Eighth Edition

Communication Communication Communication

A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY

Em Griffin

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EIGHTH EDITION

EM GRIFFIN

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Wheaton College

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In addition to teaching and writing, Em serves with Opportunity International, a microfinance development organization that provides opportunities for people in chronic poverty around the world to transform their lives. He is also an active mediator at the Center for Conflict Resolution in Chicago and runs his own mediation service, Communication First.

Em's wife, Jeanie, is an artist; they recently celebrated 50 years of marriage. They have two married, adult children, Jim and Sharon, and six grandchildren, Joshua, Amy, Sam, Kyle, Alison, and Dan.

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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

If you're 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 Eighth 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. I'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 on the junior or senior level, the course will still be the students' first comprehensive look at theory, so the book will meet them where they are.

The aim of the text is to present 32 specific theories in a way that makes them interesting and understandable. By the time readers complete the book, they should have a working knowledge of theories that explain a broad range of communication phenomena. Of course, my ultimate goal is for students to understand the relationships among the leading ideas in our field, but before they can make those connections, they need to have a good grasp of what the theorists are saying. The bulk of the book provides that raw material.

With the help of journal and yearbook editors, and the feedback of 200 instructors, I'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, 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. The axioms of Watzlawick's interactional view continue to be debated by interpersonal scholars. And no student of mediated communication should be ignorant of Gerbner's cultivation theory, which explains why heavy television viewing cultivates fear of a mean and scary world.

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, Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery's theory of relational dialectics offers insight into the ongoing tensions inherent in personal relationships.

Joe Walther's social information processing is one of the few fully developed and well-researched theories of computer-mediated communication. And Gerry Philipsen's speech codes theory upgrades the ethnography of communication from a methodology to a theory that can be used to explain, predict, and control discourse about discourse.

Organizational Plan of the Book. Each chapter introduces a single theory in 10–15 pages. I'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. In this way, students can gain an in-depth understanding of important theories rather than acquire only a vague familiarity with a jumble of related ideas. The one-chapter–one-theory arrangement also gives teachers the opportunity to drop 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, "Talk About Theory," lays the groundwork for understanding the differences between objective and interpretive theories. 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, I present the 32 theories in 32 self-contained chapters. Each theory is discussed within the context of a communication topic: interpersonal messages, relationship development, relationship maintenance, influence, group communication, organizational communication, public rhetoric, media and culture, media effects, intercultural communication, and gender and communication. These communication context sections usually contain two or three theories. Each section's two-page 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 has value implications, I 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 virtue and vice 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. The typical chapter uses an extended example to illustrate the "truth" a theory proposes. I encourage readers to try out ideas by visualizing a first meeting of freshman roommates, responding to conflict in a dysfunctional family, trying to persuade other students to support a zero-tolerance policy on driving after drinking, and many others. I also use Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*, speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and the films *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Thank You for Smoking*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *When Harry Met*

Sally to illustrate principles of the theories. The case study in each chapter follows the pedagogical principle of explaining what students don't yet know in terms of ideas and images 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. Philipsen's speech codes theory began with a three-year ethnographic study of what it means to speak like a man in "Teamsterville." And Delia's constructivist research continues to be dependent on Crockett's Role Category Questionnaire. When such exemplars exist, I describe the research in detail so that students can learn from and appreciate the benefits of grounding theory in systematic observation. Thus, readers of *A First Look* are led through a variety of research designs and data analyses.

Students will encounter the names of Baxter, Berger, Bormann, Burgoon, Burke, Deetz, Fisher, Giles, Kramarae, Pacanowsky, Pearce, Philipsen, Ting-Toomey, Walther, Wood, and many others in later communication courses. I therefore make a concerted effort to link theory and theorist. By pairing a particular theory with its originator, I 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 told me that I am a "friend" of their theory. I appreciate that. I want to present all of them in a constructive way, but after I provide a summary of the theory's strengths, I then discuss the weaknesses, unanswered questions, and possible errors that remain. I try to stimulate a "That makes sense, and yet I wonder . . ." response among students.

I 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 I 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 the book.

I believe professors and students alike will get a good chuckle out of the cartoons I've selected for each chapter and section introduction. The art's main function, however, is to illustrate significant points in the text. As in other editions, I'm committed to using quality cartoon art from *The New Yorker* and *Punch* magazines, as well as comic strips such as "Calvin and Hobbes," "Dilbert," "Cathy," and "Zits." 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.

While no author considers his or her style ponderous or dull, I believe I've presented the theories in a clear and lively fashion. Accuracy alone does not communicate. I'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 I also translate technical language into more familiar words. Students and reviewers cite readability and interest as particular strengths of the text. I 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 my "Conversations with Communication Theorists," eight-minute video clips of our discussions together. The text that accompanies each picture previews a few intriguing comments the theorists made so students can watch the interview with a specific purpose in mind. You can find these videos on the book's website, *www.afirstlook.com.*

I encourage you to check out the website for other features that can equip you to make theory exciting for your students. Features include information on movie clips that illustrate specific theories, student application log entries that show Kurt Lewin was right when he said that there's nothing as practical as a good theory, and a comparison of all major comm theory texts to find out what theories are covered in each book. Many of you will appreciate the theory archive, which contains more than 20 complete chapters from previous editions. This way you can assign one of your favorites if it isn't in the current edition. The most popular resource on the site is the world-class instructor's manual prepared by Emily Langan, which accounts for the vast majority of the 40,000 log-ins per month. In the password-protected, instructors-only section of the site, you'll find suggestions for discussions, classroom exercises and activities, and short-answer quizzes for each chapter.

Major Changes in the Eighth Edition. With the strong encouragement of a focus group and the results of an extensive online survey, I've added three new theories to this edition. Sandra Petronio's *communication privacy management theory* has garnered great interest in the last decade. Though applicable whenever private information is disclosed, CPM's relevance in the expanding field of health communication makes its inclusion in the text particularly appropriate. In previous editions I've used an abbreviated version of Ernest Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory* to illustrate the different criteria for evaluating scientific and interpretive theories. I now devote an entire chapter to this important group theory that combines rhetorical criticism with the desire for universal principles. And because the *uses and gratifications* approach of Elihu Katz changed the direction of media-effects theory and research, I'm pleased to introduce his work in this edition. In order to make room for those last two theories, I've moved my coverage of *adaptive structuration theory* and *spiral of silence* to the theory archive at *www.afirstlook.com.*

I've streamlined all of the integration chapters. I've transferred my discussion of research from Chapter 2, "Talk About Theory" to Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words," where quantitative or qualitative research becomes a sixth standard for a good objective or interpretive theory. Because I've moved my description of symbolic convergence theory to a stand-alone chapter, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are shorter and more focused. In the previous edition, Chapter 4 illustrated the seven traditions of communication theory with a potpourri of early theories, research programs, and quotations that could confuse or overwhelm beginning students. In this edition, I describe how each tradition studies friendship, a topic near and dear to most college students. The end result is that these three integrative chapters are clearer and briefer, and do more to demonstrate the relationship between theory and research.

For the last 15 years in my communication theory course, I've given an "application log" assignment in which students write a paragraph or two applying

each theory to some aspect of their own lives or the world around them. When I read some exemplars in class, they are fascinated with the way their peers put theory into practice. I've inserted an application log entry into most chapters where I think it will not only spark interest, but also reinforce the specific feature of the theory I'm describing. In each case, the writer has given me explicit permission to do so.

I've made at least one significant change in two-thirds of the theory chapters. This may be a research update, a shift in the theorist's thinking, a new example that runs throughout the theory, or a complete reorganization of the chapter. Here are a few examples: In the chapter on *social judgment theory,* I describe a media campaign at a Big Ten university that changed students' perception and behavior by placing messages on binge drinking within students' latitude of noncommitment. The treatment of *social information processing (SIP)* now addresses impression formation on social networking sites like Facebook. Instead of illustrating the *functional perspective on group decision making* with an example of a faculty search committee (most students couldn't care less), I now describe how two groups of students in similar off-campus courses made quite different decisions on how they would live together. And the entire chapter on *cultivation theory* has been restructured.

Acknowledgments. Working closely with three former students and friends has made crafting this edition an exciting and enjoyable project. Emily Langan, my colleague at Wheaton, has written an instructor's manual that is recognized as the gold standard by others in our field. Instructors tell me they walk into class with confidence after reading Emily's insights regarding a theory and her account of best practices on how to help students grasp and appreciate it.

On the title page of the book, Glenn Sparks (Purdue University) and Andrew Ledbetter (Texas Christian University) are listed as "Special Consultants." What does this ambiguous title mean? For me, it signifies that they've been involved in every major decision I've made for this edition. They were partners in creating questions and interpreting the answers for a focus group and online survey of instructors teaching a communication theory course. They counseled me on changes that needed to be made and how best to make them. They read and made detailed comments on my drafts of new material. And they gladly took ownership of a few chapters in the book. Andrew did the rewrites of the chapters on social penetration, social information processing, and muted group theory. Glenn authored the new chapter on uses and gratifications and did a major rewrite of the chapter on cultivation theory. Emily, Andrew, and Glenn have contributed in ways that are above and beyond what any author has a right to expect. It's been a delight working with them.

I gratefully acknowledge the wisdom and counsel of many other generous scholars whose intellectual capital is embedded in every page you'll read. Over the last 24 years, hundreds of communication scholars have gone out of their way to make the book better. People who have made direct contributions to this edition include Ron Adler, Santa Barbara City College; Ron Arnett, Duquesne University; Julie Borkin, Oakland University; Brant Burleson, Purdue University; Stan Deetz, University of Colorado; Linda Desidero, University of Maryland; Thomas Discenna, Oakland University; Steve Duck, University of Iowa; Belle Edson, Arizona State University; Darin Garard, Santa Barbara City College; Howard Giles, University of California, Santa Barbara; Donna Gotch, California State University, San Bernardino; John Harrigan, Erie Community College; Cheris

Kramarae, University of Oregon; Erina MacGeorge, Purdue University; Glen McClish, San Diego State University; Max McCombs, University of Texas; Marty Medhurst, Baylor University; Melanie Mills, Eastern Illinois University; Barnett Pearce, Fielding Graduate Institute; Russ Proctor, Northern Kentucky University; Read Schuchardt, Wheaton College; Paul Stob, Vanderbilt University; Stella Ting-Toomey, California State University, Fullerton; Scott Turcott, Indiana Wesleyan University; Robert Woods Jr., Spring Arbor University. Without their help, this edition would be less accurate and certainly less interesting.

My relationships with the professionals at McGraw-Hill have been highly satisfactory. I am grateful for Susan Gouijnstook, Executive Editor; Erika Lake, Editorial Coordinator; Leslie Oberhuber, Executive Marketing Manager; and Holly Irish, one of two Production Editors on the project. Jennie Katsaros, Senior Development Editor, Merrill Peterson, Production Editor from Matrix Productions, and Penny Smith, Assistant Production Editor at Matrix are the three people with whom I've gladly worked most closely. Jennie has been my go-to person at McGraw-Hill for the last five editions of the text—we've seen it all together. Merrill's and Penny's competence instills confidence that the job will be done right; in a crisis they are unflappable. When McGraw-Hill confirmed that Merrill and Penny would shepherd the production process, I knew I could relax.

I've also been well-served by three outside contractors: Jenn Meyer, a commercial computer artist, created and revised figures on 24-hours notice; Judy Brody achieved the impossible by making the extensive permissions process enjoyable; Robyn Tellefsen was my student research assistant for the fourth edition of the book and is now a freelance writer and editor. When I wanted to work with someone who was familiar with the content and who I trusted implicitly, Robyn enthusiastically agreed to edit new material before I submitted it and proofread the entire text before it went to the printer. Other authors are envious when they hear of my good fortune to work with these nine people.

My research assistants for this edition have been Elizabeth Wilhoit and Ben Robertson. Elizabeth saw me through the first half of the project before she entered a graduate program in rhetoric at Purdue. Ben, a media-studies honor student at Wheaton, picked up where Elizabeth left off. His work included the daunting task of constructing the book's extensive index while the publishing deadline loomed. I'm grateful for Elizabeth's and Ben's cheerful and helpful can-do attitude throughout the process. Colleagues at other schools are amazed when they hear of the dedicated and sophisticated help I receive from Wheaton undergraduates.

Finally, I gratefully recognize the continued encouragement, understanding, and loving support of my wife, Jean—not just on this project, but throughout 50 years of marriage. Her love, sense of humor, and parallel passion to create art and glorious music for others has made it possible for me to throw myself into this project.

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A FIRST LOOK AT COMMUNICATION THEORY

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DIVISION ONE

Overview

CHAPTER 1. Launching Your Study of Communication Theory
CHAPTER 2. Talk About Theory
CHAPTER 3. Weighing the Words
CHAPTER 4. Mapping the Territory (Seven Traditions in the Field of Communication Theory)

CHAPTER 1

Launching Your Study of Communication Theory

This is a book about theories—communication theories. After that statement you may already be stifling a yawn. Many college students, after all, regard theory as obscure, dull, and irrelevant. People outside the classroom are even less charitable. 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 Ph.D. 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. I appreciate his desire to make sense of his world. Here's a man who spends a big hunk of his life making sure that planes stay safely in the air until pilots are ready to land. When we really care about something, we should seek to answer the *why* and *what if* questions that always emerge. That was the message I heard from University of Arizona communication theorist Judee Burgoon when I talked with her in my series of interviews, *Conversations with Communication Theorists*.[1] If we care about the fascinating subject of communication, she suggested, we've got to "do theory."

WHAT IS A THEORY AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

In earlier editions I've used *theory* as "an umbrella term for all careful, systematic, and self-conscious discussion and analysis of communication phenomena," a definition offered by University of Minnesota communication professor Ernest Bormann.[2] I like this definition because it's general enough to cover the diverse theories presented in this book. Yet the description is so broad that it doesn't give us any direction on how we might construct a theory, nor does it offer a way to figure out when thoughts or statements about communication haven't attained that status. If I call any idea a "theory," does saying it's so make it so?

In my discussion with Judee Burgoon, she suggested that a theory is nothing more than a "set of systematic hunches about the way things operate."[3] Since Burgoon is the most frequently cited female scholar in the field of communica-

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tion, I 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 me that it would, quickly adding that they should be "informed hunches." So for Burgoon, a theory consists of *a set of systematic, informed hunches about the way things work.* In the rest of this section, I'll examine the three key features of Burgoon's notion of a theory. First, I'll focus on the idea that theory consists of a *set of hunches*. But a set of hunches is only a starting point. Second, I'll discuss what it means to say that those hunches have to be

informed. Last, I'll highlight the notion that the hunches have to be *systematic*. Let's look briefly at the meaning of each of these core concepts of theory.

A Set of Hunches

Theory
A set of systematic, informed hunches about thew ay things work.

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 that you've launched, but when you first float your theory, 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. The young theorist in the cartoon may be quite sure that dogs and bees can smell fear, but that isolated conviction isn't a theory. A developed theory offers some sort of explanation. For example, how are bees and dogs able to sniff out fright? Perhaps the scent of sweaty palms that comes from high anxiety is qualitatively different than the odor of people perspiring from hard work. A theory will also give some indication of scope. Do only dogs and bees possess this keen sense of smell, or do butterflies and kittens have it as well? Theory construction involves multiple hunches.

Informed Hunches

Bormann's description of creating communication theory calls for a careful, self-conscious analysis of communication phenomena, but Burgoon's definition asks for more. It's not enough simply to think carefully about an idea; a theorist's hunches should be *informed*. Working on a hunch that a penny thrown from the Empire State Building will become deeply embedded in the sidewalk, the young theorist has a responsibility to check it out. Before developing a theory, there are articles to read, people to talk to, actions to observe, or experiments to run, all of which can cast light on the subject. At the very least, a communication theorist should be familiar with alternative explanations and interpretations of the type of communication they are studying. (Young Theorist, have you heard the story of Galileo dropping an apple from the Leaning Tower of Pisa?)

Pepperdine University 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.[4]

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 whole pattern emerges.

None of the young theories in the cartoon rise to this standard. Since most of the nine are presented as one-shot claims, they aren't part of a conceptual framework. One possible exception is the dual speculation that "adults are really Martians, and they're up to no good." But the connecting word *and* doesn't really show the relationship of grown-ups' unsavory activity and their hypothesized other-world origin. To do that, the young theorist could speculate about the basic character of Martians, how they got here, why their behavior is suspicious, and whether today's youth will turn into aliens when they become parents. A theory would then tie together all of these ideas into a unified 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?* I've presented a verbal definition. Many of us are visual learners as well and would appreciate a concrete image that helps us understand what a theory is and does. I'll therefore present three metaphors that I find helpful, but will also note how an over-reliance on these representations of theory might lead us astray.

Theories as Nets: Philosopher of science Karl Popper says that "theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world' . . . . We endeavor to make the mesh ever finer and finer."[5] I appreciate this metaphor because it 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. Yet 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 that humans think, say, or do strikes me as 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, perhaps—and depending on the lens each uses, one theorist may view this speech act as a breakdown of communication or the breakup of a relationship, while the other theorist will see it as democracy in action. For me, the danger of the lens metaphor is that we might regard what is seen through the glass as so dependent on the theoretical stance of the viewer that we abandon any attempt to discern what is real or true.

Theories as Maps: I use this image when I describe the *First Look* text to others. Within this analogy, communication theories are maps of the way communication works. The truth they depict may have to do with objective behaviors "out there" or subjective meanings inside our heads. Either way we need to have

theory to guide us through unfamiliar territory. In that sense this book of theories is like a scenic atlas that pulls together 32 must-see locations. It's the kind of travel guide that presents a close-up view of each site. I would caution, however, that the map is not the territory.[6] A static theory, like a still photograph, can never fully portray the richness of interaction between people that is constantly changing, always more varied, and inevitably more complicated than what any theory can chart. As a person intrigued with communication, aren't you glad it's this way?

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

To ask this question is to invite controversy and raise expectations that can't be met. Frank Dance, the University of Denver scholar credited for publishing the first comprehensive book on communication theory, cataloged more than 120 definitions of *communication*—and that was more than 40 years ago.[7] Communication scholars have suggested many more since then, yet no single definition has risen to the top and become the standard within the field of communication. When it comes to defining what it is we study, there's little discipline in the discipline.

At the conclusion of his study, Dance suggested that we're "trying to make the concept of communication do too much work for us."[8] 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 it is that 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."[9]

Despite the pitfalls of trying to define *communication* in an all-inclusive way, it seems to me that students who are willing to spend a big chunk of their college education studying communication deserve a description of what it is they're looking at. Rather than giving the final word on what human activities can be legitimately referred to as *communication*, this designation would highlight the essential features of communication that shouldn't be missed. So for starters I offer this working definition:

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

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

To the extent that there is redeeming value in this statement, it lies in drawing your attention to five features of communication that you'll run across repeatedly as you read about the theories in the field. In the rest of this section I'll flesh out these concepts.

1. Messages

Messages are at the very core of communication study. University of Colorado 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."[10]

When academic areas such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, literature, and philosophy deal with human symbolic activity, they intersect with the study of communication. The visual image of this intersection of interests has prompted some to refer to communication as a *crossroads discipline*. The difference is that communication scholars are parked at the junction focusing on messages, whereas other disciplines are just passing through on their way to other destinations. All of the theories covered in this book deal specifically with messages.

Communication theorists use the word *text* as a synonym for a message that can be studied, regardless of the medium. This book is a text. So is a verbatim transcript of a conversation with your instructor, a recorded presidential news conference, a silent YouTube video, or a Kelly Clarkson song on your iPod. To illustrate the following four parts of the definition, suppose you received this cryptic text message from a close, same-sex friend: "Pat and I spent the night together." You immediately know that the name Pat refers to the person with whom you have an ongoing romantic relationship. An analysis of this text and the context surrounding its transmission provides a useful case study for examining the essential features of communication.

Text
A record of a message that can be analyzed by others; for example, a book, film, photograph, or any transcript or recording of a speech or broadcast.

2. Creation of Messages

This phrase in the working definition indicates that the content and form of a text are usually *constructed, invented, planned, crafted, constituted, selected*, or *adopted* by the communicator. Each of these terms is used in one or more of the theories I describe, and they all imply that the communicator is usually making a conscious choice of message form and substance. For whatever reason, your friend sent a text message rather than meeting face-to-face, calling you on the phone, sending an email, or writing a note. Your friend also chose the seven words that were transmitted to your cell phone. There is a long history of textual analysis in the field of communication, wherein the rhetorical critic looks for clues in the message to discern the motivation and strategy of the person who created the message.

There are, of course, many times when we speak, write, or gesture in seemingly mindless ways—activities that are like driving on cruise control. These are preprogrammed responses that were selected earlier and stored for later use. In like manner, our repertoire of stock phrases such as *thank you*, *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 five or six of the theories I'll present—each one seeks to increase our communication choices.

3. Interpretation of Messages

Messages do not interpret themselves. The meaning that a message holds for both the creators and receivers doesn't reside in the words that are spoken, written, or acted out. A truism among communication scholars is that *words don't mean things, people mean things*. Symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer states its

implication: "Humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things."[11]

What is the meaning of your friend's text message? Does "spent the night together" mean *talking until all hours? Pulling an all-night study session? Sleeping on the sofa? Making love?* If it's the latter, was Pat a *willing* or *unwilling partner* (perhaps drunk or the victim of acquaintance rape)? How would your friend characterize their sexual liaison? *Recreational sex? A chance hookup? Friends with benefits? Developing a close relationship? Falling in love? The start of a long-term commitment?* Perhaps of more importance to you, how does Pat view it? What emotional meaning is behind the message for each of them? *Satisfaction? Disappointment? Surprise? The morning-after-the-night-before blahs? Gratefulness? Guilt? Ecstasy?* And finally, what does receiving this message through a digital channel mean for you, your friendship, and your relationship with Pat? None of these answers are in the message. Words and other symbols are polysemic—they're open to multiple interpretations.

4. A Relational Process

The Greek philosopher Heraclites observed that "one cannot step into the same river twice."[12] These words illustrate the widespread acceptance among communication scholars that communication is a *process*. 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. This means that the text message "Pat and I spent the night together" is not the whole story. You'll probably contact both your friend and Pat to ask the clarifying questions raised earlier. As they are answered or avoided, you'll interpret the message in a different way. That's because communication is a process, not a freeze-frame snapshot.

In the opening lines of her essay "Communication as Relationality," University of Georgia rhetorical theorist Celeste Condit suggests that the communication process is more about relationships than it is about content.

> Communication is a process of relating. This means it is not primarily or essentially a process of transferring information or of disseminating or circulating signs (though these things can be identified as happening within the process of relating).[13]

Communication is a relational process not only because it takes place between two or more persons, but also because it affects the nature of the connections among those people. It's obvious that the text message you received will influence the triangle of relationships among you, Pat, and your (former?) friend. But this is true in other forms of mediated communication as well. Television viewers and moviegoers have emotional responses to people they see on the screen. And as businesses are discovering, even the impersonal recorded announcement that "this call may be monitored for the purpose of quality control" has an impact on how we regard their corporate persona.

5. Messages That Elicit a Response

This final component of communication deals with the effect of the message upon people who receive it. For whatever reason, if the message fails to stimulate

any cognitive, emotional, or behavioral reaction, it seems pointless to refer to it as *communication*. We often refer to such situations as a message "falling on deaf ears" or the other person "turning a blind eye." That nonresponse is different than the prison warden's oft-quoted line in Paul Newman's classic film *Cool Hand Luke*.[14] When Luke repeatedly breaks the rules laid down by the warden, this man who insists on being called Boss drawls, "Luke, what we have here is a failure to communicate." He's wrong. Luke understands and actively resists the clearly stated rules; the Boss responds violently to Luke's insubordination and his attempts to escape. Both men respond to the message of the other.

In like manner, surely you would respond to your friend's cryptic message—one way or another. In fact, the text seems to be crafted and sent in a way to provoke a response. How closely your thoughts, feelings, words, or other reactions would match what your friend expected or intended is another matter. But whether successful or not, the whole situation surrounding the text and context of the message fits the working definition of communication that I hope will help you frame your study of communication theory: *Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.*

AN ARRANGEMENT OF IDEAS TO AID COMPREHENSION

Now that you have a basic understanding of what a communication theory is, knowing how I've structured the book and arranged the theories can help you grasp their content. That's because I've organized the text to place a given theory in a conceptual framework and situational context before I present it. After this chapter, there are three more integrative chapters in the "Overview" division. For Chapter 2, I've asked two leading communication scholars to analyze a highly acclaimed TV ad in order to illustrate how half the theories in the 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 theory 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 32 chapters that run 10–15 pages apiece, each concentrating on a single theory. I 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 four major divisions according to the primary communication context that they address. The theories in Division Two, "Interpersonal Communication," consider one-on-one interaction. Division Three, "Group and Public Communication," deals with face-to-face involvement in collective settings. Division Four, "Mass Communication," pulls together theories that explore electronic and print media. Division Five, "Cultural Context," explores systems of shared meaning that are so all-encompassing that we often fail to realize their impact upon us.

These four divisions are based on the fact that theories are tentative answers to questions that occur to people as they mull over practical problems in specific situations. It therefore makes sense to group them according to the different communication settings that usually prompt those questions. The organizational

plan I've described is like having four separately indexed file cabinets. Although there is no natural progression from one division to another, the plan provides a convenient way to classify and retrieve the 32 theories.

Finally, Division Six, "Integration," seeks to distill core ideas that are common to a number of theories. Ideas have power, and each theory is driven by one or more ideas that may be shared by other theories from different communication contexts. For example, there's at least one theory in each of the four context divisions committed to the force of narrative. They each declare that people respond to stories and dramatic imagery with which they can identify. Reading about key concepts that cut across multiple theories wouldn't mean much to you now, but after you become familiar with a number of communication theories, it can be an eye-opening experience that also helps you review what you've learned.

CHAPTER FEATURES TO ENLIVEN THEORY

In many of the chapters ahead, I use an extended example from life on a college campus, a well-known communication event, or the conversations of characters in movies, books, or TV shows. The main purpose of these illustrations is to provide a mind's-eye picture of how the theory works. The imagery will also make the basic thrust of the theory easier to recall. But if you can think of a situation in your own life where the theory is relevant, that personal application will make it doubly interesting and memorable for you.

You might also want to see how others put the theories into practice. With my students' permission, I've weaved in their accounts of application for almost all the theories featured in the text. I'm intrigued by the rich connections these students make—ones I wouldn't have thought of on my own. Some students draw on scenes from short stories, novels, or movies. To see an annotated list of feature film scenes that illustrate the theories, go to the book's website, www.afirstlook.com, and under Theory Resources, click on Suggested Movie Clips.

I make a consistent effort to link each theory with its author. 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 I always include a section in theory chapters labeled "Critique." 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 a mastery of names like Deetz, Giles, Walther, Baxter, Berger, and Burke will allow you to enter into the dialogue without being at a disadvantage. Ignoring the names of theorists could prove to be false economy in the long run.

Don't overlook the three features at the end of each chapter. The queries under the title "Questions to Sharpen Your Focus" will help you mull over key points of the theory. They can be answered by pulling together information from this text and from the text of your life. The italicized words in each question highlight terms you need to know in order to understand the theory. Whenever you see a picture of the theorist, it's captured from one of my *Conversations with*

Communication Theorists and shown alongside a brief description of what we talked about. You can view these 6- to 8-minute interviews at www.afirstlook.com. And the feature entitled "A Second Look" offers an annotated bibliography of resources should you desire to know more about the theory. You'll find it a good place to start if you are writing a research paper on the theory or are intrigued with a particular aspect of it.

You've already seen the last feature I'll mention. In every chapter and section introduction I 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. In addition to enjoying their humor, you can use the cartoons as minitests of comprehension. Unlike my comments on "Young Theories" earlier in this chapter, I 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.

Some students are afraid to try. Like travelers whose eyes glaze over at the sight of a road map, they have a phobia about theories that seek to explain human intentions and behavior. I sympathize with their qualms and misgivings, but I find that the theories in this book haven't dehydrated my life or made it more confusing. On the contrary, they add clarity and provide a sense of competence as I communicate with others. I hope they do that for you as well.

Every so often a student will ask me, "Do you really think about communication theory when you're talking to someone?" My answer is "Yes, but not all the time." Like everyone else, I often say things while speaking on automatic pilot—words, phrases, sentences, descriptions rolling off my tongue without conscious thought. Old habits die hard. But when I'm in a new setting or the conversational stakes are high, I start to think strategically. And that's when the applied wisdom of theories that fit the situation comes to mind. By midterm, many of my students discover they're thinking that way as well. That's my wish for you as you launch your study of communication theory.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Suppose you share the aircraft mechanic's suspicion that scholars who create theories would be all thumbs working on a plane's ailerons or engine. What would it take to transform your *hunch* into a *theory*?

2. Which *metaphor* offered to capture the meaning of theory do you find most helpful—theory as a *net*, a *lens*, or a *map*? Can you think of another image that you could use to explain to a friend what this course is about?

3. Suppose you want to study the effects of yawns during intimate conversations. Would your research fall under *communication* as defined as the *relational process of creating and interpreting messages to elicit a response*? If not, how would you change the definition to make it include your interest?

4. You come to this course with a vast array of communication experiences in *interpersonal, group and public, mass media,* and *intercultural contexts*. What are the communication *questions* you want to answer, *puzzles* you want to solve, *problems* you want to fix?

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, 1970, pp. 201–210.

Focus on messages: George Gerbner, "Mass Media and Human Communication Theory," in Frank E.X. Dance, *Human Communication Theory: Original Essays,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1967, pp. 40–60.

Communication as human symbolic interaction: Gary Cronkhite, "On the Focus, Scope and Coherence of the Study of Human Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vol. 72, No. 3, 1986, pp. 231–246.

Theories of communication as practical: J. Kevin Barge, "Practical Theory as Mapping, Engaged Reflection, and Transformative Practice," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 11, 2001, pp. 5–13.

Integration of scientific and humanistic theories: Karl Erik Rosengren, "From Field to Frog Ponds," *Journal of Communication,* Vol. 43, No. 3, 1993, pp. 6–17.

Multidimensional view of theory: James A. Anderson and Geoffrey Baym, "Philosophies and Philosophic Issues in Communication, 1995–2004," *Journal of Communication,* Vol. 54, 2004, pp. 589–615.

Differences in theoretical scope: Ernest Bormann, *Communication Theory,* Sheffield, Salem, WI, 1989, pp. 81–101.

CHAPTER 2

Talk About Theory

I met Glenn Sparks and Marty Medhurst my first year teaching at Wheaton College. Glenn and Marty were friends who signed up for my undergraduate persuasion course. As students, both men were interested in broadcast media. After graduating from Wheaton, each went on for a master's degree at Northern Illinois University. Each then earned a doctorate at a different university, and both are now nationally recognized communication scholars. Glenn is on the faculty at Purdue University; Marty is at Baylor University.

Behavioral scientist
A scholar who applies the scientific method to describe, predict, and explain recurring forms of human behavior.

Rhetorician
A scholar who studies the ways in which symbolic forms can be used to identify with people, or to persuade them toward a certain point of view.

Despite their similar backgrounds and interests, Glenn and Marty are quite different in their approaches to communication. Glenn calls himself a *behavioral scientist*, while Marty refers to himself as a *rhetorician*. Glenn's training was in empirical research; Marty was schooled in rhetorical theory and criticism. Glenn conducts experiments; Marty interprets texts.

