# *A First Look at*
# COMMUNICATION THEORY


*Eleventh Edition*

Em Griffin | Andrew Ledbetter | Glenn Sparks

Mc Graw Hill

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ELEVENTH EDITION

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*Special Consultants:*

Katherine R. Cooper

Theon E. Hill

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# A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY

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A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY, ELEVENTH EDITION



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## CLEAR AND ENGAGING COVERAGE OF THE FOLLOWING THEORIES:

**Interpersonal Communication**

Symbolic Interactionism (Mead)
Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon)
Family Communication Patterns (Koerner & Fitzpatrick)
Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor)
Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger)
Social Information Processing Theory (Walther)
Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Bakhtin)
Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio)
Media Multiplexity Theory (Haythornthwaite)

**Social Influence**

Social Judgment Theory (Sherif & Sherif)
Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo)
Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger)
The Rhetoric (Aristotle)
Dramatism (Burke)
Narrative Paradigm (Fisher)

**Group and Organizational Communication**

Functional Perspective (Hirokawa & Gouran)
Symbolic Convergence Theory (Bormann)
Cultural Approach (Geertz & Pacanowsky)
Communicative Constitution of Organizations (McPhee)
Critical Theory of Communication (Deetz)

**Cultural Context**

Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles)
Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey)
Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe)
Afrocentricity (Asante)
Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding & Wood)
Muted Group Theory (Kramarae)

**Mass Communication**

Media Ecology (McLuhan)
Context Collapse (boyd & Marwick)
Semiotics (Barthes)
Cultural Studies (Hall)
Uses and Gratifications (Katz)
Cultivation Theory (Gerbner)
Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw)

**Conversations with Communication Theorists**

Video interviews with the following theorists are available on the author-driven website, *www.afirstlook.com*, and are among the resources available through McGraw Hill Connect.

Judee Burgoon—Expectancy Violations Theory (Em)
Chuck Berger—Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Em)
Joe Walther—Social Information Processing Theory (Em)
Leslie Baxter—Relational Dialectics Theory (Em)
Sandra Petronio—Communication Privacy Management Theory (Glenn)
Randy Hirokawa—Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making (Em)
Stan Deetz—Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations (Em)
Howie Giles—Communication Accommodation Theory (Andrew)
Stella Ting-Toomey—Face-Negotiation Theory (Em)
Mark Orbe—Co-Cultural Theory (Andrew)
Cheris Kramarae—Muted Group Theory (Em)
Max McCombs—Agenda-Setting Theory (Em)

The archive includes Em's interviews with Barnett Pearce (Coordinated Management of Meaning); Scott Poole (Adaptive Structuration Theory); Jesse Delia, Brant Burleson, and Jim Applegate (Constructivism); Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass (Media Equation); and Gerry Philipsen (Speech Codes Theory).

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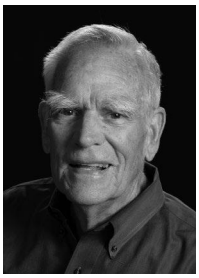
# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

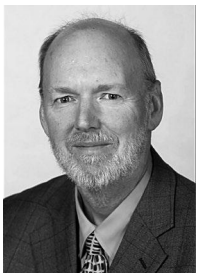


Emory Griffin/
McGraw Hill

**Em Griffin** is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Wheaton College in Illinois, where he taught for more than 35 years and was chosen Teacher of the Year. In 2016, he was awarded the Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award from the National Communication Association. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in communication from Northwestern University; his research interest is in the development of close friendships. Em is the author of three applied communication books: *The Mind Changers* (persuasion), *Getting Together* (group dynamics), and *Making Friends* (close relationships). Throughout his life, Em has served as an active volunteer in four nonprofit organizations—Young Life (high school youth), Opportunity International (microfinance services for women in poverty), Chicago Center for Conflict Resolution (mediation), and his church. Em's wife, Jean, is an artist and a musician. They've been married for 60 years and have two adult children, Jim and Sharon, and six grandchildren—all deeply involved in baseball or hockey. You can reach Em at em.griffin@wheaton.edu.

Andrew Ledbetter/
McGraw Hill

**Andrew Ledbetter** is a Professor of Communication Studies at Texas Christian University. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Kansas. His research addresses how people use communication technology to maintain family and other interpersonal relationships. Andrew has published more than 60 articles and book chapters, and he has received recognition for teaching excellence from both the National Communication Association and Central States Communication Association. His wife, Jessica, holds doctorates in law and higher education administration, and she works as an assistant dean in student affairs at Texas Christian University. With their daughters, Sydney and Kira, they enjoy involvement in their church, playing board and card games, running, reading, cooking, and following the TCU Horned Frogs and Kansas Jayhawks. You can reach Andrew at a.ledbetter@tcu.edu, visit his blog at www.andrewledbetter.com, or follow him on Twitter via @dr_ledbetter.



Glenn Sparks/
McGraw Hill

**Glenn Sparks** is a Professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University in Indiana, where he has taught for 35 years and won the highest undergraduate teaching award given by the College of Liberal Arts. He received his Ph.D. in communication arts from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Glenn is the author of *Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview* and a personal memoir, *Rolling in Dough: Lessons I Learned in a Doughnut Shop.* He's co-author of *Refrigerator Rights: Our Crucial Need for Close Connection.* Glenn is an avid sports fan and an aspiring theremin player. He is married to Cheri, who is also a Ph.D. and lecturer in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue. They have three adult children, David, Erin, and Jordan, and four grandchildren, Caleb, Joshua, Autumn, and Benjamin. You can reach Glenn at gsparks@purdue.edu.

Kate Cooper/
McGraw Hill

**Katherine R. Cooper** is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at DePaul University in Chicago. She received her M.A. and Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her main research interests include nonprofit organizations and interorganizational collaboration in response to social challenges. Kate is the co-author of *Networks for Social Impact*. In her spare time, she is a mediocre but enthusiastic artist and gardener. She is married to Matt, an engineer, and together they have two daughters.

Theon Hill/
McGraw Hill

**Theon E. Hill** is an Associate Professor of Communication at Wheaton College in Illinois. He received his Ph.D. in communication from Purdue University in Indiana. Theon's expertise lies at the intersections of race, politics, and society, and his research has appeared in scholarly journals, edited collections, and popular news outlets. He is a passionate advocate for racial justice in academia and the local community. He was selected as a 2021 Civil Society Fellow, a partnership of the Aspen Institute and the Anti-Defamation League. In this fellowship, Theon will study community-based leadership around the world with the goal of launching a venture to fight for racial justice in his local community. He is married to Amy, and together they have two children.

## DEDICATION

We dedicate this book to our wives, Jeanie, Jessica, and Cheri, who encouraged us to work together, celebrated with us when the process went well, and comforted us when it didn't. Just as they lovingly supported us in this project, we commit to being there for them in what they feel called to do.

Em, Andrew, Glenn

# CONTENTS

# PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

If you are already familiar with *A First Look at Communication Theory* and understand the approach, organization, and main features of the book, you may want to jump ahead to the "Major Changes in the Eleventh Edition" section. For those who are new to the text, reading the entire preface will give you a good grasp of what you and your students can expect.

**A Balanced Approach to Theory Selection.** We've written *A First Look* for students who have no background in communication theory. It's designed for undergraduates enrolled in an entry-level course, regardless of the students' classification. The trend in the field is to offer students a broad introduction to theory relatively early in their program. But if a department chooses to offer its first theory course at the junior or senior level, the course will still be students' first comprehensive look at theory, so the book will meet them where they are.

Our goal in this text is to present 33 communication theories in a clear and interesting way. After reading about a given theory, students should understand the theory, know the research that supports it, see useful applications in their lives, and be aware of the theory's possible flaws. We hope readers will discover relationships among theories located across the communication landscape—a clear indication that they grasp what they're reading. But that kind of integrative thinking only takes place when students first comprehend what a theorist claims.

With the help of more than 200 instructors, we've selected a range of theories that reflect the diversity within the discipline. Some theories are proven candidates for a Communication Theory Hall of Fame. For example, Aristotle's analysis of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals continues to set the agenda for many public speaking courses. Mead's symbolic interactionism is formative for interpretive theorists who are dealing with language, thought, meaning, self-concept, or the effect of society upon the individual. Berger's uncertainty reduction theory was the first objective theory to be crafted by a social scientist trained in the field. And no student of mediated communication should be ignorant of McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory, which says the media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it.

It would be shortsighted, however, to limit the selection to the classics of communication. Some of the discipline's most creative approaches are its newest. For example, Sandra Petronio's theory of communication privacy management undergirds much of the research conducted in the field of health communication.

Robert McPhee's communicative constitution of organizations describes how the principle of social construction works in an organizational context. And, like almost all social media theorizing, Caroline Haythornthwaite's media multiplexity theory and danah boyd and Alice Marwick's theory of context collapse are still being tested and refined.

**Organizational Plan of the Book.** Each chapter introduces a single theory in 10 to 15 pages. We've found that most undergraduates think in terms of discrete packets of information, so the concentrated coverage gives them a chance to focus their thoughts while reading a single chapter. This way, students can gain in-depth understanding of important theories instead of acquiring only vague familiarity with a jumble of related ideas. The one-chapter–one-theory arrangement also gives teachers the opportunity to skip theories or rearrange the order of presentation without tearing apart the fabric of the text.

The first four chapters provide a framework for understanding the theories to come. The opening chapter, "Launching Your Study of Communication Theory," presents working definitions of both *theory* and *communication*, and also prepares students for the arrangement of the chapters and the features within them. Chapter 2, "Objective and Interpretive Approaches to Communication Theory," lays the groundwork for understanding and comparing these two types of theory. Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words," presents two sets of criteria for determining a good objective or interpretive theory. Based on Robert Craig's (University of Colorado) conception, Chapter 4, "Mapping the Territory," introduces seven traditions within the field of communication theory.

Following this integrative framework, we feature 33 theories in 33 self-contained chapters. Each theory is discussed within the context of a communication topic: interpersonal messages, relationship development, relationship maintenance, persuasion, public rhetoric, group communication, organizational communication, intercultural communication, gender and communication, media and culture, and media effects. These communication context sections usually cover three theories. Each section's brief introduction outlines a crucial issue that theorists working in this area address. The placement of theories in familiar contexts helps students recognize that theories are answers to questions they've been asking all along. The final chapter, "Common Threads in Comm Theories," offers students a novel form of integration that will help them discern order in the tapestry of communication theory that might otherwise seem chaotic.

Because all theory and practice have value implications, we briefly explore a dozen ethical principles throughout the book. Consistent with the focus of this text, each principle is the central tenet of a specific ethical theory. Other disciplines may ignore these thorny issues, but to discuss communication as a process that is untouched by questions of good and bad, right and wrong, or questions of character would be to disregard an ongoing concern in our field.

**Features of Each Chapter.** Most people think in pictures. Students will have a rough time understanding a theory unless they apply its explanations and interpretations to concrete situations. Many chapters offer an extended example to illustrate the "truth" a theory proposes. We encourage readers to try out ideas by visualizing a first meeting of college roommates, seeking to persuade other students to support a zero-tolerance policy on texting while driving, considering the symbolic meaning of wearing a mask or taking a knee, and many others. We also use speeches by

presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, as well as testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, to illustrate three theories of public address. The case studies in chapters follow the pedagogical principle of explaining what students don't yet know in terms of ideas and images that are already within their experience.

Some theories are tightly linked with an extensive research project. For example, the impact of cognitive dissonance theory was greatly spurred by Festinger's surprising finding in his now classic $1/$20 experiment. And Orbe's co-cultural theory emerged when he conducted intensive focus groups with members of the LGBTQ community, Black men, and people with physical disabilities. When such exemplars exist, we describe the research in detail so that students can learn from and appreciate the benefits of grounding theory in systematic observation. In this way, readers of *A First Look* are led through a variety of research designs and data analyses.

Students will encounter the names of Asante, Baxter, Berger, Bormann, Burgoon, Burke, Deetz, Fisher, Giles, Kramarae, Orbe, Pacanowsky, Ting-Toomey, Walther, Wood, and many others in later communication courses. We therefore make a concerted effort to link theory and theorist. By pairing a particular theory with its originator, we try to promote both recall and respect for a given scholar's effort.

The text of each chapter concludes with a section that critiques the theory. This represents a hard look at the ideas presented in light of the criteria for a good theory outlined in Chapter 3. Some theorists have suggested that we are "friends" of their theory. We appreciate that because we want to present all of the theories in a constructive way. But after we summarize a theory's strengths, we then discuss its weaknesses, unanswered questions, and possible errors that remain. We try to stimulate a "That makes sense, and yet I wonder . . ." response among students.

