**Communicating Communication: The Making of a Communication Skills Expert**

**Introduction: the professionalization of communication**

In the early 1970s, actor Michael Fox was hired for a social experiment testing the correlation between the expressiveness of a speaker and how the audience evaluates them. He was given the name “Dr. Myron L. Fox” and was instructed to play the role of an authority in mathematics and game theory, delivering an hour-long lecture titled “Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education” to a group of highly trained educators. After the lecture, participants filled out questionnaires rating several aspects of the content of the talk and the manner of its presentation. Dr. Fox scored highly and received warm praise in all categories, even though his talk consisted of nothing more than double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs and contradictory statements coated with parenthetical humor and vague references to unrelated topics (Naftulin et al., 1973). The study received tremendous interest, and the “Dr. Fox effect”—as it has come to be known—has been quoted extensively, mainly in the context of students‘ evaluations of teachers (Peer and Babad, 2014).

Fox was neither a game theorist nor a mathematician, and his lecture was pure nonsense. Nevertheless, he was a true expert in acting, and he certainly performed with great skill. Fox‘s concluding words may be considered a disclosure of both his true expertise and the real purpose of his lecture: “To convince the other,” he said, “we must get him to listen to us. And this cannot usually be done if we ourselves do not listen. We go in one door, we go all the way around, we come out the same way. I think the word is ‘communication’.” Indeed, similar to acting, in which performance must perform itself, expertise and performance of expertise are inseparable in the field of communication. One could even say they are one and the same, as they are both about doing communication. The nature and outcome of this performance of communication are the subject of this paper, which asks: what makes one a communication skills expert and what can we, as academic researchers of communication, learn about the act of communication from these experts? To answer these questions, we examine three interrelated dimensions of performance enacted by communication skills experts, as expressed by them in in-depth interviews. Based on these interviews, we analyze the acquisition, practice and performance of this specific kind of expertise, the ways in which it performs communication, and its special relation to laypeople.

Since the second half of the 20th century, “communication” has become a culturally dominant term. Communication deeply affects diverse realms from the home to the workplace and the political arena. Indeed, contemporary Western society has been characterized as a “communication culture” (Cameron, 2000). Scholars have analyzed various intertwined economic, sociological and cultural causes behind this new form of culture, among them the weakening of traditional ties to family, community and religion; the rise of democratic and feminist values; the increasing penetration of psychology into the work domain and popular culture; and the late-modern capitalist shift from locally based production of goods to a global system of services (Bellah et al., 1985; Illouz, 2007; Illouz, 2008; Giddens, 1992; Cameron, 2000). Scholars have studied several aspects of the communication culture including self-help literature (Blackman, 2004; Crawford, 2004; Illouz, 2008), call-in radio programs (Katriel, 2004) and television talk shows (Carbaugh, 1988; Illouz 2003). Katriel and Philipsen (1981) discussed the meaning of the “communication ritual” in romantic relationships, and Cameron (2000) scrutinized programs aimed at teaching communication skills in school and at the office. Altogether, such efforts were described as a process in which discursive practices are being “systematically applied in a variety of organizations by professional technologists who research, redesign, and provide training in discourse practices” (Fairclough, 1992: 8).

“Communication skills” is the key term in this communication culture. Communication skills rank highest on the list of skills and qualities employers seek in candidates (NACE, 2016) and are considered relevant in seemingly all occupations, from scientists (Miller & Fahy, 2009) and corporate managers to zookeepers (Steenberg & Irwin, 2013) and professional boxers (Savucu & Senbakar, 2017). These skills have been defined as “a set of goal-directed, inter-related situationally appropriated social behaviors which can be learned and which are under the control of the individual” (Hargie, 1986: 12). Most scholarly and popular texts about communication skills focus on what they include, how they work and, above all, how they can be improved (e.g., Silverman et al., 2016; Maguire & Pitceathly, 2002). These texts hold that the key to perfecting communication skills (indeed, any skill) is training. This approach assumes that competence (i.e. the essential inborn potential to perform a specific physical or mental task) can be gradually improved by being activated repeatedly and consciously under appropriate guidance. Critics, however, claim that the real goal of mandatory training programs is to increase conformity with corporate norms (Cameron, 2000; Bell, 2007), that “skills” serve as a means of shifting responsibility for employment outcomes from the whole to the individual (Halborow, 2008) and that “skills discourses” express neoliberal commodification (or fetishization) of the self, which is reconceptualized as a “bundle of skills” (Urciuoli, 2008).

