentation of communication elements present in the sessions, such as tone, emotion, and content, enabling a comprehensive examination of communicative interactions. The analysis process involved transcribing conversations into textual format and summarizing observation notes, which were further enriched with annotated transcriptions. Grounded theory principles guided the data processing and analysis, employing an open coding technique to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the communication (Flick, 2006; Creswell, Plano-Clark, 2007; Savin-Baden, Howell Major, 2013; Hendl, 2016; Slettebø, 2021)
 9. Coding of Communication Elements
 10. An essential component of the analytical process involves coding the communication elements observed during the sessions. This process entails deconstructing the data into units that are assigned specific codes. These codes can range from single-word descriptors to full sentences, capturing the essence of the observed communication elements. Coding enables the systematic categorization and subsequent analysis of the data. Whether generated intuitively or through a systematic approach, each code represents an utterance or a segment of conversation, facilitating further interpretation and understanding of the communicative interactions (Flick, 2006; Savin-Baden, Howell Major, 2013; Hendl, 2016)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The aim of observing and analysing the recorded interactions was to identify the ambivalent elements of social communication employed by social workers during their engagements with clients. The data underwent systematic encoding and rigorous evaluation. Through logical organization and grouping of similar communication elements, eight distinct categories initially emerged. However, upon further analysis, overlaps were identified not only within the codes but also across the categories themselves. Consequently, these categories were synthesized into three overarching “supercategories”, as outlined in *Table 2*. The codes within the table denote specific instances of ambivalent elements observed in social communication.



Table 2: Concept of Ambivalent Elements of Social Communication

Participants and Ambivalent Elements of Social Communication	Category	Supercategory	Concept	Central Concept
P1/252 Inquiry P4/417 Sarcasm P4/653 Flattery P4/560 Commenting P5/163 Nodding P1/1267 Confidence	Behavioural Manifestations		Ambivalent Elements of Social Communication	Communication Elements of Social Workers
P4/1121 Referencing unofficial documents P4/1267 Providing unofficial documents to help clients	Ethical Considerations			
P4/241 Technical terms P5/68 Diminutives P5/55 Vocabulary	Linguistic Manifestations	Communication Competencies of Social Workers		
P1/280 Expediting the conversation P1/431 Abrupt conclusion of the conversation P4/223 Conversation initiation P4/314 Encouragement to continue the conversation	Communication Process			
P3/116 Methods and techniques P4/71 Practical experience P4/221 Self-introduction P4/221 First interaction P4/10 Activities	Utilization of Competencies			
P3/125 Eye contact P3/121 Recognition of non-verbal cues P4/4 Gestural communication P4/5 Engaging the client's senses	Non-verbal Communication			
P4/220 Practical demonstrations P7/59 Mediated communication	Method of Information Transfer	Communication Channel		
P4/220 Communication aids P4/4 Materials	Communication Aids			

Social Workers' Personality

The first supercategory in the table, initially termed as “social workers behavioural manifestations,” was found to lack specificity in capturing its essence effectively. As a more suitable alternative name has yet to be determined, this supercategory remains unnamed. It encompasses two categories. The first category addresses behavioural manifestations, encompassing ambivalent elements of communication associated with the behavioural expressions of social workers towards their clients. For instance, Participant 1 consistently sought information from their client through questions unrelated to the topic of discussion, such as “*Oh dear, and does he have any associated medical conditions?*” Participant 4, during the session, made a provocative remark that bordered on disrespect within the social worker–client relationship, stating, “*From just looking at you, it won't be that swift.*” Additionally, another observed communication element in the same session was the use of flattery: “*An experienced person, aren't you?*” Upon multiple reviews of the audio recording, it became evident