We include a short list of thought questions at the end of each chapter. Labeled "Questions to Sharpen Your Focus," these probes encourage students to make connections among ideas in the chapter and also to apply the theory to their everyday communication experience. As part of this feature, words printed in italics remind students of the key terms of a given theory.

Each chapter ends with a short list of annotated readings entitled "A Second Look." The heading refers to resources for students who are interested in a theory and want to go further than a 10- to 15-page introduction allows. The top item is the resource we recommend as the starting point for further study. The other listings identify places to look for material about each of the major issues raised in the chapter. The format is designed to offer practical encouragement and guidance for further study without overwhelming the novice with multiple citations. The sources of quotations and citations of evidence are listed in an "Endnotes" section at the end of each chapter.

We think instructors and students alike will get a good chuckle out of the cartoons we've selected for each chapter. The art's main function, however, is to illustrate significant points in the text. As in other editions, we're committed to using quality cartoon art from *The New Yorker* and comic strips such as *Calvin and Hobbes, Dilbert, Baldo,* and *The Boondocks*. Perceptive cartoonists are modern-day prophets—their humor serves the education process well when it slips through mental barriers or attitudinal defenses that didactic prose can't penetrate.

A co-authored book always faces the challenge of being consistent in style and voice across chapters. This has been less of a problem for us because of our history

together. Andrew Ledbetter and Glenn Sparks continue to be co-authors and equal partners with Em. Both are highly recognized scholars in their field—Andrew in online communication and family communication, Glenn in media effects and interpersonal communication. Glenn was a student in Em's first persuasion course at Wheaton; Andrew aced one of the last communication theory classes Em taught before he retired from full-time teaching. Despite differences in our ages of more than 40 years, the three of us are close friends and colleagues who have published together before. Each of us vets and edits what the other two write and offers advice on what to cover. We're convinced that this interactive process ensures students will read up-to-date information presented in the same style that has characterized the book throughout the previous 10 editions.

While no author considers their style ponderous or dull, we believe we've presented the theories in a clear and lively fashion. Accuracy alone does not communicate. We've tried to remain faithful to the vocabulary each theorist uses so that the student can consider the theory in the author's own terms, but we also translate technical language into more familiar words. Students and reviewers cite readability and interest as particular strengths of the text. We encourage you to sample a chapter so you can decide for yourself.

In 12 of the chapters, you'll see photographs of the theorists who appear in "Conversations," eight-minute video clips of our discussions together. The text that accompanies each picture previews intriguing comments the theorists made so students can watch the interview with a specific purpose in mind. These videos are available at *www.afirstlook.com*, our authors' website averaging 30,000 visits a month. On that site you will also find auto-graded quizzes, chapter outlines, theory abstracts, and an archive of theory chapters no longer in the text. You'll also find a list of pop culture references for each theory. Because of rapid changes in how people access media, this replaces the list of feature film clips that appeared in an appendix in previous editions. Placing this list on the website allows us to feature a broader set of resources and, in some cases, enables instructors and students to link directly to the material. In a password-protected section of the site, instructors can see suggestions for classroom discussion and activities, recommendations for further theory resources, chapter-by-chapter changes from the previous edition, and a chart of theory coverage in other communication theory texts.

Along with many of these resources, an Instructor's Manual, test bank, and lecture slides are available through McGraw Hill Connect. Connect, McGraw Hill Education's integrated assignment and assessment platform, also offers SmartBook for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students study more effectively. Additional information about Connect is available at the end of this preface.

**Major Changes in the Eleventh Edition.** On the title page of the book, Kate Cooper (DePaul University) and Theon Hill (Wheaton College) are listed as "Special Consultants." They've earned this title through the hard work and intellectual capital they've invested in key revisions. Their voices, experiences, and insights enrich this book. Both have contributed in ways that are above and beyond what any author has a right to expect, and it has been a delight to work with them. With deep gratitude, we'll describe their contributions below.

This edition includes three new theory chapters. We agree with the instructors who have told us that they and their students want to examine theories that devote focused attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This edition introduces students to

Molefi Kete Asante's theory of Afrocentricity. This landmark theory seeks to disrupt Eurocentric ways of thinking about culture and communication by centering knowledge on the experiences of members of the African diaspora. We're grateful to special consultant Theon Hill for his expert work in crafting this important new chapter.

Given growing interest in family communication over the past two decades, we've also added a chapter on Ascan Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick's family communication patterns theory. The theory identifies conversation and conformity as distinct ways that parents and children create a shared social reality, with consequences for how children think, feel, and communicate in the future.

A third new chapter centers on social media. The theory of context collapse, crafted by danah boyd and Alice Marwick, wrestles with the difficulty of performing the self to multiple audiences in the digital era—a challenge for everyone, but particularly so for members of marginalized groups. To make room for these theories, we've moved our treatment of Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning and Tannen's genderlect styles to the archive at *www.afirstlook.com*, where full chapters can be easily accessed if you wish to assign them to your students.

This edition features a significant restructuring of the chapters. We now group theories of persuasion (social judgment theory, elaboration likelihood model, and cognitive dissonance theory) with theories of public rhetoric (Aristotle's Rhetoric, dramatism, and the narrative paradigm), placing them in a division titled "Social Influence." We've also swapped the order of the final two divisions, addressing cultural context prior to mass communication. This arranges the book in a rough order from contexts focusing on small numbers of people (interpersonal communication often includes just two) to larger numbers of people (many forms of mediated communication address humans across the globe).

Throughout all chapters, we've made a concerted effort to update and replace examples that no longer have the explanatory power or appeal they did when introduced in previous editions. We've also worked hard to keep each theory current with the state of scholarship in the discipline. Here's a sample of chapters with significant revisions:

- The first chapter, **"Launching Your Study,"** has been restructured to first define communication and then define theory. We think this revision will stimulate students' interest in learning more about communication.
- The second chapter bears the more descriptive title **"Objective and Interpretive Approaches to Communication Theory."** The chapter features analysis of "Upstream," a popular Super Bowl ad. The insights of Travis Dixon (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and Kristina Scharp (University of Washington) reveal how objective and interpretive scholars differ in their approaches.
- ***Uncertainty reduction theory*** introduces students to three current-day approaches to studying uncertainty in interpersonal relationships.
- ***Social information processing theory's*** revised critique section considers the applicability of the theory in our age of multimodality.
- ***Relational dialectics theory*** has been significantly revised and simplified with the aim of providing students with an accessible introduction to the theory.
- ***Media multiplexity theory*** has been restructured around recent research that clarifies the five core propositions of the theory, and now includes an ethical reflection on Sherry Turkle's reclaiming conversation.

- ***Social judgment theory*** offers a fresh example of a college student trying to persuade her father regarding climate change.
- ***Elaboration likelihood model*** includes texting and driving as an ongoing example.
- ***Dramatism*** features an updated example from President Trump's rhetoric during the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.
- ***Narrative paradigm*** focuses on how the theory provides insight into Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's accusation of sexual assault by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, an event that captured the attention of the nation.
- ***Symbolic convergence theory*** includes new research on fantasy themes among schoolteachers.
- ***Cultural approach to organizations*** has been reworked with several new examples, including a transgender women's center, flight attendants, and online work during COVID-19.
- ***Communicative constitution of organizations*** has been heavily revised by special consultant Kate Cooper, including several new examples focusing on nonprofit organizations.
- ***Critical theory of communication in organizations*** has been revised by Kate Cooper for student clarity, highlighting the British royal family, the Me Too movement, and corporate influence over work life during COVID-19.
- ***Co-cultural theory*** adds cutting-edge research on dominant group theory, which addresses how privileged members of society respond to co-cultural group communication practices.
- ***Feminist standpoint theory*** is now properly situated as a *feminist* theory, and includes examples drawn heavily from Shardé Davis' research on the strong Black woman collective. The chapter also introduces a new ethical reflection on Miranda Fricker's epistemic justice.
- ***Muted group theory*** features a revised section on "Men as the Gatekeepers of Communication Media," which focuses on the presentation of race and gender in Marvel movies, bias against women in online spaces, and algorithmic oppression in the design of search engines.
- ***Semiotics*** is now illustrated by the symbolic meaning of COVID-19 masks and the act of taking a knee, both current and powerful examples of semiotics in action.
- ***Cultural studies*** has been significantly revised to demonstrate Hall's claim that media producers encode the dominant ideology, as well as the ways consumers decode those messages. This process is illustrated by Hall's extensive study of the press-created panic of being "mugged."
- ***Cultivation theory*** has been updated in light of technological changes, particularly the shift toward streaming video content.

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**Acknowledgments.** We gratefully acknowledge the wisdom and counsel of many generous scholars whose intellectual capital is embedded in every page you'll read. Over the last 30 years, more than a thousand communication scholars have gone out of their way to make the book better. People who have made direct contributions to this edition include Benjamin Bates, Ohio University; Dennis Cali, University of Texas at Tyler; Chris Carpenter, Western Illinois University; Shardé Davis, University of Connecticut; Travis Dixon, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Sandy French, Radford University; Johny Garner, Texas Christian University; Howie Giles, University of California, Santa Barbara; Britney Gilmore, Texas Christian University; Amorette Hinderaker, Texas Christian University; Kristen Irwin, Loyola University Chicago; Ronald Jackson II, University of Cincinnati; Bree McEwan, University of Toronto Missisauga; Colten Meisner, Cornell University; Monika Miller, Columbia College; Sandra Petronio, University of Indiana–Purdue University Indianapolis; Kaitlin Phillips, Utah State University; Doug Pruim, Purdue University; Kristina Scharp, University of Washington; Jordan Soliz, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; Samuel Hardman Taylor, University of Illinois at Chicago; Joe Walther, University of California, Santa Barbara; Deborah Whitt, Wayne State College. Without their help, this edition would be less accurate and certainly less interesting.

We are grateful to our colleagues at McGraw Hill who have been indispensable in making this edition possible: Alex Preiss, Product Developer; Sarah Remington, Managing Director; and Sarah Flynn, Content Licensing Specialist. We greatly appreciate the work of Jennifer Apt and Rajesh Negi, Project Managers at Lumina Datamatics and MPS Limited, respectively.

We've been fortunate to work closely with a group of outside contractors who have worked in concert for several editions. Jenn Meyer, a commercial computer artist, created and revised figures on 24-hour notice. Robyn Tellefsen, freelance writer and editor, was Em's student research assistant for the fourth edition of the book, proofreader for three editions, and copy editor for the last three. She also edited a book Glenn wrote. Robyn is quite familiar with communication theory and is someone whose edits we trust implicitly. Thus, the book your students read is better than the one we wrote. Stu Johnson has been the unflappable webmaster of *www.afirstlook.com* since its inception, creating multiple digital paths for users to find what they want and quickly short-circuiting glitches when they occur. And Amy Keating, for whom Andrew served as graduate advisor at TCU, graciously volunteers to respond to the almost daily requests for passwords to enter the instructors-only section of *www.afirstlook.com*. It's a wonderful team and we're incredibly fortunate to have their skills and friendship.

We offer a special word of appreciation to Emily Langan, who is a central member of our team. Emily is Em's former student who now teaches the courses he taught at Wheaton. This edition is Emily's sixth as author of the ever-evolving Instructor's Manual that is famous among communication theory instructors. Em recalls the time when he first introduced Emily at a National Communication Association short course on teaching communication theory. The participants stood and applauded. The three of us are grateful for her wisdom, dedication, creativity, and friendship.

Em Griffin
Andrew Ledbetter
Glenn Sparks

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# DIVISION ONE

# *Overview*

CHAPTER 1

# *Launching Your Study of Communication Theory*

As you begin this book and this course, you bring a wealth of experiences with communicating. You've noticed that some people communicate more effectively than others, and even excellent communicators sometimes say the wrong thing. Maybe you've cringed when you've heard a speaker flub their words, and if we're honest with ourselves, we can remember a conversation where we now think, "I can't believe I said that."

You have memories of effective communication, too. Maybe you've seen or experienced one of the following:

- A friend or relative who knows just the right thing to say to comfort you when you're down.
- A first date where people are so enchanted with each other that conversation flows smoothly for hours.
- A boss or coach whose uplifting words fuel great achievements in those they lead.
- A courageous soul who speaks out against injustice, persuading others to make the world a better place.
- A teacher, politician, or religious leader whose audience hangs on their every word.

Wherever you've seen outstanding communication, it would be natural to wonder, "How exactly did they do that?" This book can't unravel every communication mystery, but it does contain the insights of 33 theories that take a close, careful look at communication. Paying attention to these theories is important because, to a significant extent, your ability to communicate will shape the quality of your personal and professional life. In the rest of this chapter, we will explore what we mean by the words *communication* and *theory*.

## WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

The five bullet points above are clear examples of communication. In each case, at least one person intentionally uses words to seek shared understanding with others. But what else counts as communication? How about a hug from an empathetic friend? Or the exuberant gestures of the inspiring coach? After the first date, what does it mean if it's been three days and the other person hasn't responded to text

messages? Is that silence a form of communication? When the person advocating for social change coughs, are they doing so to interrupt, to express displeasure, or because they have seasonal allergies? What about things said while sleepy, sick, drunk, or in the heat of the moment? Sometimes we say things we don't mean, and sometimes we interpret messages the other person didn't intend to send. So, what exactly do we mean when we talk about *communication*? What's in and what's out?

We know you might want a clear definition of *communication* that everyone agrees on, but we can't give you one. Frank Dance, the University of Denver scholar credited with publishing the first comprehensive book on communication theory, cataloged more than 120 definitions of *communication*—and that was over 50 years ago.[1] Communication scholars have suggested many more since then, yet no single definition has risen to the top as the standard.

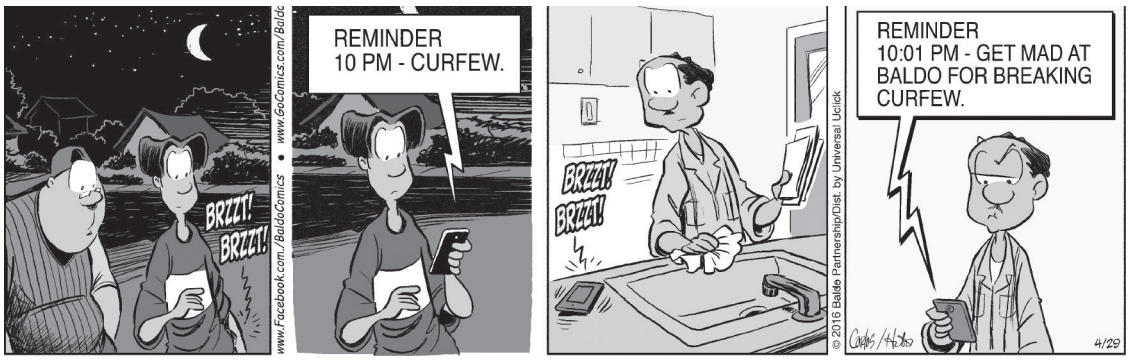
At the conclusion of his study, Dance suggested that we're "trying to make the concept of communication do too much work for us."[2] Other communication theorists agree, noting that when the term is used to describe almost every kind of human interaction, it's seriously overburdened. Michigan Tech University communication professor Jennifer Slack brings a splash of reality to attempts to draw definitive lines around what our theories and research cover. She declares that "there is no single, absolute essence of communication that adequately explains the phenomena we study. Such a definition does not exist; neither is it merely awaiting the next brightest communication scholar to nail it down once and for all."[3]

But you don't need to despair. Even though we can't give you a once-and-for-all definition of communication that everyone endorses, we can report that scholars have some general areas of agreement regarding what communication is and what it's not. Given that you might be spending a big chunk of your college education studying communication, we think you deserve a description of what you'll be looking at. So for starters, we offer this working definition:

**Communication**
The relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.

> *Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.*

Notice that this definition implies that an act of communication has a beginning (the creation of the message), a middle (the message's characteristics), and an end (the interpretation of the message and response to it). Communication theorists focus on these three parts of the communication process. As we discuss each part, we'll reference the cartoon below, which depicts a teenager named Baldo responding to his dad's text message reminder about curfew.



## 1. The Creation of Messages

You may be studying communication because you're seeking a career in the creation of messages. That's the essential task of public relations specialists, advertisers, salespeople, campaign managers, and social media influencers, to name a few. Really, any career involves creating messages, as we talk with supervisors, co-workers, suppliers, clients, and others. Of course, as the cartoon depicts, we're constantly creating messages in our personal lives too.

When communication theorists study the creation of messages, they're interested in all the things that shape our communication choices. One factor is context. Baldo is away from home at night, a contextual reality that triggers his father's reminder. Another factor is the relationship between the communicators. We hope Baldo's dad wouldn't give a curfew reminder to a co-worker or a neighbor. Our internal motives and goals are a third factor. We might assume that Baldo's father is motivated by concern for his son's well-being. Baldo's motive for his flippant response seems less clear. Maybe he intends to humorously poke fun at his dad's strict rules. Perhaps he wants to express defiance, making it clear that he won't be home by curfew whether his father likes it or not. Or it could be that he hopes his mocking response will really hurt his overbearing father.

The word *creation* implies that the content and form of messages are usually *constructed, invented, planned, crafted, selected,* or *adopted* by the communicator. Each of these terms is used in at least one of the theories in this book, and they all imply that the communicator is making a conscious choice of message form and substance. Of course, there are many times when we speak, write, or gesture in seemingly mindless ways—activities that are like driving on cruise control. In like manner, our repertoire of stock phrases such as *thanks, no problem, whatever,* or a string of swear words were chosen sometime in the past to express our feelings, and over time have become habitual responses. Only when we become more mindful of the nature and impact of our messages will we have the ability to alter them. That's why consciousness-raising is a goal of several theories in this book—each one seeks to increase our communication choices.

## 2. The Message's Characteristics

Messages are at the core of communication study and practice. University of Colorado emeritus communication professor Robert Craig says that communication involves "talking and listening, writing and reading, performing and witnessing, or, more generally, doing anything that involves 'messages' in any medium or situation."[4] This intense focus on messages is what sets the communication major apart from related areas like psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science. Accordingly, all the theories covered in this book deal specifically and deeply with messages.

**Content level**
The level of communication that addresses the topic of conversation.

**Relationship level**
The level of communication that addresses how people think and feel about each other.

Our working definition indicates communication is a process that's *relational.* Most communication scholars agree that every message has two levels.[5] The *content level* is the topic addressed by the message. In the messages between Baldo and his father, the content concerns family rules about curfew. The *relationship level* communicates how each person thinks and feels about the other. Sometimes that's stated explicitly; we could imagine Baldo's dad replying, "I am your father, and you must do as I say as long as you live under my roof." More often, the relational level of meaning is conveyed through nonverbal communication. A "HELLO!" shouted

with a big smile in a loud tone of voice conveys more enthusiasm about the relationship than a "hello" mumbled while looking at the ground.

Baldo and his father are communicating over text messaging, so they don't have many nonverbal cues—but they still have some. Baldo's father sends his message in ALL CAPS. What does that mean? Perhaps he wants to sound like he's shouting because the rule is so important, indicating that he sees himself as an authority figure over his son. Another nonverbal cue is time, and Baldo's response is immediate. Even though Baldo's text expresses defiance, maybe his quick reply signals tacit acknowledgment of his father's authority. A delayed reply could send a different relational message, as would the silence of no reply at all. There's also the choice to communicate via text messaging in the first place. Maybe that was a strategic choice on Baldo's father's part, hoping to protect the relationship by avoiding a face-to-face or over-the-phone argument. As Baldo and his dad communicate about curfew, they're also communicating about their relationship.

**Text**
Any message that can be studied, regardless of the medium.

The cartoon portrays two text messages, but communication theorists use the word *text* much more broadly. They consider a *text* to be any message that can be studied, regardless of the medium. That could be the back-and-forth of messaging, as in the cartoon. This book is a text. So is a verbatim transcript of a YouTube video, a recorded presidential news conference, an Instagram photo, or a Taylor Swift song.

Any specific text is only one piece of the puzzle. Just as we can't understand a movie by viewing one scene in isolation, so we can't grasp Baldo and his dad's communication without knowing something about the nature of their relationship. Their messages arise from their history of communication, and they will continue to reshape their relationship as they talk about curfew and other topics. This message and reply is only one snippet of that longer chain of parent–child communication. Much like a river, the flow of communication is always in flux, never completely the same, and can only be described with reference to what went before and what is yet to come. That's what we mean when we say communication is a relational *process*.

### 3. Interpretation and Response

No matter how carefully you craft a message, you cannot control how other people interpret and respond to it. Messages do not interpret themselves. The meaning that a message holds for the creators and receivers doesn't reside in the words that are spoken, written, or acted out. Many communication scholars believe that *words don't mean things, people mean things.* Symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer stated the implication of this claim: "Humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things."[6] That's *interpretation*—deciding what a message means.

**Interpretation**
The process of deciding what a message means.

When people interpret a message, they respond. At the end of his groundbreaking book on communication theory, Dance concluded, "'Communication,' in its broadest interpretation, may be defined as the eliciting of a response."[7] If a message fails to stimulate any cognitive, emotional, or behavioral reaction, it seems pointless to consider it *communication.* We often refer to such situations as a message "falling on deaf ears" or the other person "turning a blind eye."

We can't be certain how Baldo interprets his dad's message—whether he perceives his father as caring, bossy, unreasonable, or fair. He may not even be certain what the text from his father means. Is the "REMINDER" an ironclad rule, a

**Polysemic**
A quality of symbols that means they're open to multiple interpretations.

flexible guideline, an invitation to debate, or a threat of punishment? Words and other symbols are *polysemic*—they're open to multiple interpretations. Although we can't observe the interpretation inside Baldo's mind, we can see his reply to his father. As this relational process unfolds, we also see his dad respond with a scowl—perhaps because he thinks Baldo is disobedient, or because he feels criticized by the mocking imitation of his all-caps text. He might be so upset that he decides to give Baldo "the silent treatment" for a while. Many communication scholars quote this axiom from pioneering scholar Paul Watzlawick: *You cannot not communicate*.[8] Silence is a response, too, and Baldo might draw interpretations from it. Messages sent *and* unsent produce interpretations and responses.

So that's communication: a *relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.* You've done this throughout your life and seen others do it too. From those experiences, you surely have your own thoughts about how communication works (including, perhaps, how parents and teenagers can communicate effectively with each other). But *theorizing* communication goes beyond routine observation. When we develop theory, we try to develop systematic explanations for the process of communication.

## WHAT IS A THEORY AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

An aircraft mechanic once chided a professor: "You academic types are all alike. Your heads are crammed so full of theory, you wouldn't know which end of a socket wrench to grab. Any plane you touched would crash and burn. All PhD stands for is 'piled higher and deeper.'"

The mechanic could be right. Yet it's ironic that even in the process of knocking theory, he resorts to his own theory of cognitive overload to explain what he sees as the mechanical stupidity of scholars. It's also clear that we couldn't build or repair planes without theories explaining gravity, engineering, and aerodynamics. As authors of this book, we appreciate the mechanic's desire to make sense of his world. Here's a man who spends a good chunk of his life making sure that planes stay safely in the air until pilots are ready to land. That's worth doing—a problem worth solving.

Human communication likewise presents many opportunities, challenges, and problems, such as building interpersonal relationships, developing a sales pitch, or standing up to biased patterns of talk. If we have robust theories of how communication works, that will give us an edge in accomplishing our goals. When we really care about something, we should seek to answer the *why* and *what if* questions that always emerge.

That was the message Em heard from University of Arizona communication theorist Judee Burgoon when he talked with her in our series of interviews, *Conversations with Communication Theorists.*[9] If we care about the fascinating subject of communication, she said, we've got to "do theory." She also suggested that a theory is nothing more than a "set of systematic hunches about the way things operate." Since Burgoon is one of the most frequently cited scholars in the communication discipline, Em was intrigued by her unexpected use of the nontechnical term *hunch.* Would it therefore be legitimate to entitle the book you're reading *Communication Hunches?* She assured Em that it would, quickly adding that they should be "informed hunches."

**Theory**
A set of systematic, informed hunches about the way things work.

So for Burgoon, a *theory* consists of *a set of systematic, informed hunches about the way things work.* In the rest of this section, we'll examine the three key features of Burgoon's notion of a theory. First, we'll focus on the idea that theory consists

of a *set of hunches.* But a set of hunches is only a starting point, so we'll then discuss what it means to say that those hunches have to be *informed.* Last, we'll highlight the notion that the hunches have to be *systematic.*

As we look at these features, we'll continue to consider Baldo and his father (p. 3). Dad wants to persuade Baldo to come home at a reasonable hour; Baldo wants to persuade his father to get off his back. Both, we hope, want to have a warm family relationship. They have communication problems they want to solve, and communication theory might help them do that.

## A Set of Hunches

If a theory is a set of hunches, it means we aren't yet sure we have the answer. When there's no puzzle to be solved or the explanation is obvious, there's no need to develop a theory. Theories always involve an element of speculation, or conjecture. Being a theorist is risky business because theories go beyond accepted wisdom. Once you become a theorist, you probably hope that all thinking people will eventually embrace the trial balloon you've launched. When you first float your theory, however, it's definitely in the hunch category.