To understand the theories ahead, you need to first grasp the crucial differences between the objective and interpretive approaches to communication. As a way to introduce the distinctions, I asked Glenn and Marty to bring their scholarship to bear on a television commercial that was first aired a few months before Super Bowl XLI. Both the commercial and the game featured football star Peyton Manning.

TWO COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS VIEW A DIEHARD FAN

In 1998 Peyton Manning was drafted to play quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts. A year earlier, MasterCard had launched its "Priceless" campaign, which suggests that the credit card company has both a sense of humor and the wisdom to realize that some of the best things in life can't be bought, no matter what your credit limit. Nine years later, Peyton and "Priceless" commercials were still going strong. Manning was poised to lead the Colts to a 2007 Super Bowl victory, and MasterCard was using his star power to project the company's image. *Adweek* sets the scene:

> Peyton Manning is one of the few superstar athletes who shows he can act in his commercials. We've seen his cheerleader-for-the-everyday guy before. This time he's rooting for the waitress who drops her tray, the latte guy who's burned by escaping steam, and the movers who let a piano escape down a hill. "That's okay guys. They're not saying 'boo,' they're saying 'moooooooovers.' "[1]

The fourth scene, captured in Figure 2–1, is Manning shouting encouragement to the paperboy who made an errant throw: "That's alright, Bobby. You've

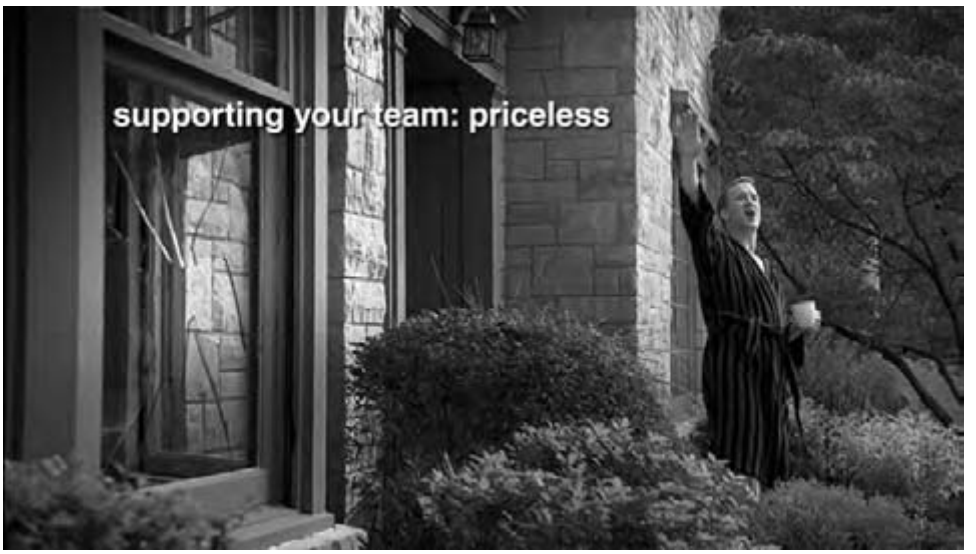


FIGURE 2–1 Diehard Fan Peyton Manning Shouting Encouragement
Photo © 2007 MasterCard. All rights reserved. No photo reproduction without the prior written consent of MasterCard. Reprinted courtesy of McCann Erickson.

still got the best arm in the neighborhood." All four scenes illustrate the spoken and written message of the ad: Support for your team is priceless—especially when they've screwed up. It's something money can't buy. "For everything else, there's MasterCard." Social scientist Glenn and rhetorical critic Marty take different theoretical approaches as they analyze how the ad works.

Glenn: An Objective Approach

Objective approach
The assumption that truth is singular and is accessible through unbiased sensory observation; committed to uncovering cause-and-effect relationships.

The distinguishing feature of this commercial is football superstar Peyton Manning. The folks at MasterCard are obviously convinced that his celebrity appeal will rub off on the public image of their credit card. As a social scientist, I'd like to discover if they are right. The answer will help scholars and advertisers better predict what persuasive techniques really work. If this "branding" strategy proves effective, I would also want to find out *why* it does. Objective researchers want to *explain* as well as *predict*.

Theory is an essential tool in the scientific effort to predict and explain. For this type of commercial, I might turn to *source credibility theory,* proposed by Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss as part of the Yale Attitude project on persuasion.[2] They suggest that expertise and trustworthiness are the two main ingredients of perceived credibility. For football fans who watched the ad, there's no question that Peyton Manning is a highly competent quarterback. And cheering on ordinary people who are having a bad day may suggest that he's on our side and won't steer us wrong. The central premise of source credibility theory is that people we view as trusted experts will be much more effective in their attempts to persuade us than sources we distrust or regard as incompetent.

Source credibility
Perceived competence and trustworthiness of a speaker or writer that affects how the message is received.

Herbert Kelman's theory of opinion change also offers insight. Kelman said that when people forge a bond of *identification* with a highly attractive figure like Manning, they'll gladly embrace his persuasive pitch.[3] In contrast to many top

Identification
A perceived role relationship that affects self-image and attitudes; based on attractiveness of the role model and sustained if the relationship remains salient.

athletes who come across as surly, uptight, or egotistical, Manning is upbeat, relaxed, and encouraging as he cheers on people like us who don't have his fan base.

As a scientist, however, I can't just assume that this commercial is persuasive and the theories I applied are correct. Manning's expertise is football—not finance. Do viewers transfer his expertise from the gridiron to credit cards? I'd want an objective test to find out if celebrity appeals really work. I might find out if this ad campaign was followed by either an increase in new card applications or a spike in the number of charges made by MasterCard users. Or I could test whether the ad has the same effect on viewers who don't know who Manning is—he's never identified in the ad. Testing the audience response is a crucial scientific enterprise. Even though a theory might sound plausible, we can't be sure it's valid until it's been tested. In science, theory and research walk hand in hand.

Marty: An Interpretive Approach

Interpretive approach
The linguistic work of assigning meaning or value to communicative texts; assumes that multiple meanings or truths are possible.

I see this ad for MasterCard, starring NFL quarterback Peyton Manning, as an attempt to identify manliness with money. The ad achieves its effect by inviting the viewer to become part of the "team" being instructed by "Coach" Manning. To become part of the team, one must adopt the attitudes and actions of the coach. Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism helps us understand the symbolic action.

Since we can consider this 30-second commercial a mini-drama, Burke's *dramatistic pentad* of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose can help provide a framework for interpretation.[4] Peyton Manning is the coach—the agent. Everyday activities such as eating brunch, drinking coffee, moving furniture, and retrieving the morning paper are the background—the scene. Coaching people in the proper attitude is what Manning does in each scene—the act. Using the typical jargon and gestures of a football coach is the vehicle—the agency. And the goal is the acquisition and use of a MasterCard—the purpose.

Burke's dramatistic pentad
A five-pronged method of rhetorical criticism to analyze a speaker's persuasive strategy—act, scene, agent, agency, purpose.

Burke holds that as a drama develops, the symbolic action moves through different stages. He encourages critics to look at the symbolic forms as they move "*from what through what to what*."[5] In this ad, the symbolic action starts with confusion—Wendy dropping the tray of food. It moves through pain and destruction—Johnny scalded by steam, the mover dropping the piano, the paperboy breaking the window. And by the end, the drama arrives at manliness, money, and acceptance—football helmets crashing together (manliness) and forming the MasterCard logo (money), Johnny giving a thumbs-up signal (acceptance).

What's important to notice is that a symbolic transformation has taken place. Throughout most of the ad, Manning is "coaching" the right attitude. We hear it in his language ("You're the man; Rub some dirt on it; It's alright, Bobby"). We see it in his gestures (arms raised, palms up, clapping, pointing). Yet by the end of the ad the transformation is complete. It is Johnny who is doing the coaching, with a thumbs-up gesture that signals his acceptance of the right attitude and his adoption of the right action—getting a MasterCard. A symbolic equivalence has been established between being manly (like a pro football player) and being in the money (with MasterCard).

The message of this ad is clear. To be a man is to have the right attitude about the little trials of life; it is to be part of the home team. Acquiring a MasterCard is a way of symbolically identifying with the tough guys and achieving victory over the obstacles that stand between a man and his goals.

OBJECTIVE OR INTERPRETIVE WORLDVIEWS: SORTING OUT THE LABELS

Although both of these scholars focus on the role of Peyton Manning in promoting MasterCard, Glenn's and Marty's approaches to communication study clearly differ in starting point, method, and conclusion. Glenn is a social *scientist* who works hard to be *objective.* When I refer to theorists and researchers like Glenn throughout the book, I'll use the terms *scientist* and *objective scholar* interchangeably. Marty is a *rhetorical critic* who does *interpretive* study. Here the labels get tricky.

While it's true that all rhetorical critics do interpretive analysis, not all interpretive scholars are rhetoricians. Most (including Marty) are *humanists* who study what it's like to be another person in a specific time and place. But a growing number of postmodern communication theorists reject that tradition. These interpretive scholars refer to themselves with a bewildering variety of brand names: hermeneuticists, poststructuralists, deconstructivists, phenomenologists, cultural studies researchers, and social action theorists, as well as combinations of these terms. Writing from this postmodernist perspective, University of Utah theorist James Anderson observes:

Humanistic scholarship
Study of what it's like to be another person in a specific time and place; assumes there are few important panhuman similarities.

> With this very large number of interpretive communities, names are contentious, border patrol is hopeless and crossovers continuous. Members, however, often see real differences.[6]

All of these scholars, including Marty, do interpretive analysis—scholarship concerned with meaning—yet there's no common term like *scientist* that includes them all. So from this point on I'll use the designation *interpretive scholars* or the noun form *interpreters* to refer to the entire group and use *rhetoricians, humanists, postmodernists,* or *critical scholars* only when I'm singling out a particular subgroup.

The separate worldviews of interpretive scholars and scientists reflect contrasting assumptions about ways of arriving at knowledge, the core of human nature, questions of value, and the purpose of having theory. The rest of this chapter sketches out these differences.

WAYS OF KNOWING: DISCOVERING TRUTH OR CREATING MULTIPLE REALITIES?

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 issue, however, we all inevitably make assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

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

Scientists assume that Truth is singular. They see a single, timeless reality "out there" that's not dependent on local conditions. It's 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 seeks to be bias-free, with no ax to grind. The evidence speaks for itself. As Galileo observed, 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 are faithful representations of an underlying reality—mirrors of nature. They are confident that once a principle is discovered and validated, it will continue to hold true as long as conditions remain relatively the same. That's why Glenn believes the credibility of a message source can explain why other media messages succeed or fail.

Interpretive scholars seek truth as well, but many interpreters regard that truth as socially constructed through communication. They believe language creates social realities that are always in flux rather than revealing or representing fixed principles or relationships in a world that doesn't change. Knowledge is always viewed from a particular standpoint. A word, a gesture, or an act may have constancy within a given community, but it's dangerous to assume that interpretations can cross lines of time and space.

Texts never interpret themselves. Most of these scholars, in fact, hold that truth is largely subjective—that meaning is highly interpretive. But rhetorical critics like Marty are not relativists, arbitrarily assigning meaning on a whim. They do maintain, however, that objectivity is a myth; we can never entirely separate the knower from the known.

Convinced that meaning is in the mind rather than in the verbal sign, interpreters are comfortable with the notion that a text may have multiple meanings. Rhetorical critics are successful when they get others to view a text through their interpretive lens—to adopt a new perspective on the world. For example, did Marty convince you that the MasterCard ad was an attempt to equate manliness with money? As Anderson notes, "Truth is a struggle, not a status."[7]

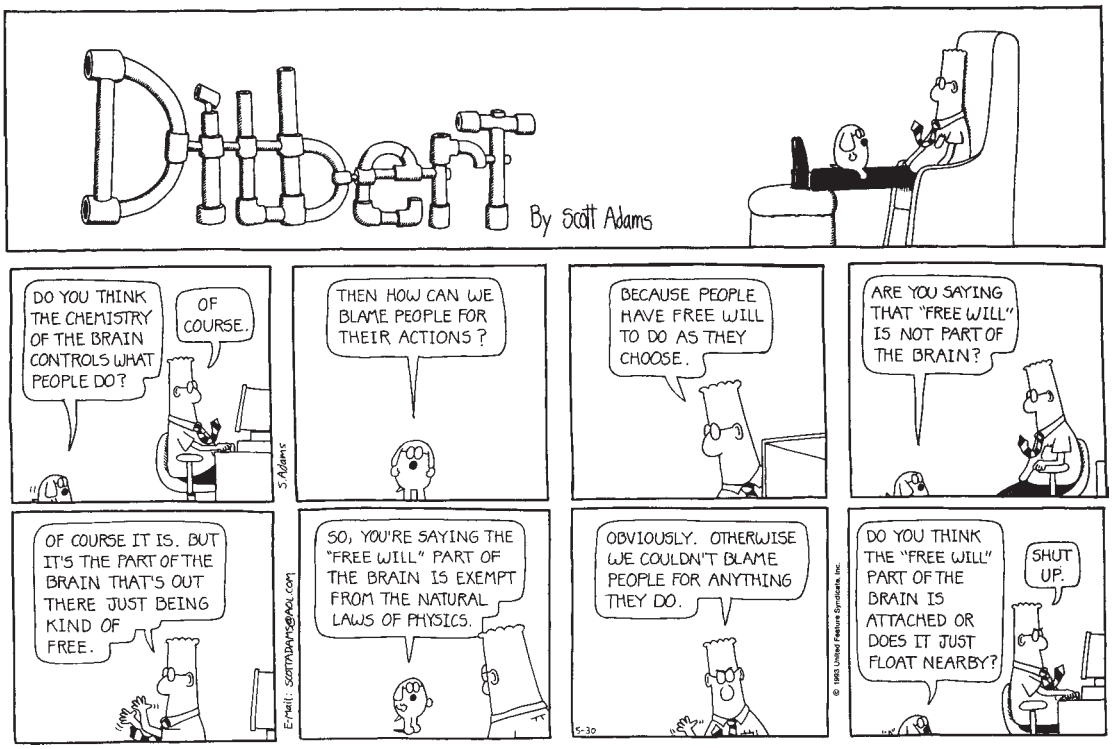
HUMAN NATURE: DETERMINISM OR FREE WILL?

One of the great philosophical debates throughout history revolves around the question of human choice.[8] Hard-line *determinists* claim that every move we make is the result of heredity ("biology is destiny") and environment ("pleasure stamps in, pain stamps out"). On the other hand, free-will purists insist that every human act is ultimately voluntary ("I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul"[9]). Although few communication theorists are comfortable with either extreme, most tend to line up on one side or the other. Scientists stress the forces that shape human behavior; interpretive scholars focus on conscious choices made by individuals.

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

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 . . . ," while 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 argument at the next table."

In the same way, 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 not to include appeals to mental reasoning or conscious choice. They usually describe behavior as the response to a prior stimulus. Note that Kelman's theory of opinion change that Glenn cited suggests a cause-and-effect inevitability in the persuasion process. We *will* be swayed by those we find attractive.



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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 choice of words suggests that people are free agents who could decide to respond differently under an identical set of circumstances. Marty, for example, uses the language of voluntary *action* rather than knee-jerk *behavior* when he writes about the ad *inviting* the viewer to become part of the team and Johnny *adopting* the right attitude. The consistent interpreter doesn't ask why Johnny made that choice. As Anderson explains, "True choice demands to be its own cause and its own explanation."[10]

Human choice is therefore 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 author 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.[11]

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

THE HIGHEST VALUE: OBJECTIVITY OR EMANCIPATION?

When we talk about values, we are discussing priorities, questions of relative worth.[12] Values are the traffic lights of our lives that guide what we think, feel, and do. The professional values of communication theorists reflect the commitments they've made concerning knowledge and human nature. Since most social scientists hold to a distinction between the "knower" and the "known," they place value on objectivity that's not biased by ideological commitments. Because humanists and others in the interpretive camp believe that the ability to choose is what separates humanity from the rest of creation, they value scholarship that expands the range of free choice.

As a behavioral scientist, Glenn works hard to maintain his objectivity. He is a man with strong moral and spiritual convictions, and these may influence the topics he studies. But he doesn't want his personal values to distort reality or confuse what *is* with what he thinks *ought to be.* As you can see from Glenn's call for objective testing, he is 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. He is even more upset when he hears of researchers who fudge the findings of their studies to shore up questionable hypotheses. Glenn shares the research values of Harvard sociologist George Homans—to let the evidence speak for itself: "When nature, however stretched out on the rack, still has a chance to say 'no'—then the subject is science."[13]

Empirical evidence
Data collected through direct observation.

Marty is aware of his own ideology and is not afraid to bring his values to bear upon a communication text and come under scrutiny. By pointing out the subtle equating of manliness with money, Marty creates an awareness that this is more than a humorous, feel-good spot. Although he doesn't take an overtly critical stance toward advertising or the capitalist system, his insight is a resource for viewers that enables them to laugh not only at Peyton's over-the-top support for his "team," but also at the underlying economic boosterism in the ad. Critical interpreters value socially relevant research that seeks to liberate people from oppression of any sort—economic, political, religious, emotional, or any other type. They decry the detached stance of scientists who refuse to take responsibility for the results of their work. Whatever the pursuit—a Manhattan Project to split the atom, a 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."[14]

In the heading for this section, I've contrasted the primary values of scientific and interpretive scholars by using the labels *objectivity* and *emancipation.* University of Colorado communication professor Stan Deetz frames the issue somewhat differently. He says that every general communication theory has two priorities—*effectiveness* and *participation.*[15] 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 relegate participation to the background. Interpretive theorists tend to focus on participation and downplay effectiveness.

Emancipation
Liberation from any form of political, economic, racial, religious, or sexual oppression; empowerment.

PURPOSE OF THEORY: UNIVERSAL LAWS OR INTERPRETIVE GUIDES?

Even if Glenn and Marty could agree on the nature of knowledge, the extent of human autonomy, and the ultimate values of scholarship, their words would still sound strange to each other because they use distinct vocabularies to accomplish different goals. As a behavioral scientist, Glenn is working to pin down universal laws of human behavior that cover a variety of situations. As a rhetorical critic, Marty strives to interpret a particular communication text in a specific context.

If these two scholars were engaged in fashion design rather than research design, Glenn would probably tailor a coat suitable for many occasions that covers everybody well—one size fits all. Marty 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. Glenn adopts a theory and then tests it to see if it covers everyone. Marty uses theory to make sense of unique communication events.

Since theory testing is the basic activity of the behavioral scientist, Glenn starts with a hunch about how the world works—perhaps the idea that source credibility enhances persuasion. He then crafts a tightly worded hypothesis that temporarily commits him to a specific prediction. As an empiricist, he can never completely "prove" that he has made the right gamble; he can only show in test after test that his behavioral bet pays off. If repeated studies uphold his hypothesis, he can more confidently predict which media ads will be effective, explain why, and make recommendations on how practitioners can increase their credibility.

The interpretive scholar explores the web of meaning that constitutes human existence. When Marty creates scholarship, he isn't trying to prove theory. However, he sometimes uses the work of rhetorical theorists like Kenneth Burke to inform his interpretation of the aural and visual texts of people's lives. Robert Ivie, former editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* suggests that rhetorical critics ought to use theory this way:

> We cannot conduct rhetorical criticism of social reality without benefit of a guiding rhetorical theory that tells us generally what to look for in social practice, what to make of it, and whether to consider it significant.[16]

OBJECTIVE OR INTERPRETIVE: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Why is it important to grasp the differences between objective and interpretive scholarship? The first answer is because you can't fully understand a theory if you aren't familiar with its underlying assumptions about *truth, human nature,* the *purpose of the theory,* and its *values.* If you aren't, things can get confusing fast. It's like the time my wife, Jeanie, and I were walking around the Art Institute of Chicago, enjoying the work of French impressionists who painted realistic scenes that I could recognize. Then I wandered into a room dedicated to abstract expressionism. The paintings seemed bizarre and made no sense to me. I 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. Right now you are probably more familiar and comfortable with one approach than you are with the other. But when you understand what each type of theorist is about, your comfort zone will expand and your confusion will diminish.

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

There's another reason to master these *metatheoretical* differences. After exposure to a dozen or more theories, you may find that they begin to blur together in your mind. Classifying them as scientific 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 the course you could have up to 32 cards in your deck of communication theories. Being able to sort them in multiple ways 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.

Understanding the objective/interpretive choice points I've described can also help you decide the direction you want to take in your remaining course work. Some concentrations in the field of communication tend to have either a scientific or an interpretive bias. For example, all the theories I present in the relationship development, influence, and media effects sections of the book are proposed by objective scholars. Conversely, most of the theories I cover in the public rhetoric, media and culture, organizational communication, and gender and communication sections are interpretive. You'll want to see if this is true at your school before you choose the specific route you want to take.

Finally, theorists in both camps hope you'll care because each group believes that 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 unearthing communicator motivation and hidden ideologies will improve society by increasing free choice and discouraging unjust practices.

PLOTTING THEORIES ON AN OBJECTIVE-INTERPRETIVE SCALE

In this chapter I've introduced four important areas of difference between objective and interpretive communication scholars and the theories they create. A basic appreciation of these distinctions will help you understand where like-minded thinkers are going and why they've chosen a particular path to get there. But once you grasp how they differ, it will be helpful for you to realize that not all theorists fall neatly into one category or the other. Many 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 theorists spread out along the scale.

Objective _____ **Interpretive**

Figure 2–2 displays my evaluation of where each theory I feature fits on an objective-interpretive continuum. For easier reference to positions on the scale, I've numbered the five columns at the bottom of the chart. In placing a theory, I've tried to factor in choices the theorists have made about ways of knowing, human nature, what they value most, and the purpose of theory. I've consulted a number of scholars in the field to get their "read" on appropriate placements. They didn't always agree, but in every case the discussion has sharpened my understanding of theory and the issues to be considered in the process of creating one. What I learned is reflected in the chapters ahead.

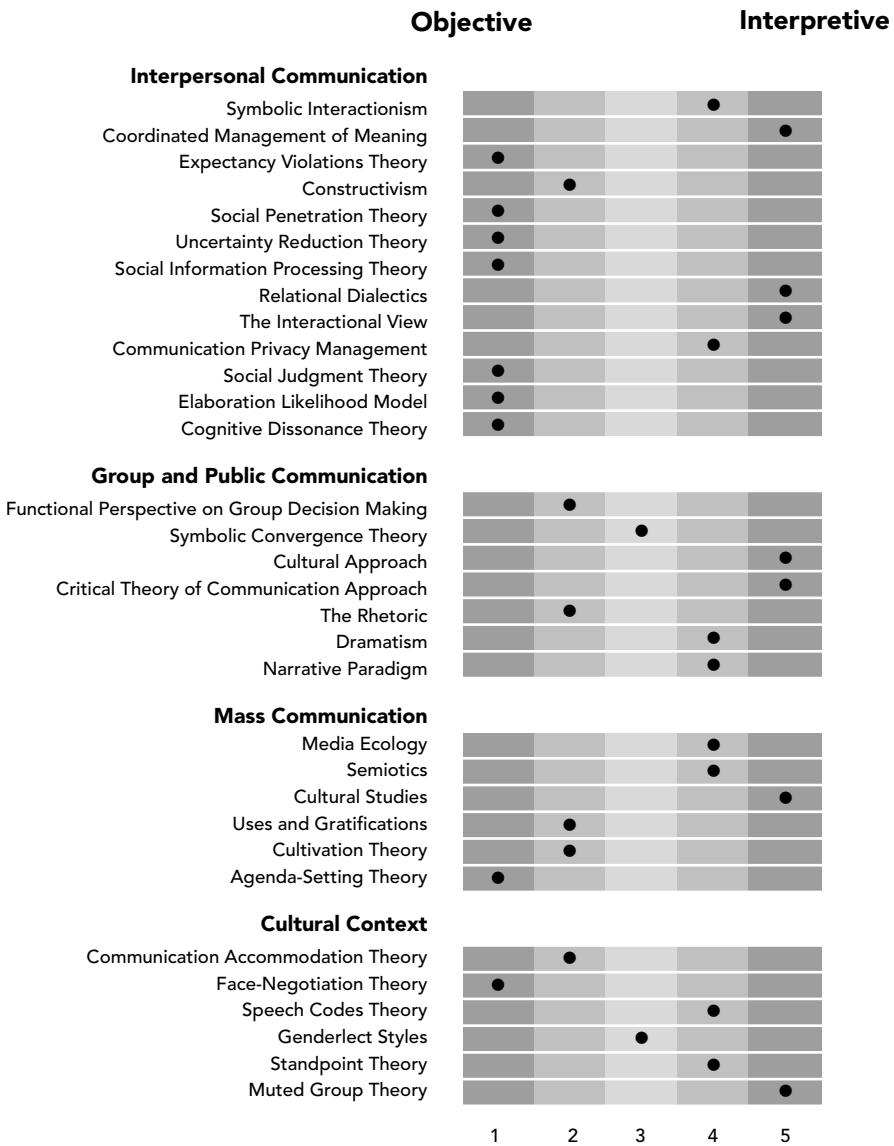


FIGURE 2–2 Classification of Communication Theories According to Objective/Interpretive Worldview

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 of the theories have an objective orientation, while the other half reflect an interpretive commitment. This 50–50 split matches the mix of scholarship I see in our field. When talking about relationships among the theories and the common assumptions made by a group of theorists, your instructor may frequently refer back to this chart. So for easy reference, I've reproduced 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. I 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 alternative criteria to discern the worth of interpretive theories. By applying the appropriate criteria, you can see if you agree with my evaluations.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Compare Glenn Sparks' and Marty Medhurst's approaches to the MasterCard 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. How do you account for the wide-ranging diversity among types of interpretive theories (*rhetorical, critical, humanistic, postmodern,* etc.) as compared to the relative uniformity of objective theories?

4. Think of the communication classes you've taken. Did an *objective* or *interpretive* orientation undergird each course? Was this due more to the nature of the subject matter or to the professor's point of view?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: James A. Anderson and Geoffrey Baym, "Philosophies and Philosophic Issues in Communication 1995–2004," *Journal of Communication,* Vol. 54, 2004, pp. 589–615.

Metatheoretical overview: James A. Anderson, *Communication Theory: Epistemological Foundations,* Guilford, New York, 1996, pp. 13–77.

Metatheory: Robert T. Craig, "Metatheory," in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory,* Sage, Los Angeles, CA, 2009, pp. 657–661.

Contemporary scientific scholarship: Charles Berger, Michael Roloff, and David Roskos-Ewoldsen (eds.), *Handbook of Communication Science,* 2nd ed., Sage, Los Angeles, CA, 2010.

Contemporary rhetorical scholarship: Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric,* 3rd ed., Waveland, Prospect Heights, IL, 2000.

Defense of empirical scholarship: Robert Bostrom and Lewis Donohew, "The Case for Empiricism: Clarifying Fundamental Issues in Communication Theory," *Communication Monographs,* Vol. 59, 1992, pp. 109–129.

Defense of interpretive scholarship: Arthur Bochner, "Perspectives on Inquiry II: Theories and Stories," in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication,* 2nd ed., Mark Knapp and Gerald Miller (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994, pp. 21–41.

Scientific research: Glenn Sparks, *Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview,* 3rd ed., Wadsworth, Belmont, CA, 2009.

Rhetorical analysis: Martin J. Medhurst, "Mitt Romney, 'Faith in America,' and the Dance of Religion and Politics in American Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs,* Vol. 12, 2009, pp. 195–221.

Critical approach to theory: Stanley Deetz, "The Role of Communication Studies," *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization,* State University of New York, Albany, NY, 1992, pp. 65–90.

Research methods: Lawrence R. Frey, Carl H. Botan, and Gary L. Kreps, *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods,* 2nd ed., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA, 2000.

Bridging science and interpretation: Charles Pavitt, "Answering Questions Requesting Scientific Explanations for Communication," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 10, 2000, pp. 379–404.

Relationship between theory and research: Robert Bostrom, "Theories, Data and Communication Research," *Communication Monographs,* Vol. 70, 2003, pp. 275–294.

For a historical perspective on the place of objective and interpretive theory in the field of communication, click on Theory Resources, then Archive, and select Talk about Communication at *www.afirstlook.com.*

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 ranchers and farmers in Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* One song calls for understanding and cooperation:

> The farmer and the cowman should be friends,
> Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends,
> One man likes to push a plough,
> The other likes to chase a cow,
> But that's no reason why they cain't be friends.[1]

The problem, of course, is that farmers and ranchers want to push a plough or chase a cow over the same piece of land. Daily disputes over fences, water, and government grants make friendship tough. The same can be said of the turf wars that are common between objective and interpretive scholars. Differences in ways of knowing, views of human nature, values, goals of theory building, and research methods seem to ensure tension and misunderstanding.

Friendly attitudes between empiricists and interpreters are particularly 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 automatically 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 easily 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 moviegoers watching one of Clint Eastwood's early Westerns, you'll want a way to separate the good, the bad, and the ugly. Since I've included theories originating in both the social sciences and the humanities, you need to have two separate lenses through which to view their respective claims. This chapter offers that pair of bifocals. I 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 because it fulfills the twin objectives of scientific knowledge. The theory *explains* the past and present, and it *predicts* the future. 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 I discuss these standards, I will use the terms *objective* and *scientific* interchangeably.

Scientific Standard 1: Explanation of the Data

A good objective theory explains an event or human behavior. Philosopher of science Abraham Kaplan says that theory is a way of making sense out of a disturbing situation.[2] 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.

In past editions I included *interpersonal deception theory,* which offers 18 propositions on the relationship among variables that affect a deceiver's success. These include the deceiver's familiarity, credibility, attractiveness, communication skill, nonverbal leakage, and fear of detection, as well as the receiver's trust bias, suspicion, and detection accuracy.[3] Many of the connections that interpersonal deception theory describes are well-founded, but the theory is often criticized for not having an explanatory glue that holds it all together:

> We cannot find the "why" question in [their] synthesis. There is no intriguing riddle or puzzle that needs to be solved, and no central explanatory mechanism is ever described. With no conceptual motor to drive their synthesis, there is no new understanding.[4]

Of course, many practitioners don't really care *how* communication works. For example, you could be an effective public speaker without understanding why the audience likes what you say. But when you take a course in communication *theory,* you lose your amateur status. The *reason* something happens becomes as important as the fact that it does.

Scientific Standard 2: 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.

