THE CONCEPT OF SKILL AND ITS APPLICATION TO SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The modern concept of social skill arose in the early 1960s from the application of the concepts of skill then current in studies of man-machine interactions, to those between persons. The analogy is close, involving all the main functional mechanisms - perceptual, decisional, motor, etc. - concerned with information processing, and their operation in a feedback system. Skill itself of any kind, whether social or other, is conceived as the use of efficient strategies to relate the demands of tasks or situations to the performer's capacities.

Two separate aspects of capacity attach to each of the main physical and mental mechanisms underlying performance: instantaneous, such as maximum strength; and time-related, such as the amount that can be done in a given time. Demands of tasks and situations need to be expressed in the same terms as capacities if the two are to be related together. The strategies that couple demands to capacities appear to have a generic character in the sense that they are flexible and subject to modification to suit precise details of the situation. Social skills are not concerned with any separate social capacity: instead different social skills parallel other types of skill concerned with the main functional mechanisms of performance. Efficiency of strategy needs to be assessed in a time perspective - what is efficient in the short run may not be in the long. The attainment of skill involves learning, for which observation of the results of action is necessary. The fact that new tasks are inevitably tackled in terms brought from previous experience means that initial experience exerts important steering effects on subsequent performance.
The principles outlined are illustrated by an example of the industrial manager who needs to develop and exercise a range of social skills to convey information to those managed, to assess their capacities, and to counter the pressures of those seeking short-term gains at the expense of long-term. He should also recognise the inevitability of error by both himself and others if performance is to be efficient, and should try to see that the lessons of it are learnt. These social skills, if they are to be fully effective, must be backed by skill in handling the non-social aspects of the task and situation.

SKILL AND SOCIAL SKILL: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

Although significant studies of skill can be traced back at least to the turn of the century, modern concepts clearly take their rise from the development in the 1940s onwards of what has come to be known as the information-processing approach to human performance. This approach gave a precision and unity to studies of the interaction between man and machine that had not been attained previously, and it was perhaps understandable that attempts were made to apply it also to interactions between man and man. The concept of social skill appears to have come into focus with a study of automation by Crossman (1960). He noted that for the operators of process plants, traditional trade skills were of little importance. Their effectiveness as operators did, however, depend to a substantial extent upon the ability to maintain easy and effective communication, on the one hand with supervisors and on the other with maintenance staff, so that they would co-operate willingly and quickly when needed. Such communication seemed to depend on qualities of social relationship which were then undefined, although intuitively identifiable. A further significant stage came when Crossman, then recognised as an expert in human information processing and the study of industrial skills, went to Oxford and teamed up with Michael Argyle, a leading social psychologist, to put forward a research proposal to the then Department of Industrial and Scientific Research in Britain, for a study of social skill, which would specifically explore analogies between man-machine and man-man interactions. It was very much to the credit of DSIR that the proposal was generously funded.

Crossman and Argyle were not alone in their ideas. Around the same period several others were thinking along similar lines, although in most cases less explicitly. For example, in 1953 Leslie Farrer-Brown who was then Director of the Nuffield Foundation, urged the Ergonomics Research Society to apply the principles of ergonomics to social problems (see Welford, 1966); in 1959 the ERS held a meeting with the title "Ergonomics of Administration" at which concepts of skill were applied to social relations in industry (Ergonomics, 1960, 3:179-182), and in 1964 the Operational Research Society held an international conference on "Operational research and the Social Sciences" which was concerned to apply operational analysis to social interaction (Lawrence, 1965).