By referring to a plural "set of hunches" rather than a single "hunch," Burgoon makes it clear that a theory is not just one inspired thought or an isolated idea. Someone who reads the Baldo cartoon might say, "Yeah, that's what happens when we try to communicate through text messaging. It just isn't a good way to talk." That's a clear hunch, but it's also a simple and isolated one. Notice that it doesn't explain exactly *why* texting is bad.

We could flesh out that idea. Maybe it's because texting lacks nonverbal cues. Baldo can't hear the loving concern in his dad's voice or detect the worry on his face. Also, text messaging doesn't let us immediately perceive the reaction of the other person. Baldo doesn't see the grimace his sarcastic reply produced; if he did, maybe he would be quick to assure his dad that he didn't mean any disrespect. Perhaps communication skill makes a difference. Dad's all-caps message might suggest he lacks knowledge about texting, and maybe that's why his curt message produced a dismissive response from his son. By appealing to nonverbal cues, the ability to perceive the other person, and communication skill, we've expanded our simple "texting is just bad" assumption to a set of hunches.

## Informed Hunches

For Burgoon, it's not enough to think carefully about an idea; a theorist's hunches should be *informed.* We can't draw sweeping conclusions about the usefulness of text messaging based on one quick conversation. We'd be better off collecting data from several different text messaging exchanges, from several different people, and looking for patterns. That's *research*, which North Carolina State University communication professor Joann Keyton calls "the process of asking questions and finding answers."[10]

**Research**
The process of asking questions and finding answers.

Good theory and good research go hand in hand. That's why so many chapters in this book discuss the studies that support the theory. When a question about communication comes into your mind, you can open a textbook, visit your university library, or use a reputable online search engine (such as Google Scholar) to see if anyone has researched that question. If the answers you find are incomplete or unsatisfying, you might see if a professor is willing to help you do research of

your own. Whether through experiments, interviews, surveys, or textual analysis, the evidence could help you find answers to your questions. (You can read more about these research methods in Chapter 3.)

Pepperdine University emeritus communication professor Fred Casmir's description of theory parallels Burgoon's call for multiple informed hunches:

> Theories are sometimes defined as guesses—but significantly as "educated" guesses. Theories are not merely based on vague impressions nor are they accidental by-products of life. Theories tend to result when their creators have prepared themselves to discover something in their environment, which triggers the process of theory construction.[11]

## Hunches That Are Systematic

Most scholars reserve the term *theory* for an *integrated system* of concepts. A theory not only lays out multiple ideas, but also specifies the relationships among them. In common parlance, it connects the dots. The links among the informed hunches are clearly drawn so that a pattern emerges.

The quip that "text messaging is just bad" doesn't rise to this standard. It's a one-shot claim that isn't part of a conceptual framework. Even our multiple hunches that appeal to nonverbal cues, the ability to see responses, and communication skill aren't really integrated. Perhaps we can pull these ideas together by considering the complexity of the message. Maybe texting works well for simple, straightforward messages, but not for more complicated tasks, like haggling over curfew.[12] In complex situations, the lack of nonverbal cues and immediate feedback might hinder our ability to create shared understanding (unless, perhaps, we're really skilled communicators). By weaving our ideas around the fit between the medium and the message, we're on our way to integrating our thoughts into a coherent whole. As you read about any theory covered in this book, you have a right to expect a set of *systematic,* informed hunches.

## Images of Theory

In response to the question *What is a theory?* we've presented a verbal definition. To help you further make sense of *theory*, we'll share some concrete images that have helped us think through what a theory is and what it does. We'll also note how an overreliance on these representations of theory might lead us astray.

**Theories as Nets.** Philosopher of science Karl Popper said that "theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world'.... We endeavor to make the mesh ever finer and finer."[13] This metaphor highlights the ongoing labor of the theorist as a type of deep-sea angler. For serious scholars, theories are the tools of the trade. The term *the world* can be interpreted as everything that goes on under the sun—thus requiring a *grand* theory that applies to all communication, all the time. Conversely, *catching* the world could be construed as calling for numerous *special* theories—different kinds of small nets to capture distinct types of communication in local situations. Either way, the quest for finer-meshed nets is somewhat disturbing because the study of communication is about people rather than schools of fish. The idea that theories could be woven so tightly that they'd snag everything humans think, say, or do seems naive. The possibility also raises questions about our freedom to choose some actions and reject others.

**Theories as Lenses.** Many scholars see their theoretical constructions as similar to the lens of a camera or a pair of glasses, as opposed to a mirror that accurately reflects the world out there. The lens imagery highlights the idea that theories shape our perception by focusing attention on some features of communication while ignoring other features, or at least pushing them into the background. Two theorists could analyze the same communication event—an argument about politics, perhaps—and, depending on the lens each uses, one theorist may view the speech act as a breakdown of communication or the breakup of a relationship, while the other theorist will see it as democracy in action. A danger of the lens metaphor is that we might regard what is seen as so dependent on the theoretical lens of the viewer that we abandon any attempt to discern what is real or true.

**Theories as Maps.** A good map helps us understand unfamiliar terrain. It's designed with a purpose. Road maps explain how to get from point A to point B. Political maps show boundaries between states and nations. Climate maps reveal whether a place is hot or cold. Within this analogy, a communication theory is a kind of map that's designed to help you navigate some part of the topography of human relationships. In a sense, this book of theories is like a scenic atlas that pulls together 33 must-see locations. However, we must remember that the map is not the territory.[14] Like a still photograph, no theory can fully portray the richness of interaction between people that is constantly changing, always varied, and inevitably more complicated than what any theory can chart.

## WHAT TO EXPECT AS YOU READ THIS BOOK

Now that you have a basic understanding of what a communication theory is, knowing how we've structured this book and arranged the theories can help you grasp their content. After this chapter, there are three more chapters in the "Overview" division that will help you compare and contrast theories—think of these chapters as a bird's-eye view of the communication theory terrain. In Chapter 2, two leading communication scholars analyze a TV ad in order to illustrate how half the theories in this book are based on *objective* assumptions, while the other half are constructed using an *interpretive* set of principles. Chapter 3 presents criteria for judging both kinds of theories so you can make an informed evaluation of a theory's worth rather than relying solely on your gut reaction. Finally, Chapter 4 describes seven traditions of communication theory and research. When you know the family tree of a theory, you can explain why it has a strong affinity with some theories but doesn't speak the same language as others.

Following this overview, there are 33 chapters, each concentrating on a single theory. We think you'll find that the one-chapter, one-theory format is user-friendly because it gives you a chance to focus on a single theory at a time. This way, they won't all blur together in your mind. These chapters are arranged into five major divisions, according to the primary communication context they address:

- Division Two, "Interpersonal Communication," considers communication between people in close relationships.
- Division Three, "Social Influence," contains theories that help us understand how people use communication to change the beliefs and behaviors of others.
- Division Four, "Group and Organizational Communication," looks at communication dynamics when people join together into larger units.

- Division Five, "Cultural Context," delves into systems of shared meaning that cut across entire states, nations, and people groups.
- Division Six, "Mass Communication," describes theories of how journalism, entertainment media, and technology shape our understanding of the world.

You might notice that these divisions move in a rough order from smaller to larger groups of people. To conclude the book, a chapter on "Common Threads" seeks to distill core ideas that appear across several theories.

We believe it isn't enough to just memorize a theory's vocabulary. That's why you'll find examples and applications mixed in with descriptions of each theory. After all, you don't really know a theory until you can explain how it applies to practical, real-life situations. Along those lines, you might also want to see how others put the theories into practice. With our students' permission, we've weaved in their accounts of application for most of the theories featured in the text. We're intrigued by the rich connections these students make—ones we wouldn't have thought of on our own.

As co-authors of this book, the three of us (Em, Andrew, and Glenn) will draw upon our life experiences as well. We've been professional colleagues for years and are close friends, so we'd like that warmth to extend to readers by writing in a direct, personal voice. In the first four chapters, we've written using words like *we* and *our.* We want you to know the basic commitments we share collectively as communication scholars. For each of the remaining chapters on specific theories, we'll make it clear who is "speaking" when using words like *I, me,* and *my* to share individual thoughts or stories from our lives. We don't use personal references in every chapter, but when we do, we want you to know whose voice you're "hearing."

We also make a consistent effort to link each theory with its creator(s). It takes both wisdom and courage to successfully plant a theoretical flag. In a process similar to the childhood game king-of-the-hill, as soon as a theorist constructs a theory of communication, critics try to pull it down. That's OK, because the value of a theory is discerned by survival in the rough-and-tumble world of competitive ideas. For this reason, we always include a "Critique" section in theory chapters. Theorists who prevail deserve to have their names associated with their creations. There is a second reason for tying a theory to its author. Many of you will do further study in communication, and mastery of names like Asante, Baxter, Berger, Deetz, Giles, and Ting-Toomey will allow you to enter into the dialogue without a disadvantage.

## RESOURCES TO HELP YOU LEARN COMMUNICATION THEORY

Understanding communication theory is hard work. One of the most common questions we hear as instructors is, "How can I study most effectively for this class?" We know the comm theory course has a reputation for difficulty, so we'll conclude this introductory chapter with a few tips to help you succeed in the class.

First, we can't stress enough how important it is to carefully read each chapter assigned by your instructor. We've seen students who try to skim or skip their readings, or cram them in right before a test. That's a mistake—communication theory is too complex to absorb all at once. Steadily keeping up with the course readings is definitely the way to go.

As you read, we encourage you to think about the big-picture goal of each theory: *What is this theory trying to accomplish?* In Appendix A, you can read a 50-word summary of each theory. You might start with that summary and keep it

in mind as you read the chapter. Doing so can help you identify how the details of each theory build toward that overarching goal.

In every chapter we include a cartoon for your learning and enjoyment. Cartoonists are often modern-day prophets. Their incisive wit can illustrate a feature of the theory in a way that's more instructive and memorable than a few extra paragraphs would be. You can also use the cartoons as mini-tests of comprehension. Unlike our comments on Baldo and his dad in this chapter, we usually don't refer to the art or the caption that goes with it. So if you can't figure out why a particular cartoon appears where it does, make a renewed effort to grasp the theorist's ideas.

Finally, we've created a website to help students learn communication theory. At www.afirstlook.com, you'll find a variety of resources, including chapter outlines, video interviews with theorists (also available on our YouTube channel), student application logs, and suggested movie clips. Many students especially appreciate the self-help quizzes. Each chapter quiz contains 30 questions designed to test your understanding of the content. All of these resources and more are free to anyone with internet access, and we encourage you to use them.

Every so often a student will ask one of us, "Do you really think about communication theory when you're talking to someone?" Our answer is "Yes, but not all the time." Like everyone else, we often speak on autopilot—words, phrases, and sentences roll off the tongue without careful thought. Old habits die hard. But when we're in a new setting or the conversational stakes are high, we start to think strategically. And that's when the applied wisdom of theories that fit the situation comes to mind. By midterm, many of our students discover they're thinking that way as well. That's our wish for you as you launch your study of communication theory.

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Which do you find most interesting: the *creation* of messages, the nature of *message characteristics*, or the *interpretation and response* to messages? To what extent are your interests shaped by your personal and/or professional goals?
2. Suppose you want to understand the effects of yawns during one-on-one conversations between friends. Would that address *communication* as we've defined it (the *relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response*)? If not, how could you change the definition to make it fit?
3. If you share the aircraft mechanic's suspicion that scholars who create theories would be all thumbs working on a plane's wings or engine, what would it take to transform your *hunch* into a *theory?*
4. Which *metaphor* of theory do you find most helpful—theory as a *net,* a *lens,* or a *map?* Can you think of another image you could use to explain to a friend what this course is about?

## A SECOND LOOK

*Recommended resource:* Gregory Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (eds.), *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006.

*Diverse definitions of communication:* Frank E. X. Dance, "The Concept of Communication," *Journal of Communication,* Vol. 20, No. 2, 1970, pp. 201–210.

*Brief history of communication theory since the early 1990s:* Barbie Zelizer, "Making Communication Theory Matter," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 26, No. 4, 2015, pp. 410–415.