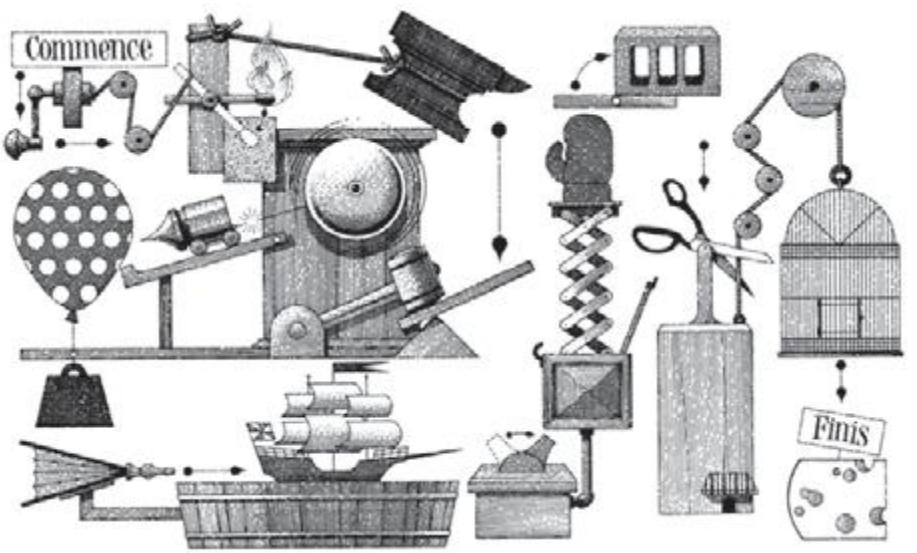
The social sciences are another matter. Although theories about human behavior often cast their predictions in cause-and-effect terms, a certain humility on the part of the theorist is advisable. Even the best theory may only be able to speak about people in general, rather than about specific individuals—and 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 the quality of communication is the result of some other pre-existing factor. (Cognitive complexity is a necessary precondition for crafting person-centered messages.) 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 bet that communication is either the cause or the effect of some other variable.

Scientific Standard 3: Relative Simplicity

A good objective theory is as simple as possible—no more complex than it has to be. A few 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 really necessary to explain what's going on.[5] 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. Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein put it this way: "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex. . . . It takes a touch of genius—and a lot of courage—to move in the opposite direction."[6]

Einstein practiced what he preached. His 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 carry as they try to explain why time stands still when you approach the speed of light.

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

Scientific Standard 4: Hypotheses That Can Be Tested

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.[7] 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 may help illustrate this point.

Falsifiability
Ther equirement that a scientific theory must be stated in such a way that it can be tested and disproved if it is indeed wrong.

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 fade-away 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 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 arching 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. That also means there's no way to show if they are true.

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 type of thorny social situations that the theory addresses should be able to benefit from its wisdom. This requirement is consistent with Lewin's claim that there is nothing as practical as a good theory (see Chapter 1). A theory that communication practitioners find helpful may not be more valid than one few folks turn to for guidance, yet because of its influence, it may prove to be 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's 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. I'll try to do my 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 I've included a student-written application in almost all of the 32 chapters that feature a specific theory.

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 insists 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.[8]

Given the radical nature of Hume's over-the-top pronouncement, we can wryly imagine the English philosopher making daily trips to a used bookstore for fuel to heat his home in the 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
Ares earch method that manipulates a variable in a tightly controlled situation in order to find out if it has the predicted effect.

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 before they met. A similarity-causes-attraction hypothesis would be supported if the subjects whose attitudes meshed with

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

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what they thought the confederate believed ended up liking that person better than did those who thought they were quite different from the confederate.[9]

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 in a mean and scary world?* 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.[10]

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

It's always difficult to support cause-and-effect relationships from correlational data. Yet, unlike a highly controlled laboratory experiment, a well-planned survey gives the social scientist a chance to get inside the heads of people in a "real-life" situation. There's less rigor but more vigor in a survey than in an experiment.

WHAT MAKES AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY GOOD?

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

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

Interpretive Standard 1: 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 that they regard as uniquely human—symbolic interaction. As opposed to social science theories that 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 notes 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."[11]

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. Klaus Krippendorff of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania urges us to recognize that we, as theorists, are both the cause and the consequence of what we observe. His *self-referential imperative* for building theory states, "Include yourself as a constituent of your own construction."[12]

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

Interpretive Standard 2: 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 Texas A&M University communication professor 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."[13] Of course, not all interpretive scholars occupy the same moral ground, but there are core values most of them share. For example, humanists usually place a premium on individual liberty. Krippendorff 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."[14] 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."[15]

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 he or she has 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 Washington professor Barbara Warnick, a rhetorical critic can fill one or more of four roles—artist, analyst, audience, and advocate.[16] 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 his or her creation come alive for others. I 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 sums 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.[17]

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 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 decided ultimately 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 Communication Association president David Zarefsky warns that rhetorical validity can be established only when a work is debated in the broad marketplace of ideas. For this Northwestern University rhetorical critic, sound arguments differ from unsound ones in that "sound arguments are addressed to the general audience of critical readers, not just to the adherents of a particular 'school' or perspective. . . . They open their own reasoning process to scrutiny."[18]

John Stewart is the editor of *Bridges, Not Walls,* a collection of humanistic articles on interpersonal communication. As the book has progressed through 10 editions, Stewart's judgment to keep, drop, or add a theoretical work has been made possible by the fact that interpretive scholarship is "not a solitary enterprise carried out in a vacuum." It is instead, he says, "the effort of a community of scholars who routinely subject their findings to the scrutiny of editors, referees, and readers."[19]

Interpretive Standard 5: Reform of Society

A good interpretive theory often generates change. Some interpretive scholars, but by no means all, aren't content merely to interpret the intended meanings of a text. Contrary to the notion that we can dismiss calls for social justice or emancipation as *mere rhetoric,* critical interpreters are reformers who can have an impact on society. They want to expose and publicly resist the ideology that permeates the accepted wisdom of a culture. Kenneth Gergen, a Swarthmore College social psychologist, states that theory has the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted," and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action.[20]

Along with many interpretive scholars, *critical theorists* tend to reject any notion of permanent truth or meaning. They see society's economic, political, social, religious, and educational institutions as socially constructed by unjust communication practices that create or perpetuate gross imbalances of power. The aim of their scholarship is to unmask these communication practices in an attempt to stimulate change. To traditional thinkers, their activity looks like a few angry children in kindergarten knocking over other kids' blocks, but they are intentionally using theory to carve out a space where people without power can be heard. For example, a critical theorist working from a Marxist, feminist, or postmodern perspective might craft a theory to support an alternative interpretation of the Golden Rule, namely, *He who has the gold, rules.* The theorist would then apply this reinterpretation to a specific practice, perhaps the publishing and pricing of required textbooks such as the one you're reading. To the extent that the theory stimulates students to rethink, respond, and react to this "free-market" process, it is a good interpretive theory.

Critical theorists
Scholars who use theory to reveal unjust communication practices that create or perpetuate an imbalance of power.

Interpretive Standard 6: Qualitative Research

While scientists use *numbers* to support their theories, interpretive scholars use *words*. That's the basic difference between quantitative and qualitative research. As the editors of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* describe the process, "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to

them."[21] A focus on meaning and significance is consistent with the maxim that once hung on the wall of Einstein's Princeton University office:[22]

> Not everything that can be counted counts, and
> not everything that counts can be counted.

The interpretive scholar's qualitative tools include open-ended interviews, focus groups, visual texts, artifacts, and introspection. But *textual analysis* and *ethnography* are the two methods most often used to study how humans use signs and symbols to create and infer meaning.

Textual Analysis. The aim of *textual analysis* is to describe and interpret the characteristics of a message. Communication theorists use this term to refer to the intensive study of a single message grounded in a humanistic perspective.

Textual analysis
A research method that describes and interprets the characteristics of any text.

Rhetorical criticism is the most common form of textual research in the communication discipline. For example, rhetorical critics have asked, *What does Martin Luther King's choice of language in his "I Have a Dream" speech on the Washington mall reveal about his strategic intent?* They've then undertaken a close reading of the text and context of that famous speech and concluded that King was trying to simultaneously appeal to multiple audiences without alienating any of them.[23]

Ethnography. Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz says that *ethnography* is "not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive [approach] in search of meaning."[24] As a sensitive observer of the human scene, Geertz is loath to impose his way of thinking onto a society's construction of reality. He wants his theory of communication grounded in the meanings that people within a culture share. Getting it right means seeing it from their point of view.

Ethnography
A method of participant observation designed to help a researcher experience a culture's complex webofmeani ng.

In the Academy Award-winning film *Dances with Wolves,* Kevin Costner plays John Dunbar, a nineteenth-century Army lieutenant alone on the Dakota plains.[25] With some anxiety and great tentativeness, Dunbar sets out to understand the ways of the Sioux tribe camped a short distance away. He watches carefully, listens attentively, appreciates greatly, and slowly begins to participate in the tribal rituals. He also takes extensive notes. That's ethnography. Although the film is fictional, the ethnographic methods Dunbar employs would be an appropriate means of answering the research question, *How do the Dakota Sioux view war and peace with their neighbors?*

CONTESTED TURF AND COMMON GROUND AMONG THEORISTS

Throughout this chapter I have urged using separate measures for weighing the merits of objective and interpretive theories. That's because the two sets of criteria reflect the divergent mindsets of scientists and interpretive scholars as outlined in Chapter 2. Perhaps the field of personality assessment offers a way to understand how deeply these differences run. Some of you have taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a test that measures individual preferences on four bipolar scales. The *sensing–intuition* scale shows how people perceive or acquire information—how they seek to find out about things. As you read through the descriptions of *sensing* and *intuition* below, consider how closely they reflect the contrast of objective and interpretive epistemology—different ways of knowing.[26]

Sensing. One way to "find out" is to use your sensing function. Your eyes, ears, and other senses tell you what is actually there and actually happening, both

inside and outside of yourself. Sensing is especially useful for appreciating the realities of a situation.

Intuition. The other way to "find out" is through intuition, which reveals the meanings, relationships, and possibilities that go beyond the information from your senses. Intuition looks at the big picture and tries to grasp the essential patterns.

These are differences that make a difference. It's hard to imagine two theorists becoming intellectual soul mates if each discounts or disdains the other's starting point, method, and conclusion. Does that mean they can't be friends? Not necessarily. There are at least three reasons for guarded optimism.

A firm foundation for their friendship would be a mutual respect for each other's curiosity about the communication process and a recognition that they are both bringing the very best of their intellect to bear on what they study. A second basis for mutual appreciation would be an understanding that the strong point of science is a rigorous comparison of multiple messages or groups, while the forte of humanism is its imaginative, in-depth analysis of a single message or group. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson described *rigor* and *imagination* as the two great contraries of the mind. He wrote that either "by itself is lethal. Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity."[27] Rhetorician Marie Hochmuth Nichols echoed Bateson's call for the temporizing effect that the sciences and humanities can have on each other. She claimed that "the humanities without science are blind, but science without the humanities may be vicious."[28]

A third reason for mutual appreciation can be seen in a side-by-side comparison of the two sets of criteria in Figure 3–1. The chart suggests that the standards set by scientists and the evaluative criteria used by interpretive theorists share some similarities. Work down through the chart line-by-line and note a bit of overlap for each pair of terms. Here are the points of contact I see:

1. An *explanation* of communication behavior can lead to further *understanding* of people's motivation.
2. Both *prediction* and *value clarification* look to the future. The first suggests what *will* happen; the second, what *ought* to happen.
3. For many students of theory, *simplicity* has an *aesthetic appeal*.
4. *Testing hypotheses* is a way of achieving a *community of agreement*.

Scientific Theory	Interpretive Theory
Explanation of Data	Understanding of People
Prediction of Future	Clarification of Values
Relative Simplicity	Aesthetic Appeal
Testable Hypothesis	Community of Agreement
Practical Utility	Reform of Society
Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research

FIGURE 3–1 Summary of Criteria for Evaluating Communication Theory

5. What could be more *practical* than a theory that *reforms* unjust practices?
6. Both *quantitative research* and *qualitative research* reflect a commitment to learn more about communication.

At the very least, the two scholarly communities should have a familiarity with each other's work. That's one reason I've elected to present both objective and interpretive theories in this book.

You'll find that I often refer to these requirements for good theory in the critique sections at the end of each chapter. As you might expect, the 32 theories stack up rather well—otherwise I wouldn't have picked them in the first place. But constructing theory is difficult, and most theories have an Achilles' heel that makes them vulnerable to criticism. All of the theorists readily admit a need for fine-tuning their work, and some even call for major overhauls. I encourage you to weigh their words by the standards you think are important before reading my critique at the end of each chapter.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How can we call a scientific theory good if it is *capable of being proved wrong?*
2. How can we decide when a *rhetorical critic* provides a *reasonable interpretation?*
3. All theories involve trade-offs; no theory can meet every standard of quality equally well. Of the 12 *criteria* discussed, which two or three are most important to you? Which one is least important?
4. Which of the 12 *standards* presented in this chapter can you tie to the contrasting *worldviews* of objective or interpretive theorists discussed in Chapter 2—specifically their commitment to *ways of knowing, human nature, ultimate values,* and *purpose for theorizing?*

A SECOND LOOK

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CHAPTER 4

Mapping the Territory

(Seven Traditions in the Field of Communication Theory)

In Chapter 1, I presented working definitions for the concepts of *communication* and *theory*. In Chapters 2 and 3, I outlined the basic differences between objective and interpretive communication theories. These distinctions should help bring order out of chaos when your study of theory seems confusing. And it may seem confusing. University of Colorado communication professor Robert Craig describes the field of communication theory as awash with hundreds of unrelated theories that differ in starting point, method, and conclusion. He suggests that our field of study resembles "a pest control device called the Roach Motel that used to be advertised on TV: Theories check in, but they never check out."[1]

My mind conjures up a different image when I try to make sense of the often baffling landscape of communication theory. I picture a scene from the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in which college professor Indiana Jones is lowered into a dark vault and confronts a thick layer of writhing serpents covering the floor—a tangle of communication theories. The intrepid adventurer discovers that the snakes momentarily retreat from the bright light of his torch, letting him secure a safe place to stand. It's my hope that the core ideas of Chapters 1–3 will provide you with that kind of space. The fantasy nature of the film is such that I could even imagine Indiana Jones emerging from the cave with all the snakes straightened like sticks of kindling wood, bound together in two bundles—the objective batch held in his right hand and the interpretive batch held in his left. But that's an overly simplistic fantasy. Craig offers a more sophisticated solution.

Craig agrees that the terrain is confusing if we insist on looking for some kind of grand theoretical overview that brings all communication study into focus—a top-down, satellite picture of the communication theory landscape. He suggests, however, that communication theory is a coherent field when we understand communication as a practical discipline.[2] He's convinced that our search for different types of theory should be grounded where real people grapple with everyday problems and practices of communication. Craig explains that "all communication theories are relevant to a common practical lifeworld in which *communication* is already a richly meaningful term."[3] Communication theory is the systematic and thoughtful response of communication scholars to questions posed as humans interact with each other—the best thinking within a practical discipline.

Craig thinks it's reasonable to talk about a *field of communication theory* if we take a collective look at the actual approaches researchers have used to study communication problems and practices. He identifies seven established traditions of communication theory that include most, if not all, of what theorists have done. These already established traditions offer "distinct, alternative vocabularies" that describe different "ways of conceptualizing communication problems and practices."[4] This means that scholars within a given tradition talk comfortably with each other but often take potshots at those who work in other camps. As Craig suggests, we shouldn't try to smooth over these between-group battles. Theorists argue because they have something important to argue about.

In the rest of the chapter I'll outline the seven traditions that Craig describes. Taken together, they reveal the breadth and diversity that spans the field of communication theory. The classifications will also help you understand why some theories share common ground, while others are effectively fenced off from each other by conflicting goals and assumptions. As I introduce each tradition, I'll highlight how its advocates tend to define communication, suggest a practical communication problem that this kind of theory addresses, and provide an example of research that the tradition has inspired.[5] Since I find that the topic of friendship is of great interest to most college students, the seven research studies I describe will show how each tradition approaches this type of close relationship.

THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL TRADITION

Communication as Interpersonal Interaction and Influence

The socio-psychological tradition epitomizes the scientific or objective perspective described in Chapter 2. Scholars in this tradition believe there are communication truths that can be discovered by careful, systematic observation. They look for cause-and-effect relationships that will predict the results when people communicate. When they find causal links, they are well on the way to answering the ever-present question that relationship and persuasion practitioners ask: *How can I get others to change?* In terms of generating theory, the socio-psychological tradition is by far the most prolific of the seven that Craig names. This disciplinary fact of life is reflected in the many theories of this type that I present in the book.

When researchers search for universal laws of communication, they try to focus on what *is* without being biased by their personal view of what *ought to be.* As social scientists, they heed the warning of the skeptical newspaper editor: "You think your mother loves you? Check it out—at least two sources." For communication theorists in the socio-psychological tradition, checking it out usually means designing a series of surveys or controlled experiments. That's been my approach.

Teaching at a small liberal arts college where I've had the opportunity to be personally involved in the lives of my students, I've always wondered if there is a way to predict which college friendships will survive and thrive after graduation. As someone trained in the socio-psychological tradition, I began a longitudinal study spanning two decades to find out the answer.[6] I asked 45 pairs of best friends to respond to questions about (1) when they became close friends; (2) the similarity of their academic majors; (3) their range of mutual-touch behavior;

(4) their perceived status difference; and (5) the extent to which they avoided discussing awkward topics. I also (6) assessed actual self-disclosure by submitting them to a procedure akin to *The Newlywed Game;* and (7) measured their communication efficiency by watching them play two rounds of the cooperative word game *Password*. Would any of these measures forecast who would be friends forever?

In order to determine the answer, I needed a reliable and valid measure of relational closeness. Glenn Sparks (Purdue University), who is one of two special consultants for this book, joined me in creating such a measure. Based on social psychologist Harold Kelley's interactional theory, which suggests that close relationships are characterized by "strength, frequency, diversity, and duration," we developed a composite measure that assessed these properties.[7] For example, we gauged *relative strength* by asking the pair how many friends they now have to whom they feel closer than their college best friend. And we assessed *frequency of contact* by counting the number of times over the last year that the pair communicated face-to-face, over the phone, by letter, and through email.

Nineteen years after the initial study, Andrew Ledbetter (Texas Christian University), who is my other special consultant for this book, located the study participants and asked them to respond to the measures of relational closeness mentioned above. We weren't surprised that participants with a longer history as best friends when they came to the study were most likely to remain close two decades later. Past behavior tends to be a good predictor of future behavior. Of more interest to us as communication scholars was the fact that those with similar academic majors and those with better scores on the *Password* game also remained close.[8] Remember that participants' choice of major and the *Password* game occurred about two decades earlier, yet these factors still predicted friendship long after college. It appears that communicating on the same wavelength and sharing common academic interests is a boon to long-lasting friendship.

Theorists and researchers working within the socio-psychological tradition often call for longitudinal empirical studies. Only by using this type of research design could we predict which pairs were likely to be friends forever.

THE CYBERNETIC TRADITION

Communication as a System of Information Processing

MIT scientist Norbert Wiener coined the word *cybernetics* to describe the field of artificial intelligence.[9] The term is a transliteration of the Greek word for "steersman" or "governor," and it illustrates the way feedback makes information processing possible in our heads and on our laptops. During World War II, Wiener developed an anti-aircraft firing system that adjusted future trajectory by taking into account the results of past performance. His concept of feedback anchored the cybernetic tradition, which regards communication as the link connecting the separate parts of any system, such as a computer system, a family system, a media system, or a system of social support. Theorists in the cybernetic tradition seek to answer such questions as *How does the system work? What could change it?* and *How can we get the bugs out?*

Cybernetics
The study of information processing, feedback, and control in communication systems.

University of Washington communication professor Malcolm Parks studies personal relationships by asking both partners to describe their social network. In one major study of college students' same-sex friendships, he separately asked

each partner to prepare a list of his or her closest relationships, including four family members and eight non-family ties.[10] In almost all cases, the eight people who weren't family were other friends or romantic partners rather than co-workers, coaches, or teachers. Parks then had the two friends trade their lists and asked them questions that probed their relationship with the key people in their *friend's* social network. These included:

1. Prior contact: Which people did you know before you met your friend?
2. Range of contact: How many of them have you now met face-to-face?
3. Communication: How often do you communicate with each of them?
4. Liking: How much do you like or dislike each of the ones you know?
5. Support: To what extent does each of them support your friendship?
6. Support: To what extent does *your own* network support your friendship?

Note that the first four questions establish the links within and between the friends' social networks. Both support questions reveal the feedback friends receive from these support systems.

Using a number of traditional measures that assess personal relationships, Parks measured the amount of *communication* between the friends, the *closeness* of their relationship, and their *commitment* to see it continue. When he compared these three measures to the quantity and quality of links to their friend's social network, the results were striking. Friends who had multiple and positive interactions with their partner's social networks had more communication with, closeness to, and commitment toward their partner than friends who had little involvement and felt little support from these folks. Friendships don't exist in a vacuum; they are embedded in a network that processes social information.

THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

Communication as Artful Public Address

Rhetoric
The art of using all available means of persuasion, focusing upon lines of argument, organization of ideas, language use, and delivery in public speaking.

Whether speaking to a crowd, congregation, legislative assembly, or jury, public speakers have sought practical advice on how to best present their case. Well into the twentieth century, the rhetorical theory and advice from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and other Greco-Roman rhetors served as the main source of wisdom about public speaking. There are a half-dozen features that characterize this influential tradition of rhetorical communication:

- A conviction that speech distinguishes humans from other animals. Cicero suggested that only oral communication had the power to lead humanity out of its brutish existence and establish communities with rights of citizenship.[11]
- A confidence that public address delivered in a democratic forum is a more effective way to solve political problems than rule by decree or resorting to force. Within this tradition, the phrase *mere rhetoric* is a contradiction in terms.
- A setting in which a single speaker attempts to influence multiple listeners through persuasive discourse. Effective communication requires audience adaptation.
- Oratorical training as the cornerstone of a leader's education. Speakers learn to deliver strong arguments in powerful voices that carry to the edge of a crowd.

- An emphasis on the power and beauty of language to move people emotionally and stir them to action. Rhetoric is more art than science.
- Oral public persuasion as the province of males. A key feature of the women's movement has been the struggle for the right to speak in public.

Readers of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* may be surprised to find a systematic analysis of friendship. He defines a friend as "one who loves and is loved in return."[12] The Greek word for this kind of love is *philia,* as in Philadelphia (the city of brotherly love). Based on this mutual love, Aristotle says a friend takes pleasure when good things happen to the other and feels distress when the other goes through bad times—both emotions experienced for no other reason than the fact that they are friends. Aristotle then catalogs more than 20 personal qualities that make people attractive to us as friends. For example, we have friendly feelings toward those who are pleasant to deal with, share our interests, aren't critical of others, are willing to make or take a joke, and show that they "are very fond of their friends and not inclined to leave them in the lurch."[13] Although Aristotle wrote 2,500 years ago, this last quality resonates with James Taylor's promise in the song "You've Got a Friend." If you call out his name, wherever he is, he'll come running.[14]

You might have trouble seeing the link between the main features of the rhetorical tradition and Aristotle's comments on friendship. After an in-depth study on Aristotle's entire body of work—not just the *Rhetoric*—St. John's University philosopher Eugene Garver concluded that Aristotle didn't analyze friendship as a way to help Greek citizens develop close relationships.[15] Rather, he was instructing orators on how to make their case seem more probable by creating a feeling of goodwill among the audience. If by word and deed a speaker appears friendly, listeners will be more open to the message.

Twenty-five years ago I wrote a book on friendship and suggested the title *Making Friends*. The publisher liked my proposal, but at the last minute added a phrase. I was startled when the book came out entitled *Making Friends (and Making Them Count).*[16] I'm uncomfortable with the idea of using friends as a means to achieve other goals. According to Garver, Aristotle had no such qualms. Rhetoric is the discovery of all available means of persuasion.

THE SEMIOTIC TRADITION

Communication as the Process of Sharing Meaning Through Signs

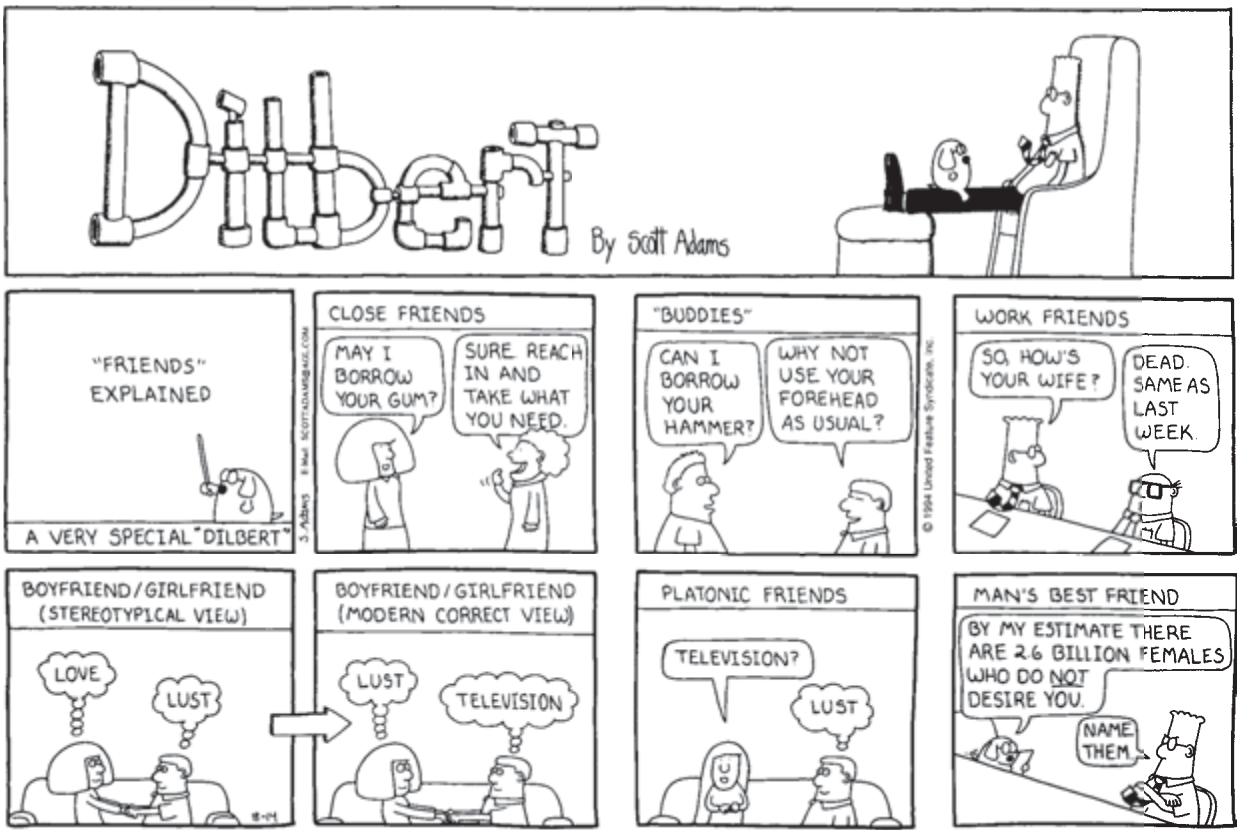
Semiotics
The study of verbal and nonverbal signs that can stand for something else, and how their interpretationim pacts society.

Symbols
Arbitrary words and nonverbal signs that bear no natural connection with the things they describe; their meaning is learned within a given culture.

Semiotics is the study of signs. A *sign* is anything that can stand for something else. High body temperature is a sign of infection. Birds flying south signal the coming of winter. A white cane signifies blindness. An arrow designates which direction to go.

Words are also signs, but of a special kind. They are *symbols.* Unlike the examples I've just cited, words are arbitrary symbols that have no inherent meaning, no natural connection with the things they describe. For example, there's nothing in the sound of the word *share* or anything visual in the letters *h-u-g* that signifies a good friendship. One could just as easily coin the term *snarf* or *clag* to symbolize a close relationship between friends. The same thing is true for nonverbal symbols like *winks* or *waves.*

Cambridge University literary critic I. A. Richards railed against the semantic trap that he labeled "the proper meaning superstition"—the mistaken belief



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that words have a precise definition. For Richards and other semiologists, meaning doesn't reside in words or other symbols; meaning resides in people. Most theorists grounded in the semiotic tradition are trying to explain and reduce the misunderstanding created by the use of ambiguous symbols.

Communication professor Michael Monsour (University of Colorado Denver) recognized that the word *intimacy* used in the context of friendship might mean different things to different people, and the disparity could lead to confusion or misunderstanding. So he asked 164 communication students what they meant by intimacy when used in reference to their same-sex and their opposite-sex friends. Roughly two-thirds of the respondents were female, two-thirds were single, and two-thirds were under the age of 30. Participants offered 27 distinct interpretations of intimacy between friends, and the number of meanings suggested by each respondent ranged from 1–5, with an average of two different meanings per person.[17]

Seven meanings were mentioned often enough to include them in the final analysis. Self-disclosure was by far the meaning of intimacy mentioned most. In rank-order of frequency, the seven interpretations were:

1. Self-disclosure: Revelations about self that the friend didn't know
2. Emotional expressiveness: Closeness, warmth, affection, and caring

3. Physical contact: Nonsexual touch
4. Trust: Confidence that the other is reliable
5. Unconditional support: Being there for the other in good times and bad
6. Sexual contact: Overt sexual activity
7. Activities: Doing things together of a nonsexual nature

The content and order of the top five interpretations of intimacy held relatively constant for both opposite-sex and same-sex friendships, whether the respondent was a man or a woman. The notable deviations were that a few more men in opposite-sex friendships thought of intimacy as sexual contact, but in same-sex relationships characterized it as activities together. For Monsour, the major contribution of this study is that for friends in both kinds of relationships, the word *intimacy* is multidimensional—a polysemic linguistic sign. A symbol like this can easily be misunderstood. Yet if two of the students in Monsour's study referred to intimacy in a conversation, with a few exceptions, it's likely that they'd understand what the other was talking about.

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL TRADITION

Communication as the Creation and Enactment of Social Reality

The socio-cultural tradition is based on the premise that as people talk, they produce and reproduce culture. Most of us assume that words reflect what actually exists. However, theorists in this tradition suggest that the process often works the other way around. Our view of reality is strongly shaped by the language we've used since we were infants.

University of Chicago linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf were pioneers in the socio-cultural tradition. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity states that the structure of a culture's language shapes what people think and do.[18] "The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group."[19] Their theory of linguistic relativity counters the assumption that words merely act as neutral vehicles to carry meaning. Language actually structures our perception of reality.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity
The claim that the structure of a language shapes what people think and do; the social constructionof reality.

Contemporary socio-cultural theorists grant even more power to language. They claim that it is through the process of communication that "reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed."[20] Or, stated in the active voice, *persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social worlds*.[21] When these worlds collide, the socio-cultural tradition offers help in bridging the culture gap that exists between "us" and "them."

Patricia Sias, a communication professor at Washington State University, takes a socio-cultural approach when studying friendships that form and dissolve in organizational settings. She writes that "relationships are not entities external to the relationship partners, but are mental creations that depend on communication for their existence and form. . . . If relationships are constituted in communication they are also *changed* through communication."[22] Sias uses a social construction lens through which to view deteriorating friendships in the workplace.

Sias located 25 people in a variety of jobs who were willing to talk about their failing workplace friendships. Some relationships were between peer

co-workers, others between a supervisor and a subordinate. All the workers spontaneously told stories about their deteriorating friendship that revealed how communication between the two co-workers had changed. Although the friendships went sour for a variety of reasons—personality problems, distracting life events, conflicting expectations, betrayal, and promotion—the *way* the friendships dissolved was remarkably similar. Almost all workers told stories of using indirect communication to change the relationship.