that Participant 4 frequently felt compelled to comment on the clients' actions, extending beyond the necessary scope of interaction. A similar communication element was noted in Participant 5, who nodded frequently in response to a significant portion of the client's complaints, affirming with phrases like, "Yes, of course, you are right... for sure." Confidence also emerged as a behavioural manifestation. While healthy confidence can enhance effective communication, observations of Participant 1 revealed instances where they displayed overconfidence and asserted their authority during interactions with clients: "You don't know that, only I do because I am the qualified one here." The second category in this table is termed "Ethical Considerations". The first communication element identified within this category is "referencing unofficial documents", as demonstrated by Participant 4 in their interactions with clients. Participant 4 mentioned, "This is just an initiative by some colleagues who use it as an aid, but I want to make clear that it is not meant for official use. Providing it informally, that's okay, but it should not be openly talked about." In another instance, Participant 4 deviated from protocols by deciding to provide the documents despite regulations: "Well, I'll send it to you. Just keep it a secret, okay?" This statement highlights potential ambivalence in the social worker's behaviour, as it reflects both the act of providing unofficial documents and expressing reservations about openly sharing them with the client.

The second supercategory, "Communication Competencies of Social Workers", encompasses the highest number of communication elements due to the research's focus on the specific procedural aspects of social communication relevant to the practice of social work. The first category within this supercategory, termed "Linguistic Manifestations", includes the use of technical terms by social workers that were not always understood by their clients. The category also encompasses the use of diminutives, which in some instances appeared intrusive, while in others, they added a pleasant nuance to the communication. Analysis of the sessions revealed variability in vocabulary usage among participants, with some overusing complex terms and others relying on a limited range of expression. The next category, termed "Communication Process", encompasses several ambivalent elements of communication. For instance, Participant 4 repeatedly encouraged clients to continue the conversation, stating, "Go on, I'm listening." In other instances, Participant 1 used interruption to prompt the client to quickly restate their statement, such as "Cut to the chase." Participant 1 also tended to abruptly conclude conversations without explanation, stating "Okay, let's move on." Another identified element within this category is "conversation initiation," exemplified by Participant 4's introduction: "Hello, how is it going? I'm quite busy today, so we won't have much time to talk." In the same session, the participant implicitly prompted the client to continue, stating "I'm listening, go on." The third category, "Utilization of Competencies," encompasses various ambivalent elements. The first identified element within this category is "methods and techniques", as described by Participant 3, stating "I refrain from approaching him with a barrage of questions or techniques right away." In another session with Participant 4, the interview revealed a lack of practical experience, leading to ambivalent communication: "When you don't have enough, how should I put it, practical experience." The third communication element termed "self-introduction" was identified in the statement of Participant 4: "So, before we address your concern, allow me to introduce myself... I work at the employment office, and I specialize in counselling. My job involves facilitating self-employment preparation, including both group sessions and individual consultations." Participant 4 provided an inadequate self-introduction, accompanied by an incomplete job role description. Additionally, another ambivalent element identified in this session was "first interaction." The last ambivalent element included within this category is "activities." Participants employed various activities to enhance communication, but these did not always yield positive responses. Notably, Participant 4 introduced an activity to strengthen client relationships, but some clients perceived this as coercive, leading to feelings of insecurity or rejection. The supercategory also addresses non-verbal communication, which constitutes approximately 60-80% of the communication process. While it is feasible to list all forms of non-verbal communication within this category, this analysis focuses on specific elements. The first ambivalent element identified is "eye contact," as observed



in interactions with Participant 3 and their clients. The participant maintained eye contact, but its intensity and frequency varied in response to the emotional intensity of the interaction. Another element is “recognition of non-verbal cues,” which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. For instance, during an interaction with Participant 3, a client frequently checked the time on his mobile phone, initially perceived by the participant as disinterested. However, it later emerged that the client was awaiting an important message from his mother. “Gestural communication” is another ambivalent element observed in a session with Participant 4, who discussed the ambivalent nature of some gestures used in client interactions. The participant noted that crossing arms while standing, a gesture he uses when contemplating, is often misinterpreted by clients as a sign of anger. A similar ambivalent element was noted in Participant 4’s greeting approach, where some clients interpreted handshakes or smiles as an invasion of personal space, resulting in uncertainty or reticence. The final element under this category, and within the entire supercategory, is “engaging the client’s senses.” Participant 4 noted that sensory engagement like aromatherapy or background music may not always be universally appropriate.