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## ENDNOTES

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2. Dance, p. 210.
3. Jennifer Daryl Slack, "Communication as Articulation," in *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory*, Gregory Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, p. 223.
4. Robert T. Craig, "Communication as a Practice," in *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory*, p. 39.
5. Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1967, pp. 32–35.
6. For further discussion of Blumer and this statement, see Chapter 5.
7. Frank E. X. Dance, "Toward a Theory of Human Communication," in *Human Communication Theory: Original Essays*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967, p. 289.
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9. Judee Burgoon, "Expectancy Violations Theory," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kmnZIxiYHk, accessed March 23, 2021.
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To access 50-word summaries of theories featured in the book, see Appendix A or click on Theory Overviews under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com.*

CHAPTER 2

# *Objective and Interpretive Approaches to Communication Theory*

As you look over your communication theory course syllabus and the list of theories you'll get to study this semester, we hope you're excited. Mastering these theories will help you understand the fascinating topic of communication and become a better communicator! We understand, though, if you also feel a sense of dread. That list may look daunting, and you may wonder how you'll keep all these different theories straight in your head—not only for your tests and papers, but also for later in your program of study and in your life.

This chapter will help you organize the theories by sorting them into two types. *Objective* communication theories assume we live in a world where we can understand truth through unbiased observation. The scholars who create these theories identify as scientists and use quantitative measurement to uncover cause-and-effect relationships involving messages. *Interpretive* communication theories assume we live in a world where truth is subjective, depending on a person's lived experiences. Although some interpretive scholars identify as scientists, many identify as humanists, rhetoricians, critical theorists, or social constructionists, and they examine qualitative data to understand, interpret, and critique messages. Your understanding of communication will be richer and deeper if you can appreciate both approaches.

In the rest of this chapter we'll take a closer look at what distinguishes each type of theorizing. To begin, we've invited two renowned scholars to demonstrate the difference. Travis Dixon (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is an objective scholar. He studies how media messages influence stereotypes, something he has researched in rap music, Instagram, and news portrayals of race and crime. Kristina Scharp (University of Washington) is an interpretive scholar. She studies the stories people tell about their families, examining topics such as estrangement, postpartum depression, and adoption. Travis tests cause-and-effect relationships; Kristina searches for understanding. Both have won awards for the excellence of their scholarship, and both believe research helps us understand communication and improve the world. To help you understand the difference between interpretive and objective work, we've asked Travis and Kristina to bring their scholarship to bear on a popular TV advertisement.

## TWO COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS VIEW A HEARTWARMING AD

Toyota's Super Bowl commercial titled "Upstream" opens with a young woman in a racing swimsuit, floating on her back in water.[1] Text tells us she is Jessica Long, winner of 13 gold medals in the Paralympic Games. Her legs end near the knee. As Jessica dives underwater, a phone rings and we see a woman at a desk with an old landline phone glued to her ear. In a surreal combination of images, the desk stands in the water as Jessica swims by. This mixing of land-based scenes (in the past) with Jessica's swimming pool (in the present) continues throughout the ad.

The caller doesn't introduce herself, but it's clear she's from an agency that's trying to help Mrs. Long adopt a child from outside the United States. The infant is in Siberia, but a medical condition requires amputating her legs. During the call we see images of Jessica's orphanage nursery, of her learning to walk with prosthetics as a toddler, and of her in a swimming locker room as a young girl. After the caller says the child will face many challenges, the scene shifts fully to the present, with Jessica swimming to victory in the Paralympic Games and a crowd cheering her on behind a giant Toyota banner. As Jessica touches the end of the pool she stops, and suddenly the water extends into her parents' kitchen. Jessica looks at her mother as she responds to the adoption agent that she looks forward to welcoming the child into their family. Jessica smiles, and a voiceover declares: "We believe there is hope and strength in all of us. Toyota, proud partner of Team USA."

Viewers have watched this ad on YouTube more than one million times—more than almost any other video posted by Toyota. *Ad Age* writer Simon Dumenco gave the commercial 4.5 of 5 stars, commenting that "the spot is an elegant, quietly moving way for Toyota to call attention to its support of the Olympics… and align its brand with optimism, perseverance and triumph over adversity."[2] As communication scholars, Kristina and Travis agree that the ad is a powerful message, but they differ regarding how the ad works and what it means.

### Travis: An Objective Approach

After its initial airing, one research company proclaimed "Upstream" the most effective ad of the Super Bowl.[3] The firm used a panel of 200 people (100 were shown the ad and 100 were not), comparing the two groups and calculating a brand reaction score to gauge the *uplift* of the commercial—its emotional engagement. "Upstream" had the most *uplift* of any major Super Bowl ad. The spot's connection to family and positive emotions caused 63 percent of viewers to be emotionally engaged. Social scientists want to understand why commercials produce positive emotions and whether this changes human behavior. They also examine the unintended influence of commercials on perceptions of stigmatized groups.

Social scientists test positive and negative influences of media by relying on theory. In this context, we might consider two theories. One is *schema theory*, which focuses on mental constructs (called schemas) that we use to make sense of a particular topic or individual. Schemas allow us to quickly categorize individuals by associating specific traits (e.g., *smart*) with their social category (e.g., *college student*). Although schemas allow advertisers to efficiently convey their messages, they can also lead to stereotyping[4]—an unintended consequence of the ad. Some media critics have argued that people with disabilities remain largely invisible, and when seen, they tend to be relegated to appearances as either a *bitter crip* (upset at the world) or a *super crip* (having exceptional abilities).[5] The ad's

focus on an extraordinary paraplegic athlete may inadvertently reinforce the *super crip* stereotype.

Typically, social scientists also rely on *classical conditioning* to explain the effects of advertising.[6] Classical conditioning demonstrates how the positive emotions generated during the experience of viewing an ad can transfer over to the product itself and then lead to changes in behavior toward the advertised product. Toyota hopes that the positive feelings viewers experienced while watching the ad will lead them to feel the same way about the car company, making them more likely to purchase a Toyota.

However, all theories need validation. Social scientists do not simply try to identify a theory that seems to apply to the situation. We want an objective test to explore whether a theory or its application may be problematic. For "Upstream," we would want more evidence that the ad triggered warm feelings that transferred to Toyota, based on multiple studies of audiences. We could also test audience reactions to see whether there were any unintended stereotyping effects of the ad. The scientific enterprise relies on testing and verifying audience response. Even when a theory seems valid, we wait for the test of the theory before trusting its application.

### Kristina: An Interpretive Approach

Interpretive scholars focus on the ways language constructs realities that emerge in and across people's accounts. They acknowledge the way their own experiences create a lens through which they see the world. Thus, it's relevant to know that I am a transnational adoptee. My personal experience with adoption and my position as a family communication scholar informs how I interpret this commercial about an adoptive family. From an interpretive approach, researchers' experiences are neither good nor bad; rather, recognizing one's stance illuminates how experiences are intrinsically tied to interpretation.

From a family communication perspective, this ad challenges society's expectations about what a family is while simultaneously reinforcing misconceptions that treat adoption as a "second best" way to form a family.[7] On the one hand, we see a heartwarming narrative unfold about a couple adopting a child who will become a gold medalist. In this regard, the commercial challenges a definition of family that emphasizes biological and legal ties. Instead, a definition grounded in communication and love becomes centered. On the other hand, the commercial also reinforces cultural concerns that adopted children might have disabilities. The ad suggests that life will not just be as difficult as it is for everyone else—it will be *more* difficult.[8] It is in these insinuations that adoption is constructed as inferior to biological reproduction. American adoptive parents, then, are painted as saviors to foreign-born adoptees. Thus, in one ad, Toyota aligns itself with both family values and American exceptionalism (the idea that the US is the best).

More generally, you might be thinking, "What does any of this have to do with selling cars?" On the ad's face, it might not seem like very much. A rhetorician, however, might argue that the Toyota ad is an *enthymeme* (see Chapter 17). An enthymeme is an argument with an unstated premise; it asks that the audience fill in what is missing. In other words, enthymemes, especially visual ones like a commercial, ask viewers to help construct their meaning. By telling Jessica's story and stating, "We believe there is hope and strength in all of us. Toyota, proud partner of Team USA," Toyota asks its audience to conclude that it is a company that values family (by promoting adoption), contributes to US success (by supporting Team USA), and is compassionate (by caring about people with disabilities). Thus, Toyota

relies on implicit personality bias, where people (or companies) with one positive trait are assumed to have other equally positive attributes. Because people want to be associated with positive things, the enthymeme follows that if Toyota is a great company, then buying a Toyota will make you great, too.

As you can see, Kristina and Travis each approach the ad differently. While both scholars question the commercial's portrayal of Jessica Long's disability, they diverge in how they use theory to understand the ad's meaning, purpose, and effect on the audience. In the rest of the chapter, we'll dive into four major distinctions between the two approaches: beliefs about (1) ways of knowing about communication, (2) whether human nature is free or constrained, (3) the purpose of theory, and (4) the value of scholarship to society.

## WAYS OF KNOWING: DISCOVERING TRUTH OR CREATING MULTIPLE REALITIES?

**Epistemology**
The study of the origin, nature, method, and limits of knowledge.

How do we know what we know, if we know it at all? This is the central question addressed by a branch of philosophy known as *epistemology*. You may have been in school for a dozen-plus years, read assignments, written papers, and taken tests without ever delving into the issue *What is truth?* With or without in-depth study of the question, we all inevitably make assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

Objective scholars assume that Truth is singular. They see a single, timeless reality "out there" waiting to be discovered through the five senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Since the raw sensory data of the world is accessible to any competent observer, science strives to be bias-free, with no ax to grind. The evidence speaks for itself. As Galileo claimed, anyone could see through his telescope. Of course, no one person can know it all, so individual researchers pool their findings and build a collective body of knowledge about how the world works.

Scientists consider good theories to be those that faithfully represent the way the world really is. Of the metaphors introduced in Chapter 1, they like the image of theory as a mirror that reflects reality, or a net that captures part of it. Objective theorists are confident that once a principle is discovered and validated, it will continue to hold true as long as conditions remain similar. That's why Travis believes classical conditioning captures the reasons "Upstream" succeeds or fails. It's a theoretical approach that has explained human behavior in other persuasive situations, so it should work for this Toyota ad, too.

Interpretive scholars regard truth as socially constructed through communication. They believe language creates social realities that are always in flux, rather than revealing or representing fixed principles in an unchanging world. Knowledge is always viewed from a particular point of view. A word, a gesture, or an act may have constancy within a given community, but it's risky to assume interpretations can cross lines of time and space.

When it comes to messages, interpretive scholars insist that texts never interpret themselves. That's why Kristina emphasizes her own experience as a transnational adoptee—she says it's a *lens* for interpreting "Upstream." And of the theory metaphors described in Chapter 1, the lens is probably the most comfortable for interpretive scholars. However, they don't believe there is a universal lens like the one in Galileo's telescope. Instead, lenses are like individualized glasses that each of us wears. Those glasses are forged by the lifetime of experiences we bring to any situation. Because my experiences shape what I see, and your experiences shape what you see, we can never entirely separate the observer from what they're observing. Interpretive scholars see theory as successful when it provides a new perspective

on human life. For example, did Kristina convince you that the ad positions adoption as less than biological reproduction? As communication theorist James Anderson (University of Utah) notes, "Truth is a struggle, not a status."[9]

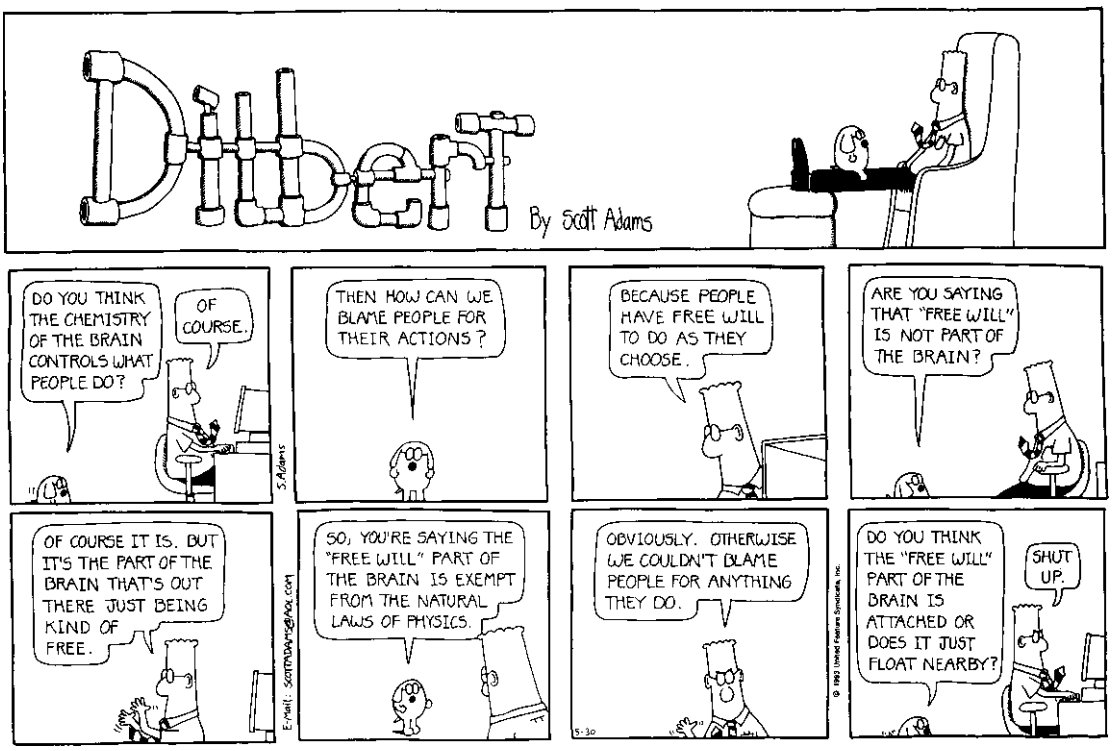
## HUMAN NATURE: DETERMINISM OR FREE WILL?