There exists one occupation in which communication skills are not merely an advantage or even a prerequisite, but at the very core and title of the profession, and whose practitioners embrace both a theoretical approach to and practical application of communication: communication skills experts. Due to the high levels of media exposure and public interest they enjoy, these experts are key figures in popularizing practical knowledge about communication skills. Nevertheless, they have not been sufficiently studied so far. The present research seeks to do so. As we analyze the making of a communication skills expert, we both build on and depart from two approaches to expertise in general: one that focuses on deployment of cognitive mechanisms and another that focuses on experts’ social role and status.

Experts are often described as individuals who competently make use of specific knowledge to achieve certain goals in a defined field, physical (e.g., typewriting) or mental (e.g., chess), in a manner that consistently yields better results compared to the general population (Glaser & Chi, 1998). Such definitions belong to a substantialist approach which is positivist and objectivist. Focusing on observable and quantifiable performances, it holds that experts employ particular cognitive resources to conceptualize their knowledge, thus enabling them to successfully cope with situations beyond existing problem-solving scenarios (Ericsson & Charness, 2004; Zeitz, 1997). Acquiring expertise, according to this approach, requires immersion in a field throughout a lengthy process (10,000 hours) of learning-focused deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2006; Ericsson et al., 1993; Treem 2012; Perera et al., 2012).

Various attempts have been made to determine clear criteria for categorizing and assessing expertise (Colins & Evans, 2007). These include training, proven past achievements, professional status, experience, substantial knowledge, methodological and technical skills, credentials and reputation (Burgman et al., 2011; Stern & Fineberg, 1996). A fair amount of research has been devoted to comparing experts and laypeople, demonstrating that in their fields, experts reach better results than their lay counterparts. Experts are faster, more accurate and more efficient even when laypeople enjoy advantageous starting points; they are better at identifying and analyzing realities and detecting underlying meanings within them; they succeed in adding layers of information to their observations; they have higher levels of self-monitoring and awareness of their abilities and limits; they employ more appropriate strategies of problem-solving; they use a higher level of improvisation; and they utilize fewer cognitive resources while carrying out missions (see review in Chi, 2006: 23–24; Evans, 2008).

The second approach to expertise is constructivist. It dwells on the social negotiation involved in setting standards of expertise, stresses the importance of professional institutions in sorting, classifying and training individuals, and ponders the social role of expertise as an enactment and a form of status (Evetts et al., 2006; Greenwood et al., 2005; Carr 2010). Researchers who favor this approach question the dichotomy between experts and laypeople, pointing at cases in which abilities exhibited by amateurs were indistinguishable from those of professionals (e.g., Epstein, 1995; Sarangi, 2001). They also note the difficulty of examining experts due to the authority or social status enjoyed by experts or the interest groups to whom they are beholden (Walton, 1997; Agrawal, 1995), or the nature of the fields in which they operate (Treem, 2012). As a result, calls have been made to expand the category “expert“ so as to include knowledgeable individuals who lack formal certification (Colins & Evans, 2007), to give more weight to the opinion of “lay experts” (Wynne, 1996) and to promote “democratization of knowledge” whereby non-experts take part in decision-making processes related to public and environmental policies (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993).

The difference between the two approaches can be described in terms of their different attitude toward experts’ *performance*. Substantialists care about actual (measurable) accomplishments, while constructivists focus on social enactments. Applying this distinction to communication experts, it may be said that substantialists would regard them as individuals who express high levels of “communicative performance” (Hymes 1972), aptly knowing “when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (277). Constructivists, on the other hand, would underscore the Goffmanian (1959)theatrical performance these experts enact in order to gain social recognition as such. There is also a third type of performance that applies only to communication experts. It relates to what is known as “performativity studies” based on Austin’s (1962) speech-act theory describing utterances that create,by their mere pronouncement, the (social) reality about which they report. Communication experts’ performativity collapses all three meanings of performance: by successfully communicating (performance according to Hymes) their communicativeness (performance according to Goffman), individuals establish themselves as communication experts while also establishing the field within which they operate (performance according to Austin). Communication experts’ expertise is thus performative and recursive because, unlike other speech acts, the means of this performance and its outcome are the same: both are “communication.”