The final supercategory examined is termed “Communication Channel” and is divided into two specific categories. The first category, “Method of Information Transfer,” encompasses three distinct communication elements. One such ambivalent element was observed during a group session led by Participant 4. During this session, practical demonstrations were utilized to illustrate stress-coping mechanisms, therapeutic approaches, and video presentations. However, the ambivalence arose because these demonstrations were not uniformly directed towards the entire group. The second element categorized under “Method of Information Transfer” is “mediated communication,” as exemplified in a session involving Participant 7. She recounted an instance where communication was facilitated by a family member: *“I had a client who for some reasons did not engage directly but attended sessions accompanied by a family member.”* The last category within this supercategory is “Communication Aids,” which examines instances where aids both enhanced and hindered the communication process. Specifically, Participant 4 utilized aids such as a data projector, interactive whiteboard, tablet, and notebook. This category also encompasses digital tools like the Internet, software applications, educational videos, telephone conversations, emails, and written materials such as brochures, books, documents, posters, and infographics.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ambivalent elements of social communication are characterized by their inherent ambiguity, which allows them to be interpreted in multiple ways by communicators. In the context of social work, these elements encompass situations where specific communication practices or expressions may have simultaneous positive and negative impacts. Such dynamics influence the communication process and the relationship between social workers and their clients. The research categorized these ambivalent elements into three supercategories, which align logically with the principles of effective communication (Araya, 2010; Deveugele, 2015; McClure, Burt, 2023).

The first supercategory addresses the personality of the social workers. The personality of social workers plays a pivotal role in their practice, significantly influencing their ability to establish effective relationships with clients and navigate complex social situations (Millington, 1981). In social communication, the relevance of a social worker’s personality lies in its profound impact on the quality of interactions with clients, the cultivation of trust, and the fostering of empathy. A social worker’s personality substantially shapes their capacity to comprehend clients’ needs, respond to their emotional states, and effectively resolve challenges. Beyond behavioural manifestations and ethical considerations, critical aspects of a social worker’s personality include self-reflection, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills. Foundational personality traits such as openness, empathy, patience, and a deep appreciation of human diversity are essential for fostering effective social communication (Kurčíková, Šolcová, 2018; Brozmanová Gregorová



et al., 2019). These traits enable social workers to dismantle communication barriers and create an environment where clients feel secure and respected. A social worker's personality encompasses a multifaceted array of characteristics that significantly influence their ability to provide effective support, offer counselling, and address social issues to benefit clients (Antolová, 2019). Developing a social worker's personality is an ongoing process that involves continuous self-reflection, learning, and adaptation to diverse situations. In social work, communication transcends mere information exchange; it is fundamentally about building relationships and facilitating the individual growth of clients. Therefore, there is a perpetual need for social workers to refine these qualities and adapt to evolving challenges in their professional practice.

The second supercategory is termed "Communication Competencies of Social Workers". Effective communication" is foundational to social work practice and, particularly in challenging situations, it can be posited that effective communication facilitates constructive working relationships and improves work outcomes. Achieving this level of communication proficiency necessitates substantial investment of time, financial resources, and effort to acquire practical experience, not solely limited to social communication (Koprowska, 2020; Reith-Hall, Montgomery, 2022). Research indicates that communication competencies are most fundamental in navigating ambivalent elements of communication. Non-verbal communication, including gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice, often exhibits ambivalence due to the possibility of varying interpretations. For example, a smile can convey joy or mask nervousness, illustrating the nuanced nature of non-verbal cues. Hence, cultivating proficiency in non-verbal communication holds significant value in professional practice. Further reading of the scientific literature revealed a recurring principle of enhancing communicators' competencies and skills as crucial for improving communication effectiveness (Achimská, 2019; Kurčíková, Šolcová, 2019; Wirzén, Čekaitė, 2022). According to Brozmanová Gregorová (2019:50), *"the development of essential communication competencies is a prerequisite for successful and effective communication with clients."*