**Determinism**
The assumption that behavior is caused by heredity and environment.

One of the great philosophical debates throughout history revolves around the question of human choice.[10] Those who champion *determinism* claim every move we make is the result of heredity ("biology is destiny") and environment ("pleasure stamps in, pain stamps out"). On the other hand, those who emphasize *free will* insist that every human act is ultimately voluntary ("I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul"[11]). Although few communication theorists are comfortable with either extreme, most tend to emphasize one side or the other. Typically, objective scholars stress the forces that shape human behavior, and interpretive scholars focus on conscious choices made by individuals.

The difference between these two views of human nature inevitably creeps into the language people use to explain what they do. Individuals who feel like puppets on strings say, "I *had* to . . . ," whereas people who feel they pull their own strings say, "I *decided* to. . . ." The first group speaks in a passive voice: "I was distracted from studying by the argument at the next table." The second group speaks in an active voice: "I stopped studying to listen to the arguing couple."

Likewise, the language of scholarship often reflects theorists' views of human nature. Behavioral scientists usually describe human conduct as occurring *because of* forces outside the individual's awareness. Their causal explanations tend to avoid



appeals to mental reasoning or conscious choice. They usually describe behavior as the response to a prior stimulus. That's the essence of Travis' appeal to schema theory. We *will* stereotype people based on the traits presented in an ad, without thinking about what we're doing.

In contrast, interpretive scholars tend to use explanatory phrases such as *in order to* and *so that* because they attribute a person's action to conscious intent. Their word selection suggests people are free agents who could decide to respond differently under an identical set of circumstances. Kristina, for example, describes how the ad portrays "American adoptive parents . . . as saviors to foreign-born adoptees." The decision to adopt a child is an act of volition. So is the decision to feature adoption when advertising cars. Viewers make choices, too. Kristina hopes her analysis will help you make purposeful choices about whether to tie your self-worth to the vehicle you drive.

Human free will is problematic for the behavioral scientist because as individual freedom goes up, predictability of behavior goes down. Conversely, the roots of humanism are threatened by a highly restricted view of human choice. In an impassioned plea, British literary scholar C. S. Lewis exposes the paradox of stripping away people's freedom and yet expecting them to exercise responsible choice:

> In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.[12]

Lewis assumes that significant decisions are value-laden; interpretive scholars would agree.

## THE PURPOSE OF THEORY: UNIVERSAL LAWS OR INTERPRETIVE GUIDES?

Both Travis and Kristina believe theory is important, but for different reasons. Travis is most interested in developing theories that serve as universal laws, accurately predicting behavior across different contexts. Kristina is most interested in developing theories that serve as interpretive guides, providing deeper insight into specific messages and relationships. If these two scholars were engaged in fashion design rather than research design, Travis would probably tailor a coat suitable for many occasions that covers everybody well: one-size-fits-all. Kristina might apply principles of fashion design to style a coat that makes an individual statement for a single client: a one-of-a-kind, custom creation.

**Hypothesis**
A prediction; an educated guess about the way the world works.

The basic activity of behavioral scientists is *testing* theory. They want to design nets that accurately capture the world. To do this, Travis and other objective scholars craft a tightly worded *hypothesis* that temporarily commits them to a specific prediction. Then, they gather data to put that hypothesis to the test. If the test fails, that's a knock against the theory that led to the hypothesis. But if repeated studies uphold the hypothesis, they have evidence supporting the accuracy of the theory. Objective scholars believe theories are never proven—just not yet disproven. If a new theory offers predictions that explain the data better, that theory will knock the reigning theory off its throne. That's why Travis wants more data to see if classical conditioning and schema theory explain the appeal of "Upstream."

Interpretive scholars are less interested in testing theory through empirical data. Because they don't subscribe to the idea that the observer can be so neatly separated from the observed, they are more interested in *using* theory to view the world, seeing if a theory offers insight into the web of messages and meanings that

shapes human existence. Kristina is an expert on relational dialectics theory (Chapter 11), which describes communication as a struggle between competing narratives. Within this ad, she sees two messages wrestling: one that positions adoptive family as equal to biological family, and another that portrays adoption as "less than."[13] Kristina doesn't express a wish for more data, because the value of theory is apparent in how it already has helped her grapple with the messages in "Upstream."

## THE VALUE OF THEORY: OBJECTIVITY OR EMANCIPATION?

Why perform research and develop communication theory in the first place? After all, researchers need time, energy, equipment, and money to design their studies, collect and analyze their data, and publish their results. We could use those resources in other ways. Is communication theory worth the investment? Both interpretive and objective scholars would answer with a hearty *yes,* but for different reasons. Objective scholars believe we benefit from having an unbiased account of communication based on observable evidence. Many interpretive scholars believe we benefit from insight into communication that emancipates people from oppression.

Objective scholars hold to a distinction between the "knower" and the "known," so they place high value on objectivity that's not biased by ideological commitments. In his research, Travis works hard to maintain an unbiased stance. Although he's concerned about negative media portrayals of disability, he doesn't want his personal values or beliefs to distort his report of reality, nor does he want to confuse what he thinks ought to be with what *is*. Objective scholars are frustrated when theorists offer no empirical evidence for their claims or don't even suggest a way in which their ideas could be validated by an independent observer. As Harvard sociologist George Homans put it, the evidence should speak for itself: "When nature, however stretched out on the rack, still has a chance to say 'no'—then the subject is science."[14]

Scientists believe their objective work is crucial because the success of communication choices often depends on having an unbiased view of the world. Imagine Travis is offering advice to Toyota about how to sell cars. What should the company do: Scare drivers about the risk of a crash in a competitor's unreliable vehicle? Emphasize the economic and environmental benefits of Toyota's good gas mileage? Try to exert peer pressure by portraying attractive people who drive Toyotas? For objective scholars, these aren't questions of opinion. For decades, persuasion scholars have researched fear appeals, peer pressure, offering benefits, and other influence tactics. Research-based advice that corresponds to the real world could help Toyota increase its profits. It might even help them do that in ways that avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes. Uninformed recommendations might have no effect, or they could backfire.

Interpretive scholars value socially relevant research that gives us deeper insight into how people assign meaning. Many are interested in who has power to enforce their meanings, and they seek to liberate people from oppression—economic, political, religious, emotional, or any other. Interpretive scholars are frustrated when theorists refuse to take responsibility for the results of their work. They point out that science has too often ignored questions of value and become a tool of oppression. Whatever the pursuit—a Manhattan Project to split the atom, a Human Genome Project to map human genes, or a class project to analyze the effectiveness of an

ad—critical interpreters insist that knowledge is never neutral. "There is no safe harbor in which researchers can avoid the power structure."[15]

Interpretive scholars believe such work is crucial because all communication is value-laden and defies reduction to numbers. We all have a penchant for assuming that our perspective is the best, and humans too often ignore clear evidence of injustice. If Kristina's analysis gave you second thoughts about the ad, that may be because she brought her identity as a transnational adoptee into her analysis. Someone without her life experience might miss the mixed messages of "Upstream." If Toyota tapped Kristina as a consultant, she might urge the organization to show the ad to focus groups that draw from many different walks of life. Such research might reveal meanings Toyota didn't intend to convey. She would also urge the company to think not only about selling cars, but about ethics—such as whether their corporate practices unintentionally disadvantage, disparage, or disregard the experiences of members of marginalized groups.

In the heading for this section, we've contrasted the primary values of scientific and interpretive scholars by using the labels *objectivity* and *emancipation*. University of Colorado emeritus communication professor Stan Deetz frames the issue somewhat differently. He says that every general communication theory has two priorities: *effectiveness* and *participation*.[16] Effectiveness is concerned with successfully communicating information, ideas, and meaning to others. It also includes persuasion. Participation is concerned with increasing the possibility that all points of view will affect collective decisions and individuals being open to new ideas. It also encourages difference, opposition, and independence. The value question is *Which concern has higher priority?* Objective theorists usually foreground effectiveness and put participation in the background. Interpretive theorists tend to focus on participation and downplay effectiveness.

## OBJECTIVE OR INTERPRETIVE: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In our experience, students come away from this chapter with a variety of reactions. After reading about the differences between objective and interpretive approaches, some students express enthusiasm for one rather than the other. Many other students find themselves in the middle, perhaps torn between the two. For example, you might value human free will, but also believe we can discover truth through the five senses; or you might hunger for grand explanations that apply universally, but want to apply them in pursuit of emancipation and justice. Another group of students reserves judgment for later in the semester, after they've had time to read about specific theories in each tradition.

Whatever your reaction to this chapter, we hope you agree that these issues are important. They speak to fundamental beliefs about the human condition and how we arrive at knowledge about it. Both interpretive and objective theorists hope you'll care because each group believes its brand of work holds promise for improving relationships and society. The scientist is convinced that knowing the truth about how communication works will give us a clearer picture of social reality. The interpreter is equally sure that unmasking hidden meanings and oppressive ideologies will discourage unjust practices.

Understanding the objective/interpretive distinction can also help you decide the direction you want to take in your remaining coursework. Some concentrations in the field of communication have either a scientific or an interpretive bias. For

example, all the theories we present in the relationship development, influence, and media effects sections of the book are proposed by objective scholars. Conversely, the theories we cover in the public rhetoric, media and culture, organizational communication, and gender and communication sections are interpretive. If your department gives you freedom to choose which courses you'll take, you might ask your advisor whether certain courses emphasize one approach, the other, or a combination of both.

**Metatheory**
Theory about theory; the stated or inherent assumptions made when creating a theory.

But that's for later. Right now, in your communication theory course, it's important to grasp these *metatheoretical* differences because they will help you make sense of the theories ahead. After exposure to a dozen or more theories, they might begin to blur together in your mind. Classifying them as objective or interpretive is a good way to keep them straight. It's somewhat like sorting 52 cards into suits—spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs. In most sophisticated card games, the distinction is crucial. By the end of this course you could have up to 33 cards in your deck of communication theories. Being able to sort them in multiple combinations is a good way to show yourself and your professor that you've mastered the material. When you can compare and contrast theories on the basis of their interpretive or objective worldview, you've begun an integration that's more impressive than rote memorization.

You can't fully understand a theory if you aren't familiar with its underlying assumptions about *truth, human nature,* the *purpose of theory,* and its *values.* If you're clueless, things can get confusing fast. It's like the time Em and his wife, Jeanie, were walking around the Art Institute of Chicago, enjoying the work of French impressionists who painted scenes that Em could recognize. Then they wandered into a room dedicated to abstract expressionism. The paintings seemed bizarre and, to Em's untrained eye, made no sense. He was bewildered and somewhat disdainful until Jeanie, who is an artist, explained the goals these painters had and the techniques they used to achieve them. So too with interpretive and objective communication theories. When you understand what each type of theorist is about, your comfort zone will expand and your confusion will diminish.

## PLOTTING THEORIES ON AN OBJECTIVE–INTERPRETIVE SCALE

In this chapter we've introduced four important areas of difference between objective and interpretive communication scholars and the theories they create. Once you understand how they differ, it will be helpful for you to realize that not all theorists fall neatly into one category or the other. Some have a foot in both camps. It's more accurate to picture the *objective* and *interpretive* labels as anchoring the ends of a continuum, with theories spread out along the scale.

**Objective** ——————————————————— **Interpretive**

Figure 2–1 displays our evaluation of where each theory we feature fits on an objective–interpretive continuum. For easier reference to positions on the scale, we've numbered the five columns at the bottom of the chart. In placing a theory, we've tried to factor in choices the theorists made about ways of knowing, human nature, what they value most, and the purpose of theory.