The recursivity of experts’ performance can be fully understood only from within. As Krippendorff (1994) argues, “a (social) theory for human communication has to acknowledge the understanding that practitioners of communication of it [and] provide spaces for their individual participation” (79). Adopting such an approach, we engaged with communication skills experts in a communication about communication (about communication) in a series of in-depth interviews. These interviews turned out to be more than merely a means for eliciting answers from informants; they were also a chance to witness the real “interactional positioning” (Wortham et al., 2011) informants carry out in their day-to-day practice. Thus, throughout the interviews, communication experts performed their expertise by raising their own questions, evaluating their interviewer’s communication skills, typifying him as a communicator, and, generally, by communicating their ability to communicate—projecting their capabilities to charm and convince.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Performing communication**

One is not born, but rather becomes, an expert. Lacking a standard body of knowledge, formalized training programs or any sort of official recognition, communication experts must manage their own professional trainingand build their reputation by themselves. In part, this explains the variety of fields and levels of education, former careers, clienteles and methods of treatment seen among communication experts. In spite of these differences, interviews yielded common themes about the conditions of becoming a communication expert, which can be divided into four categories: 1. professional knowledge, 2. professional experience, 3. personal traits and 4. personal biography.

*1. Professional knowledge.* Communication experts are well aware of the loose boundaries of their field. Adam, a former journalist who became a communication trainer, put it succinctly: “The matter is borderless; it is not professional, not academic, not research-based. There is no clear method.” Indeed, interviewees mentioned many sources of knowledge: psychology, psychotherapy, counseling, biology, coaching, spiritual and new age theories, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), linguistics, marketing, interpersonal communication, acting, mediation and more. The varied nature of these sources of knowledge means knowledge was also gained in various ways: through academic and non-academic courses, lectures and workshops and professional and popular literature.None of the interviewees follows a single theory or method; instead, all combine a variety of sources to form their own personal approach. Rina, a business communication counselor, said she had developed “a method that involves a whole lot of other approaches,” including, among others, acting, positive psychology and Buddhism. Similarly, Dina, a couples communication counselor, described how her background in coaching and her (incomplete) degree in psychology fit in with her current occupation: “I believe that very slowly, some connection is starting to emerge between all the tools I’ve learned until today and the psychotherapy I studied, something that is personally and uniquely mine.”

Experts‘ practice is based less on their fusing of existing theories and more on adding on their own original input. When speaking of the professional tools he uses, Doron, a biologist whose interest in evolutionary psychology eventually led him into counseling, mentioned that “some of them are things I developed while working.” Other interviewees expressed similar stances. Benny, a salespeople trainer, said that the “load of books” he has read and the many courses he had taken merely added tools to the ones he had developed himself during his many years of working as a salesman. Another salespeople trainer, David, expressed a similar self-made attitude. Years ago, when he was in his fifties and working as a car mechanic, he attended a communication types workshop for the first time in his life. Although he lacked relevant expertise and experience, he did not hesitate to voice his opinions. “The teacher explained the rules,” he recalled, “and of course when someone explains to me the rules, I check to see what *aren’t* the rules. I mean, he taught it one way, and understood it to be the best way in the world, and I checked how I could construct a workshop that is better than what he taught me.”

Communication experts’ tendency to improve and create theory meshes not only with their self-made narrative but also with their frequent critiqueof existing theories as inaccessible, unclear, over-theorized or detached from reality. Adam held this as a general problem with academia:

There is a wide gap between the academic field and the practical field. There is a lot of research that’s locked up in what’s called “the academic ivory tower” and is not accessible to the general public, and to some extent also not to me, so long as I‘ve not done my Ph.D.

Inaccessibility, detachment and other flaws were nonetheless said to exist outside the ivory tower too. The theory most mentioned by interviewees was “typing”—a method of identifying an individual‘s personality and communication style and adjusting to it (e.g., using visual metaphors when speaking to a “visual type”). Interviewees noted that the theory initially described four types but was expanded later to a typology of sixteen types. David thought that teaching the latter version is a waste of time, as “people who listen to the lecture leave without learning anything, and they’ll never know what they learned.” Referring to the same method, Benny claimed that “they sort of messed things up. What they’re saying is true, but you needn‘t complicate things so much.”

Many other remarks point at an assumed contradiction between theory and practice. Ruth, a couples counselor, said that her assets as a trainer are “not connected to what I learned and [the] certificates [I obtained]—because that‘s really not it.” Rina was blunter: “What does it matter how many courses we took? Reality is not really connected to the course they give you.” Several interviewees were dismissive of formal education, voluntarily acknowledging that their brain “was never all that strong,” that they were never really into learning or that they failed to complete an academic degree. Unlike other fields, then, expertise in communication carries an ambivalence toward professional knowledge. On the one hand, experts present themselves and the field in which they operate as rich in knowledge. On the other hand, they frequently criticize existing theories and debase their practical significance. Experts emphasize “knowing how” over “knowing that,” believing that “communication” must be *done* and not merely contemplated, and that its theories and methods should themselves be “communicable”: simple, concise and practical. Hence their strong emphasis on what, to a considerable extent, substitutes for formal education and academic degrees: experience.