The third supercategory, termed the "Communication Channel", intersects with the communication competencies of social workers (Kurčíková, Šolcová, 2018; Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2019). However, the effective transmission of information is not solely under the social worker's control, as ensuring the accurate reception of the intended message by the recipient can be challenging. It is essential to acknowledge that selecting an appropriate communication channel remains a fundamental competence and responsibility of social workers. The diverse methods of conveying information, along with the media employed, may lead to varying interpretations among clients. Therefore, the communication channel plays a crucial role in social work, characterized by its ambivalent nature that necessitates a nuanced and tailored approach by social workers when choosing communication means (Bambúch, 2022). Different communication channels can elicit different interpretations and perceptions among recipients. For instance, the same message may be perceived differently when delivered face-to-face, via email, or over the phone. Communication through various media involves filtering mechanisms that can attenuate or alter information, potentially creating ambiguity in how the message is understood. The absence of visual cues in online communication further contributes to ambivalence due to the inability to discern non-verbal signals. Combining multiple communication channels can mitigate these limitations and promote accurate information interpretation (Araya, 2010; Mahoney, Tang, 2016; Ijeoma, Ngozi, 2019; Bambúch, 2022). Nonetheless, face-to-face communication often surpasses online communication in effectiveness and depth of interaction.

Enhancing the quality of communication involves developing the personal attributes of social workers through various approaches such as self-experiential training, supervision, coaching, counselling, skills development, and observational learning. Feedback, in particular, plays a crucial role as it enables social workers to evaluate the accuracy of message comprehension and identify areas of potential misunderstanding with their communication partners (Venglářová, 2011). Elevating the communication competencies of future professionals in the helping professions, especially



within higher education settings, is imperative (Vančo et al., 2016; Brozmanová Gregorová, 2019; Reith-Hall, Montgomery, 2022). Future professionals should receive comprehensive training and practical education in communication skills, focusing on understanding and navigating the complexities of ambivalent communication. Organizations should prioritize training initiatives that equip practitioners with both theoretical knowledge and practical experience in social communication. Furthermore, it is essential for all practitioners who utilize social communication in their professional roles to undergo thorough training. This training should integrate theoretical foundations with hands-on learning experiences, ensuring that practitioners are well-prepared to engage effectively with clients and colleagues in diverse and challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of ambivalent elements in social communication highlights the critical need for contextual understanding and sensitivity to nuanced expressions. This examination significantly contributes to understanding interpersonal dynamics and improving communication efficacy across diverse contexts. Competent communicators must adeptly discern ambivalent elements and decipher underlying intentions to foster favourable outcomes in client interactions. A comprehensive understanding of these elements and communicative intents is essential for enhancing communication effectiveness and cultivating robust client relationships, thereby promoting positive workflow outcomes. This research advocates for a nuanced approach to communication elements, moving beyond simplistic dichotomies like positive/negative or supporting/barrier, and embracing the intricate complexity inherent in ambivalent elements of social communication.

Research Limitations

Research in identifying communication elements spanning support, ambivalence, and barrier encounters significant challenges that can impact accuracy. While beneficial to some, this concept may potentially confuse others. A primary limitation of this study is rooted in the subjective interpretation of ambivalent elements, influenced by the triangulation approach employed in the research methodology. As a result, the conceptualization of ambivalent elements may lack comprehensive scope. Moreover, the research is delimited by its specific focus on face-to-face interactions between social workers and clients, limiting its direct transferability to online contexts.

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