While their friendships were deteriorating, the former friends still had to talk with each other in order to accomplish their work. But these co-workers stopped eating lunch together and spending time together outside the office. While on the job they avoided personal topics and almost never talked about the declining state of their relationship. Even seemingly safe topics such as sports or movies were no longer discussed; small talk and watercooler chitchat disappeared.

While linguistic connection was sparse, nonverbal communication spoke loudly. The workers who talked with Sias recalled the lack of eye contact, snappy or condescending tones of voice, and physically backing away from the other. Ideally, social construction research in the office would capture the real-time communication of co-workers, but that would require a videotaped record of office conversations when the friendship was in the process of deteriorating—a high hurdle for Sias to clear. As for contrasting narratives, she notes that "the damaged nature of the relationships made it difficult to recruit both partners in each friendship."[23] Yet without the actual dialogue of both conversational partners to examine, any statement about their co-creation of social reality must remain tentative.

THE CRITICAL TRADITION

Communication as a Reflective Challenge of Unjust Discourse

The term *critical theory* comes from the work of a group of German scholars known as the "Frankfurt School" because they were part of the independent Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University. Originally set up to test the ideas of Karl Marx, the Frankfurt School rejected the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism yet carried on the Marxist tradition of critiquing society.

What types of communication practice and research are critical theorists *against?* Although there is no single set of abuses that all of them denounce, critical theorists consistently challenge three features of contemporary society:

1. *The control of language to perpetuate power imbalances.* Critical theorists condemn any use of words that inhibits emancipation.

Culture industries
Entertainment businesses that reproduce the dominant ideology of a culture and distract people from recognizing unjust distribution of power within society; e.g., film, television, music, and advertising.

2. *The role of mass media in dulling sensitivity to repression.* Critical theorists see the "culture industries" of television, film, MP3s, and print media as reproducing the dominant ideology of a culture and distracting people from recognizing the unjust distribution of power within society.

3. *Blind reliance on the scientific method and uncritical acceptance of empirical findings.* Critical theorists are suspicious of empirical work that scientists claim to be ideologically free, because science is not the value-free pursuit of knowledge that it claims to be.

University of Louisville communication professor Kathy Werking agrees that personal relationship research decisions aren't neutral. In a chapter titled "Cross-Sex Friendship Research as Ideological Practice," Werking acknowledges that the reigning cultural model of relationships between women and men is one of romance. Yet she is critical of scholars for continually reproducing this heterosexual ideology to the point where it seems natural or just common sense to assume that all close male–female relationships are about sex and romance.[24]

In support of her ideological critique, Werking notes that academic journals devoted to the study of personal relationships publish vastly more articles on dating, courtship, and marriage than they do on opposite-sex friendships. Even when a rare study of opposite-sex friendship is reported, the author usually compares this type of relationship unfavorably with romantic ties that "may or may not include equality, are passionate, and have the goal of marriage."[25] Friendship, Werking claims, is best "based on equality, affection, communion, and is an end in itself."[26] This disconnect puts opposite-sex friends in a bind. They have no language that adequately describes or legitimizes their relationship. The term *just friends* downplays its importance, *platonic friends* has an archaic connotation, and if they use the word *love,* it must be qualified so that no one gets the wrong idea.

Werking also criticizes Western scholars for the individualistic ideology that permeates their opposite-sex research. She says they equate biological sex characteristics with gender identity—an assumption that precludes the possibility that masculine and feminine orientations are socially created and can change over time. They also assume that the perceptions of one friend adequately represent the complexity of what's going on in the relationship. And rather than observe friends' actual interactions over time, they naively rely on freeze-frame responses on a structured survey to provide sufficient information to understand a relationship. Werking claims that all of these research practices do an injustice to men and women in opposite-sex relationships.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL TRADITION

Communication as the Experience of Self and Others Through Dialogue

Although *phenomenology* is an imposing philosophical term, it basically refers to the intentional analysis of everyday life from the standpoint of the person who is living it. Thus, the phenomenological tradition places great emphasis on people's perception and their interpretation of their own experience. For the phenomenologist, an individual's story is more important, and more authoritative, than any research hypothesis or communication axiom. As psychologist Carl Rogers asserts, "Neither the Bible nor the prophets—neither Freud nor research—neither the revelations of God nor man—can take precedence over my own direct experience."[27]

Phenomenology
Intentional analysis of everyday experience from the standpoint of the person who is living it; explores the possibility of understanding the experience of self and others.

The problem, of course, is that no two people have the same life story. Since we cannot experience another person's experience, we tend to talk past each other and then lament, "Nobody understands what it's like to be me." Thus, theorists who work within the phenomenological tradition seek to answer two questions: *Why is it so hard to establish and sustain authentic human relationships?* and *How can this problem be overcome?*

Communication professor Bill Rawlins (Ohio University) works within this tradition as he studies friendship by taking an in-depth look at the actual conversations between friends. In his book *The Compass of Friendship: Narratives, Identities, and Dialogues,* he devotes an entire chapter to a 90-minute recorded conversation between Chris and Karen, two women who agree they've been friends for "30 years and counting."[28] Rawlins provided no guidelines or instructions. The women only know that he is interested in their friendship. After an hour of recounting stories about shared experiences, Chris brings up Karen's slow retreat into silence the past winter. Obviously bothered by losing contact, Chris continues . . .

> CHRIS: And I thought, "Well that's okay; everybody has these times when they feel this way." But I feel like you should *alert* people that *care* about you [laughs] to the fact that this is what is goin' on—
>
> KAREN: [laughs] Yeah . . .
>
> CHRIS: "I'm going into my cave. See ya in the spring," or whatever. Or "I don't wish to have anything, writing or any communications for a while. Not to worry. Adios. Bye to everybody. Hasta la vista or whatever."
>
> KAREN: Yeah.
>
> CHRIS: Or something, because I [pause], I [pause], I . . .
>
> KAREN: You were worried.[29]

The dialogue above is less than a minute of the women's conversation, yet it provides a rich resource for Rawlins' insight into their friendship. Chris quotes to herself at the time that such feelings are commonplace and "OK." Even so, she believes that Karen "should *alert* people that *care* about you to the fact that this is going on. . . ." They both laugh at this paradoxical recommendation that Karen communicate to significant others that she does not intend to communicate with them. Chris rehearses two voices for Karen here: a humorous one that trades on a hibernation metaphor, and then a more serious, explicit statement with Spanish flourishes at the end that seem to add a comical flavor. As Karen affirms this idea, however, Chris surrenders her comic tone and makes the frank request, "Or something," haltingly trying to offer her reasons, "I [pause], I [pause], I . . . ," which Karen completes for her: "You were worried." In short, Karen again recognizes the emotional basis of Chris' concerns and legitimates Chris' suggested policy for communicating social withdrawal.[30]

Rawlins' reconstruction of this segment reveals how *he* experiences the women's friendship. After reading his interpretation of the entire conversation, the women independently tell him that he was "right on" and had "nailed it."[31] That's because he paid attention to *their* interpretation of their experience.

FENCING THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION THEORY

The seven traditions I've described have deep roots in the field of communication theory. Team loyalties run strong, so theorists, researchers, and practitioners working within one tradition often hear criticism from those in other traditions that their particular approach has no legitimacy. In addition to whatever arguments

each group might muster to defend their choice, they can also claim "squatters' rights" because scholars who went before had already established the right to occupy that portion of land. Taking the real estate metaphor seriously, in Figure 4–1, I've charted the seven traditions as equal-area parcels of land that collectively make up the larger field of study. A few explanations are in order.

First, it's important to realize that the location of each tradition on the map is far from random. My rationale for placing them where they are is based on the distinction between objective and interpretive theories outlined in Chapter 2. According to the scientific assumptions presented in that chapter, the socio-psychological tradition is the most objective, and so it occupies the far left position on the map—solidly rooted in objective territory. Moving across the map from left to right, the traditions become more interpretive and less objective. Some students wonder why rhetoric is rated more objective than semiotics. It's because rhetoricians have traditionally regarded what language refers to as "real," whereas semiologists perceive the relationship between a word and its referent as more tenuous. I see the phenomenological tradition as the most subjective of the seven traditions, and so it occupies the position farthest to the right—firmly grounded in interpretive territory. The order of presentation in this chapter followed the same progression—a gradual shift from objective to interpretive concerns. Scholars working in adjacent traditions usually have an easier time appreciating each other's work. On the map they share a common border. Professionally, they are closer together in their basic assumptions.

Second, hybrids are possible across traditions. You've seen throughout this chapter that each tradition has its own way of defining communication and its own distinct vocabulary. Thus, it's fair to think of the dividing lines on the map as fences built to keep out strange ideas. Scholars, however, are an independent bunch. They climb fences, read journals, and fly to faraway conferences. This cross-pollination sometimes results in theory grounded in two or three traditions.

Finally, the seven charted traditions might not cover every approach to communication theory. Craig recently suggested the possibility of a *pragmatist tradition*—a pluralistic land where different perspectives on truth could all be

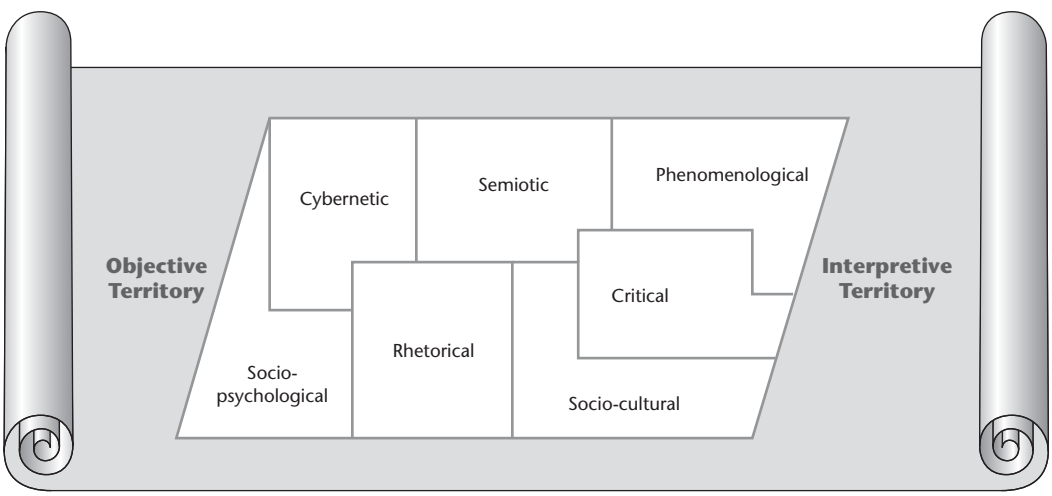


FIGURE 4–1 A Survey Map of Traditions in the Field of Communication Theory

Pragmatism
An applied approach to knowledge; the philosophy that true understanding of an idea or situation has practical implicationsforact ion.

legitimate in different ways. He pictures it as a tradition that "orients to practical problems, and evaluates ideas according to their usefulness rather than by an absolute standard of truth."[32] It would be a location where he sees his own work fitting in well. Craig's openness to considering new territories leads me to offer a quite different stream of theory running through the field of communication. My candidate is an *ethical tradition.*

THE ETHICAL TRADITION

Communication as People of Character Interacting in Just and Beneficial Ways

More than most academic disciplines, the field of communication has been concerned with ethical responsibility. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, communication scholars have grappled with the obligations that go along with the opportunities we have to communicate. Contemporary discussions of morality are increasingly beleaguered by the rise of ethical relativism.[33] Yet despite the postmodern challenge to all claims of Truth, at the turn of the century, the National Communication Association (NCA) adopted a "Credo for Communication Ethics" (see Appendix C).[34] Like most attempts to deal with communication ethics, it addresses the problem of what is ethical and starts with the issue of honesty versus lying. I'll cite three of the creed's nine principles in order to illustrate the major streams of thought within the ethical tradition:[35]

1. *We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.* This principle centers on the *rightness* or *wrongness* of a communication act regardless of whether it benefits the people involved. It speaks to the question of *obligation.* Is it always our *duty* to be honest?

2. *We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others.* This principle is concerned with the *harm* or *benefit* that results from our words. It raises the question of *outcomes.* Will a lie promote *well-being* or prevent *injury?*

3. *We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.* This principle focuses on the *character* of the communicator rather than the act of communication. It bids us to look at our *motives* and *attitudes.* Do I seek to be a person of *integrity* and *virtue?*

These are difficult questions to answer, and some readers might suggest that they have no place in a communication theory text. But to deal with human intercourse as a mechanical process separate from values would be like discussing sexual intercourse under ground rules that prohibit any reference to love. And within the ethical tradition, communication theorists do offer answers to these questions. Many of these theorists come out of the rhetorical or critical traditions. Others are spread across the objective–interpretive landscape I've drawn in Figure 4–1, so I won't try to locate the ethical tradition in any single spot. I have, however, encapsuled the thoughts of a dozen ethical theorists into 13 brief summary statements. I refer to them as *ethical reflections* and place each one alongside a theory with which it naturally resonates.

As for an ethical approach to friendship, the final chapter of Bill Rawlins' book *The Compass of Friendship* suggests what a friendship aligned with a moral compass looks like. The friends negotiate their relationship voluntarily, care

about each other's well-being, respect each other as equals, and engage in ongoing learning about each other. They also trust and are trustworthy, are respectively honest, and give special attention to the other's needs and desires.[36]

With or without my addition of an ethical tradition, Craig's framework can help make sense of the great diversity in the field of communication theory. As you read about a theory in the section on media effects, remember that it may have the same ancestry as a theory you studied earlier in the section on relationship development. On the first page of each of the next 32 chapters, I'll tie each theory to one or more traditions. Hopefully this label will make it easier for you to understand why the theorist has made certain choices. So, after four chapters of introduction and integration, let's begin.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Considering the differences between *objective* and *interpretive* theory, can you make a case that the *rhetorical* tradition is less objective than the *semiotic* one or that the *socio-cultural* tradition is more interpretive than the *critical* one?

2. Suppose you and your best friend have recently been on an emotional roller coaster. Which of the seven highlighted *definitions of communication* offer the most promise of helping you achieve a stable relationship? Why?

3. Communication departments rarely have a faculty representing all seven traditions. In order to create specialties and minimize conflict, some recruit from just one. What tradition(s) seems well-represented in your department?

4. The map in Figure 4–1 represents seven traditions in the field of communication theory. In which region do you feel most at home? What other areas would you like to explore? Where would you be uncomfortable? Why?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Robert T. Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 9, 1999, pp. 119–161.

Communication as a practical discipline: Robert T. Craig, "Communication as a Practical Discipline," in *Rethinking Communication: Vol. 1,* Brenda Dervin, Lawrence Grossberg, Barbara O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1989, pp. 97–122.

Anthology of primary resources for each tradition: Heidi L. Muller and Robert T. Craig (eds.), *Theorizing Communication: Readings Across Traditions,* Sage, Los Angeles, CA, 2007.

Socio-psychological tradition: Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion,* Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1953, pp. 1–55.

Cybernetic tradition: Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings,* Avon, New York, 1967, pp. 23–100.

Rhetorical tradition: Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition,* Longman, New York, 1990, pp. 1–52.

Semiotic tradition: C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning,* Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1946, pp. 1–23.

Phenomenological tradition: Carl Rogers, "The Characteristics of a Helping Relationship," in *On Becoming a Person,* Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1961, pp. 39–58.

Socio-cultural tradition: Benjamin Lee Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behaviour to Language," in *Language, Culture, and Personality: Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir,* University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, 1941, pp. 123–149.

Critical tradition: Raymond Morrow with David Brown, *Critical Theory and Methodology,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994, pp. 3–34, 85–112.

Ethical tradition: Richard L. Johannesen, "Communication Ethics: Centrality, Trends, and Controversies," in *Communication Yearbook 25,* William B. Gudykunst (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2001, pp. 201–235.

Pragmatic tradition: Robert T. Craig, "Pragmatism in the Field of Communication Theory," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 17, 2007, pp. 125–145.

Critique of Craig's model and his response: David Myers, "A Pox on All Compromises: Reply to Craig (1999)," and Robert T. Craig, "Minding My Metamodel, Mending Myers," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 11, 2001, pp. 218–230, 231–240.

DIVISION TWO

Interpersonal Communication

INTERPERSONAL MESSAGES

CHAPTER 5. Symbolic Interactionism (Mead)
CHAPTER 6. Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce & Cronen)
CHAPTER 7. Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon)
CHAPTER 8. Constructivism (Delia)

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 9. Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor)
CHAPTER 10. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger)
CHAPTER 11. Social Information Processing Theory (Walther)

RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

CHAPTER 12. Relational Dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery)
CHAPTER 13. Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio)
CHAPTER 14. The Interactional View (Watzlawick)

INFLUENCE

CHAPTER 15. Social Judgment Theory (Sherif)
CHAPTER 16. Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo)
CHAPTER 17. Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger)

Communication theorists often use the image of a game to describe interpersonal communication. Various scholars refer to *language games, rules of the game, gamelike behavior,* and even *game theory*. I'll use three specific game metaphors to illustrate what interpersonal communication *is*, and what it *is not*.[1]

Communication as Bowling The bowling model of message delivery is likely the most widely held view of communication. I think that's unfortunate.

This model sees the bowler as the sender, who delivers the ball, which is the message. As it rolls down the lane (the channel), clutter on the boards (noise) may deflect the ball (the message). Yet if it is aimed well, the ball strikes the passive pins (the target audience) with a predictable effect.

In this one-way model of communication, the speaker (bowler) must take care to select a precisely crafted message (ball) and practice diligently to deliver it the same way every time. Of course, that makes sense only if target listeners are interchangeable, static pins waiting to be bowled over by our words—which they aren't. Communication theory that emphasizes message content to the neglect of relational factors simply isn't realistic. Real-life interpersonal communication is sometimes confusing, often unpredictable, and always involves more than just the speaker's action. This realization has led some observers to propose an interactive model for interpersonal communication.

Communication as Ping-Pong Unlike bowling, Ping-Pong is not a solo game. This fact alone makes it a better analogy for interpersonal communication. One party puts the conversational ball in play, and the other gets into position to receive. It takes more concentration and skill to receive than to serve because while the speaker (server) knows where the message is going, the listener (receiver) doesn't. Like a verbal or nonverbal message, the ball may appear straightforward yet have a deceptive spin.

Ping-Pong is a back-and-forth game; players switch roles continuously. One moment the person holding the paddle is an initiator; the next second the same player is a responder, gauging the effectiveness of his or her shot by the way the ball comes back. The repeated adjustment essential for good play closely parallels the feedback process described in a number of interpersonal communication theories. There are, however, two inherent flaws in the table-tennis analogy.

The first defect is that the game is played with one ball, which at any point in time is headed in a single direction. A true model of interpersonal encounters would have people sending and receiving multiple balls at the same time. The other problem is that table tennis is a competitive game—there's a winner and a loser. In successful dialogue, both people win.

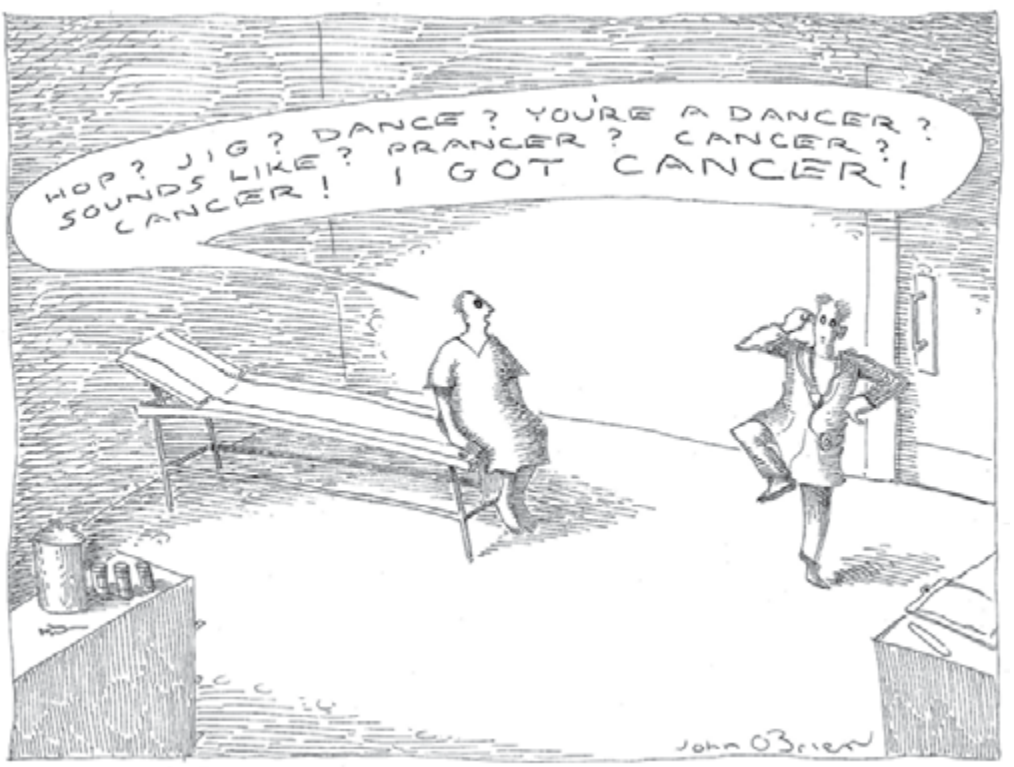
Communication as Charades The game of charades best captures the simultaneous and collaborative nature of interpersonal communication. A charade is neither an action, like bowling a strike, nor an interaction, like a rally in Ping-Pong. It's a *transaction.*

Charades is a mutual game; the actual play is cooperative. One member draws a title or slogan from a batch of possibilities and then tries to act it out visually for teammates in a silent minidrama. The goal is to get at least one partner to say the exact words that are on the slip of paper. Of course, the actor is prohibited from talking out loud.

Suppose you drew the saying "God helps those who help themselves." For *God* you might try folding your hands and gazing upward. For *helps* you could act out offering a helping hand or giving a leg-up boost over a fence. By pointing at a number of real or imaginary people you may elicit a response of *them,* and by this point a partner may shout out, "God helps those who help themselves." Success.

Like charades, interpersonal communication is a mutual, ongoing process of sending, receiving, and adapting verbal and nonverbal messages with another person to create and alter the images in both of our minds. Communication between us begins when there is some overlap between two images, and is effective to the extent that overlap increases. But even if our mental pictures are congruent, communication will be partial as long as we interpret them differently. The idea that "God helps those who help themselves" could strike one person as a hollow promise, while the other might regard it as a divine stamp of approval for hard work.

All four theories in this section reject a simplistic, one-way bowling analogy and an interactive Ping-Pong model of interpersonal communication. Instead, they view interpersonal communication in a way more akin to charades—a complex transaction in which overlapping messages simultaneously affect and are affected by the other person and multiple other factors.



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CHAPTER 5

Socio-cultural tradition

Symbolic Interactionism

of George Herbert Mead

George Herbert Mead was an early *social constructionist*. Mead believed that our thoughts, self-concept, and the wider community we live in are created through communication—symbolic interaction. The book that lays out his theory, *Mind, Self, and Society,* describes how language is essential for these three critical human characteristics to develop.[1] Without symbolic interaction, humanity as we know it wouldn't exist.

Symbolic interaction isn't just talk. The term refers to the language and gestures a person uses in anticipation of the way others will respond. The verbal and nonverbal responses that a listener then provides are likewise crafted in expectation of how the original speaker will react. The continuing process is like the game of charades described in the introduction to this section; it's a full-fledged conversation.

Symbolic interaction
The ongoing use of language and gestures in anticipation of how the other will react; a conversation.

Mead was a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago for the first three decades of the twentieth century. As a close personal friend of renowned pragmatist John Dewey, he shared Dewey's applied approach to knowledge. Mead thought that the true test of any theory is whether it is useful in solving complex social problems. If it doesn't work in practice, forget it! He was a social activist who marched for women's suffrage, championed labor unions in an era of robber-baron capitalism, and helped launch the urban settlement house movement with pioneer social worker Jane Addams.

Although Mead taught in a philosophy department, he is best known by sociologists as the teacher who trained a generation of the best minds in their field. Strangely, he never set forth his wide-ranging ideas in a book or systematic treatise. After he died in 1931, his students pulled together class notes and conversations with their mentor and published *Mind, Self, and Society* in his name. It was only then that his chief disciple, Herbert Blumer at the University of California, Berkeley, coined the term *symbolic interactionism.* This phrase captures what Mead claimed is the most human and humanizing activity that people can engage in—talking to each other. This claim provides the backdrop for the movie *Nell.*

Jodie Foster received a best actress Oscar nomination for her 1994 portrayal of a backwoods, Appalachian young woman raised in almost total isolation. The film, *Nell,* covers a three-month period of the woman's life immediately

following the death of her mother.[2] Nell is discovered by Jerry Lovell, a small-town doctor who is quickly joined by Paula Olsen, a psychologist from a big-city university medical center. Both are appalled and fascinated by this grown-up "wild child" who cowers in terror and makes incomprehensible sounds.

Nell is based on the play *Idioglossia,* a Greek term meaning a personal or private language. As Jerry and Paula come to realize, Nell's speech is not gibberish. Her language is based on the King James Version of the Bible, which her mother read to her out loud for more than 20 years. Yet because the mother had suffered a stroke that left one side of her face paralyzed, the words Nell learned were unintelligible to anyone else.

Early in the film Paula labels Nell "autistic" and tries to have her committed to a psych ward for observation. Jerry, on the other hand, treats Nell as a frightened human being and tries to get to know her by learning her language. Although fiction, the movie is an intriguing story about the civilizing influence of language. As such, it could easily have been scripted by a symbolic interactionist. I'll describe scenes from the film to illustrate the key ideas of George Herbert Mead, his student Herbert Blumer, and others who adopt an interactionist approach. The film illustrates Mead's theory so well that you might find it fascinating to watch the whole movie. You can rent *Nell* through Netflix, your local video store, or purchase it at *www.moviesunlimited.com* for less than the cost of a ticket at a multiscreen theater.

Blumer stated three core principles of symbolic interactionism that deal with *meaning, language,* and *thinking.*[3] These premises lead to conclusions about the creation of a person's *self* and socialization into the larger *society.* The rest of this chapter discusses these five related topics one by one. As you will see, all of these themes are prominent in the story of Nell.

MEANING: THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

Blumer starts with the premise that *humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things.* It's our interpretation that counts. The viewer of *Nell* can see this principle played out in the radically different responses that Jodie Foster's character elicits from the people she meets. The county sheriff regards Nell as crazy and suggests she be put in a padded cell. His chronically depressed wife sees Nell as a free spirit and joins her in a lighthearted game of patty-cake. The chief psychiatrist at the medical center views this child-of-the-wild case as a chance to make research history and insists the patient be brought to the center for study. And because a group of sleazy guys in a pool hall are convinced that Nell will mindlessly mimic any action she sees, they approach her as easy sexual prey. As for the doctor who found her, Jerry assumes Nell is fully human and seeks to become her friend. She in turn calls Jerry her guardian angel.

Which of these interpretations is correct? Who is the *real* Nell? From Mead's pragmatic standpoint, the answer doesn't make much difference. Once people define a situation as real, it's very real in its consequences.[4] And with the possible exception of Jerry, all of the people in the story initially regard Nell as totally other than themselves—an oddity to be explored or exploited.

In Jane Wagner's one-woman play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe,* Trudy the bag lady views society from her perspective on the street.

Her words underscore the interactionist position that meaning-making is a community project:

> It's my belief we all, at one time or another,
> secretly ask ourselves the question,
> "Am *I* crazy?"
> In my case, the answer came back: A resounding
> YES!
>
> You're thinkin': How does a person know if they're crazy or not? Well, sometimes you don't know. Sometimes you can go through life suspecting you *are* but never really knowing for sure. Sometimes you know for sure 'cause you got so many people tellin' you you're crazy that it's your word against everyone else's. . . .
>
> After all, what is reality anyway? Nothin' but a collective hunch.[5]

What causes people to react this way toward Trudy or Nell? For followers of Mead that's a loaded question, one that reflects the stimulus–response thinking of behavioral scientists. Interactionists are united in their disdain for deterministic thinking. The closest they come to the idea of causality is to argue that humans act on their definition of the situation.[6] An interactionist revision of the way scientists diagram stimulus–response causality might look like this:

Stimulus → Interpretation → Response

The middle term in the chain shows that it's the meaning that matters. As Trudy notes, however, when those interpretations are shared throughout society, they become hard to resist.

LANGUAGE: THE SOURCE OF MEANING

Blumer's second premise is that *meaning arises out of the social interaction that people have with each other.* In other words, meaning is not inherent in objects; it's not pre-existent in a state of nature. Meaning is negotiated through the use of *language*—hence the term *symbolic interactionism.*

As human beings, we have the ability to name things. We can designate a specific object *(person),* identify an action *(scream),* or refer to an abstract idea *(crazy).* Occasionally a word sounds like the thing it describes *(smack, thud, crash),* but usually the names we use have no logical connection with the object at hand. Symbols are arbitrary signs. There's nothing inherently small, soft, or lovable in the word *kitten.*[7] It's only by talking with others—symbolic interaction—that we come to ascribe that meaning and develop a universe of discourse.

Mead believed that symbolic naming is the basis for human society. The book of Genesis in the Bible states that Adam's first task was to name the animals—the dawn of civilization.

Interactionists claim that the extent of knowing is dependent on the extent of naming. Although language can be a prison that confines us, we have the potential to push back the walls and bars as we master more words. From your experience taking the SAT or ACT college entrance exams, you probably recall a major focus on linguistic aptitude. The construction of the test obviously reflects agreement with the interactionist claim that human intelligence is the ability to symbolically identify much of what we encounter. When Paula

realizes the extent of Nell's personal vocabulary, she can no longer treat Nell as incompetent or ignorant.

But symbolic interaction is not just a means for intelligent expression; it's also the way we learn to interpret the world. A symbol is "a stimulus that has a learned meaning and value for people."[8] Consider the puzzle posed by the following story:

> A father and his son were driving to a ball game when their car stalled on the railroad tracks. In the distance a train whistle blew a warning. Frantically, the father tried to start the engine, but in his panic, he couldn't turn the key, and the car was hit by the onrushing train. An ambulance sped to the scene and picked them up. On the way to the hospital, the father died. The son was still alive but his condition was very serious, and he needed immediate surgery. The moment they arrived at the hospital, he was wheeled into an emergency operating room, and the surgeon came in, expecting a routine case. However, on seeing the boy the surgeon blanched and muttered, "I can't operate on this boy—he's my son."[9]

How can this be? How do you explain the surgeon's dilemma? If the answer isn't immediately obvious, I encourage you to close the book and think it through.

This puzzle is the opening paragraph of an article that appears in a fascinating book of readings that is my Second Look resource for applications of symbolic interactionism. Douglas Hofstadter, the man who poses the problem, is adamant that readers think it through until they figure out the answer. There's no doubt, he assures us, that we'll know it when we get it.

I first heard this puzzle in a slightly different form about a decade ago. I'm ashamed to admit that it took me a few minutes to figure out the answer. My chagrin is heightened by the fact that my doctor is the wife of a departmental colleague and my daughter-in-law is a physician as well. How could I have been taken in?

