

One affects the other:

How ideological and individual change mirror and impact each other

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Abstract

Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory posits that a person's conscious and unconscious actions and words are themselves rhetoric. A person is a walking rhetorical text. Because of the nature of humanity, a person's actions and words are formed out of their experiences and therefore shape the human text. All this helps to form ideologies that shape communities and create a lens that defines reality. And ideologies change as the experiences of the community change. Human behavior and changing that behavior mirror Burke's ideology. Taking that further, a change in a person could result in a change in ideology, and a change in ideology could result in change to a person. One affects the other, each potentially defining the identity of the other. This paper seeks to briefly explore that concept.

One of the central tenets of the philosophical framework held by Kenneth Burke was that symbols held great power. Indeed, one of Burke's definitions of rhetoric was "the use of language as a *symbolic* means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols (*emphasis mine*)" (Burke, 1969, p. 43). For Burke, the essential function of symbols is the means by which we understand our world, and therefore understand what constitutes our reality. Burke would say, "[h]owever important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall picture is but a construct of symbol systems" (Burke, 1966, p. 5).

This is important because he defines humanity in terms of symbol. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, he states that "[m]an is the symbol-making animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, moved by the sense of order, and rotten with perfection" (Burke, 1966, p. 3). If rhetoric is how humanity *use* symbols, and by definition humans *make* symbols, then humanity itself is an expression of rhetoric. The essence of rhetoric is found in everything a person does, including the unconscious. Human action is symbolic action.

In the thinking of Burke, symbolic action is the evaluation and interpretation of a situation. Accepting the evaluation and interpretation of another means that one person has been persuaded by what another person does and says. In saying this, particularly by adding the unconscious, Burke asserts that all human behavior is strategic action that works to define and influence situations and attitudes for those in one's social network, which would also include that very same person.

For example, the symbols of rhetoric can be anything a person owns. What a person wears, the car a person drives, or the timepiece a person uses reflects the personality, character or status the person has. Or at least what that person believes they should have. Wearing a Rolex watch puts the person in a different category than someone who wears a ten year-old Timex. Driving a new BMW creates a different impression of a person than if he or she drove a Yugo. In this, a human becomes a living, breathing rhetorical device, even to him or herself.

Society determines the meaning of those symbols. Working together, the community categorizes all that is done and said and through that establishes meaning. That also means that the meaning of those symbols will change depending on the community. In one culture, the beauty of a woman may be defined by how thin she is, while in another it is defined by how large she is. One culture may see tattoos on a man as something positive, possibly indicating the number of battles he has led. Another community may deem tattoos as a negative, something that denigrates the body. Reality, then, is defined by symbolic action – verbal or nonverbal, conscious or unconscious – which is assigned meaning by the society in which those symbols are expressed.

Burke would convey that the meaning of those symbols is an expression of what he termed ideology. An ideology is a culture. Culture is not just a set of values, or a language system, or a set of social standards. It is also a way of living and is the primary way we interpret reality. It is also one of the means through which social organization occurs (Beach, 2012, p. 15).

Through the development of language and the refinement of thought, identity is formed. Identity is a constantly evolving system whereby people influence, and in some cases form, a culture but are also influenced by it. As different subsystems arise within various groups of people, ideologies emerge as a way to blend the various beliefs of multiple subsystems together to bring about social order (Beach, 15). Then as ideologies develop, a core develops as some ideologies gain precedence over others, privileging certain ideologies over others, and creating a lens through which the society at large understands life (Beach, 17).

Ideologies are inherently flawed, however. Why? Though they work to help both individuals and groups see the world through a particular lens, they also work to effectively blind the same individual or group, keeping them from seeing the world in any other way but through their own ideology (Beach, 27).

A healthy ideology adapts to changing environments, creating a constantly adapting interpretive lens. However, ideologies over time can institutionalize into a rigid system that disrupts adaptation to changing conditions. This often happens because individuals choose to reject adaptation or because social pressures benefit the privileged and their ideological framework (Beach, 15). So though ideologies arise from the bottom-up, they can get rigid from the top-down. The meanings of the symbols become self-perpetuating and calcified, struggling to change.

Because symbols transmit ideology, changing ideology mean new symbols must be introduced. Getting beyond a specific ideology requires someone challenging the symbols of that ideology while at the same time creating new symbols that will create a new perspective and help shape a new meaning. These

new symbols become a way to violate the language of the privileged ideology, and in doing so, the ideology is destabilized (Beach, 40).

Human Behavior

Could Burke have been aware of what science is showing about the nature of human behavior and thought? His understanding of meaning-making reflects how humans come to understand reality as well as how that reality gets wired into behavior.

First, consider how experiences create meaning. A person receives inputs from their five senses and that input travels first to the part of the brain called the thalamus. From there, it branches off on two separate pathways. One path carries information to the amygdala, or the emotional part of the brain, and on its way to the neocortex. The second path carries information straight to the neocortex. However, the input reaches the amygdala *first* (Phillips, 2010, p. 39).