Of course, the position of each dot won't make much sense to you until you've read about the theory. But by looking at the pattern of distribution, you can see that roughly half the theories have an objective orientation, while the other half

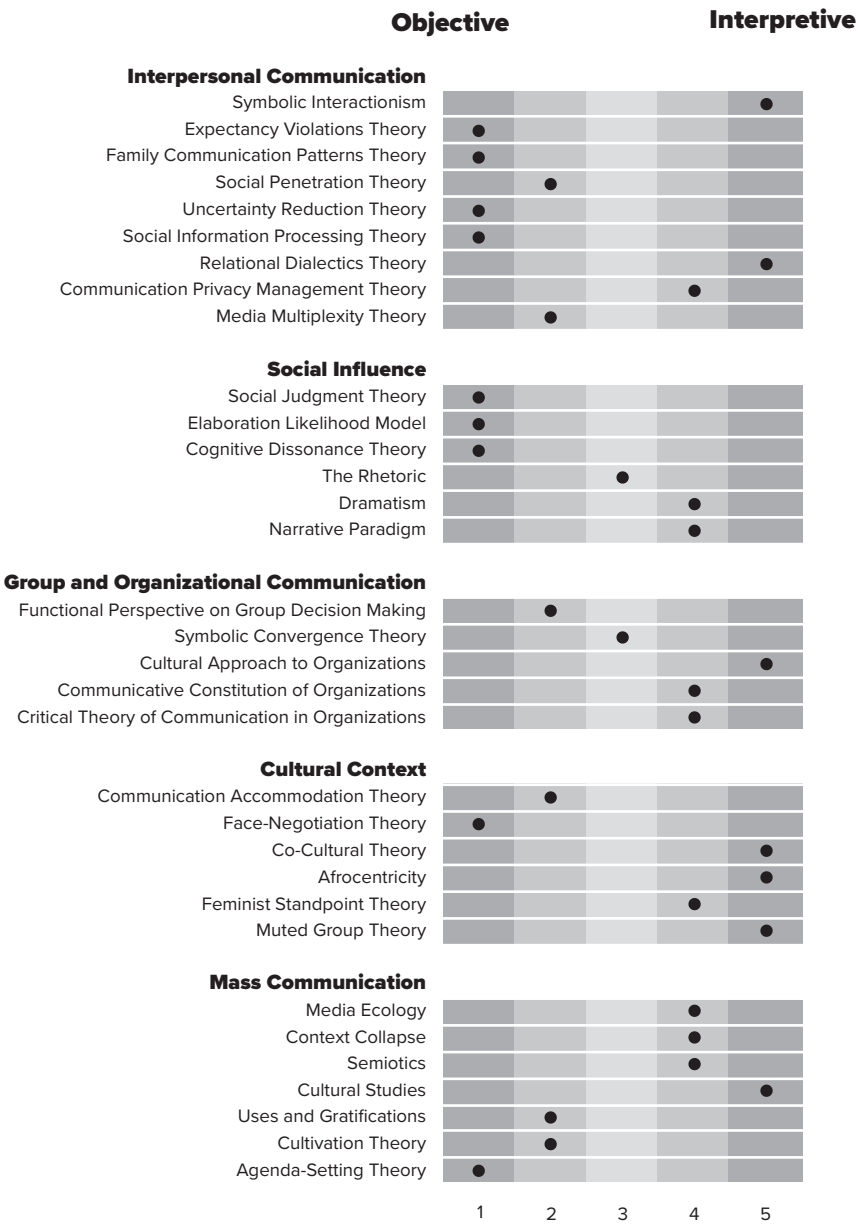



**FIGURE 2–1 Classification of Communication Theories According to Objective/Interpretive Worldview**

reflect an interpretive commitment. This 50–50 split matches the mix of scholarship we see in the field. When talking about relationships among the theories and the common assumptions made by a group of theorists, your instructor may refer back to this chart frequently. So for easy reference, we reproduce the appropriate "slice" of the chart on the first page of each chapter.

Now that you have an idea of the differences between objective and interpretive theories, you may wonder whether some of these theories are better than others. We think so. Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words," offers a set of six standards you

can use to judge the quality of objective theories, and a half dozen standards to discern the worth of interpretive theories. By applying the appropriate criteria, you can see if you agree with our evaluations.

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Compare Travis Dixon's and Kristina Scharp's approaches to the Toyota commercial. Which analysis makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. How do scientists and interpretive scholars differ in their answers to the question *What is truth?* Which perspective do you find more satisfying?
3. Think about why you're in college and why you're pursuing your chosen course of study. Do your educational goals have more to do with *objectivity* and *effectiveness* or with *emancipation* and *participation*?
4. Reflect on the college classes you've taken so far. Did an *objective* or *interpretive* orientation undergird each course? Was this due more to the nature of the subject matter or to the instructor's point of view?

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CHAPTER 3

# *Weighing the Words*

In Chapter 2 we looked at two distinct approaches to communication theory—objective and interpretive. Because the work of social scientists and interpreters is so different, they often have trouble understanding and valuing their counterparts' scholarship. This workplace tension parallels the struggle between Democrats and Republicans. Members of both political parties study the same financial reports, projected statistics, and potential solutions for fixing the nation's economic woes. Nevertheless, when it comes to proposing a plan of action, the two parties are often miles apart. The distance is usually due to the different assumptions each party uses to guide its thinking. Their philosophies can be so divergent that significant agreement seems nearly impossible, and meaningful compromise an unrealistic option.

In politics, when it gets down to the nitty-gritty of adopting specific proposals and passing concrete laws, the partisan bickering can make the conversation tense. The same can be said of the disputes that are common between objective and interpretive communication scholars. Differences in ways of knowing, views of human nature, values, goals of theory building, and research methods seem to lead to tension and misunderstanding.

Friendly attitudes between empiricists and interpreters can be hard to come by when each group insists on applying its own standards of judgment to the work of the other group. As a first-time reader of communication theory, you could easily get sucked into making the same mistake. If you've had training in the scientific method and judge the value of every communication theory by whether it predicts human behavior, you'll be tempted to reject 50 percent of the theories presented in this book. On the other hand, if you've been steeped in the humanities and expect every theory to help unmask the meaning of a text, you'll be inclined to dismiss the other half.

Regardless of which approach you favor, not all objective or interpretive communication theories are equally good. For each type, some are better than others. Like family members trying to decide which pizza to order, you'll want a way to separate the good, the bad, and the nasty. Since we've included theories originating in the social sciences as well as the humanities, you need to have two separate lenses through which to view their respective claims. This chapter offers that pair of bifocals. We hope by the time you finish you'll be on friendly terms with the separate criteria that behavioral scientists and a wide range of interpretive scholars use to weigh the words of their colleagues. We'll start with the standards that social scientists use to judge the worth of objective theories, and then turn to the criteria that interpretive scholars employ to evaluate their communication theories.

## WHAT MAKES AN OBJECTIVE THEORY GOOD?

An objective theory is credible when it fulfills the twin objectives of scientific knowledge. The theory *predicts* some future outcome, and it *explains* the reasons for that outcome. Social scientists of all kinds agree on four additional criteria a theory must meet to be good—*relative simplicity, testability, practical utility,* and *quantifiable research.* As we discuss these standards, we will use the terms *objective* and *scientific* interchangeably.

### Scientific Standard 1: Prediction of Future Events

A good objective theory predicts what will happen. Prediction is possible only when we are dealing with things we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste over and over again. As we repeatedly notice the same things happening in similar situations, we begin to speak of invariable patterns or universal laws. In the realm of the physical sciences, we are seldom embarrassed. Objects don't have a choice about how to respond to a stimulus. The sun can't choose to rise in the west instead of the east.

The social sciences are another matter. Although theories of human behavior often cast their predictions with confidence, a good measure of humility on the part of the theorist is advisable. Even the best theory may only be able to speak about people in general, rather than about specific individuals—and these only in terms of probability and tendencies, not absolute certainty.

What do good scientific communication theories forecast? Some predict that a specific type of communication triggers a particular response. (Mutual self-disclosure creates interpersonal intimacy.) Other theories predict that people will use different types of communication depending upon some pre-existing factor. (People avoid messages that they think will be disagreeable so they won't experience cognitive dissonance.) These claims may or may not be true, but you should regard the scientific theories presented in this book as valuable to the extent that theorists are willing to make confident predictions about communication behavior. Predictions that are intriguing or provocative add value if they stimulate further theorizing and research among scholars.

### Scientific Standard 2: Explanation of the Data

A good objective theory explains an event or human behavior. Philosopher of science Abraham Kaplan said that theory is a way of making sense out of a disturbing situation.[1] An objective theory should bring clarity to an otherwise jumbled state of affairs; it should draw order out of chaos.

A good social science theory describes the process, focuses our attention on what's crucial, and helps us ignore that which makes little difference. But it also goes beyond raw data and explains *why.* When Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, urban legend says the Depression-era bandit replied, "Because that's where the money is." It's a great line, but as a theory of motivation, it lacks explanatory power. There's nothing in the words that casts light on the internal processes or environmental forces that led Sutton to crack a safe while others tried to crack the stock market.

Sometimes a communication theory can sound great, but upon closer inspection it doesn't explain much. Years ago, researchers discovered that by having people answer a few key questions about the emotions they felt prior to giving a speech, they could predict which people would be the most nervous or apprehensive during the talk itself. A theory based on the research claimed that *communication*

*apprehension* was a trait only some people possess. The theory had great predictive power in identifying nervous public speakers, but it lacked a good explanation for why some people became nervous and others didn't.[2] It merely suggested that nervous speakers possessed the trait of communication apprehension.

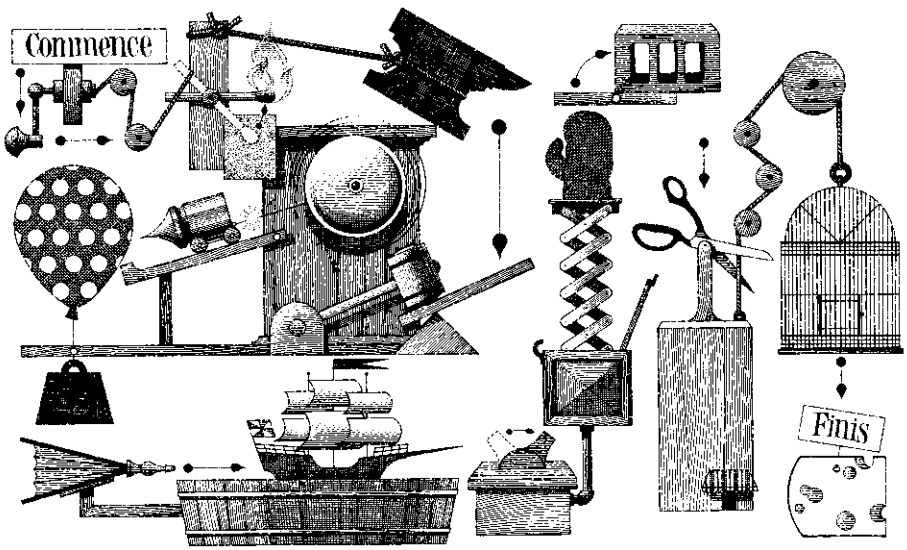
You can probably sense that this circular thinking leaves something to be desired. How do people acquire the trait? Are they born with it? Can they get rid of it through some type of intervention? Over the past few decades, theorists have grappled with the question of how well "trait" theories explain behavior.[3] If the rationale behind why people engage in certain behaviors is simply *That's the kind of people they are,* objective scholars won't be happy with the theory's explanatory power. As a student of communication theory, you shouldn't be either. When you evaluate an objective theory, keep in mind that the *reason* something happens becomes as important as the fact that it does.

## Scientific Standard 3: Relative Simplicity

A good objective theory is as simple as possible—no more complex than it has to be. Several decades ago a cartoonist named Rube Goldberg made people laugh by sketching plans for complicated machines that performed simple tasks. His "better mousetrap" went through a sequence of 15 mechanical steps that were triggered by turning a crank and ended with a bird cage dropping over a cheese-eating mouse.

Goldberg's designs were funny because the machines were so needlessly convoluted. They violated the scientific principle called Occam's razor, so named because philosopher William of Occam implored theorists to "shave off" any assumptions, variables, or concepts that aren't necessary to explain what's going on.[4] When you've concentrated on a subject for a long time, it's easy to get caught up in the grandeur of a theoretical construction. Yet the *rule of parsimony*—another label for the same principle—states that given two plausible explanations for the same event, we should accept the less complex version. Economist E. F. Schumacher put it this way: "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex. . . . It takes a touch of genius—and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction."[5]

**Rule of parsimony (Occam's razor)**
Given two plausible explanations for the same event, we should accept the simpler version.