Hofstadter's answer to my question is that the words we use have *default assumptions.* Since the story contains no reference to the doctor's gender, and the majority of physicians in America are men, we'll likely assume that the surgeon in the story is male. While such an assumption may have some basis in fact, the subtle tyranny of symbols is that we usually don't consciously think about the mental jump we're making. Unless we're brought up short by some obvious glitch in our taken-for-granted logic, we'll probably conjure up a male figure every time we read or hear the word *surgeon.* What's more, we'll probably assume that the way we think things are is the way they ought to be. That's how most of the "normal" people in *Nell* operated. They labeled Nell *strange, weird,* or *deviant*—assuming that those who are different are also demented.

Significant symbols can of course be nonverbal as well as linguistic. When I asked my students to apply a feature of symbolic interaction to their own experience, Glynka wrote the following:

> A ring. A class ring. A guy's class ring. In high school it was the ultimate symbol of status, whether dangling from a chain or wrapped with a quarter inch of yarn. Without ever speaking a word, a girl could tell everybody that she was loved (and trusted with expensive jewelry), that she had a protector (and how big that protector was, based, of course, on ring size—the bigger the better), the guy's status (preferably senior), and his varsity sport (preferably football). Yes, if you had the (right) class ring, you were really somebody.

She then noted it was only through hundreds of conversations among students at her school that the privileges and responsibilities that went with wearing the ring became something "everyone knows." Without symbolic interaction, there's no shared meaning.

THINKING: THE PROCESS OF TAKING THE ROLE OF THE OTHER

Blumer's third premise is that *an individual's interpretation of symbols is modified by his or her own thought processes.* Symbolic interactionists describe thinking as an inner conversation. Mead called this inner dialogue *minding.*

Minding is the pause that's reflective. It's the two-second delay while we mentally rehearse our next move, test alternatives, anticipate others' reactions. Mead says we don't need any encouragement to look before we leap. We naturally talk to ourselves in order to sort out the meaning of a difficult situation. But first, we need language. Before we can think, we must be able to interact symbolically.

Minding
An inner dialogue used to test alternatives, rehearse actions, and anticipate reactions before responding; self-talk.

The Lion King, Finding Nemo, and *Dr. Dolittle* movies aside, Mead believed that animals act "instinctively" and "without deliberation."[10] They are unable to think reflectively because, with few exceptions, they are unable to communicate symbolically. The human animal comes equipped with a brain that is wired for thought. But that alone is not sufficient for thinking. Interactionists maintain that "humans require social stimulation and exposure to abstract symbol systems to embark upon conceptual thought processes that characterize our species."[11] Language is the software that activates the mind, but it doesn't come pre-installed.

Throughout the first half of *Nell,* Jerry and Paula are hard-pressed to explain Nell's ability to reflect rather than merely react. They understand that Nell interacted with her mother but are puzzled as to how communication with a single reclusive and taciturn adult would offer the social stimulation that learning a language requires.[12] According to interactionist principles, there's no way that a person who has had almost zero human contact would be able to develop a language or think through her responses. Yet through cinematic flashbacks, viewers learn that Nell had a twin sister, who was her constant companion during her early childhood development. Until her sister died, Nell's life was rich in social stimulation, twin-speak, and shared meaning. As her past comes to light, Jerry and Paula gain an understanding of Nell's capacity to think. Symbolic interaction has activated cognitive processes that, once switched on, won't shut down.

Mead's greatest contribution to our understanding of the way we think is his notion that human beings have the unique capacity to *take the role of the other.* Early in life, kids role-play the activities of their parents, talk with imaginary friends, and take constant delight in pretending to be someone else. As adults, we continue to put ourselves in the place of others and act as they would act, although the process may be less conscious. Mead was convinced that thinking is the mental conversation we hold with others, always with an eye toward how they might see us and react to what we might do.

Taking the role of the other
Thep rocess of mentally imagining that you are someone else who is viewingy ou.

In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Scout stands on Boo Radley's porch and recalls her father's words, "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them."[13] That's a clear statement of what symbolic interactionism means by role-taking. The young, impulsive girl takes the perspective of a painfully shy, emotionally fragile man. Note that she doesn't

become him—that would be *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.* She does, however, look out at the world through his eyes. More than anything else, what she sees is herself.

THE SELF: REFLECTIONS IN A LOOKING GLASS

Once we understand that *meaning, language,* and *thinking* are tightly interconnected, we're able to grasp Mead's concept of the *self.* Mead dismissed the idea that we could get glimpses of who we are through introspection. He claimed, instead, that we paint our self-portrait with brush strokes that come from *taking the role of the other*—imagining how we look to another person. Interactionists call this mental image the *looking-glass self* and insist that it's socially constructed. Mead borrowed the phrase from sociologist Charles Cooley, who adapted it from a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson wrote that each close companion . . .

Looking-glass self
Thement al self-image that results from taking the role of the other; the objective self; me.

> Is to his friend a looking-glass
> Reflects his figure that doth pass.[14]

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Stated more formally, the Mead–Cooley hypothesis claims that "individuals' self-conceptions result from assimilating the judgments of significant others."[15]

Symbolic interactionists are convinced that the self is a function of language. Without talk there would be no self-concept. "We are not born with senses of self. Rather, selves arise in interaction with others. I can only experience myself in relation to others; absent interaction with others, I cannot be a self—I cannot emerge as someone."[16] To the extent that we interact with new acquaintances or have novel conversations with significant others, the self is always in flux. This means that there is no etched-in-stone Em inside my body waiting to be discovered or set free. We can only imagine the wrenching change in self-concept that a real-life Nell would experience when thrust into interviews with psychologists, reporters, and lawyers.

According to Mead, the self is an ongoing process combining the "I" and the "me." The "I" is the spontaneous, driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self. For those of you intrigued with brain hemisphere research, the "I" is akin to right-brain creativity. Nell's dancelike movements that simulated trees blowing in the wind sprang from the "I" part of self. So did Jerry's spur-of-the-moment musical accompaniment. (Surely if he'd thought about it ahead of time, he'd have selected a song other than Willie Nelson's "Crazy.") When Paula goes ballistic over his lack of professionalism, he can only respond that sometimes people do things on impulse. Like Jerry, we know little about the "I" because it's forever elusive. Trying to examine the "I" part of the self is like viewing a snowflake through a lighted microscope. The very act causes it to vanish. Put another way, you can never know your "I," because once it is known it becomes your "me."[17]

I
The subjective self; the spontaneous driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self.

The "me" is viewed as an object—the image of self seen in the looking glass of other people's reactions. Do you remember in grammar school how you learned to identify the personal pronoun *me* in a sentence as the *object* of a verb? Because of the role-taking capacity of the human race, we can stand outside our bodies and view ourselves as objects. This reflexive experience is like having the Goodyear blimp hover overhead, sending back video images of ourselves while we act. Mead described the process this way: "If the 'I' speaks, the 'me' hears."[18] And "the 'I' of this moment is present in the 'me' of the next moment."[19]

Me
Theo bjective self; the image of self seen when one takes the role of the other.

An early turning point in the film comes when Jerry enters Nell's cabin. She runs to a wardrobe mirror and reaches out to her reflected image and says, "May," a word Jerry understands to mean "me." She then pulls back and hugs herself while saying, "Tay," a word he interprets as "I." In the next scene, therapists viewing Paula's videotape of the sequence are impressed by this perfect case of Nell seeing her objective self as distinct from her subjective self. As a result of her actions, they have little doubt about Nell's humanity and sanity. She has an intact self.[20]

SOCIETY: THE SOCIALIZING EFFECT OF OTHERS' EXPECTATIONS

If Nell's only human contact were with her mother, her twin sister, and Jerry, her "me" would be formed by the reflected views of just those three significant others. But once she leaves her remote mountain cabin, Nell plunges into a community of other people. In order to survive and thrive within that society, Nell needs to figure out what they are doing, what their actions mean, and what they

expect of her. Mead and other symbolic interactionists refer to the composite mental image she puts together as her *generalized other.*

> The generalized other is an organized set of information that the individual carries in her or his head about what the general expectation and attitudes of the social group are. We refer to this generalized other whenever we try to figure out how to behave or how to evaluate our behavior in a social situation. We take the position of the generalized other and assign meaning to ourselves and our actions.[21]

Generalized other
Thecom posite mental image a person has of his or her self based on societal expectations and responses.

Unlike most sociologists, Mead saw society as consisting of individual actors who make their own choices—society-in-the-making rather than society-by-previous-design.[22] Yet these individuals align their actions with what others are doing to form health care systems, legal systems, economic systems, and all the other societal institutions that Nell soon encounters. It is unclear from *Mind, Self, and Society* whether Mead regarded the *generalized other* as (1) an overarching looking-glass self that we put together from the reflections we see in everyone we know or (2) the institutional expectations, rules of the game, or accepted practices within society that influence every conversation that takes place in people's minds. Either way, the generalized other shapes how we think and interact within the community.

To summarize, there is no "me" at birth. The "me" is formed only through continual symbolic interaction—first with family, next with playmates, then in institutions such as schools. As the generalized other develops, this imaginary composite person becomes the conversational partner in an ongoing mental dialogue. In this way, kids participate in their own socialization. The child gradually acquires the roles of those in the surrounding community. Mead would have us think of the "me" as the organized society within the individual.

Although *Nell* consistently portrays Mead's interactionist concepts, there's one discordant note at the end of the film. The final scene shows Nell five years later with the people she first met. Nell has obviously changed their lives. For example, Jerry and Paula are now married and have a daughter, who reminds the viewer of Nell as a child. The sheriff's wife is no longer depressed, and she attributes her transformation to Nell. Despite the fact that Nell has been thrust into a wider world of lawyers, reporters, and salesclerks who label her behavior as deviant and insist that she conform to societal roles, she seems strangely unaffected by their judgment or expectations. The character that Jodie Foster plays radiates an inner peace and contentment. The community in the form of her generalized other has not held sway. Of course, symbolic interactionists would remind us that the story of Nell is fiction.

A SAMPLER OF APPLIED SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Since Mead believed that a theory is valuable to the extent that it is useful, I've pulled together six separate applications of symbolic interactionism. Not only will this provide a taste of the practical insights the theory has generated, it will give you a chance to review some of the theoretical ideas covered in the chapter.

Creating Reality. Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."[23] In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Erving Goffman develops the metaphor of social interaction as a dramaturgical performance.[24] Goffman claims

that we are all involved in a constant negotiation with others to publicly define our identity and the nature of the situation. He warns that "the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by minor mishaps."[25] His colleague Joan Emerson outlines the cooperative effort required to sustain the definition of a gynecological exam as a routine medical procedure.[26] The doctor and nurse enact their roles in a medical setting to assure patients that "everything is normal, no one is embarrassed, no one is thinking in sexual terms." The audience of one is reassured only when the actors give a consistent performance.

Participant observation Amet hod of adopting the stance of an ignorant yet interested visitor who carefully notes what people say and do in order to discover how they interpret their world.

Meaning-ful Research. Mead advocated research through participant observation, a form of ethnography. Like Jerry in the movie *Nell,* researchers systematically set out to share in the lives of the people they study. The participant observer adopts the stance of an interested—yet ignorant—visitor who listens carefully to what people say in order to discover how they interpret their world. Mead had little sympathy for tightly controlled behavioral experiments or checklist surveys. The results might be quantifiable, but the lifeless numbers are void of the meaning the experience had for the person. Mead would have liked the wrangler who said that the only way to understand horses is to smell like a horse, eat from a trough, and sleep in a stall. That's participant observation. Undoubtedly, *Seabiscuit's* trainer and *The Horse Whisperer* were symbolic interactionists.

Generalized Other. The sobering short story "Cipher in the Snow" tells the true account of a boy who is treated as a nonentity by his parents, his teachers, and other children. Their negative responses gradually reduce him to what they perceive him to be—nothing. He eventually collapses and dies in a snowbank for no apparent reason. The interactionist would describe his death as symbolic manslaughter.[27]

Naming. Here's a partial list of epithets heard in public places over a one-year period; they were all spoken in a demeaning voice: *dummy, ugly, slob, fag, nigger, retard, fundamentalist, liberal, Neanderthal, slut, liar.* Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can *really* hurt me. Name-calling can be devastating because the labels force us to view ourselves in a warped mirror. The grotesque images aren't easily dismissed.

Self-fulfilling prophecy The tendency for our expectations to evoke responses that confirm what we originally anticipated.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. One implication of the looking-glass-self hypothesis is that each of us has a significant impact on how others view themselves. That kind of interpersonal power is often referred to as *self-fulfilling prophecy*, the tendency for our expectations to evoke responses in others that confirm what we originally anticipated. The process is nicely summed up by Eliza Doolittle, a woman from the gutter in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion:* "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."[28]

Symbol Manipulation. Saul Alinsky was a product of the "Chicago School" of sociology at a time when Mead was having his greatest influence. Similar to Barack Obama, Alinsky became a community organizer in Chicago when he finished grad school, and applied what he learned to empower the urban poor. For example, in the early 1960s he helped found The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) to oppose his alma mater's complicity in substandard neighborhood housing.

He searched for a symbol that would galvanize Woodlawn residents into united action and stir the sympathies of other Chicago residents. He had previously described his technique for selecting a symbolic issue:

> You start with the people, their traditions, their prejudices, their habits, their attitudes and all of those other circumstances that make up their lives. It should always be remembered that a real organization of the people . . . must be rooted in the experiences of the people themselves.[29]

Alinsky found his symbol in the rats that infested the squalid apartments. TWO's rallying cry became "Rats as big as cats." Not only did the city start to crack down on slum landlords, but for the first time Woodlawn residents gained a sense of identity, pride, and political clout.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: LEVINAS' RESPONSIVE "I"

Responsive "I"
The self created by the way we respond to others.

Ethical echo
The reminder that we are responsible to take care of each other; I am my brother's keeper.

Face of the "Other"
A human signpost that points to our ethical obligation to care for the other before we care for self.

European Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas agrees with Mead that the self is socially constructed. He states that "without the Other, there is no 'I.' "[30] (Note that Levinas uses the term *"I"* to refer to what Mead calls the *self*—the "I" and the "me.") But there's a striking difference between how the two theorists think this construction project takes place. Mead contends that the looking-glass self develops through the way *others respond to us;* Levinas insists that the identity of our "I" is formed by the way *we respond to others.*

Levinas uses the term *ethical echo* to designate the responsibility he believes we all have to take care of each other. That ethical echo has existed since the beginning of human history and is summed up in the words, *"I am my brother's keeper."* The way each of us meets that obligation shapes our "I." Levinas says that every time we gaze at *the face of the Other,* we are reminded of our caretaking responsibility. Thus, each person's face is a signpost pointing to the panhuman ethical requirement to actively care for all people. Levinas suggests that "the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes."[31] If we notice the color of his eyes—or by extension the shape of her body—we aren't really in a social relationship with the Other. And since the "I" finds its identity in responding to and caring for the Other, not allowing the humanity of that face to register puts our identity at risk.

Levinas is clear about the burden that comes with looking at the face of the Other:

> My world is ruptured, my contentment interrupted. I am already obligated. Here is an appeal from which there is no escape, a responsibility, a state of being hostage. It is looking into the face of the Other that reveals the call to a responsibility that is before any beginning, decision or initiative on my part. . . . I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, [even if I were] to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair.[32]

Duquesne University communication ethicist Ron Arnett regards Levinas as the premier ethical voice of the twentieth century. Arnett acknowledges that urging others to adopt a responsive "I" ethical standard is not an easy "sell" in this postmodern age, with its quest for comfort and self-actualization.[33] Yet he notes that even in his dark hours as a prisoner in a World War II German concentration camp, Levinas found joy in embracing the human responsibility of being for the

Other before oneself. To the extent that we follow Levinas' lead, Arnett suggests that our interpersonal communication will be characterized more by listening than telling.[34]

CRITIQUE: SETTING THE GOLD STANDARD FOR THREE INTERPRETIVE CRITERIA

"Viewing theory as testable explanations of directly or indirectly observable social regularities, Mead's ideas are seriously flawed."[35] That's the judgment of Indiana University sociologist Sheldon Stryker, and I agree. If we treat symbolic interactionism as an objective theory that must meet scientific standards of prediction and testability, it's a poor theory. But Mead's work was highly interpretive and deserves to be evaluated on the six criteria for good interpretive theories offered in Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words."

Let's start with *clarification of values,* which Mead does exceedingly well. Drawing upon William James, John Dewey, and other pragmatists, Mead proclaimed that humans are free to make meaningful choices on how to act when facing problems. In his critique, Stryker reveals, "What fascinated me as an undergraduate and graduate student was in part the dignity accorded humans by seeing them as important determiners of their lives rather than the pure product of conditioning."[36] Of course, this freedom and dignity are dependent upon our ability to communicate.

Certainly Mead offers a marvelous new *understanding of people* by showing how humans socially construct their concept of self as well as the way society influences—yet doesn't dictate—that construction project. We also can gain a new appreciation of human diversity from the extensive *ethnographic research* his theory inspired that describes individuals in similar situations responding in strikingly different ways.

Both the theory and the theorist have more than satisfied a fourth interpretive requirement for a good theory—emergence of a *community of agreement*. The once-radical Mead–Cooley looking-glass-self hypothesis has now become a truism in the field of sociology.[37] Mead, a philosopher who saw communication as the most human thing people do, has been called "America's greatest sociological thinker."[38] Even if the text you use in your interpersonal course doesn't mention the theorist or the theory by name, you can spot Mead's pervasive influence by the way the book treats the topic of self-concept.

Symbolic interactionism doesn't meet the other two criteria for an interpretive theory nearly as well as the four discussed above. Given Mead's personal efforts to help the displaced and distressed amidst urban industrialization, it's puzzling that Mead's theory doesn't call for *reform of society*. His theory says little about power or emotion—realities that a community organizer deals with every day.

In contrast to *aesthetic appeal,* most readers of *Mind, Self, and Society* get bogged down in the baffling array of ideas Mead tried to cover. The theory's fluid boundaries, vague concepts, and undisciplined approach don't lend themselves to an elegant summary. There are no *CliffsNotes* for this one. Perhaps Mead was precise when he presented his ideas in class, but their exact meaning was blurred in the years before his students compiled the manuscript. Whatever the explanation is, the theory suffers from a lack of clarity.

A final note: Symbolic interactionism may also suffer from overstatement. Mead repeatedly declared that our capacity for language—the ability to use and

interpret abstract symbols—is what distinguishes humans from other animals. My former graduate assistant is the mother of a son who has a permanent peripheral nerve disorder. His eyes, ears, and other sense receptors work fine, but the messages they send get scrambled on the way to his brain. Doctors say that he is, and always will be, unable to talk or interact with others on a symbolic level. After reading an early draft of this chapter, my assistant asked, "So this means that Caleb is less than human?" Her haunting question serves as a caution to any theorist who claims to have captured the essence of humanity.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Blumer's three core *premises of symbolic interactionism* deal with *meaning, language,* and *thinking.* According to Blumer, which comes first? Can you make a case for an alternative sequence?

2. What do interactionists believe are the crucial differences between *human beings* and *animals*? What would you add to or subtract from the list?

3. As Mead used the terms, is a *looking-glass self* the same thing as a person's *me?* Why or why not?

4. Think of a time in your life when your self-concept changed in a significant way. Do you think the shift occurred because *others viewed you differently* or because *you treated others differently*? Could Mead and Levinas both be right?

SELF-QUIZ

For chapter self-quizzes, go to the book's Online Learning Center at *www.mhhe.com/griffin8.*

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Larry T. Reynolds and Nancy J. Herman-Kinney (eds.), *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism,* AltaMira, Walnut Creek, CA, 2003:

Gil Musolf, "The Chicago School," pp. 91–117.
Bernard Meltzer, "Mind," pp. 253–266.
Andrew Weigert and Viktor Gecas, "Self," pp. 267–288.
Michael Katovich and David Maines, "Society," pp. 289–306.

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The self as a social construction: Susan Harter, "Symbolic Interactionism Revisited: Potential Liabilities for the Self Constructed in the Crucible of Interpersonal Relationships," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly,* Vol. 45, 1999, pp. 677–703.

Looking-glass self—a research review: David Lundgren, "Social Feedback and Self-Appraisals: Current Status of the Mead–Cooley Hypothesis," *Symbolic Interaction,* Vol. 27, 2004, pp. 267–286.

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Theory application: Jodi O'Brien (ed.), *The Production of Reality,* 4th ed., Pine Forge, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005.

Levinas' responsive "I": Ronald C. Arnett, "The Responsive 'I': Levinas' Derivative Argument," *Argumentation and Advocacy,* Vol. 40, 2003, pp. 39–50.

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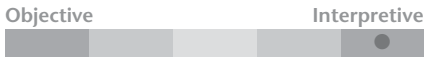
CHAPTER 6



Socio-cultural tradition
Phenomenological tradition

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)

of W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon Cronen

Barnett Pearce (The Fielding Graduate University) and Vernon Cronen (University of Massachusetts) believe that communication is the process by which we collectively create the events and objects of our social world.[1] Their theory, the coordinated management of meaning (CMM), starts with the assertion that *persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.* Stated another way, every conversation has an *afterlife*. Tomorrow's social reality is the afterlife of how we interact today. That's why Pearce and Cronen find it useful to ask, *What are we making together? How are we making it? How can we make better social worlds?*

First introduced in 1978, CMM has evolved in at least three distinct, yet compatible, directions. Pearce and Cronen have always regarded CMM as an *interpretive theory*. In 1998 they also began to refer to it as a *critical theory*—or at least one with a critical edge. And since the mid-1990s, Pearce and Cronen have emphasized that CMM is a *practical theory*. Because most current research and writing about the theory focuses on its usefulness in analyzing and improving communication, I'll start by describing its pragmatic side.

CMM AS A PRACTICAL THEORY—STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Pearce and Cronen present CMM as a practical theory crafted to help make life better for real people in a real world.[2] They believe a practical communication theory should offer a variety of tools to help us understand flawed patterns of interaction, identify critical moments in our conversations, and it should suggest ways to talk that will create a better social environment. CMM offers a wide array of concepts, descriptions, and models to do that. Therapists, mediators, social workers, consultants, and teachers find these helpful as they seek to assist others. The following first-person narratives are a sample of the theory in practice.

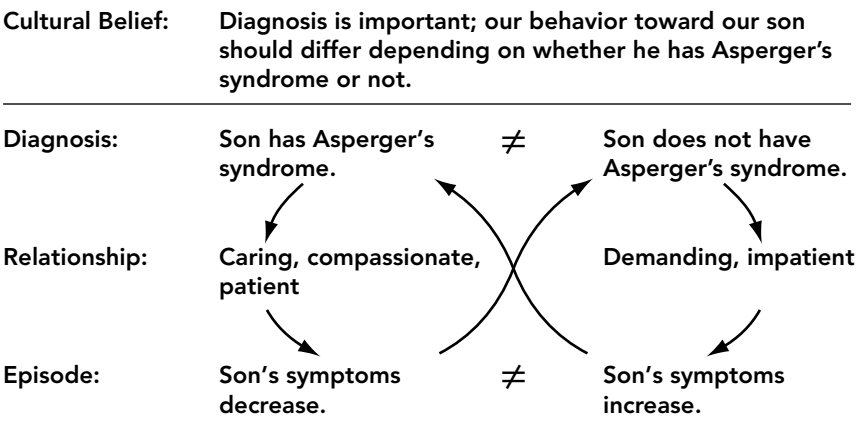


FIGURE 6–1 A Strange Loop of Diagnosis and Behavior
Courtesy of W. Barnett Pearce

Family Therapy

From John Burnham, consultant family therapist, Parkview Clinic, Birmingham, England

A father and mother came to me to talk about their 14-year-old son who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism. Halfway through the session it hit me that the boy and his parents were trapped in a repetitive pattern of behavior that CMM calls a *strange loop* (see Figure 6–1). If the parents accepted the diagnosis of Asperger's, they acted toward their son in a compassionate, patient, and forgiving way. Yet when they treated him this way, the boy improved to such an extent that it led them to think, *This is not Asperger's.* Under their altered belief they began to be less forgiving toward their son. He in turn deteriorated, which led them to think, *This is Asperger's,* and so on.

Strange loop
An unwanted repetitive communication pattern—"Darn, we did it again."

When I described this never-ending loop, the parents acted as if a light had been turned on. As long as they treated the question of whether this was Asperger's, the family continued to retrace the closed-circuit, figure-eight path. But the diagram of the loop that they were in helped me suggest a different question: *What relationship do you want with your son?* By focusing on what they were making together rather than what their son had or didn't have, their chances of escaping from this loop were increased. This approach worked well for the parents and their son, and they began to report many positive changes in their relationships with each other. They then moved on to ask, *When is it useful to think of this odd behavior as Asperger's, and when is it not?* I now use CMM's idea of strange loops in my work with other families whose children have been diagnosed as having a specific mental disorder. I tell this story because, like the parents, I learned that labeling a disease has significant consequences.[3]

Mediation

From Jonathan Shailor, professor of communication, University of Wisconsin–Parkside

In my mediation work, I act in the roles of practitioner, researcher, and trainer. In all of these roles I use the CMM concept of levels of meaning to tease out disputants' and mediators' constructions of episodes, relationships, identities,

and cultural patterns. For example, what story does she tell about the *episode* that answers the question, *Why did we come to mediation?* What story does she voice about her *relationship* with the other disputant? How does she construct her *identity?* Do *cultural narratives* come into play?

Peter and Anne were a young couple who fell into a pattern of angry fighting, which culminated with Anne obtaining a restraining order that forced Peter to move out of the apartment. A judge approved the order on the condition that the couple participate in mediation and then return to court for further review. In the mediation session, Peter framed this sequence as the story of "Anne's betrayal," a detailed series of events in which Anne's actions were interpreted as attacks and cold-blooded manipulations. Peter explained his own actions as necessary acts of self-defense, ignoring all other aspects of their relationship.

Anne constructed an autobiographical narrative that linked her history of family abuse with her sense of being "endangered" by Peter. In that context, a continued relationship with Peter was seen as dangerous. For Anne, any agreement in mediation that might compromise her physical or economic security would define her as a "victim."

Peter demanded that Anne pay for the rent during the two weeks that he was prevented from living in the apartment. This demand made sense, of course, within the subsystem of contextual meanings that Peter had assembled. But Anne interpreted this demand within her own subsystem of meanings and was determined not to play the part of the victim. Her refusal to pay confirmed Peter's construction of Anne as his persecutor and obligated him to press for retribution by looking for concessions on other issues, which she then refused, and so on.

After the mediation was over, CMM helped me describe to the two mediators the reflexive process of action and interpretation that they were co-constructing with Peter and Anne. By focusing their attention on the disputants' enactments of episodes, relationships, identities, and cultural patterns, I was able to help them see how mediator communication can either open up or shut down opportunities for empowerment.[4]

Cupertino Community Project

From W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, Public Dialogue Consortium

In 1996, the Public Dialogue Consortium[5] approached the city manager of Cupertino, California, and offered to introduce a productive form of communication to discuss the most pressing issue within the community—*ethnic diversity.* Many residents privately described race relations as a "powder keg waiting to go off," yet were unwilling to speak of it publicly for fear of providing the spark.

Our task was to change the form of communication, showing people that they could hold onto and express their deeply held convictions in a form of communication that promoted reciprocal understanding. The first phase of the project consisted of structuring situations in which people with all sorts of views could speak in a manner that made others want to listen, and listen in a way that made others want to speak. We call this *dialogic communication.* When key members of the community gained confidence in this type of communication, it was time to focus on specific issues. Working with the city government and an independent citizens' group, we invited all community members to a

"Diversity Forum" in order to give them an opportunity to discuss the way Cupertino handled three flashpoint issues—a Mandarin immersion program in the schools, public signs written only in Chinese, and a multicultural Fourth of July celebration.

The centerpiece of the forum consisted of numerous small-group discussions facilitated by members of the community. Each facilitator received at least 10 hours of training.[6] The challenge the facilitators faced was to help participants communicate dialogically beyond what they were initially willing or able to do. To accomplish this task, we trained each facilitator to (a) frame the forum as a special event in which unusual forms of communication would occur; (b) remain neutral by actively aligning oneself with all participants; (c) help people tell their own stories by expressing curiosity and asking questions; (d) enable people to tell even better stories through appreciative reframing and the weaving together of diverse stories; and (e) provide "in-the-moment" coaching and intervention.

Dialogic communication Conversation in which people speak in a manner that makes others want to listen, and listen in a way that makes others want to speak.

The dialogic communication that they stimulated transformed the social environment of Cupertino. A year after the forum only 2 percent of the residents mentioned race or ethnic diversity as a problem. The city manager interpreted this response to mean that people had finished "working through" the issue and that increased diversity was "an accomplished fact of life."

In the Cupertino Project we were particularly well served by CMM's insistence that communication creates the events and objects of our social world. We reaffirmed that dialogue requires remaining in the tension between holding our own perspective and being profoundly open to others who are unlike us, and enabling others to act similarly.[7]

These are just three of many examples from professionals who use CMM ideas and models in their work. I'll refer back to these stories throughout the chapter to illustrate practical applications of the theory that anyone can use to create more favorable social worlds.

CMM AS AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY—PICTURING PERSONS-IN-CONVERSATION

The CMM users who tell these stories refer to themselves as *social constructionists.* From their stories you can spot that they share the core conviction that our social environment is not something we find or discover. Instead, we create it. As was stated at the start of the chapter, they're convinced that **persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.**

Social constructionists Language theorists who believe that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.

Figure 6–2 presents artist M. C. Escher's 1955 lithograph *Bond of Union,* which strikingly illustrates CMM notions about persons-in-conversation. The unusual drawing illustrates the following tenets of the theory:

1. The experience of persons-in-conversation is the primary social process of human life. Pearce says that this core concept runs counter to the prevailing intellectual view of "communication as an odorless, colorless vehicle of thought that is interesting or important only when it is done poorly or breaks down."[8] He sees the ribbon in Escher's drawing as representing the of communication. It isn't just one of the activities the pair does or a tool they use to achieve some other end. On the contrary, their communication literally forms who they are and creates their relationship. In that sense, communication is performative—it does something to them quite apart from the issue they're discussing. The

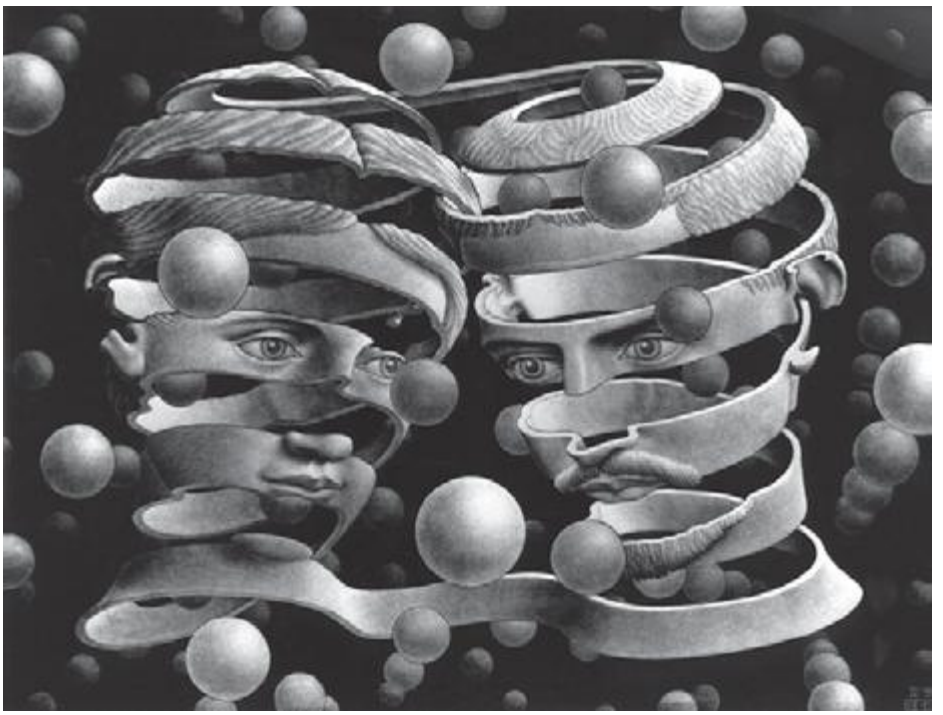


FIGURE 6–2 M. C. Escher's *Bond of Union*

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Cupertino Community Project radically altered the face of the community, not by changing what citizens wanted to talk *about*, but by changing the *form* of their communication.