Information getting to the amygdala is crucial because it saves time in the case of an emergency. What registers in the amygdala is enough of a signal to issue a warning or other response. Why? In the case of an emergency, a person does not necessarily need to know all the details of the situation to know that he or she is in danger (Phillips, p. 39).

Though the amygdala is at work preparing the impulsive reaction, which may or may not be the appropriate response, another part of the brain is trying to prepare a more fitting response. At the other end of a circuit to the neocortex, just behind the forehead, lie the prefrontal lobes. The prefrontal lobes attempt to inhibit the influence of the reactive amygdala. The lobes are at work when someone is

afraid or enraged, constraining the emotion and allowing the person to deal more effectively with the environment. If the emotional response is tempered, a more thoughtful response can occur, one that modulates the impact of the emotions (Phillips, 39). What this information flow process indicates “is the likelihood that much of cognition...is merely rationalization to make unconscious emotional response acceptable to the conscious mind” (Barry, 1997, p. 18). What most people believe is rational thought is actually the rationalization of the emotional reaction to the experience they are having.

Because the brain functions in this way, the emotional brain is the key to assigning meaning to any experience. The brain produces an image that integrates past experiences, memory, cultural learning, and other multi-sensory information. This integration creates an emotional memory that is capable of influencing behavior without a person even realizing emotions are involved (Phillips, p. 41).

Emotions, then, are important to making wise decisions and allowing us to think clearly. But emotions carry more significance than simply making wise decisions. First, emotions organize our lives. Emotions regulate our mental functioning, organizing both our thoughts and actions by establishing goal priorities and then organizing actions to meet those goals. For example, fear motivates us to flee or fight. Emotions work out the desired goal and cognition provides the best implementation for obtaining that goal. As a result, emotions are the guiding structures in our lives (Phillips, p. 42-43).

What all this means is that a person will form meaning from the experiences he or she has in life. Those experiences will define reality. Burke would describe it in

terms of a ringing bell. “A ringing bell is in itself as meaningless as an undifferentiated portion of the air we are breathing. It takes on character, meaning, significance (dinner bell or door bell) in accordance with the contexts in which we experience it” (Burke, 1984, p. 7).

Just as ideologies are different based on the collective experiences of a group, a person’s reality is defined by his or her own unique experiences. Meaning is derived experientially, not rationally, and those experiences result from words or actions that are said or done *by* a person or *to* a person. A person, then, becomes a walking rhetorical text, to borrow Burke’s idea, influencing the behavior of themselves and of others.

As stated before, Burke notes that ideologies can become solidified, hardwired, and resistant to change. Human behavior shows the same type of tendency and it is revealed in how the brain gets wired.

Everyone does things without realizing that they are doing them. Over the years, behaviors become automatic and not even part of our conscious thought. Neurological processes in the brain create processes that are so automatic a person does not realize how she or he is behaving. In fact, a person’s brain is largely under the influence of automatic processes. This is important for a person’s survival and productivity. Without these processes, for instance, every time a person gets out of a chair to walk to the refrigerator, he would have to decide whether to lead with the left foot or right foot (Phillips, 51). The brain by design is “organized so that once an activity becomes routine it doesn’t require conscious effort but occurs

automatically” (Restak, 2006, p.22). Because of this, people can be active, work hard, and enjoy life.

So repeated actions, emotions, and experiences wire the brain. In fact, the brain’s structure comes to reflect the environment that shapes it (Phillips, p. 57). The environment and experiences work to create connections between the neurons in the brain. As patterns of thinking or behavior happen they begin to be triggered, or “fired,” at the same time. Those neurons that fire together get wired together and create a kind of neural pathway. This pathway contains a set of circuits that prime our thoughts and then behaviors, meaning that over time a person likely will not even realize what he or she is doing unless they are made aware of it (Phillips, p. 53).

Repeatedly doing an action builds and reinforces these neural circuits in the brain that control behavior. This makes it difficult for a person to change behavior because he or she has to break the neural circuits that were wired together. To do that, new circuits must be created from new experiences, which will eventually lead to new patterns of behavior.

This mirrors Burke’s contention that new symbols are required to create new perspectives that will destabilize the ideology. As new circuits are wired in the brain, old habits are broken because the circuits that formed that behavioral pathway are weakened. New habits and behaviors, then, can be formed. The person is changed.

The impact of that changed person could be profound. A changed person becomes a different walking rhetorical text and potentially brings a new set of

symbols into an ideology. This new set of symbols could eventually expose the meaninglessness of the previous symbols, bringing change to that ideology. Then a changed ideology will create new experiences and new symbols that will lead to change in individuals. One affects the other, which then affects the first.

So on one level, what brings change to the individual brings change to the ideology. As the ideology changes, it affects the individual. In much the same way that change comes to an ideology, change occurs to a person.

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