*2. Personal Experience*. Communication experts hold that the correct relationship between theory and practice is that of practice-based theory rather than theory-based practice. Dina, for instance, defined a “good counselor” as one with “a lot of experience,” and Benny used these exact words when referring to the prime condition of becoming an expert. Recalling how he got started, he emphasized this point: “How did I get into the field? I didn’t learn it in university. That is to say, not like you’re doing [laughs]. I learned it maybe in the most expensive university in the world—The University of Life.” David is presumably another alumnus; he claims to have earned “a doctorate without a degree, without a diploma.” There are, of course, many experts who have earned higher degrees, some of whom disregard popular techniques based on “someone’s gut feelings and intuition” (as Adam put it) as opposed to their own science-based methods. However, even these experts consider education inferior to experience.Thus, when asked about his criteria for expertise, Adam replied: “First of all, experience.” Doron, who holds a Ph.D. in biology, also stressed the importance of practical knowledge: “When I read material in theoretical psychology, I of course read it critically. That is, I don’t always agree with what I read. But I do understand that it is experience-based, that it comes from practical knowledge.” The advantage of personal experience lies in its reliance on the accumulation of actual first-hand, real-life encounters. It therefore enjoys the benefits of a good theory without the limitations: it permits elaborateness but does not burden apprehension, and it is both rich enough and flexible enough to adjust to any specific case at hand. While the result of accumulated theories is *knowledge*, the acquisition of experience results in what many consider an even higher manifestation of expertise: *intuition*.

Apart from Adam’s dismissive remark above, intuition was mentioned explicitly by two other interviewees. The first, Dina, exclaimed: “I am not a psychologist. Here’s the point: I don’t diagnose, I even object to diagnosing. I work a lot more often with some sort of intuition, some inner voice that leads me.” In a similar vein, the other counselor, Ruth, described the instantaneousness with which she identifies her patients’ problems: “[when] People talk to me, I don‘t need too much [talking]. I understand immediately. If you talk a lot to people, you too will know. It’s some kind of intuition that I nurtured.“ In light of her background in psychology and her frequent use of typing techniques, Dina’s objection to psychological diagnosing cannot be understood as a rejection of psychology or classification per se. Likewise, it is improbable that Ruth, or any *communication* expert, may think that “too much talking” is generally a problem.[[2]](#footnote-2) What intuition is differentiated from, then, is mere “talking” on the one hand and, on the other hand, reliance on external generalizations based in theory, both of which threaten the authenticity and uniqueness of the individual. Paradoxically, precisely because it lacks external reasoning (and hence an objective basis), intuition is considered the ultimate manifestation of expertise. Deeply rooted in the self, it demonstrates the degree to which experts have *internalized* various kinds of theoretical and practical knowledge (here, notably, described in terms of communication: an “inner voice” guided by previous talking). Like self, intuition is something experts “have” (or rather something they *are*), but also something that is—unlike the dogmatism of theory—continuously and dynamically “happening.” Intuition thus brings forth experts‘ purest inherited personal qualities, helping them disclose both their own selves and their clients’ selves.

*3. Personal traits*. It is perhaps no coincidence that Dina and Ruth, who had mentioned intuition, were also the most spiritual of the interviewees. Adam’s disapproval of non-scientific “gut feelings” undoubtedly would have been exacerbated had he heard about their belief in cosmic energies and the “rule of attraction” (whereby “success is drawn to success” and “focusing on something augments it”), or their claims to have been gifted with an “elevated spirit” (Dina) or the ability to “see things” (Ruth). However, like all interviewees, Adam also mentioned having noticed since childhood that he had outstanding traits and skills as a communicator: “I think,” he said, “I also have skills from myself, ‘from home’.” Experts mentioned a wide array of personal traits, including intuition, good memory, nonconformity, determination and perseverance, candor, and, of course, communication—a category including skills such as charm, listening, expressiveness and the ability to convince. These traits were mainly described as inborn gifts, though in some cases they were said to be acquired or developed. Benny, for instance, stressed that the belief that you “either have it or not” was no more than a “myth.” “Everyone is born with interpersonal communication skills,” he exclaimed. To be sure, he added, some have more of a head start than others, but at the end of the day, it depends on the extent to which potential is cultivated.