2. The way people communicate is often more important than the content of what they say. The mood and manner that persons-in-conversation adopt plays a large role in the social construction process. Pearce points out that the faces in *Bond of Union* have no substance; they consist in the twists and turns of the spiraling ribbon:

> Were the ribbon straightened or tied in another shape, there would be no loss of matter, but the faces would no longer exist. This image works for us as a model of the way the process of communication (the ribbon) creates the events and objects of our social worlds (the faces) not by its substance but by its form.[9]

The parties in mediation, therapy, or ethnic disputes are often stuck in a destructive pattern of interaction. They call each other racists, liars, or jerks; they describe the other person's actions as criminal, cruel, or crazy. Since Pearce regards language as "the single most powerful tool that humans have ever invented for the creation of social worlds,"[10] he thinks it's tragic when people in conflict are caught up in a language game that they are bound to lose. MRI scans show that interpersonal distress affects the brain the same way as a punch in the stomach.[11]

CMM theorists speak of a *logic of meaning and action* that is made in the give-and-take of conversation. Consider this all-too-familiar sequence: You say

something, and I respond. That response makes you feel that you must instruct me about the error of my ways, but I don't feel that I should take instruction from you. So I inform you that you are not qualified to have an opinion on this topic, and that information conflicts with your self-concept as an intelligent, knowledgeable person, so you lash out with a bitter insult. In just five turns, we've moved into an escalating pattern in which we are competing to see who can say the most hurtful things to the other. By this time, the original topic of conversation is irrelevant. We can continue this feud forever, fueled only by the *logical force* of the interaction, trapped in a sense of oughtness that has us in its grip. When informed by CMM, mediators, therapists, consultants, and teachers become attuned to the logic of meaning and action generated by the way the turns in a conversation are connected. Armed with this understanding, they are equipped to intervene, breaking the destructive cycle and creating an opportunity for better patterns of communication to emerge.

Logical force
Themor al pressure or sense of obligation a person feels to respond in a given way to what someone else has just said or done—"I had no choice."

3. The actions of persons-in-conversation are reflexively reproduced as the interaction continues. Reflexivity means that our actions have effects that bounce back and affect us. "An act performed by a person also acts upon the person who performed it."[12] The endless ribbon in *Bond of Union* loops back to *re*form both people. If Escher's figures were in conflict, each person would be wise to ask, "If I win this argument, what kind of person will I become?"

Reflexivity
The process by which the effects of our words and actions on others bounce back and affect us.

Escher's spheres suspended in space can be seen as worlds or planets of the social universe that is also co-constructed by the intertwined actors. "When we communicate," writes Pearce, "we are not just talking about the world, we are literally participating in the creation of the social universe."[13] For years, environmentalists have stressed that we have to live in the world that we produce. By fouling the air we breathe, we pollute the quality of our lives—as residents of Mexico City and those who live and work on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico know all too well. In like fashion, Pearce and Cronen are social ecologists who alert us to the long-term effects of our communication practices.

Do the persons-in-conversation shown in Figure 6–2 realize that they are creating the social universe in which they talk and act? If they're like the parents who went to the family therapist to discuss their son's Asperger's syndrome, probably not. Yet that's the task that CMM practitioners have set for themselves—to get people to first ask and then answer the question, *What are we making together?*

4. As social constructionists, CMM researchers see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. They are *curious* because they think it's folly to profess certainty when dealing with individuals acting out their lives under ever-changing conditions. They are *participants* rather than spectators because they seek to be actively involved in what they study. They live in a *pluralistic world* because they assume that people make multiple truths rather than find a singular Truth. So Escher's *Bond of Union* is an apt representation of persons-in-conversation even when one of the parties is a CMM researcher.

Pearce regards Australian Ernest Stringer's *community-based action research* as a model for doing research. Action research is a "collaborative approach to investigation that seeks to engage community members as equal and full participants in the research process."[14] That research bond goes way beyond the

"participant observation" approach favored by symbolic interactionists (see Chapter 5). Action researchers work together with people to build a picture of what's going on. They then develop a shared minitheory as to why relationships are the way they are. Finally, they enact a cooperative plan to change things for the better. That's exactly the approach taken by the Public Dialogue Consortium in Cupertino.

The *Bond of Union* lithograph helps us grasp what Pearce and Cronen mean when they say that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities. But the drawing doesn't show that *stories* are the basic means that people use to pursue these social joint ventures. Since all of us perceive, think, and live our lives in terms of characters, roles, plots, and narrative sequences, CMM theorists say we shouldn't be surprised that the social worlds we create take the shape of story.

CMM AS AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY—STORIES TOLD AND STORIES LIVED

CMM theorists draw a distinction between *stories lived* and *stories told.* Stories lived are the co-constructed actions that we perform with others. *Coordination* takes place when we fit our stories lived into the stories lived by others in a way that makes life better. Stories told are the narratives that we use to make sense of stories lived.[15]

Pearce and Cronen note that the stories we tell and the stories we live are always tangled together, yet forever in tension. That's because one is the stuff of language and the other is the way we act. In stories told, a cocky young man can envision being faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap over tall buildings in a single bound. But in stories lived, inertia, gravity, and the witness of other people impose limits on what he can do. This tension is why Pearce and Cronen label their theory the *management of meaning;* we're obliged to adjust our stories told to fit the realities of our stories lived—or vice versa. They put the term *coordinated* in the title because we have to constantly make these adjustments through interactions with others. As practical theorists as well as interpretive theorists, they want to help people interpret what's said and coordinate those words with actions so that the social environment they create is one in which they can survive and thrive. Pearce and Cronen use CMM's concepts and models as ways of displaying the complexity of communication processes. Each layer of complexity provides a potential opening for strategic action.

Making and Managing Meaning Through Stories Told

The stories we tell are open to many interpretations. Pearce and Cronen offer a variety of communication models to help people figure out what's going on in a conversation. In Figure 6–3, I've combined two of them—the *hierarchy model of meaning* and the *serpentine model*—into a single drawing.[16] You'll find it helpful to think of this hierarchical–serpentine model as a schematic diagram of the communication process taking place in Escher's *Bond of Union.*

Hierarchy of meaning
A rank order of the relative significance of contexts—episode, relationship, identity, and culture—that encompass a given story as an aid to interpretation.

According to the hierarchy model of meaning, storytelling is the central act of communication, but every story is embedded within multiple contexts, or frames. No matter what the speaker says, the words of a story will make sense

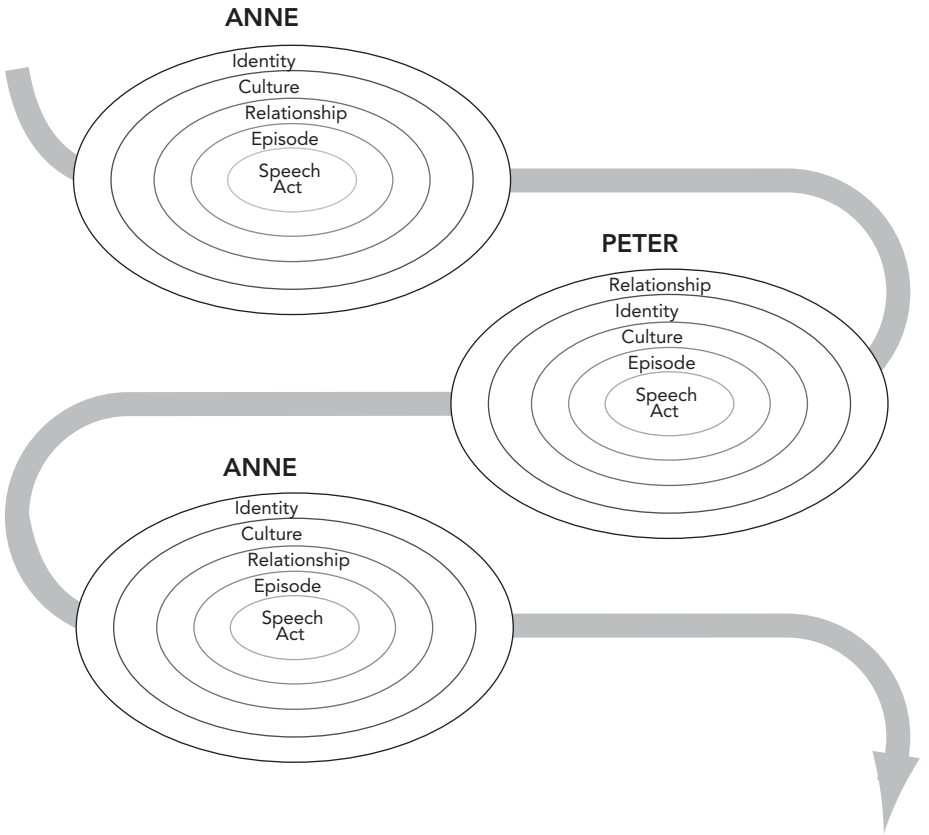

FIGURE 6–3 Hierarchical–Serpentine Model

only if they are understood within the framework of a specific *episode,* the *relationship* between the parties, the self-*identity* of the speaker, and the organizational or societal *culture* from which he or she comes. These contexts rarely have equal significance when we try to figure out what another person means, so Pearce suggests we rank-order their importance for interpreting a specific *speech act*—giving most weight to the overarching frame that encompasses all others.

Speech act
Any verbal or nonverbal message as part of an interaction; the basic building block of the social universe people create; threats, promises, insults, compliments, etc.

For example, consider the way many high school seniors talk about "The Prom." The stories they tell often elevate the *episode* to mythic proportions, yet their descriptions seem to downplay a romantic *relationship* with their prom date. The hierarchy of meaning that we construct makes a big difference. If the prom event has the most importance, there might be several partners who could serve equally well as satisfying dates. But if a specific relationship is what's most important to you, you could probably find other things to do that would be equally as enjoyable as the prom—and certainly less expensive.

Since Jonathan Shailor employs these four contexts in his analysis of communication patterns in mediation, I'll illustrate their place in the hierarchical–serpentine model referring to the dispute between Peter and Anne. Assume that Peter's *speech act* in the figure is his story of Anne's betrayal told during their court-appointed mediation.

Episode
A "nounable" sequence of speech acts with a beginning and an end that are held together by story; an argument, interview, wedding, mediation, etc.

Episode. An episode is a sequence of speech acts with a beginning and an end that are held together by story. Pearce and Cronen say that such sequences are "nounable." The noun used to designate an episode should answer the question, *What does he think he's doing?* The term *mediation* labels the episode that Shailor described. Mediators hope that their participation as a neutral third party will elicit patterns of speech acts that are part of the solution rather than part of the problem. But the fact that both Peter and Anne were locked into their separate stories of "betrayal" and "endangerment" suggests that the mediation episode had little impact on the hostile social world they were making.

Relationship. Pearce says that relationships emerge from the dynamic dance over coordinated actions and managed meanings. And just as punctuation provides a context for the printed word, the relationship between persons-in-conversation suggests how a speech act might be interpreted. This is especially true for Peter, who is fixated on Anne's betrayal in a way that blots out everything else. Without exacting some kind of retribution, he can't get on with his life. As for Anne, the relationship is important only if it doesn't end. She's in court to make sure that it does.

Identity. CMM holds that our identity is continually crafted through the process of communication, and in turn our self-image becomes a context for how we manage meaning. For Anne, Peter's demand for money is less about their broken relationship than it is about a potential threat to her self-identity. She's unwilling to do anything that suggests she is a passive victim. By asking the judge for a restraining order and refusing to pay rent for the apartment, she sees herself as actively rewriting her personal life script. Regarding Peter's self-concept, the story is mute.

Culture. Since the term *culture* describes webs of shared meanings and values, people who come from different cultures won't interpret messages exactly the same way. Although Shailor's mediation story doesn't suggest that Anne's ethnic or national background differs from Peter's, the history of abuse in her family of origin makes it difficult for her to make or manage meaning cooperatively with anyone who hasn't experienced a similar subculture of violence. Peter doesn't seem able to relate to her background of physical and verbal abuse.

The two identical sets of concentric ellipses on the left side of Figure 6–3 display my perception of Anne's hierarchy of meaning. The all-encompassing concern for her personal identity relegates the other contexts to lesser importance. As for Peter, I see his fixation with their relationship as the overarching frame that encompasses all other contexts. My judgment is depicted in the set of ovals on the right-hand side of the model. The interpretive trick, of course, is to figure out which context is dominant in any particular conversation. That's one reason a CMM analysis of communication is more art than science.

The *serpentine flow of conversation* is the other CMM model blended into Figure 6–3. Similar to Escher's *Bond of Union,* the diagram suggests that what one person says affects—and is affected by—what the other person says. The contexts for what they're saying co-evolve even as they speak. So it's foolish to try to interpret Anne's first message, because we don't know what was said before. It's equally hard to decipher the meaning of Anne's second message because we don't know what follows. As the parents in family therapy suddenly grasped, any comment

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about their son's mental health was both the result and the cause of other statements within the family. Perhaps this is the most striking feature of the serpentine model; it leaves no room for isolated acts of speech. Everything in a conversation is connected to everything else. Understanding how others make and manage meaning is possible only when we perceive the flow of conversation.

Do you get the impression from the hierarchical–serpentine model that even a brief conversation is a process that's incredibly complex and open-ended? If so, Pearce would be pleased. He thinks it's impossible to explain in a simple declarative sentence what a statement means—even when it's your own statement. For that reason, Pearce finds it difficult to give a straight answer when someone in a discussion asks him, "What does that mean?" Consistent with CMM thinking, he's tempted to reply, "I'm not completely sure yet. We haven't finished our conversation."[17]

Coordination: The Meshing of Stories Lived

Coordination
Thep rocess by which persons collaborate in an attempt to bring into being their vision of what is necessary, noble, and good and to preclude the enactment of what they fear, hate, or despise.

According to CMM, *coordination* refers to the "process by which persons collaborate in an attempt to bring into being their vision of what is necessary, noble, and good and to preclude the enactment of what they fear, hate, or despise."[18] This intentional meshing of stories lived does not require people to reach agreement on the meaning of their joint action. They can decide to coordinate their behavior without sharing a common interpretation of the event. For example, conservative activists and radical feminists could temporarily join forces to protest a pornographic movie. Although they have discrepant views of social justice and different reasons for condemning the film, they might agree on a unified course of action. As the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon on the previous page suggests, parties can coordinate effectively without much mutual understanding.

Pearce uses the phrase *coordination without coherence* to refer to people cooperating, but for quite different reasons. Sarah's application log for CMM provides a striking example:

> CMM suggests that people may synchronize their actions even if they don't share the other's motives. This was the case with my core group of friends in high school. Our group consisted of Colin—a gay atheist, Stephany—a non-practicing Jewish girl, Aliza—a devout Jewish girl, and me—a Christian. We all abstained from drinking, drugs, and sex, but the reasons for our behavior were extremely different.

Like many others who are fascinated with human interaction, CMM theorists enjoy descriptions of rules for meaning and action that are created in families, organizations, and cultures (see Chapters 14, 20, and 33). In light of the way real groups of people coordinate their actions without a great amount of mutual understanding, Calvin and Hobbes' game of "Calvinball" doesn't look that strange.

CMM AS A CRITICAL THEORY—SPOTTING HARMFUL AND HELPFUL COMMUNICATION

CMM began as an interpretive theory, its authors attempting to describe and understand recurring patterns of communication. As the theory has evolved, however, it's developed a critical edge.[19] CMM advocates today aren't satisfied with simply describing patterns of communication or providing tools for understanding how people interpret their social worlds. They want to function as *peacemakers,*

"providing a way of intelligently joining into the activity of the world so as to enrich it."[20] If any of us are tempted to dismiss the significance of helping others coordinate the way they talk with each other, CMM reminds us that communication has the power to create a social universe of alienation, anger, and malice—or one of community, tolerance, and generosity. The critical edge of CMM separates communication styles that are harmful from those that are helpful.

Naming Destructive Patterns of Communication: Offering a Better Way

As an example of where CMM's critical edge cuts, Pearce believes that the polarization of the electorate in the United States is both the cause and the product of communication patterns that he describes as *reciprocated diatribe.*[21] He claims that what former President George W. Bush labeled the "war on terror" is reproduced and sustained by patterns of communication that dismiss and demonize the other.[22] The president's address to the nation on the night of the 9/11 attacks set the tone. The speech, Pearce notes, "created an afterlife that magnified the effects of the terrorist attack and deteriorated the quality of life around the world."[23] A CMM view of the conflict between al-Qaeda and the United States suggests that *both* sides are acting morally according to their own understanding of the universe. Yet it's no surprise that each side calling the other "evil" isn't likely to resolve the conflict. As a way of expressing his own sense of horror and sadness at what he perceived as a missed opportunity to make the world a better place, Pearce wrote an alternative response that he wished the president had made that evening. A portion of Pearce's version goes as follows:

> If we are to understand why people hate us so much, we will have to understand how the world looks from their perspective. And if we are to respond effectively to protect ourselves, we must understand those whose sense of history and purpose are not like our own.
>
> It is tempting to see this vicious attack as the result of madmen trying to destroy civilization, and our response as a war of "good" against "evil." But if we are to understand what happened here today, and if we are to act effectively in the days to come, we must develop more sophisticated stories than these about the world, about our place in it, and about the consequences of our actions.
>
> This is a terrorist attack. If we are in a state of war, it is a different kind of war than we have ever fought before. Terrorists are not capable of occupying our country or meeting our armies on the field of battle. They hope to destroy our confidence, to disrupt our way of life. They hope that we will destroy ourselves by the way we respond to the atrocities that they commit. Our first reaction, that of wanting revenge, to lash out at those who have injured us so, is almost surely the wrong response because it makes us accomplices of what they are trying to achieve.[24]

COSMOPOLITAN COMMUNICATION—DISAGREE, YET COORDINATE

As a remedy to unsatisfactory or destructive patterns of interaction, CMM theorists advocate an uncommon form of communication they believe will create a social world where we can live with dignity, honor, joy, and love.[25] Over the last three decades, Pearce has used a number of terms to describe the communication style he values. He started by calling it *cosmopolitan communication.*[26] When applied to individuals, the label calls to mind a citizen of the world who interacts

comfortably with people who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, hold different values, and express discrepant beliefs. Pearce's cosmopolitan communicators assume that there is no single truth, or if there is, that it has many faces. So they try to find ways of coordinating with others with whom they do not—and perhaps should not—agree.

Cosmopolitan communication
Coordination with others who have different backgrounds, values, and beliefs, without trying to change them.

Although he still likes the concept of cosmopolitan communication, Pearce also uses the term *dialogue* in the same way that Jewish philosopher Martin Buber does—to describe what he believes is the optimum form of interaction. For Buber, *dialogic communication* "involves remaining in the tension between holding our own perspective while being profoundly open to the other."[27] This, of course, could be dangerous. As happened in Cupertino, we might learn something new that will change what we think, or even who we are.[28]

ETHICAL REFLECTION: MARTIN BUBER'S DIALOGIC ETHICS

Martin Buber was a German Jewish philosopher and theologian who immigrated to Palestine before World War II and died in 1965. His ethical approach focuses on relationships between people rather than on moral codes of conduct. "In the beginning is the relation," Buber wrote. "The relation is the cradle of actual life."[29]

Buber contrasted two types of relationships—*I-It* versus *I-Thou.* In an I-It relationship we treat the other person as a thing to be used, an object to be manipulated. Created by monologue, an I-It relationship lacks mutuality. Parties come together as individuals intent on creating only an impression. Deceit is a way to maintain appearances.

In an I-Thou relationship we regard our partner as the very one we are. We see the other as created in the image of God and resolve to treat him or her as a valued end rather than a means to our own end. This implies that we will seek to experience the relationship as it appears to the other person. Buber says we can do this only through dialogue.

For Buber, *dialogue* is a synonym for ethical communication. Dialogue is mutuality in conversation that creates the *Between,* through which we help each other to be more human. Dialogue is not only a morally appropriate act, it is also a way to discover what is ethical in our relationship. It thus requires self-disclosure to, confirmation of, and vulnerability with the other person.

Buber used the image of the *narrow ridge* to illustrate the tension of dialogic living. On one side of the moral path is the gulf of relativism, where there are no standards. On the other side is the plateau of absolutism, where rules are etched in stone:

Narrow ridge
A metaphor of I-Thou living in the dialogic tension between ethical relativism and rigid absolutism; standing your own ground while being profoundly open to the other.

> On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of the Between.[30]

Duquesne University communication ethicist Ron Arnett notes that "living the narrow-ridge philosophy requires a life of personal and interpersonal concern, which is likely to generate a more complicated existence than that of the egoist or the selfless martyr."[31] Despite that tension, many interpersonal theorists have carved out ethical positions similar to Buber's philosophy. Consistent with CMM's foundational belief that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities, Pearce is attracted to Buber's core belief that dialogue is a joint achievement that cannot be produced on demand, yet occurs among people who seek it and are prepared for it.

CRITIQUE: THREE THEORIES, THREE APPRAISALS

Because CMM's authors now regard it as an interpretive theory, a critical theory, and a practical theory, I'll offer three separate critiques. The first evaluation will use the six standards for an interpretive theory that I presented in Chapter 3. My appraisals of CMM as a critical and a practical theory are based on criteria set by others.

An Interpretive Theory

By offering such analytical tools as the hierarchical and serpentine models of communication, CMM promotes a better *understanding of people* and of the social worlds they create through their conversation. Pearce and Cronen's description of the ideal cosmopolitan communicator makes it clear that they *value* curiosity, participation, and an appreciation of diversity rather than the detached, aloof certainty of someone interacting in a my-way-is-Yahweh style.

If *reforming society* seems a bit of a stretch, recall that by teaching residents to speak in a dialogic way, Pearce and his associates changed the social world of Cupertino, California. And although many objectivist theorists ignore or dismiss CMM because of its social constructivist assumptions, CMM has generated widespread interest and *acceptance within the community* of interpretive communication scholars. Members of that community have investigated CMM's models of communication through a wide range of *qualitative research*—textual and narrative analysis, case studies, interviews, participant observation, ethnography, and collaborative action research.[32]

Despite meeting these five standards with ease, lack of clarity has seriously limited CMM's *aesthetic appeal*. CMM has a reputation of being a confusing mix of ideas that are hard to pin down because they're expressed in convoluted language. I'll revisit this problem in my analysis of CMM as a practical theory.

A Critical Theory

Most scholars who work within the critical tradition described in Chapter 4 don't consider CMM a critical theory. That's because Pearce and Cronen don't insist that *power* is the pivotal issue in all human relationships. San Francisco State University communication professor Victoria Chen concedes that she and other CMM practitioners don't automatically look for who controls a conversation in order to maintain dominance. But she's convinced that by systematically using the tools CMM provides, she and others can address unjust power relationships when they exist.[33]

Whether CMM is a viable *critical theory* depends on what that label means to the one making the judgment. If a critical theory is defined as one that unmasks how communication can perpetuate the unjust power imbalances in society, CMM doesn't make the grade. If the critical category is broad enough to include a theory that makes clear value judgments about patterns of communication and promotes the types that make better social worlds, then CMM is a worthy inclusion. By only claiming that CMM has a *critical edge,* Pearce, Cronen, and Chen make a reasonable case that CMM shouldn't be excluded.

A Practical Theory

When Robert Craig proposed that a pragmatic tradition be added to his original list of seven traditions of communication theory (see Chapter 4), he cited CMM

as the exemplar of practical theory.[34] He is not alone in that positive assessment. In "CMM: A Report from Users," multiple therapists, mediators, teachers, and consultants provide compelling examples of how CMM helps them in their work. Yet Texas A&M University communication professor Kevin Barge, a CMM advocate, adds a note of caution. He warns that a batch of enthusiastic reports of CMM in use isn't sufficient evidence to validate it as a practical theory. Pearce, Cronen, and their followers must show how the experience of practitioners has informed the theory. He adds that researchers need to establish when CMM tools are helpful, and when they aren't. There's more work to be done.[35]

There's one other hindrance to the theory's widespread usefulness. When Pearce asked longtime CMM practitioners what changes or additions they thought should be made to the theory, the most frequent plea was for user-friendly explanations expressed in easy-to-understand terms. The following story from the field underscores why this call for clarity is so crucial:

> My counseling trainees often find CMM ideas exciting, but its language daunting or too full of jargon. Some trainees connect with the ideas but most feel intimidated by the language and the concepts—diminished in some way or excluded! One trainee sat in a posture of physically cringing because she did not understand. This was a competent woman who had successfully completed counselor training three years ago and was doing a "refresher" with us. I don't think she found it too refreshing at that moment. CMM ideas would be more useful if they were available in everyday language—perhaps via examples and storytelling. (Gabrielle Parker, Dance Movement Therapist)[36]

Pearce responds that he can train people to use CMM concepts, but not by asking them to read. He first asks them to describe something going on in their lives and then *shows* them rather than tells them how to use the ideas and models that the theory offers. Because that interactive option isn't available to us, I've tried to heed Parker's advice while writing this chapter. Hopefully, you haven't cringed. But in order to reduce the wince factor, I've had to leave out many of the valued terms, tools, and models that are the working vocabulary of this complex theory. Pearce introduces a full range of these concepts in *Making Social Worlds: A Communication Perspective,* a book he wrote in a more readable style.

You should know that there are coordinated management of meaning devotees who *live* CMM rather than simply using the practical tools it offers. These folks refer to CMM as *worldview, a way of life,* or as Barnett Pearce puts it, *a tradition of practice.* Describing what this means to them goes way beyond what I can accomplish in a first look at CMM. But for a compelling story of how CMM values and ideals have transformed Barnett Pearce's life when facing imminent death, read Kim Pearce's essay cited in the Second Look section: "Living into Very Bad News: The Use of CMM as Spiritual Practice."

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Social constructionists* see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. Are you willing to not strive for certainty, a detached perspective, and a singular view of Truth so that you can join them?

2. Can you provide a rationale for placing this chapter on CMM immediately after the chapter on *symbolic interactionism?*

3. CMM suggests that we can take part in joint action without shared understanding—*coordination* without *coherence.* Can you think of examples from your own life?

4. Pearce and Cronen claim that CMM is a *practical theory.* What *consequences* do you foresee had George W. Bush delivered the speech Pearce wrote after the 9/11 attacks? What aspects of *dialogic communication* do you see in Pearce's version?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

As you watch my conversation with Barnett Pearce, you might think of us as the persons-in-conversation pictured in Escher's *Bond of Union.* What kind of social world do you see us creating as we talk? I like to think that our conversation displays a few examples of cosmopolitan communication. If so, is Pearce right in thinking that you'll find this kind of talk contagious? At one point I repeat my "Questions to Sharpen Your Focus" query about how social constructionists must give up claims of certainty, objectivity, and Truth. I then ask if that's a fair question. See if you agree with Pearce's response and the reason he gives.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: W. Barnett Pearce, *Making Social Worlds: A Communication Perspective*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2008.

Brief overview with extended example: W. Barnett Pearce, "The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)," in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication,* William Gudykunst (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2004, pp. 35–54.

Early statement of theory: W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen, *Communication, Action, and Meaning: The Creation of Social Realities,* Praeger, New York, 1980; also www.cios.org/www/opentext.htm.

Development of a three-in-one theory: W. Barnett Pearce, "Evolution and Transformation: A Brief History of CMM and a Meditation on What Using It Does to Us," in *Making Lives and Making Meaning: Reflective, Facilitative, and Interpretative Practice of the Coordinated Management of Meaning* (tentative title), C. Creede, B. Fisher-Yoshida, and P. Gallegos (eds.), in press.

Social construction: W. Barnett Pearce, "Communication as Social Construction: Reclaiming Our Birthright," in *Socially Constructing Communication,* Gloria J. Galanes and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (eds.), Hampton, Cresskill, NJ, 2009, pp. 33–56.

Coordination and coherence: W. Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition,* Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, 1989, pp. 32–87.

Intellectual heritage: Vernon E. Cronen, "Coordinated Management of Meaning: The Consequentiality of Communication and the Recapturing of Experience," in *The Consequentiality of Communication,* Stuart Sigman (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, 1995, pp. 17–65.

Peacemaking: W. Barnett Pearce and Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Moral Conflict: When Social Worlds Collide,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997.

Dialogic communication: W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, "Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialogic Virtuosity," *Southern Communication Journal,* Vol. 65, 2000, pp. 161–175.

Buber's dialogic ethics: Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* 2nd ed., R. G. Smith (trans.), Scribner, New York, 1958.

Research review of CMM: J. Kevin Barge and W. Barnett Pearce, "A Reconnaissance of CMM Research," *Human Systems,* Vol. 15, 2004, pp. 13–32.

CMM as a critical theory: Victoria Chen, "The Possibility of Critical Dialogue in the Theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning," *Human Systems,* Vol. 15, 2004, pp. 179–192.

CMM as a practical theory: J. Kevin Barge, "Articulating CMM as a Practical Theory," *Human Systems,* Vol. 15, 2004, pp. 193–204.

CMM as a way of life: Kimberly Pearce, "Living into Very Bad News: The Use of CMM as Spiritual Practice," in *Making Lives and Making Meaning: Reflective, Facilitative, and Interpretative Practice of the Coordinated Management of Meaning* (tentative title), C. Creede, B. Fisher-Yoshida, and P. Gallegos (eds.), in press.

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CHAPTER 7

Objective — Interpretive

Socio-psychological tradition

Expectancy Violations Theory

of Judee Burgoon

Early in my teaching career, I was walking back to my office, puzzling over classroom conversations with four students. All four had made requests. Why, I wondered, had I readily agreed to two requests but just as quickly turned down two others? Each of the four students had spoken to me individually during the class break. Andre wanted my endorsement for a graduate scholarship, and Dawn invited me to eat lunch with her the next day. I said yes to both of them. Belinda asked me to help her on a term paper for a class with another professor, and Charlie encouraged me to play water polo that night with guys from his house, something I had done before. I said no to those requests.

Sitting down at my desk, I idly flipped through the pages of *Human Communication Research (HCR),* a relatively new behavioral science journal that had arrived in the morning mail. I was still mulling over my uneven response to the students when my eyes zeroed in on an article entitled "A Communication Model of Personal Space Violations."[1] "That's it," I blurted out to our surprised department secretary. I suddenly realized that in each case my response to the student may have been influenced by the conversational distance between us.