For example, Einstein's elegant formula ($E = mc^2$) explains the relationships among energy, mass, time, and the speed of light using just three terms, and history credits him with more than a touch of genius. But relative simplicity doesn't necessarily mean *easy to understand.* Trained physicists admit they're still struggling to fully comprehend the theory of relativity. That theory is parsimonious not because it's a no-brainer, but because it doesn't carry the extraneous baggage rival theories do as they try to explain why time stands still when you approach the speed of light.

### Scientific Standard 4: Hypotheses That Can Be Tested

**Falsifiability**
The requirement that a scientific theory be stated in such a way that it can be tested and disproved if it is indeed wrong.

A good objective theory is testable. If a prediction is wrong, there ought to be a way to demonstrate the error. Karl Popper called this requirement *falsifiability,* and saw it as the defining feature of scientific theory.[6] But some theories are so loosely stated that it's impossible to imagine empirical results that could disprove their hypotheses. And if there is no way to prove a theory false, then any claim that it's true seems hollow. A boyhood example from Em may help illustrate this point.

When I was 12 years old, I had a friend named Mike. We spent many hours shooting baskets in his driveway. The backboard was mounted on an old-fashioned, single-car garage with double doors that opened outward like the doors on a cabinet. In order to avoid crashing into them on a drive for a layup, we'd open the doors during play. But since the doors would only swing through a 90-degree arc, they extended about 4 feet onto the court along the baseline.

One day Mike announced that he'd developed a "never-miss" shot. He took the ball at the top of the free-throw circle, drove toward the basket, then cut to the right corner. When he got to the baseline, he took a fadeaway jump shot, blindly arcing the ball over the top of the big door. I was greatly impressed as the ball swished through the net. When he boasted that he never missed, I challenged him to do it again, which he did. But his third shot was an air ball—it completely missed the rim.

Before I could make the kind of bratty comment junior high school boys tend to make, he quickly told me that the attempt had not been his never-miss shot. He claimed to have slipped as he cut to the right and therefore jumped from the wrong place. Grabbing the ball, he drove behind the door again and launched a blind arcing shot. Swish. *That,* he assured me, was his never-miss shot.

I knew something was wrong. I soon figured out that any missed attempt was, by definition, not the ballyhooed never-miss shot. When the ball went in, however, Mike heralded the success as added evidence of 100 percent accuracy. I now know that I could have called his bluff by removing the net from the basket so he couldn't hear whether the shot went through. This would have forced him to declare from behind the door whether the attempt was of the never-miss variety. But as long as I played by his rules, there was no way to disprove his claim.

Unfortunately, some theories are stated in a way that makes it impossible to prove them false. They shy away from the put-up-or-shut-up standard—they aren't testable. If it isn't possible to gather clear evidence that goes against a theory's claims, then it's also impossible to collect evidence that clearly supports those claims.

### Scientific Standard 5: Practical Utility

Over time, a good objective theory is useful. Since an oft-cited goal of social science is to help people have more control over their daily lives, people facing the types of thorny social situations that the theory addresses should be able to benefit from

its wisdom. This requirement is consistent with social psychologist Kurt Lewin's claim that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. A theory that communication practitioners find helpful may not be more accurate than one to which few folks turn for guidance, but because of its influence, it may prove more valuable.

As you read about theories crafted from an objective perspective, let usefulness be one measure of their worth. A word of caution, however: Most of us can be a bit lazy or shortsighted, having a tendency to consider unimportant anything that is hard to grasp or can't be applied to our lives right now. Before considering a theory irrelevant, make certain you understand it and consider how others have made use of its insight. We'll try to do our part by presenting each theory as clearly as possible and suggesting potential applications. Perhaps you'll be even more interested in how other students have found a theory useful in their lives. That's why we've included a student-written application in almost all of the 33 chapters that feature a specific theory. Of course, theories that only apply to students' behavior aren't as practical as theories that apply across different groups of people. The wider the scope of a theory's application, the greater its practical utility.

### Scientific Standard 6: Quantitative Research

As the heading suggests, scientists tend to appeal to *numbers* as they gather evidence to support their theories. Almost all scientific research depends on a *comparison of differences*—this group compared to that group, this treatment as opposed to that treatment, these results versus those results. Since objective theorists aim to mirror reality, it makes sense for them to measure and report what they discover in precise numerical terms rather than in linguistic terms, which are open to interpretation. Enlightenment philosopher David Hume insisted on the superiority of quantitative methods over qualitative research:

> If we take in our hand any volume . . . let us ask: Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning the matter of fact or existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[7]

Given the radical nature of Hume's over-the-top pronouncement, we can wryly imagine the Scottish philosopher making daily trips to a used bookstore for fuel to heat his home in winter. But the idea that numbers are more reliable than words does run deep in the scientific community. More than other quantitative methods, objective theorists use *experiments* and *surveys* to test their predictions.

**Experiment**
A research method that manipulates a variable in a tightly controlled situation in order to find out if it has the predicted effect.

**Survey**
A research method that uses questionnaires and structured interviews to collect self-reported data that reflects what respondents think, feel, or intend to do.

**Experiments.** Working under the assumption that human behavior is not random, an experimenter tries to establish a cause-and-effect relationship by systematically manipulating one factor (the independent variable) in a tightly controlled situation to learn its effect on another factor (the dependent variable). A laboratory experiment would be an appropriate way to answer the question, *Does greater perceived attitude similarity lead to increased interpersonal attraction?* The experimenter might first identify a range of attitudes held by the participating subjects and then systematically alter the attitude information provided about an experimental confederate—someone in cahoots with the experimenter—before they met. A similarity-causes-attraction hypothesis would be supported if the subjects whose attitudes meshed with what they thought the confederate believed ended up liking that person better than did those who thought they were quite different from the confederate.[8]


*"Are you just pissing and moaning, or can you verify what you're saying with data?"*



**Surveys.** Whether using questionnaires or structured interviews, survey researchers rely on self-reported data to discover people's past behavior and what they now think, feel, or intend to do. For example, media-effects researchers have used survey methodology to answer the research question, *Do people who watch a high amount of dramatic violence on television hold an exaggerated belief that the world is a mean and scary place?* They asked the number of hours a day the respondents watched TV and then gave a series of forced-choice options that tapped into respondents' perceived odds of becoming a victim of violence. The researchers discovered a positive relationship between the amount of viewing and the amount of fear.[9]

Although the presence of a correlation doesn't necessarily imply a causal relationship, it keeps that possibility alive. And if a survey shows two variables *aren't* correlated, that's a powerful clue that one of the variables *isn't* a cause of the other. A survey can save valuable time that would otherwise be needed to establish cause and effect by conducting an experiment. In addition to the clues they provide about causal relationships, surveys are often the most convenient way to discover what people are thinking, feeling, and intending to do—the key components of our attitudes.

## WHAT MAKES AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY GOOD?

Unlike social scientists, interpretive scholars don't have a six-point set of agreed-upon criteria for evaluating their theories. But, even though there is no universally approved model, rhetoricians, humanists, critical theorists, and other interpreters repeatedly urge that interpretive theories should accomplish some or all of the

following functions: *identify values, create understanding, inspire aesthetic appreciation, stimulate agreement, reform society,* and *conduct qualitative research.* The rest of this chapter examines these oft-mentioned ideals.

## Interpretive Standard 1: Clarification of Values

A good interpretive theory brings people's values into the open. The theorist actively seeks to acknowledge, identify, or unmask the ideology behind the message under scrutiny.

Interpretive theorists should also be willing to reveal their own ethical commitments. As Webster University dean of communications Eric Rothenbuhler states, "Theoretical positions have moral implications, and when we teach them, advocate their use by others, or promote policies based upon them they have moral consequences."[10] While not all interpretive scholars occupy the same moral ground, there are core values most of them share. For example, humanists usually place a premium on individual liberty. Klaus Krippendorff of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania wants to make sure that scholars' drive for personal freedom extends to the people they study. His *ethical imperative* directs the theorist to "grant others that occur in your construction the same autonomy you practice constructing them."[11] When theorists follow this rule, scholarly monologue gives way to collegial dialogue. In this way, people have a say in what's said about them. This kind of communal assessment requires reporting multiple voices rather than relying on one or two informants.

**Ethical imperative**
Grant others that occur in your construction the same autonomy you practice constructing them.

Some interpretive scholars value equality as highly as they do freedom. This commitment leads to continual examination of the power relationships inherent in all communication. Critical theorists, in particular, insist that scholars can no longer remain ethically detached from the people they are studying or from the political and economic implications of their work. For critical theorists, "There is no safe harbor in which researchers can avoid the power structure."[12]

## Interpretive Standard 2: New Understanding of People

Interpretive scholarship is good when it offers fresh insight into the human condition. Rhetorical critics, ethnographers, and other humanistic researchers seek to gain new understanding by analyzing the activity they regard as uniquely human—symbolic interaction. As opposed to social science theorists who attempt to identify communication patterns common to all people, an interpretive scholar typically examines a one-of-a-kind speech community that exhibits a specific language style. By analyzing this group's communication practice, the researcher hopes to develop an understanding of local knowledge or members' unique rules for interaction. Interpretive theories are tools to aid this search for situated meaning.

Some critics fear that by relying on rhetorical theory, we will read our preconceived ideas into the text rather than letting the words speak for themselves. They suggest that there are times when we should "just say no" to theory. But University of Minnesota communication theorist Ernest Bormann noted that rhetorical theory works best when it suggests universal patterns of symbol using: "A powerful explanatory structure is what makes a work of humanistic scholarship live on through time."[13]

Bormann's claim is akin to the behavioral scientist's insistence that theory explains why people do what they do. But the two notions are somewhat different. Science wants an objective explanation; humanism desires subjective understanding.

**Self-referential imperative**
Include yourself as a constituent of your own construction.

Krippendorff urges us to recognize that we, as theorists, affect and are affected by what we observe. We can't stand aloof. His *self-referential imperative* for building theory states, "Include yourself as a constituent of your own construction."[14] When theorists follow that rule, they must reflect seriously on how their identity and experience shapes what they see.

### Interpretive Standard 3: Aesthetic Appeal

The way a theorist presents ideas can capture the imagination of a reader just as much as the wisdom and originality of the theory they have created. As with any type of communication, both content and style make a difference. Objective theorists are constrained by the standard format for acceptable scientific writing—propositions, hypotheses, operationalized constructs, and the like. But interpretive theorists have more room for creativity, so aesthetic appeal becomes an issue. Although the elegance of a theory is in the eye of the beholder, clarity and artistry seem to be the two qualities needed to satisfy this aesthetic requirement.

No matter how great the insights the theory contains, if the essay describing them is disorganized, overwritten, or opaque, the theorist's ideas will come across murky rather than clear. A student of mine who fought through a theorist's monograph filled with esoteric jargon likened the experience to "scuba diving in fudge."

According to University of Pittsburgh professor Barbara Warnick, a rhetorical critic can fill one or more of four roles—artist, analyst, audience, and advocate.[15] As an artist, the critic's job is to spark appreciation. Along with clarity, it's another way to construct an interpretive theory with aesthetic appeal. By artfully incorporating imagery, metaphor, illustration, and story into the core of the theory, the theorist can make their creation come alive for others. We can't illustrate all of these artful devices in a single paragraph, but many students of rhetoric are moved by the way University of Wisconsin rhetorical critic Edwin Black summed up his analysis of Lincoln's Gettysburg address:

> The Gettysburg Address is, finally and inevitably, a projection of Lincoln himself, of his discretion, of his modesty on an occasion which invited him to don the mantle of the prophet, of his meticulous measure of how far he ought to go, of the assurance of his self-knowledge: his impeccable discernment of his own competence, his flawless sense of its depth and its limits. As an actor in history and a force in the world, Lincoln does not hesitate to comprehend history and the world. But he never presumes to cast his mind beyond human dimensions. He does not recite divine intentions; he does not issue cosmic judgments. He knows, to the bottom, what he knows. Of the rest, he is silent.[16]

### Interpretive Standard 4: Community of Agreement

We can identify a good interpretive theory by the amount of support it generates within a community of scholars who are interested in and knowledgeable about the same type of communication. Interpretation of meaning is subjective, but whether the interpreter's case is reasonable or totally off-the-wall is ultimately decided by others in the field. Their acceptance or rejection is an objective fact that helps verify or vilify a theorist's ideas.

Sometimes interpretive theorists present a controversial thesis to an audience restricted to true believers—those who already agree with the author's position. But an interpretive theory can't meet the community of agreement standard unless it becomes the subject of widespread analysis. For example, former National