The key to cultivation, according to these experts, is awareness of oneself and of others. As Ruth stated, “paying attention is the most important thing.” The importance of awareness lies in its being the means for communicating with the self, and thus the tool for converting “knowing how” to “knowing that” and vice versa. Benny recalled how, as the most successful salesperson in his company, he was selected to put together a training program for the other employees: “I returned to the field, but this time I went and did some sort of reflection on how I operate.” Benny took notes and recorded conversations with customers. Immediately after leaving customers’ houses, he held “meetings” with himself to analyze patterns of success or failure. Benny finally understood that during these sales meetings, he is not only holding a conversation between himself and the customer but also a simultaneous conversation within himself. Assuming that customers, too, have similar inner conversations, he called some of them a day or two after the meeting to ask for their comments. Analyzing their feedback, Benny was able to convert what, in his words, he had “felt without knowing” to a set of guidelines and tips for training employees. These guidelines and tips later became the basis for a book he has written and the workshops he gives. With clients as with experts, self-awareness is both a tool for and the result of improved communication. Thus, when Dina spoke of the patients she likes to deal with most—“young quality guys” who come for a consultation before getting married—she attributed to them two characteristics: “a lot of self-awareness” and “a real willingness to do the initialwork.”

The interviews revealed that communication experts‘ pattern of treatment involves three stages, two of which have to do with awareness. Experts identify their clients‘ communicative behavior, raise their awareness of it and guide them in improving it. Crucially, experts do not explicitly tell clients what communication style they have or how to improve it. Instead, experts provide analogies from their own life, imitate clients’ behavior or have it recorded and analyzed by them. Dina expressed her policy as, “Never say it must be the patient’s insight.” Even in workshops and lectures, where the context is less personal and the goals more instrumental, experts prefer demonstrating over explaining. Benny, for instance, conducts simulations of sales meetings during his training sessions. The advantage, he explained, is that participants “see for themselves, without any effort, where they made mistakes, and they themselves want to close those gaps […] It suddenly becomes very, very clear to them.” Similarly, Adam stressed the importance of the recording devices he uses for training: “From my perspective there is only one technique, and that is to put the guy in front of a camera, do a simulation on him, and then watch and analyze it with him.” Here too, then, experts prefer practice over theory, opting to display the performance of communication rather than talk about it. Ironically, “communication” is assumed to be understood better when fewer words are used.

Whether with words or with media, interviewees regard much of their work as reflecting. They frequently used this word, along with similar terms such as “projecting” and “mirroring,” in connection with their relationships with clients and their clients’ relationships with family, friends and colleagues. In all cases, “reflection” referred either to an external reaction that causes an inner understanding or to a private change of behavior that initiates an imitative response by the other. In the first sense, “reflection” described receiving feedback from the surroundings to understand one’s communication patterns. This is the implicit way in which experts “tell” clients what needs to be fixed in their communication behavior. “Reflecting” by paying attention to the reactions they elicit while interacting with others is also what experts encourage clients to do outside of training sessions. Adam described the effect of one of the drills he uses in workshops: “[E]ven without using the camera, you tell the person, ‘instead of making these motions, I want you to make the motions of giving a gift and combine it with the message that you are giving to people’ and… He says ‘wow, my mom, my daughter say that I really use this gesture, and show these small signs of impatience toward people’.”

“Reflection” may also denote a set of ways in which one affects one’s surroundings merely by changing one’s behavior. In a narrow sense, this can refer to “mirroring,” a technique of subconsciously building rapport by copying the interlocutor‘s body language. More broadly, in couples counseling, reflection describes a total shift in the behavior of one’s spouse correlating to one’s work on oneself. “It’s a mirror. It somehow projects,” said Dina, explaining why the participation of only one spouse suffices to bring change to the couple as a whole. The direction of the projection is thus either outward from the self or inward from the external world, and in both cases, it involves a relationship between two sets of communication, interpersonal and intrapersonal. In spite of the emphasis on an inner human self, “reflection” and similar terms semantically borrow from, and often literally rely on, media.

*4. Personal biography.* Communication experts not only teach self-awareness to others but use it themselves as a tool for deriving meaningful resources from their own lives (their past and present biographies). Unlike other fields of expertise in which the role of personal biography is reserved only as *motivation* for becoming an expert (e.g., becoming a surgeon after being saved by one in childhood), here it is a *resource* for expertise. Interviewees frequently mentioned a two-way connection between their profession and personal life, describing how their expertise influences encounters with spouses, children and acquaintances. Benny said, “If my wife, my daughter, my friends… contact me and they have all kinds of issues communicating among themselves, it’s totally not in the business dimension, but the tools are the same tools, so I try to use them as appropriate.” Still, there are drawbacks to applying communication techniques from the utilitarian environment of business to the romantic environment of relationships. Benny recounted how, in his first years of marriage, his wife was jealousof what she regarded as his flirting with other women. It took her some time to realize that Benny was actually, or at least seemingly, paying close attention to *any* interlocutor he met. Still, she suspects his intentions to this day: “I come to my wife and open my mouth, and she says: ‘What are you selling me?’” Presumably for similar reasons, Adam tries to refrain from using his techniques at home: “On the personal level, when I‘m in front of my wife or daughter—you don’t always use it, I too am a person.”