I mentally pictured the four students making their requests—each from a distance that struck me as inappropriate in one way or another. Andre was literally in my face, less than a foot away. Belinda's 2-foot interval invaded my personal space, but not as much. Charlie stood about 7 feet away—just outside the range I would have expected for a let's-get-together-and-have-some-fun-that-has-nothing-to-do-with-school type of conversation. Dawn offered her luncheon invitation from across the room. At the time, each of these interactions had seemed somewhat strange. Now I realized that all four students had violated my expectation of an appropriate interpersonal distance.

Because I describe my impressions and reactions to these students, I've changed their names, and replaced them with names that start with the letters *A, B, C,* and *D* to represent the increasing distance between us when we spoke. (Andre was the closest; Dawn, the farthest away.) Figure 7–1 plots the intervals relative to my expectations.

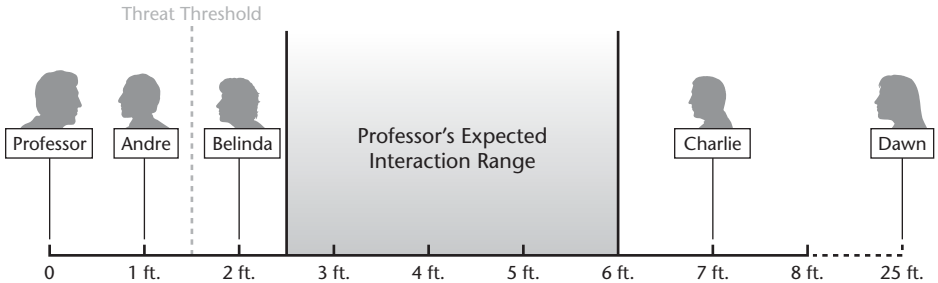


FIGURE 7–1 Expectancy Violations in a Classroom Setting

Judee Burgoon, a communication scholar at the University of Arizona, wrote the journal article that stimulated my thinking. The article was a follow-up piece on the *nonverbal expectancy violations model* that she had introduced in *HCR* two years earlier. Since my own dissertation research focused on interpersonal distance, I knew firsthand how little social science theory existed to guide researchers studying nonverbal communication. I was therefore excited to see Burgoon offering a sophisticated theory of personal space. The fact that she was teaching in a communication department and had published her work in a communication journal was value added. I eagerly read Burgoon's description of her nonverbal expectancy violations model to see whether it could account for my mixed response to the various conversational distances chosen by the four students.

PERSONAL SPACE EXPECTATIONS: CONFORM OR DEVIATE?

Personal space
The invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual that defines that individual's preferred distance from others.

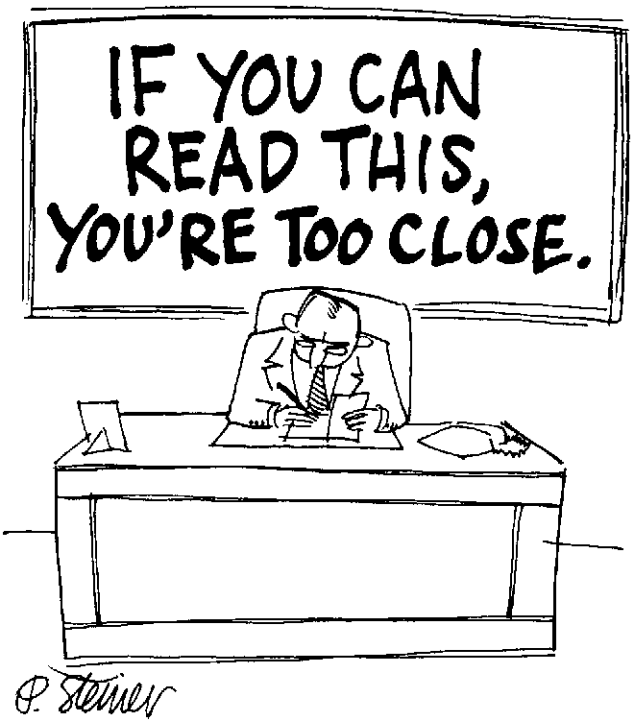
Burgoon defined *personal space* as the "invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual that defines that individual's preferred distance from others."[2] She claimed that the size and shape of our personal space depend on our cultural norms and individual preferences, but our space always reflects a compromise between the conflicting approach–avoidance needs that we as humans have for affiliation and privacy.

Proxemics
The study of people's use of space as a special elaboration of culture.

The idea of personal space wasn't original with Burgoon. In the 1960s, Illinois Institute of Technology anthropologist Edward Hall coined the term *proxemics* to refer to the study of people's use of space as a special elaboration of culture.[3] He entitled his book *The Hidden Dimension* because he was convinced that most spatial interpretation is outside our awareness. He claimed that Americans have four proxemic zones, which nicely correspond with the four interpersonal distances selected by my students:

1. Intimate distance: 0 to 18 inches (Andre)
2. Personal distance: 18 inches to 4 feet (Belinda)
3. Social distance: 4 to 10 feet (Charlie)
4. Public distance: 10 feet to infinity (Dawn)

Hall's book is filled with examples of "ugly Americans" who were insensitive to the spatial customs of other cultures. He strongly recommended that in order to be effective, we learn to adjust our nonverbal behavior to conform to the communication rules of our partner. We shouldn't cross a distance boundary uninvited.



Cartoon by Peter Steiner. Reprinted with permission.

In his poem "Prologue: The Birth of Architecture," poet W. H. Auden echoes Hall's analysis and puts us on notice that we violate his personal space at our peril:

> Some thirty inches from my nose
> The frontier of my Person goes,
> And all the untilled air between
> Is private pagus or demesne.
> Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes
> I beckon you to fraternize,
> Beware of rudely crossing it:
> I have no gun, but I can spit.[4]

Burgoon's nonverbal expectancy violations model offered a counterpoint to Hall and Auden's advice. She didn't argue with the idea that people have definite expectations about how close others should come. In fact, she would explain Auden's 30-inch rule as based on well-established American norms plus the poet's own idiosyncracies. But contrary to popular go-along-to-get-along wisdom, Burgoon suggested that there are times when it's best to break the rules. She believed that under some circumstances, violating social norms and personal expectations is "a superior strategy to conformity."[5]

AN APPLIED TEST OF THE ORIGINAL MODEL

Whether knowingly or not, each of the four students making a request deviated from my proxemic expectation. How well did Burgoon's initial model predict

my responses to these four different violations? Not very well. So that you can capture the flavor of Burgoon's early speculation and recognize how far her current theory has come, I'll outline what the model predicted my responses would be and, in each case, compare that forecast to what I actually did.

Threat threshold
The hypothetical outer boundary of intimate space; a breach by an uninvited other occasions fight or flight.

Andre. According to Burgoon's early model, Andre made a mistake when he crossed my invisible *threat threshold* and spoke with me at an intimate eyeball-to-eyeball distance. The physical and psychological discomfort I'd feel would hurt his cause. But the model missed on that prediction, since I wrote the recommendation later that day.

Belinda. In the follow-up article I read that day, Burgoon suggested that noticeable deviations from what we expect cause us to experience a heightened state of arousal. She wasn't necessarily referring to the heart-pounding, sweaty-palms reaction that drives us to fight or flight. Instead, she pictured violations stimulating us to review the nature of our relationship with the person who acted in a curious way. That would be good news for Belinda if I thought of her as a highly rewarding person. But every comment she made in class seemed to me a direct challenge, dripping with sarcasm. Just as Burgoon predicted, the narrow, 2-foot gap Belinda chose focused my attention on our rocky relationship, and I declined her request for help in another course. Score one for the nonverbal expectancy violations model.

Charlie. Charlie was a nice guy who cared more about having a good time than he did about studies. He knew I'd played water polo in college, but he may not have realized that his casual attitude toward the class was a constant reminder that I wasn't as good a teacher as I wanted to be. In her 1978 *HRC* article, Burgoon wrote that a person with "punishing power" (like Charlie) would do best to observe proxemic conventions or, better yet, stand slightly farther away than expected. Without ever hearing Burgoon's advice, Charlie did it right. He backed off to a distance of 7 feet—just outside the range of interaction I anticipated. Even so, I declined his offer to swim with the guys.

Dawn. According to this nonverbal expectancy violations model, Dawn blew it. Because she was an attractive communicator, a warm, close approach would have been a pleasant surprise. But her decision to issue an invitation from across the room would seem to guarantee a poor response. The farther she backed off, the worse the effect would be. There's only one problem with this analysis: Dawn and I had lunch together in the student union the following day.

Obviously, my attempt to apply Burgoon's original model to conversational distance between me and my students didn't meet with much success. The theoretical scoreboard read:

Nonverbal expectancy violations model: **1**
Unpredicted random behavior: **3**

Burgoon's first controlled experiments didn't fare much better. But where I was ready to dismiss the whole model as flawed, she was unwilling to abandon *expectancy violation* as a key concept in human interaction. At the end of her journal article she hinted that some of her basic assumptions might need to be tested and reevaluated.

Of course that was then; this is now. Over the last three decades, Judee Burgoon and her students have crafted a series of sophisticated laboratory experiments and field studies to discover and explain the effects of expectancy violations. One of the reasons I chose to write about her theory is that the current version is an excellent example of ideas continually revised as a result of empirical disconfirmation. As she has demonstrated, in science, failure can lead to success.

A CONVOLUTED MODEL BECOMES AN ELEGANT THEORY

When applied to theories, the term *elegant* suggests "gracefully concise and simple; admirably succinct."[6] That's what expectancy violations theory has become. Burgoon has dropped concepts that were central in earlier versions but never panned out. Early on, for example, she abandoned the idea of a "threat threshold." Even though that hypothetical boundary made intuitive sense, repeated experimentation failed to confirm its existence.

Burgoon's retreat from *arousal* as an explanatory mechanism has been more gradual. She originally stated that people felt physiologically aroused when their proxemic expectations were violated. Later she softened the concept to "an orienting response" or a mental "alertness" that focuses attention on the violator. She now views arousal as a side effect of a partner's deviation and no longer considers it a necessary link between expectancy violation and communication outcomes such as attraction, credibility, persuasion, and involvement.

Arousal, relational
A heightened state of awareness, orienting response, or mental alertness that stimulates a review of the relationship.

By removing extraneous features, Burgoon has streamlined her model. By extending its scope, she has produced a complete theory. Her original nonverbal expectancy violations model was concerned only with spatial violations—a rather narrow focus. But by the mid-1980s, Burgoon had realized that proxemic behavior is part of an interconnected system of nonlinguistic cues. It no longer made sense to study interpersonal distance in isolation. She began to apply the model to a host of other nonverbal variables—facial expression, eye contact, touch, and body lean, for example. Burgoon continues to expand the range of expectancy violations. While not losing interest in nonverbal communication, she now applies the theory to what's said in emotional, marital, and intercultural communication as well. Consistent with this broad sweep, she has dropped the *nonverbal* qualifier and refers to her theory as "expectancy violations theory" and abbreviates it EVT. From this point on, so will I.

What does EVT predict? Burgoon sums up her empirically driven conclusions in a single paragraph. It is my hope that my long narrative account of the theory's development will help you appreciate the 30 years of work that lie behind these simple lines.

> Expectancies exert significant influence on people's interaction patterns, on their impressions of one another, and on the outcomes of their interactions. Violations of expectations in turn may arouse and distract their recipients, shifting greater attention to the violator and the meaning of the violation itself. People who can assume that they are well regarded by their audience are safer engaging in violations and more likely to profit from doing so than are those who are poorly regarded. When the violation act is one that is likely to be ambiguous in its meaning or to carry multiple interpretations that are not uniformly positive or negative, then the reward valence of the communicator can be especially significant in moderating interpretations, evaluations, and subsequent outcomes. . . . In other cases, violations

have relatively consensual meanings and valences associated with them, so that engaging in them produces similar effects for positive- and negative-valenced communicators.[7]

CORE CONCEPTS OF EVT

A close reading of Burgoon's summary suggests that EVT offers a "soft determinism" rather than hard-core universal laws (see Chapter 2). The qualifying terms *may, more likely, can be,* and *relatively* reflect her belief that too many factors affect communication to allow us ever to discover simple cause-and-effect relationships. She does, however, hope to show a link among surprising interpersonal behavior and attraction, credibility, influence, and involvement. These are the potential outcomes of expectancy violation that Burgoon and her students explore. In order for us to appreciate the connection, we need to understand three core concepts of EVT: *expectancy, violation valence,* and *communicator reward valence.* I'll illustrate these three variables by referring back to my students' proxemic behavior and to another form of nonverbal communication—touch.

Expectancy

When I was a kid, my mother frequently gave notice that she *expected* me to be on my best behavior. I considered her words to be a wish or a warning rather than a forecast of my future actions. That is not how Burgoon uses the word. She and her colleagues "prefer to reserve the term *expectancy* for what is predicted to occur rather than what is desired."[8] Figure 7–1 shows that I anticipated conversations with students to take place at a distance of 2½ to 6 feet. How did this expectation arise? Burgoon suggests that I processed the context, type of relationship, and characteristics of the others automatically in my mind so that I could gauge what they might do.

Expectancy
What people predict will happen, rather than what they desire.

Context begins with cultural norms. Three feet is too close in England or Germany yet too far removed in Saudi Arabia, where you can't trust people who won't let you smell their breath. Context also includes the setting of the conversation. A classroom environment dictates a greater speaking distance than would be appropriate for a private chat in my office.

Relationship factors include similarity, familiarity, liking, and relative status. In one study, Burgoon discovered that people of all ages and stations in life anticipate that lower-status people will keep their distance. Because of our age difference and teacher–student relationship, I was more surprised by Andre's and Belinda's invasion of my personal space than I was by Charlie's and Dawn's remote location.

Communicator characteristics include all of the age/sex/place-of-birth demographic facts asked for on application forms, but they also include personal features that may affect expectation even more—physical appearance, personality, and communication style. Dawn's warm smile was a counterpoint to Belinda's caustic comments. Given this difference, I would have assumed that Dawn would be the one to draw close and Belinda the one to keep her distance. That's why I was especially curious when each woman's spatial "transgression" was the opposite of what I would have predicted.

We can do a similar analysis of my expectation for touch in that classroom situation. Edward Hall claimed that the United States is a "noncontact culture,"

so I wouldn't anticipate touch during the course of normal conversation.[9] Does this mean that Latin American or Southern European "contact cultures" wouldn't have tight expectations for nonverbal interaction? By no means; Burgoon is convinced that all cultures have a similar *structure* of expected communication behavior but that the *content* of those expectations can differ markedly from culture to culture. Touch is fraught with meaning in every society, but the who, when, where, and how of touching are a matter of culture-specific standards and customs.

As a male in a role relationship, it never occurred to me that students might make physical contact while voicing their requests. If it had, Dawn would have been the likely candidate. But at her chosen distance of 25 feet, she'd need to be a bionic woman to reach me. As it was, I would have been shocked if she'd violated my expectation and walked over to give me a hug. (As a lead-in to the next two sections, note that I didn't say I would have been disturbed, distressed, or disgusted.)

Violation Valence

Violation valence
The perceived positive or negative value assigned to a breach of expectations, regardless of who the violator is.

The term *violation valence* refers to the positive or negative value we place on a specific unexpected behavior, regardless of who does it. Do we find the act itself pleasing or distressing, and to what extent? With her commitment to the scientific method, Burgoon may have borrowed the concept of valence from chemistry, where the valence of a substance is indicated by a number and its sign (+3 or −2, for example). The term *net worth* from the field of accounting seems to capture the same idea.

We usually give others a bit of wiggle room to deviate from what we regard as standard operating procedure. But once we deal with someone who acts outside the range of expected behavior, we switch into evaluation mode. According to Burgoon, we first try to interpret the meaning of the violation, and then figure out whether we like it.

The meaning of some violations is easy to spot. As a case in point, no one would agonize over how to interpret a purposeful poke in the eye with a sharp stick. It's a hostile act, and if it happened to us, we'd be livid. Many nonverbal behaviors are that straightforward. For example, moderate to prolonged eye contact in Western cultures usually communicates awareness, interest, affection, and trust. A level gaze is welcome; shifty eyes are not. With the exception of a riveting stare, we value eye contact. Even Emerson, a man of letters, wrote, "The eyes of men converse as much as their tongues, with the advantage that the ocular dialect needs no dictionary. . . ."[10]

When a behavior has a socially recognized meaning, communicators can usually figure out whether to go beyond what others expect. If the valence is negative, do less than expected. If the valence is positive, go further. Burgoon validated this advice when she studied the effect of expectancy on marital satisfaction.[11] She questioned people about how much intimate communication they expected from their partner compared to how much focused conversation they actually got. Not surprisingly, intimacy was ranked as positive. Partners who received about as much intimacy as they expected were moderately satisfied with their marriages. But people were highly satisfied with their marriages when they had more good talks with their husbands or wives than they originally thought they would.

On the other hand, many expectancy violations are ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. For example, the meaning of unexpected touch can be puzzling. Is it a mark of total involvement in the conversation, a sign of warmth and affection, a display of dominance, or a sexual move? Distance violations can also be confusing. Andre isn't from the Middle East, so why was he standing so close? I don't bark or bite, so why did Dawn issue her invitation from across the room? According to EVT, it's at times like these that we consider the reward valence of the communicator as well as the valence of the violation.

Before we look at the way communicator reward valence fits into the theory, you should know that Burgoon has found few nonverbal behaviors that are ambiguous when seen in a larger context. A touch on the arm might be enigmatic in isolation, but when experienced along with close proximity, forward body lean, a direct gaze, facial animation, and verbal fluency, almost everyone interprets the physical contact as a sign of high involvement in the conversation.[12] Or consider actor Eric Idle's words and nonverbal manner in a *Monty Python* sketch. He punctuates his question about Terry Gilliam's wife with a burlesque wink, a leering tone of voice, and gestures to accompany his words: "Nudge nudge. Know what I mean? Say no more . . . know what I mean?"[13] Taken alone, an exaggerated wink or a dig with the elbow might have many possible meanings, but as part of a coordinated routine, both gestures clearly transform a questionable remark into a lewd comment.

There are times, however, when nonverbal expectancy violations are truly equivocal. The personal space deviations of my students are cases in point. Perhaps I just wasn't sensitive enough to pick up the cues that would help me make sense of their proxemic violations. But when the meaning of an action is unclear, EVT says that we interpret the violation in light of how the violator can affect our lives.

Communicator Reward Valence

EVT is not the only theory that describes the human tendency to size up other people in terms of the potential rewards they have to offer. *Social penetration theory* suggests that we live in an interpersonal economy in which we all "take stock" of the relational value of others we meet (see Chapter 9). The questions, *What can you do for me?* and *What can you do to me?* often cross our minds. Burgoon is not a cynic, but she thinks the issue of reward potential moves from the background to the foreground of our minds when someone violates our expectation and there's no social consensus as to the meaning of the act. She uses the term *communicator reward valence* to label the results of our mental audit of likely gains and losses.

Communicator reward valence
The sum of positive and negative attributes brought to the encounter plus the potential to reward or punish in the future.

The reward valence of a communicator is the sum of the positive and negative attributes that the person brings to the encounter plus the potential he or she has to reward or punish in the future. The resulting perception is usually a mix of good and bad and falls somewhere on a scale between those two poles. I'll illustrate communicator characteristics that Burgoon frequently mentions by reviewing one feature of each student that I thought about immediately after their perplexing spatial violations.

Andre was a brilliant student. Although writing recommendations is low on my list of fun things to do, I would bask in reflected glory if he were accepted into a top graduate program.

Belinda had a razor-sharp mind and a tongue to match. I'd already felt the sting of her verbal barbs and thought that thinly veiled criticism in the future was a distinct possibility.

Charlie was the classic goof-off—seldom in class and never prepared. I try to be evenhanded with everyone who signs up for my classes, but in Charlie's case I had to struggle not to take his casual attitude toward the course as a personal snub.

Dawn was a beautiful young woman with a warm smile. I felt great pleasure when she openly announced that I was her favorite teacher.

My views of Andre, Belinda, Charlie, and Dawn probably say more about me than they do about the four students. I'm not particularly proud of my stereotyped assessments, but apparently I have plenty of company in the criteria I used. Burgoon notes that the features that impressed me also weigh heavily with others when they compute a reward valence for someone who is violating their expectations. Status, ability, and good looks are standard "goodies" that enhance the other person's reward potential. The thrust of the conversation is even more important. Most of us value words that communicate acceptance, liking, appreciation, and trust. We're turned off by talk that conveys disinterest, disapproval, distrust, and rejection.

Why does Burgoon think that the expectancy violator's power to reward or punish is so crucial? Because puzzling violations force victims to search the social context for clues to their meaning.[14] Thus, an ambiguous violation embedded in a host of relationally warm signals takes on a positive cast. An equivocal violation from a punishing communicator stiffens our resistance.

Now that I've outlined EVT's core concepts of expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence, you can better understand the bottom-line advice that Burgoon's theory offers. Should you communicate in a totally unexpected way? If you're certain that the novelty will be a pleasant surprise, the answer is yes. But if you know that your outlandish behavior will offend, don't do it.

When you aren't sure how others will interpret your far-out behavior, let their overall attitude toward you dictate your verbal and nonverbal actions. So if like Belinda and Charlie you have reason to suspect a strained relationship, and the meaning of a violation might be unclear, stifle your deviant tendencies and do your best to conform to expectations. But when you know you've already created a positive personal impression (like Andre or Dawn), a surprise move is not only safe, it probably will enhance the positive effect of your message.

INTERACTION ADAPTATION—ADJUSTING EXPECTATIONS

As evidence of its predictive power, EVT has been used to explain and predict attitudes and behaviors in a wide variety of communication contexts. These include students' perceptions of their instructors, patients' responses to health care providers, and individuals' actions in romantic relationships. For example, Arizona State University communication professor Paul Mongeau has studied men and women's expectations for first dates and compares those expectations with their actual experiences.[15] He discovered that men are pleasantly surprised when a woman initiates a first date and that they usually interpret such a request as a sign that she's interested in sexual activity. But there's a second surprise in store for most of these guys when it turns out that they have less physical intimacy than they do on the traditional male-initiated first date. We might expect that the men's disappointment would put a damper on future dates together, but surprisingly it doesn't.

For Mongeau, EVT explains how dating partners' expectations are affected by who asks out whom. Yet unlike early tests of EVT, Mongeau's work considers how one person's actions might reshape a dating partner's perceptions after their time together—a morning-after-the-night-before adjustment of expectations. In the same way, Burgoon has reassessed EVT's single-sided view and now favors a dyadic model of adaptation. That's because she regards conversations as more akin to duets than solos. Interpersonal interactions involve synchronized actions rather than unilateral moves. Along with her former students Lesa Stern and Leesa Dillman, Burgoon has crafted *interaction adaptation theory* (IAT) as an extension and expansion of EVT.[16]

Interaction adaptation theory
A systematic analysis of how people adjust their approach when another's behavior doesn't mesh with what's needed, anticipated, or preferred.

Burgoon states that human beings are predisposed to adapt to each other. That's often necessary, she says, because another person's actions may not square with the thoughts and feelings we bring to our interaction. She sees this initial *interaction position* as made up of three factors: requirements, expectations, and desires. *Requirements* (R) are the outcomes that fulfill our basic needs to survive, be safe, belong, and have a sense of self-worth. These are the panhuman motivations that Abraham Maslow outlined in his famous hierarchy of needs.[17] As opposed to requirements that represent what we need to happen, *expectations* (E) as defined in EVT are what we think really will happen. Finally, *desires* (D) are what we personally would like to see happen. These RED factors coalesce or meld into our interaction position of what's needed, anticipated, and preferred. I'll continue to use touch behavior to show how Burgoon uses this composite mindset to predict how we adjust to another person's behavior.

Interaction position
A person's initial stance toward an interaction as determined by a blend of personal requirements, expectations, and desires (RED).

In her course application log, Lindi briefly describes a roommate's unanticipated interaction with a casual friend:

> At the end of last year my roommate was hanging out with a bunch of our friends late at night and one of the guys started playing with her hair and continued to do so for the rest of the night. This unexpected violation of her personal space surprised her, but turned out to be a very pleasant experience. She was forced then to reevaluate their relationship. Even though they didn't develop a romantic relationship, this violation brought them closer together and helped them redefine their friendship.

Although details are sparse, it's possible to approximate the roommate's interactional position at the start of the evening. Her willingness to spend the night hanging around with a group of friends suggests that she has a high need or requirement for affiliation and belongingness (R). Given her surprise at the fellow fiddling with her hair, we can assume that this ongoing touch was definitely not the behavioral norm of the group, nor what she expected based on the guy's past behavior (E). Yet her pleasure with this fellow's continual touch indicates that she had a strong desire for this kind of personal attention from him (D). Her initial interaction position would therefore be an amalgam of what she needed, expected, and preferred.

With the help of hindsight, we can see that the valence of the guy playing with her hair was more positive than her interaction position. According to IAT, the pattern of response would therefore be one of reciprocity or convergence. Reciprocity would mean that she then ran her fingers through his hair. There's no hint that this happened. Yet since the whole group of friends could monitor her response, it's unlikely he would have continued with this form of touch unless she encouraged him with a smile or words indicating pleasure. That

would be convergence. If, on the other hand, the valence she assigned to him messing with her hair was more negative than her interaction position, Burgoon predicts some form of compensation or divergent behavior. She might lean away from him, excuse herself to comb her hair, or simply look at him and say, "Cut it out." Unlike EVT, IAT addresses how people adjust their behavior when others violate their expectations.

Burgoon outlined two shortcomings of expectancy violations theory that she found particularly troubling:

Reciprocity
A strong human tendency to respond to another's action with similar behavior.

> First, EVT does not fully account for the overwhelming prevalence of reciprocity that has been found in interpersonal interactions. Second, it is silent on whether communication valence supersedes behavior valence or vice versa when the two are incongruent (such as when a disliked partner engages in a positive violation).[18]

Interaction adaptation theory is Burgoon's attempt to address these problems within the broader framework of ongoing behavioral adjustments. There's obviously more to the theory than I've been able to present, but hopefully this brief sketch lets you see that for Burgoon, one theory leads to another.

CRITIQUE: A WELL-REGARDED WORK IN PROGRESS

I have a friend who fixes my all-terrain cycle whenever I bend it or break it. "What do you think?" I ask Bill. "Can it be repaired?" His response is always the same: "Man made it. Man can fix it!"

Judee Burgoon shows the same resolve as she seeks to adjust and redesign an expectancy violations model that never quite works as well in practice as its theoretical blueprint says it should. Almost every empirical test she runs seems to yield mixed results. For example, her early work on physical contact suggested that touch violations were often ambiguous. However, a sophisticated experiment she ran in 1992 showed that unexpected touch in a problem-solving situation was almost always welcomed as a positive violation, regardless of the status, gender, or attractiveness of the violator.

Do repeated failures to predict outcomes when a person stands far away, moves in too close, or reaches out to touch someone imply that Burgoon ought to trade in her expectancy violations theory for a new model? Does IAT render EVT obsolete? From my perspective, the answer is no.

Taken as a whole, Burgoon's expectancy violations theory continues to meet five of the six criteria of a good scientific theory, as presented in Chapter 3. Her theory advances a reasonable *explanation* for the effects of expectancy violations during communication. The explanation she offers is *relatively simple* and has actually become less complex over time. The theory has *testable hypotheses* that the theorist is willing to adjust when her *quantitative research* doesn't support the prediction. Finally, the model offers *practical advice* on how to better achieve important communication goals of increased credibility, influence, and attraction. Could we ask for anything more? Of course.

We could wish for *predictions* that prove more reliable than the *Farmer's Almanac* long-range forecast of weather trends. A review of expectancy violations research suggests that EVT may have reached that point. For example, a comparative empirical study tested how well three leading theories predict interpersonal responses to

nonverbal immediacy—close proximity, touch, direct gaze, direct body orientation, and forward lean.[19] None of the theories proved to be right all of the time, but EVT did better than the other two. And based on what a revised EVT now predicts, the scoreboard for my responses to the proxemic violations of Andre, Belinda, Charlie, and Dawn shows four hits and no misses.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

EVT focuses on what's *effective*. But, according to German philosopher Immanuel Kant, before we knowingly violate another's expectation we should consider what's *ethical*. Kant believed that any time we speak or act, we have a moral obligation to be truthful. He wrote that "truthfulness in statements which cannot be avoided is the formal duty of an individual to everyone, however great may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or another."[20] Others might wink at white lies, justify deception for the other's own good, or warn of the dire consequences that can result from total honesty. But from Kant's perspective, there are no mitigating circumstances. Lying is wrong—always. So is breaking a promise. He'd regard nonverbal deception the same way.

Kant came to this absolutist position through the logic of his *categorical imperative,* a term that means duty without exception. He stated the categorical imperative as an ethical absolute: "Act only on that maxim which you can will to become a universal law."[21] In terms of EVT, Kant would have us look at the violation we are considering and ask, *What if everybody did that all the time?* If we don't like the answer, we have a solemn duty not to do the deed.

Categorical imperative Duty without exception; act only on that maxim which you can will to become a universal law.

The categorical imperative is a method of determining right from wrong by thinking through the ethical valence of an act, regardless of motive. Suppose we're thinking about touching someone in a way he or she doesn't expect and hasn't clearly let us know is welcome. Perhaps the other person, like Lindi's roommate, might be pleasantly surprised. But unless we can embrace the idea of everyone—no matter what their communication reward valence—having that kind of unbidden access to everybody, the categorical imperative says don't do it. No exceptions. In the words of a sports-minded colleague who teaches ethics, "Kant plays ethical hardball without a mitt." If we say, *I "Kant" play in that league,* what ethical scorecard will we use in place of his categorical imperative?

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What *proxemic* advice would you give to communicators who believe they are seen as *unrewarding?*

2. Except for ritual handshakes, *touch* is often *unexpected* in *casual relationships.* If you don't know someone well, what is the *violation valence* you ascribe to a light touch on the arm, a brief touch on the cheek, or a shoulder hug?

3. EVT suggests that *communicator reward valence* is especially important when the *violation valence* is equivocal. What verbal or nonverbal expectancy violations would be confusing to you even when experienced in context?

4. EVT and coordinated management of meaning (see Chapter 6) hold divergent assumptions about the nature of *knowledge, reality,* and *communication research.* Can you draw the distinctions?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

A few minutes into my discussion with Judee Burgoon, you'll notice that one of us violates a communication expectation of the other. See if you think the violation is accidental or strategic. How does this event affect the rest of the conversation? Burgoon's love of theory is apparent throughout the segment. Do you think her enthusiasm is bolstered by a view of theories as systematic hunches rather than timeless principles chiseled in stone? As a scientist, Burgoon believes that much of human behavior is genetically programmed, yet she insists that communication is also a choice-driven, strategic behavior. As you watch, decide whether you think these beliefs are compatible.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Judee K. Burgoon and Jerold Hale, "Nonverbal Expectancy Violations: Model Elaboration and Application to Immediacy Behaviors," *Communication Monographs,* Vol. 55, 1988, pp. 58–79.

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Nonverbal persuasion: Judee K. Burgoon, Norah E. Dunbar, and Chris Segrin, "Nonverbal Influence," in *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice,* James Dillard and Michael Pfau (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, pp. 445–473.