While importing communication techniques into one‘s personal life may not always be wise, communication experts hold that the opposite is advisable at all times. Adam, for example, guides his clients to refine their public-appearance skills by paying attention to the feedback they receive in their private, day-to-day life. Similarly, Dina, reports that she is careful about bringing home the “complicated things” she deals with at work, but apparently sees no problem in bringing her home into the clinic: “Everything I’ve said up to now, and everything I do in the clinic, we’ve [previously] gone through at home. I can’t come with some grand theory if it hasn’t worked for me.”

The use of personal experience was often framed as “sharing,” a term denoting emotional talk with the prime goal of establishing and maintaining social ties that was seen as the essence of communication to a large extent. Rina, for example, noted, “If your child calls, and you say to him: ‘what do you need?’ and the kid is calling not because he needs something, but because he wants to share, and you don’t understand that, you’re going to end the conversation on a downer. He’s not going to share anymore. And then, four years later, you’re going to say [to him]: ‘you’re not talking to me’.”

The power of “sharing,” as Nicholas John (2016) analyzes, lies in the myriad positive values the concept has come to encompass: empathy, fairness, openness, communication and equality. Semantically situated at the intersection of business and therapy, “sharing” is a prime example of “emotional capitalism” (Illouz, 2007) that is equally relevant in the workplace and at home.[[3]](#footnote-3) Experts believe that sharing is essential for communication and give examples from their own life. Dina commented, “I’m not afraid to provide a personal example, to expose myself, to share and say: ‘I was in this place, and I did such and such, and you should try it, too, and maybe it will work for you, too’.” As with reflecting, the practice of sharing exemplifies desired relationships between experts and their clients as well as between clients and their family or friends. It, too, involves the personal and the interpersonal and implies mutuality, reciprocity and equality, and likewise, it is a multilayered, self-generating concept: experts share their personal experiences—the contents of which are themselves stories of sharing (or the failure thereof)—so that patients will share their own emotional stories in return, in the clinic and at home (where, finally, it is meant to evokesharing on the part of the partner).

“Sharing,” “reflecting,” learning to listen, identifying communication patterns and adjusting to them, and all the other practices devised by communication experts for intra- and inter- communication are part of what Giddens (1991) calls “the reflexive project of the self”—the never-ending endeavor of the consciously aware individual to shape and improve their personality. Becoming aware of one‘s communication patterns is thus not merely a necessary step toward change but part of change itself, perhaps the most essential part of it. Improving communication, then, is more about reshaping the self than about learning to express it better. To some extent, this notion provides answers to questions regarding the genuineness and authenticity of practiced communication. Adam, who is frequently asked such questions in his workshops, had a prepared threefold answer. First, he said, as with driving or playing tennis, communication is a skill that can be learned and developed. Second, he noted, we all have multiple selves—as a father, as a student, as a coach and so on. Communicating accurately is letting a “higher self” choose which particular self will be presented at any given moment. Third and most importantly, according to Adam, “working on communication” is actually a way of “liberating” the real inner self. Standing in front of a microphone or camera causes people to act unnaturally in the beginning: they freeze, artificially speak in a higher register or avoid smiling. Workshops are meant to undo this. But even more importantly, Adam added, “I draw the analogy with a tennis match. I say that after all the training, when you get up there, you need to forget everything the coach said. You just play. Ultimately, you let yourself be who you are.”

Much like psychoanalysis, clients of communication experts experience change of self through talk. Likewise, their relationships with experts are seen as analogous to relations in the day-to-day world. Clients become aware of their needs and capabilities, learn to manage relations with others, and arrive (or return) to their true inner self. However, unlike therapy, clients of communication experts are expected to learn the theory, gain direct and vicarious practical experience and discover and perfect their own skills.

**Discussion: the recursive expertise of communication**

Arguably, all experts use communication skills throughout the process of acquiring, maintaining and enacting their expertise. During training, experts communicate with teachers and instructors and, after being deemed (or deeming themselves) accomplished experts, proceed to interact with peers, clients and, in some cases, policymakers and, through the media, the entire public. “Expertise,” claims Carr (2010), “requires the mastery of verbal performance, including—perhaps most importantly—the ability to use language to index and therefore instantiate already existing inner states of knowledge” (19). When it comes to communication skills, communication is not only the means of acquisition and enactment of expertise but its very substance. Expertise in communication is hence recursive, and this recursion, moreover, exists within each of its components. Attempting to carry out a “reverse engineering“ of these recursive loops may shed light on some essential aspects of communication as revealed through the work of communication skills experts, which may well be relevant to the study of communication more generally. In other words, answering the two questions—what makes one a communication expert and how does one perform such expertise—will help answer a third question: what exactly is the “communication” these experts are expert in?

As described, communication experts‘ enactment of expertise is recursive because it collapses three meanings of performance—performance as defined by Hymes, Goffman and Austin. The practice of communication experts is recursive as well because it uses communication to communicate (about communication). Consequently, the key terms that experts use are themselves recursive. Thus, for instance, “intuition” is one‘s consultation with one’s “inner voice.” Similarly, “reflecting,” “mirroring” and other attendant self-awareness practices expose—and simultaneously constitute—the various conduits through which communication flows within the self, within the other and between self and other. Likewise, “sharing” shares itself: regardless of its specific content, it imparts the very ideal of this sort of emotional disclosure as a preferred form of communication. In all cases, the terms carry both the form and the content of “communication,” exhibiting multiple levels of meta-discourse, self-reference and recursion: namely, the performative act of pointing at the fact of pointing at itself as “communication” (the deixis of deixis, if you will). As Kripendorff (1994) asserts, recursivity is an essential but commonly overlooked aspect of any communication and any theorizing of communication. Communication is recursive because each of its occurrence mandates, and hence in some way refers to, a preexisting taken-for-granted context of its occurring. The meaning of words and gestures, the rules of proper usage of language and the very ability to communicate are all given realities into which interlocutors enter even while creating their own personal and unique exchanges. Theories of communication are also recursive since every theory *about* communication is also a form *of* communication. Furthermore, since communication is a social construct, notions about what communication is, what it should be, and how it should be carried out emerge from, and re-enter, the same social fabric (Krippendorff, 1994).

Communication experts are thus experts in, and as such, agents of, communication‘s recursion insofar as they use communication to teach, practice and display communication. Their conduct relies not merely on their client’ resources but on the latter’s active participation, requiring, in turn, ongoing coordination with them via dialog—via communication. From the start, then, communication experts must position themselves on the same plane as their clients and continuously attune themselves to their clients’ level of communication. The ability to convey high proficiency without losing touch with the non-expert is arguably the most salient manifestation of expertise that communication experts perform. “The amazing thing,” said Benny, “is that they perceive me as being really up here [raises his hand above his head], but I talk to them at eye level. They really love it.” Indeed, a common maneuver among the communication experts interviewed here is presenting their credentials and professionalism while also thoroughly dismissing the existence of their expertise. All interviewees expressed high levels of self-esteem, on the verge of boasting: several interviewees claimed to be leading figures in their field on a national or even international level. At the same time, they embraced a down-to-earth approach by refraining from theorization, promoting simplicity and repeatedly intertwining their private lives with their professional work. Some experts went as far as to reject expertise entirely. “There is no such expertise,” Adam claimed. “Some guy called Adam comes and defines himself as an expert, and on TV, they give him [the title of] expert.” Dina, too, admitted that “communication” is not an expertise and that she uses the title for promotional purposes only. This seemingly contradictory proclamation—asserting and immediately renouncing the status of expertise—is the inaugural gesture of communication skills expertise, an expertise devoted to and concerned with laypeople.

Unlike other experts, who are often accused of being arrogant toward and detached from the general public (Burgman et al., 2011), communication experts’ expertise does not come at the expense of laity (etymologically derived from “the common folk, the people”). Communication experts are specialized not only in comparison with the general public but in their relations withit—both in the sense of specializing in relations and of the required cooperation with ordinary people. The recursivity of their expertise—the quality of it not being a manifestation of a static body of knowledge but a continuous process of becoming—supports the dynamism of interaction with their clients. In another sense, however, communication’s recursivity is tautological, and as such undermines its substance. It exists only when—and as—performed, and is relevant only insofar as it can be understood and accepted by laypeople.

It is this unique nature of expertise that explains the prospering of communication experts precisely in the age of “the death of expertise” (Nichols, 2017) in which “we are witnessing the *death of the ideal of expertise* itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople” (3). This collapse, as described by Nichols, is due to an increasingly narcissistic culture in which laypeople cannot tolerate a hint of inequality, in which higher education has adopted a customer satisfaction model (expressed, for instance, in excessive teacher evaluations and an atmosphere that elevates emotions at the expense of reason) that encourages students to consider experts as equal, even inferior, to themselves; and in which mass media, chiefly the Internet, provide easy access to an abundance of partial, inaccurate or patently wrong information, with journalists forced to lower professional standards to cope with the rapid flow of information. Experts, for their part, are not exempted from responsibility:

The fact of the matter is that the pitfalls of discussion and debate aren’t limited to mistakes made by the least intelligent among us… The many influences on the death of expertise, including higher education, the media, and the Internet, are all enablers of these basic human traits. All of these challenges to better communication between experts and citizens can be overcome with education, rigor, and honesty, but only if we know how they’re plaguing us in the first place (42).

The decline of expertise, then, lies in a growing split between expertise’s substance and impression—between scientific truths and alternative theories, and between those who hold real knowledge and those who only claim to do so. In all cases, communication is at fault. Fraudulent experts have always existed. In the 17th century, they came to be known as “quacks,” a term derived from the Middle Dutch word for “bragging” or “boasting.” Mass media boosted the careers of many of these “experts” but also gave rise to a new type of experts: “popular experts” who are “associated with the ‘soft,’ entertainment-oriented end of the media spectrum, figures whose expertise is intimately connected to the ‘ordinary’” (Lewis, 2008: 2). This shift has been explained as part of a growing “informationalization” of everyday life in which “advice and expertise become relatively democratized and presented in increasingly accessible forms” (ibid.). Accessibility and availability of information also account for new collective knowledge-based initiatives such as Wikipedia that have been presented as models of “dialogic expertise” (Hartelius, 2010) or “networked/participatory expertise” (Pfister, 2011).

These new forms of expertise—all based on new possibilities of communication and new roles assigned to laypeople—weaken the status of established fields of expertise and profoundly change the meaning of the term expertise itself. In extreme cases, self-proclaimed experts risk the safety or health of the whole public, as is the case with vaccination opponents, climate change disbelievers and AIDS denialists. The threat these “pseudo-expert discourses” pose is so great that some argue they should be banned from the public sphere altogether (Sorial, 2017). Limiting free speech on the Web is an extreme step with questionable efficacy. Experts have thus come to understand that in the process of specialization, they have become distanced from the general public, and that the corrective lies in improving their own communication skills.

Scientists are hence advised to take up “science communication,” which denotes the ability to explain research in simple words that avoid jargon but do not compromise accuracy (Besley & Tanner, 2011; Brownell et al., 2013; Bubela et al., 2009). Increasing numbers of scientists and undergraduate and graduate students are participating in workshops, courses and seminars in which they are exposed to the importance of interacting with the media and the general public and are encouraged to speak more frequently and more clearly about their work. An underlying assumption of science communication is the need for experts to put themselves in the shoes of laypeople, as an author of an op-ed piece in Nature insisted: “To be effective communicators, scientists have to learn to stand back from their own work and see it as strangers might do” (Radford, 2011: 445). The increasing distance between experts and laypeople is thus described in terms of a communication gap between experts and non-experts, and improved communication is deemed the solution.

One the one hand, communication skills experts can be seen as exemplifying the crisis of expertise. They are “popular experts” who deal with mundane scenarios of the domestic sphere, who have made themselves familiar to the general public through self-help books, advice columns and talk shows, and whose expertise is not scientifically acknowledged. In this sense, they are rivals to credible experts. On the other hand, however, communication experts hold knowledge that “real” experts, almost by definition, do not have—how to approach laypeople—and their help is increasingly being sought. Holding exclusive knowledge, approached in times of crisis, and treated with a combination of dependence and suspicion: communication specialists are, ironically, not only laypeople experts but also expert experts. They are the face of expertise in the era of communication culture.

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1. Interviews were held in Hebrew, took about an hour, and were recorded and transcribed. For confidentiality reasons, names have been altered. Although all interviewees were Israeli, one has previously worked in the United States, another was working there at the time, and the rest were operating in Israel but mentioned reliance on American materials (e.g., self-help literature). This attests to Katriel’’s (1990; 2004) observations regarding the similarities shared by Israeli and English-speaking communication cultures. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Moreover, she herself, in that very same quote, stressed the importance of talking “a lot to people.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Hebrew, the word for “sharing,” שיתוף (*shituf*), belongs to the collocationשיתוף פעולה (*shituf pe-ula*), which means “cooperation.” The word thus alludes to several semantic fields regarding relationships: business, romantic, parenting and other. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)