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Kant's categorical imperative: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* H. J. Paton (trans.), Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1964, pp. 60–88.

Critique: Peter A. Andersen, Laura K. Guerrero, David B. Buller, and Peter F. Jorgensen, "An Empirical Comparison of Three Theories of Nonverbal Immediacy Exchange," *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 24, 1998, pp. 501–535.

To access a chapter on Hall's proxemic theory that appeared in a previous edition, click on Theory List at *www.afirstlook.com*.

CHAPTER 8

Socio-psychological tradition
Rhetorical tradition

Constructivism

of Jesse Delia

Constructivism is a communication theory that seeks to explain individual differences in people's ability to communicate skillfully in social situations. You probably don't need to be convinced that some people are better at understanding, attracting, persuading, informing, comforting, or entertaining others with whom they talk. In fact, you may be taking communication courses so that you can become more adept at reaching these communication goals. Although some might suspect that communication success is simply a matter of becoming more assertive or outgoing, Jesse Delia believes that there is a crucial behind-the-eyes difference in people who are interpersonally effective. His theory of constructivism offers a cognitive explanation for communication competence.

Delia is the former chair of the department of speech communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and now serves as the executive director of international research relations at the school. Along with a network of constructivist researchers, he uses Walter Crockett's open-ended Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ) to help us "get inside our head."[1] So that you fully understand the theory and what it says about your communication, take 10 minutes to respond to the RCQ before you become sensitized to what the survey is measuring.

ROLE CATEGORY QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

Think of people about your age whom you know well. Select one person you like and pick someone you dislike. Once you have two specific people in mind, spend a moment to mentally compare and contrast them in terms of personality, habits, beliefs, and the way they treat others. Don't limit yourself to similarities and differences between the two; let your mind play over the full range of characteristics that make them who they are.

Now take a piece of paper and for about five minutes describe the person you enjoy so that a stranger would understand what he or she is like. Skip physical characteristics, but list all of the attributes, mannerisms, and reactions to others that identify who he or she is.

When you've finished the description, do the same thing for the person you don't like. Again, write down all the personal characteristics or actions that you associate with that person. Spend about five minutes on this description.

INTERPERSONAL CONSTRUCTS AS EVIDENCE OF COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY

The core assumption of constructivism is that "persons make sense of the world through systems of personal constructs."[2] *Constructs* are the cognitive templates or stencils we fit over reality to bring order to our perceptions. The Role Category Questionnaire is designed to sample the interpersonal constructs in our mental toolbox that we bring to the construction site of meaning—the central processing function of our minds. Much like sets of opposing terms (warm-cool, good-bad, fast-slow), constructs are contrasting features that we have available to classify other people.

Interpersonal constructs The cognitive templates or stencils we fit over social reality to order our impressions of people.

A police artist has an identification kit with which an eyewitness can construct the face of a suspect. By systematically altering the shape of the chin, size of the nose, distance between the eyes, line of the hair, and so forth, the witness can build a likeness of the person in question. However, the RCQ doesn't bother with physical features. It centers on the categories of personality and action that we use to define the character of another person.

Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ) A free-response survey designed to measure the cognitive complexity of a person's interpersonal perception.

The arena of politics offers a familiar example of the way we use constructs to describe another individual. All of us have our own bipolar dimensions of judgment that we apply to politicians. Some typical scales are liberal-conservative, steadfast-flexible, competent-inept. The politically astute observer may draw on dozens of these interpretive orientations to describe shades of difference. There are *conservatives,* and there are *social* conservatives. Then there are *articulate* social conservatives. Some of them are *belligerent,* and so forth. On the other hand, those who are politically unsophisticated may use only one value-laden construct as they watch the six o'clock news. They see only winners and losers.

An Index of Social Perception Skills

Researchers who rely on the RCQ are trying to determine our degree of *cognitive complexity* as we form impressions of other people and analyze social situations. They are convinced that people with a large set of interpersonal constructs have better *social perception skills* than those whose set of mental templates is relatively small. Those skills include figuring out others' personality traits, where they stand in relationship to us, what they are doing, and why they are doing it. Impression formation is the crucial first step in relational development, and cognitively complex people have a definite advantage in that process. They also are better able to "take the role of the other," the mental perspective-taking that makes humans unique, according to Mead (see Chapter 5). Brant Burleson (Purdue University), a longtime colleague of Delia in the constructivism project, maintains that those who have high levels of cognitive complexity are comparative experts when it comes to understanding the people and events in their social world.[3]

Cognitive complexity The mental ability to distinguish subtle personality and behavior differences among people.

Cognitive theorists like Delia and Burleson distinguish between mental *structures* and mental *processes*. What you know about word processing on your computer may help you understand the different roles of structure and process in the mind. The computer hardware is the structure. What the software does when we strike a function key is the process. A four-year-old boy at a playground explained to me the difference between mental structure and mental process without ever using those terms. "My brain is like a jungle gym," he said. "Thinking is like climbing all over it."

Delia and Burleson are more concerned with the *structure* of our constructs than with the actual judgments we make. Consistent with that focus, it's been said that there are two kinds of people in the world—those who think there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. Constructivists believe that the first kind of person is cognitively immature because he or she is able to see others only in terms of black and white. But the second type of person has developed into a sophisticated observer of the human scene, capable of distinguishing subtle differences among people. When it comes to thinking about these differences, the Role Category Questionnaire is designed to gauge how intricate the jungle gym in your head might be.

SCORING THE RCQ FOR CONSTRUCT DIFFERENTIATION

Although the RCQ can be scored in different ways, most constructivist researchers cull the descriptions of liked and disliked peers for the amount of construct differentiation. *Differentiation* is defined as the number of separate personality constructs used to portray the person in question. I'll take you through a shorthand version of the scoring procedure so you can see how constructivists might rate you on cognitive complexity.

Differentiation
The main component of cognitive complexity as measured by the number of separate personal constructs used on the RCQ.

Let's assume you wrote about the personal characteristics of a friend named Chris and a co-worker named Alex. Add up the number of different descriptions you used to describe both people. As a rule of thumb, consider that each new term represents an additional mental construct. Seeing Chris as both *sharp* and *competent* would earn two points. So would a judgment that Alex is *hurried* and *never has time.* But there are exceptions to the one-term-equals-one-construct rule.

Adjectives and adverbs that merely modify the extent of a characteristic don't reflect additional constructs. Score just one point if you wrote that Chris is *totally sincere.* Since idioms such as *good ole boy* have a single referent, they get a single point as well. On their own, physical descriptions (*tall*) and demographic labels (*Irish*) say nothing about character, so skip over them. Apart from these rules, close calls should get the benefit of the doubt and score an extra point.

Constructivists regard the combined number of constructs for both descriptions as an index of cognitive complexity. The higher your score, the more elaborate the structure within your mind over which your interpersonal perceptions play. I've seen individual scores as low as 6 and as high as 45, but about 70 percent of college students score between 15 and 25, with a mean of 20. Burleson interprets any score over 25 as a reliable indicator of high interpersonal cognitive complexity.

Are RCQ scores really an accurate measure of cognitive complexity? Delia makes a good case for their validity. His claim that cognitive complexity develops with a child's chronological age is reflected in progressively higher scores as youngsters grow older. He also believes that individual differences between adults should be relatively stable over time. That standard has been met through good test-retest reliability.

Finally, Delia notes that a pure test of personality shouldn't be confounded by other character traits or extraneous factors. Research has established that RCQ scores are independent of IQ, empathy, writing skill, and extroversion. Some critics charge that it's merely a measure of loquacity, or wordiness, but constructivists maintain that high scores on this free-response test take more than the gift of gab. What's required is a wide range of interpersonal constructs.

PERSON-CENTERED MESSAGES—THE INTERPERSONAL EDGE

Now that you have an idea of what's involved in cognitive complexity, we'll consider the main hypothesis of constructivism. Delia and his colleagues claim that people who are cognitively complex in their perceptions of others have a communication advantage over those with less developed mental structures. These fortunate individuals have the ability to produce person-centered messages that give them a better chance to achieve their communication goals.

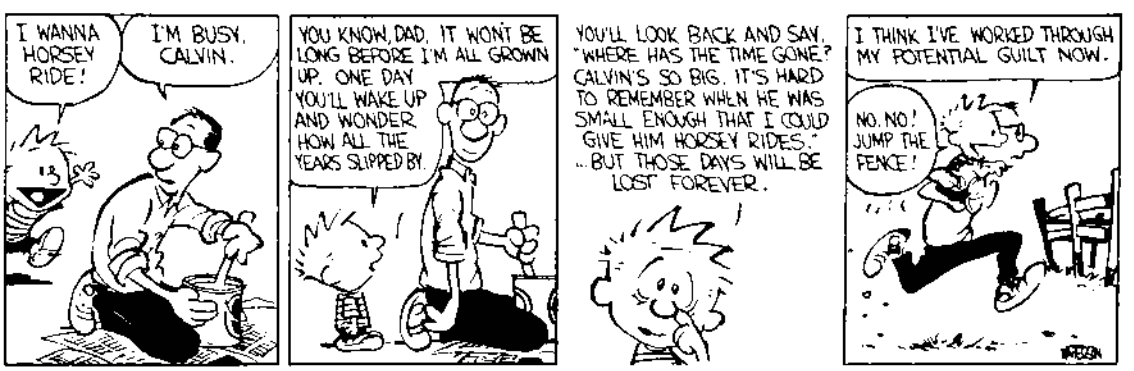
As Delia uses the phrase, *person-centered messages* refers to "messages which reflect an awareness of and adaptation to subjective, affective, and relational aspects of the communication contexts."[4] In other words, the speaker is able to anticipate how different individuals might respond to a message, and adjust his or her communication accordingly.

Person-centered message
A tailor-made message for a specific individual and context; reflects the communicator's ability to anticipate response and adjust accordingly.

The study by Ruth Ann Clark and Delia of second- to ninth-grade schoolchildren is a prototype of constructivist research that links person-centered messages to cognitive complexity.[5] It focused on the children's ability to adapt persuasive appeals to different target listeners. After taking the RCQ orally, the kids were given the role-play task of convincing a woman they didn't know to keep a lost puppy.

Naturally, the quality of messages differed. Some children showed no realization that the woman's perspective on the matter might be different from their own. Other kids recognized the difference but failed to adapt their message to this reality. A more sophisticated group took notice of the difference and were able to imagine what the woman was thinking. ("My husband will think I'm a sucker for every stray in town.") They then could make an attempt to refute the counterarguments they knew their appeal would raise. The most sophisticated messages also stressed the advantages that would come to her if she complied with the request. ("Having a dog for a companion will take away some of the loneliness you feel at night when your husband is out of town. He'll also feel better when he knows you've got a furry friend.")

Constructivists assume that strategic adaptation is a developmentally nurtured skill. Consistent with their belief, Clark and Delia found that the quality of messages improved as the age of the children increased. But differences in construct differentiation that weren't due to chronological age also had a significant impact. Cognitively complex students were two years ahead of their same-age classmates in the ability to encode person-centered messages. Thus, the older kids who possessed cognitive complexity beyond their years were best able to take the perspective of the other and tailor the message to the individual listener.



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Sophisticated communication
A person-centered message that accomplishes multiple goals.

Scholars who study communication use different terms to describe the capacity to create person-centered messages: *rhetorical sensitivity, taking the role of the other, identification, self-monitoring, audience awareness, listener adaptation.* Whatever we call it, the creation of person-centered messages is a *sophisticated communication skill*. Constructivists say cognitively complex people can do it better. Note that constructivists don't claim such people *always* do it, only that they have a capacity others don't. The way constructivists put it is that cognitive complexity is a "necessary but not sufficient condition" of person-centered messages."[6] Fatigue, the effects of alcohol, or pressure to conform to a fixed style of communication can mute the advantage. There are also many routine or mundane communication situations where this adaptive skill is neither called for nor particularly helpful. But when the stakes are high and emotions run deep, people who can craft person-centered messages are way ahead of the game.

MESSAGE PRODUCTION: CRAFTING GOAL-BASED PLANS FOR ACTION

Early versions of constructivism couldn't pin down the reason high construct differentiation usually leads to more effective communication. Like a terse bumper sticker, the theory proclaimed COGNITIVELY COMPLEX PERSONS CAN DO IT BETTER, but Delia wasn't sure why. By the late 1980s, however, other cognitive theorists had begun to develop models of *message production* that constructivists could use to explain the thought processes that tie cognitive structures to speech acts. Delia and his colleagues now consider the basic mental sequence that cognitive scientists outline as the missing link that connects mental complexity with person-centered messages.

For example, consider the workplace plight of a young single woman named Laura, whose married male boss suggests meeting together to talk about her career. At their business lunch he comes on to her—suggesting a sexual affair. Through no fault of her own, Laura's been placed in a tough communication situation.[7] In order to understand her thought process, we'll work through a *goals-plans-action model* of message production outlined by Pennsylvania State University communication professor James Dillard.[8]

Message production
A three-stage process of *goals* assessed, *plans* selected, and tactics enacted (*action*).

Goals

What does Laura want to accomplish? If her sole aim is to stop her employer's sleazy suggestions once and for all, she might adopt a simple plan of attack that creates a message expressing the repulsion she feels:

> You are the most rude and disgusting man I have ever met. You're nothing but a dirty old man. Where do you get off thinking you could force me to have an affair with you? You make me sick.[9]

But she may have another goal that's equally important to her, such as keeping her job. If so, she would have two primary persuasive goals, which she has to juggle. In other situations, she might have different primary communication goals—to inform, advise, comfort, entertain, gain assistance, or alter a relationship. These goals are called *primary* because they "set into motion an ensemble of lower-level cognitive processes that occur in parallel and align with the overall aim represented by the primary goal."[10]

The adoption of multiple primary goals usually prompts the rise of secondary goals. These additional but less important aims often conflict with the primary

goals. In Laura's case, stopping the harassment and protecting her job require that she find a way to save face for both her boss and herself. She needs to keep a good working relationship with him while preserving her professional identity and reputation. If, in fact, Laura does simultaneously pursue multiple interpersonal goals, it's a sign of her cognitive complexity. Burleson says that "people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity . . . tend to develop more complex and sophisticated goals for many social situations, especially those that appear challenging or demanding."[11] The number and variety of her interpersonal constructs also equip her to develop a multifaceted plan that can pull it off.

Plans

Once Laura knows what she wants her response to accomplish, she'll devise a message plan using *procedural records* that are stored in her long-term memory.[12] According to John Greene, a colleague of Burleson's at Purdue, a procedural record is a recollection of an action taken in a specific situation paired with its consequences—how things turned out. I think of it as a memory that has *if-when-then* implications for future actions. For example, suppose when Laura hears the unwanted sexual proposition from her boss, a long-dormant image pops into her conscious mind. She was 12 years old when the high school guy who lived next door suggested he give her kissing lessons. Confused and troubled by his offer, she laughed and treated the whole thing as a joke, although she knew he was serious. If she and her teenage neighbor maintained a casual, nonromantic relationship after the incident, the procedural record filed away in her long-term memory might take this form:

Procedural record
The recollection of an action taken in a specific situation paired with its consequences; an *if-when-then* memory.

If I want to avoid getting physical and not offend a guy (goals),

When he makes an improper sexual suggestion (situation),

Then I should pretend he's just kidding (action).

Laura may have more than a million procedural records in her long-term memory, but most of them aren't applicable to the problem posed by her employer's indecent proposal. The ones that will be activated and affect her message plan are the memories of times when she had similar goals in somewhat similar circumstances. Although not a perfect fit, the procedural record of how she handled her neighbor's proposal is a close match and will probably inform her response to her boss. If she has lots of memories of successfully feigning ignorance of questionable motives in a variety of situations, this approach could become the top-down strategy that dictates all the other tactics in her message plan.

In an article describing his basic goals-plans-action model of message production, Dillard addresses a number of frequently asked questions about constructing a cognitive plan.[13] Perhaps you'll find that format helpful to better understand the thought process that Laura and the rest of us go through before we speak.

- *What do we do first?* We search our long-term memory for tried-and-true, boilerplate plans that are likely to achieve our primary goal(s).
- *What if none of these prepackaged plans seem promising?* We'll make an existing plan more complete by fleshing out the details, or we'll make it more complex by adding steps to cover many contingencies.

- *Are we consciously aware that we're engaged in this mental process?* Most of this mental activity takes place below our level of consciousness. Yet if someone asked us to reflect on why we said what we did, we'd be able to identify the goals our plan was meant to serve.
- *How long does it take for goals to activate procedural records and to assemble them into a message plan?* Usually it's a matter of milliseconds. But if we decide to create a novel message plan rather than adopting or adapting an existing one, the mental process will take more time and effort.
- *Can we change the plan in midconversation?* Definitely—and we usually do if we aren't getting our hoped-for response. Berger's hierarchy hypothesis (see Chapter 10) suggests that we will alter low-level elements of the plan such as word choice or facial expression—changes that won't demand wholesale reorganization. If, however, we change our *goals* midstream, we automatically discard the original plan and adopt or create another one.

Action

Person-centered messages are the form of communication that Delia wants to explain, predict, and promote. Because cognitively complex people have the social perception to see the necessity of pursuing multiple goals and the skills to develop message plans to achieve them, they are the fortunate folks who can communicate skillfully when the situation demands it.

Most people regard the communication context as a factor that limits a speaker's options. It certainly seems that Laura is trapped in a no-win situation as the man who has power over her tries to use it to leverage sexual favors. But as a cognitively complex person, Laura has the ability to use context as a resource. The message she crafts parries her boss' unwelcome advances, salvages her job, and saves face both for herself *and* for him:

> We've got a great working relationship now, and I'd like us to work well together in the future. So I think it's important for us to talk this out. You're a smart and clear-thinking guy and I consider you to be my friend as well as my boss. That's why I have to think you must be under a lot of unusual stress lately to have said something like this. I know what it's like to be under pressure. Too much stress can really make you crazy. You probably just need a break.[14]

Some readers are bothered by this response. In their minds, Laura's words let her lecherous boss off the hook. These folks believe that a clear threat of exposure would be the appropriate way to block his sexual advances and possible retaliation for rejecting them. But from Laura's perspective, a person-centered message is the best way to meet her multiple concerns in this complex situation. By framing her employer's proposition as one that springs from stress rather than sleaze, Laura is able to achieve *all* her goals.

I've used the words spoken by a woman to illustrate a person-centered message. That choice is appropriate because women display this crucial communication skill more than men do. You therefore won't be surprised that the average female scores three points higher for construct differentiation on the RCQ than her male counterpart. It turns out to be a difference that makes a difference when a sophisticated interpersonal message is called for. Burleson suggests that we can spot the reason for this gender discrepancy through the social life of children

and adolescents. When guys get together they typically talk about others in terms of external *behaviors*—the sports they play, the cars they drive, the battles they fight. Conversely, girls tend to talk about *people*—their perceptions of internal motives, attitudes, traits, and personalities. As you'll see by the end of the chapter, it's by becoming sensitive to the inner life of others that a person's set of interpersonal constructs grows.

BENEFICIAL EFFECTS OF PERSON-CENTERED MESSAGES

Figure 8–1 portrays the linkages that constructivists have forged. High cognitive complexity facilitates sophisticated message plans, which in turn produce person-centered messages. Those links of the chain are well-established. Constructivist researchers have now turned to exploring the positive effects of person-centered messages on every conceivable form of communication outcome. We've already seen that these messages can be more persuasive. In this section I'll highlight the findings in three other areas of research that my students have found particularly interesting.

Social support messages try to ease the emotional distress experienced by others. Burleson has developed a nine-stage hierarchical scale to code the degree of comfort a message of support offers. At the bottom end are messages that dismiss the thoughts and feelings of the person who is hurting. Moderately comforting messages express sympathy, yet try to shift attention away from the other's loss or offer explanations for why it occurred. Highly person-centered messages

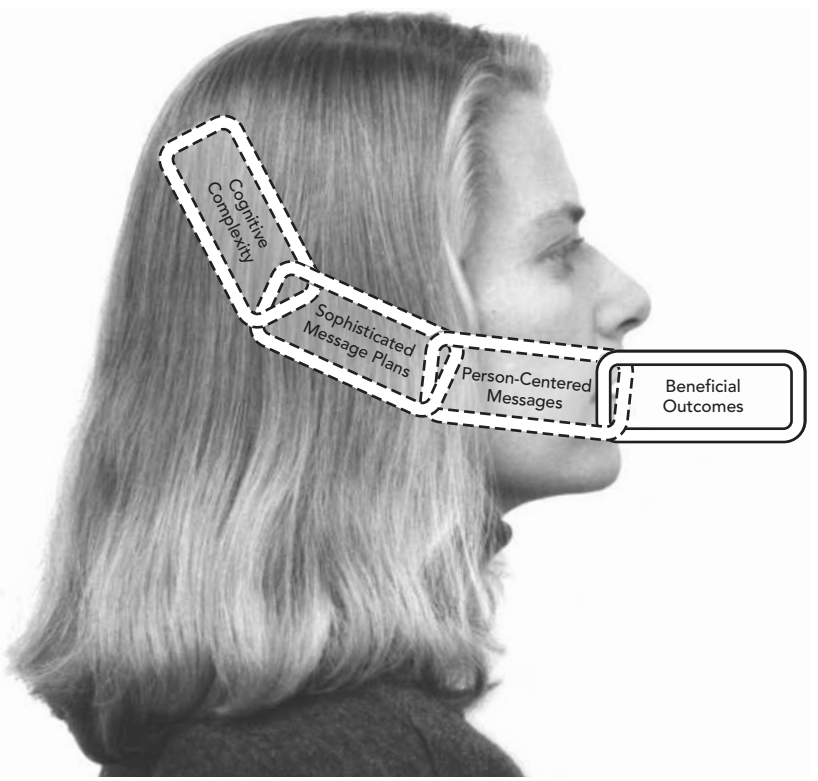

FIGURE 8–1 The Chain of Person-Centered Message Production

validate the other's feelings and may offer an additional perspective to the situation.[15] My student Camie describes the difference in the quality of support she felt after her beloved grandmother died.

> That evening my best friend Aly took me outside on the patio and we watched the sunset. She put her arm around me and said, "Camie, I know you miss Grandma June tons right now. I can't say anything to take away the pain or to ease the grief, but I am here for you. Cry on my shoulder whenever you need to and take comfort in that she is with Jesus right now, helping him to paint this beautiful sky for us to watch." I began to bawl and she just sat there with me and let me cry. It was so comforting. When I came back to school one of my roommates said, "I'm so sorry Camie. I had a grandmother die last year. Don't think about it too much because it will just make you sadder. Know that she is with God." I told her, "Thank you," but inside I was screaming, "You idiot! That doesn't give me any comfort." Now that I've read about constructivism I realize that she may care about me just as much as Aly, but not have the degree of cognitive complexity she'd need to construct a person-centered message.

You may be surprised at Camie's vehement reaction to her roommate's mid-level message of support. But perhaps Camie has an interpersonal cognitive complexity that equals or surpasses what she sees in her friend Aly. Burleson has found that those who score high on the RCQ have the capacity to listen more acutely than others. One result of this in-depth listening ability is that person-centered assurances of support feel especially comforting and those that miss the mark strike them as clueless.[16] In general, sophisticated messages are usually experienced as more comforting than clumsy attempts at social support. You hope that's reward enough for the friend who offers well-chosen words in a time of need. But Burleson notes that other positive outcomes accrue to the sensitive comforter:

> Compared to persons using less sophisticated comforting strategies, users of sophisticated strategies are better liked and more positively evaluated by both message recipients and observers. Further, users of sophisticated comforting strategies report feeling better both about themselves and those they try to help.[17]

Relationship maintenance is a process distinct from relationship development. Voluntary relationships usually begin through mutual attraction, self-disclosure, and reduction of uncertainty. Once the relationship is established, however, its ongoing health requires periodic affirmation, conflict resolution, and the type of comforting communication that Burleson describes. As with any interpersonal skill, some people are better at relationship maintenance than others. Burleson and Wendy Samter of Bryant College figured that people with sophisticated communication skills would be especially good at sustaining close friendships. It turns out they were only partially right.[18]

To test their hypothesis, Burleson and Samter reviewed their own previous studies on friendship as well as the work of other researchers. They discovered a consistent pattern, which they labeled the *similar skills model.* To their surprise, individuals' ability to give ego support, resolve conflict, and provide comfort in times of stress did little to guarantee that their close personal relationships would survive and thrive. But the degree of similarity with their partner did. Friendships tended to last when partners possessed matching verbal skills—high or low. Apparently, highly refined communication skills are an advantage in friendship only when the other has the sophistication to appreciate them. And a person

Similar skills model
A hypothesis that relationships fare better when parties possess the same level of verbal sophistication.

with few of these abilities may be more comfortable spending time with someone who likes the same activities, can tell a good story, and isn't always "talking about feelings" or "pushing that touchy-feely crap."[19]

Organizational effectiveness isn't determined by a single sophisticated message. According to constructivist theory, high performance and promotion reflect a continual use of person-centered communication that seeks to achieve multiple goals with customers and co-workers. Employees who do it better should climb the corporate ladder faster.

Beverly Sypher (Purdue University) and Theodore Zorn (University of Waikato, New Zealand) conducted a longitudinal study of 90 white-collar workers at a large U.S. insurance company.[20] At the start of the study they measured cognitive complexity with the RCQ, tested for perspective-taking ability, and gauged communication skill by asking employees to write a charitable fundraising appeal. As expected, workers with highly developed social constructs wrote letters that were more persuasive. Four years later, Sypher and Zorn checked each employee's progress within the company. Cognitively complex workers had better-paying jobs and were moving up through the ranks of the company faster than were their less complex colleagues. Anytime we deal with people, cognitive complexity seems to play a significant role.

SOCIALIZING A NEW GENERATION OF SOPHISTICATED SPEAKERS

In early editions of this text, I chided constructivists for not addressing the question of how cognitively complex thinkers get that way. That's no longer a fair criticism. Burleson, Delia, and James Applegate of the University of Kentucky have marshaled evidence that complex thinking is a culturally transmitted trait. Specifically, they suggest that parents' capacity for complex social thinking is re-created in their children through complex messages of nurture and discipline.[21] Their claim is an extension of the truism that culture is produced and reproduced through the communication of its members.

Suppose, for example, a 5-year-old boy picks a flower from a neighbor's yard without permission and presents it to his mother. Almost any parent can scold the kid for stealing. ("Taking people's things without asking is wrong. Now go and apologize for taking the flower.") But it requires a mother with a complex set of interpersonal constructs to create a sophisticated message that encourages reflection and helps her son focus on the motivation, feelings, and intentions of others—mental exercises that increase the child's own cognitive complexity. After warmly thanking her son for the gift, such a mom might say:

> When people work hard to have things (flowers), they usually want to keep them to appreciate them. Mrs. Jones might have given you a flower if you'd asked, but taking things from people without asking upsets them a lot.

Who is most likely to use this form of sophisticated socialization? According to Burleson, Delia, and Applegate, parents from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are likely candidates. They inhabit a world of intricate work environments, role systems, and social expectations. This more complicated social world stimulates the development of more complex ways of thinking and communicating. And once developed, complex ways of thinking and acting tend to perpetuate themselves. The **culture → complexity → communication** path seems

to ensure that, cognitively speaking, the rich get richer. This cognitive fact of life was obvious to me in a paper submitted by Jane, a 40-year-old grad student in an interpersonal communication class. She recorded the precocious words of her 7-year-old daughter, Sunny, a child raised in the midst of sophisticated adult conversation.

> Mom, is nonverbal communication like when you don't point your face at me when we're talking about my day? Or when you say "Uh-huh" and "Really?" but your face doesn't move around like you really care what we're talking about? When you walk around cooking or Dad writes while we're talking, I feel like I'm boring. Sometimes when you guys talk to me it sounds like you're just teaching, not talking.

Constructivists would note that Sunny can reflect on her social world because communication from mother Jane has been anything but plain.

CRITIQUE: SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY

Delia launched what he called an interpretive theory of cognitive differences in the 1970s, when most communication scientists were trying to discover laws of behavior that applied equally to everyone. While these empirical researchers were assessing communication effectiveness by crunching the numbers from standardized attitude scales, Delia called for "free-response data" that could reflect subtle differences in mental processes. He believed that open-ended responses would also force researchers to become theoretically rigorous. Constructivist analysis of person-centered messages clearly meets that goal.

Constructivists' total reliance on the RCQ to gauge cognitive complexity is another story. It's difficult to accept the notion that a single number adequately reflects the intricate mental structures that exist behind the eyes. Doesn't it seem curious to ask respondents for their perceptions of two other people and then reduce their rich narratives to a mere frequency count of constructs? The total number may predict interesting communication differences, but explanatory depth is lacking.

A prophetic ethical voice also seems to be missing. If cognitive complexity is the key to interpersonal effectiveness, and if construct differentiation is enhanced by a privileged upbringing, advocates of the theory should devote some effort to creating reflective settings for disadvantaged kids. That way black-and-white thinkers could develop the ability to see shades of gray. There are precedents for such a reform agenda.

Once medical researchers discovered the brain-deadening effects of lead poisoning, they were quick to mount a public campaign to stop the use of lead-based paint. Likewise, teachers lobbied for "Project Head Start" when they realized that food for the stomach was a prerequisite of food for thought. Obviously poverty, peeling paint, and poor nutrition are linked, and constructivist research suggests that a childhood devoid of reflection-inducing communication is part of the same vicious circle. Constructivism is open to the charge of elitism unless the theorists devise a plan for remedial efforts that will help narrow the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Burleson is keenly aware of this weakness:

> As a communication researcher and educator, I find this situation embarrassing and unacceptable. We researchers now know a lot about cognitive complexity and advanced social perception and communication skills, but thus far there have been few efforts to translate what we know into proven programs that effectively enhance these skills.[22]

More than most scholars, constructivists are capable of spearheading a reform movement to shape public policy. Early on, Delia made a strong call for a "reflective analysis of the implicit assumptions and ordering principles underlying research questions and methods."[23] He launched a research program that models that commitment, and others have enlisted in the cause. As one of the best known theories about communication to spring from within the discipline, constructivism is worth thinking about.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How many points for *differentiation* would the phrase "humorous and totally funny" score on the *Role Category Questionnaire*?

2. Look at the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon on page 101. How would *constructivists* explain Calvin's success in getting a horsey ride from his father?

3. Sometimes during an argument, one kid will chide another with the words "Aw, grow up!" According to constructivists, the phrase offers good advice in a way that's ineffective. Why?

4. Osama bin Laden constructed a highly effective terrorist campaign that reflects *sophisticated message plans*. Can you explain why the successful achievement of his goals does not necessarily show that he is *cognitively complex* as Delia uses the term?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

In this discussion, Jesse Delia (right) is joined by Brant Burleson (center) and Jim Applegate (left), the other leading theorists on the constructivist research team. They link our ability to communicate effectively with our mental constructs, our degree of cognitive complexity, the way we process information, and the way we form impressions of others. The theorists then describe the advantages of crafting person-centered messages that are designed to accomplish multiple goals. How well do you think Delia, Burleson, and Applegate adapt their messages to their audience—students of communication theory? Do you think the theorists are pursuing multiple goals? If so, do they succeed?

A SECOND LOOK

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Message production in the mind: James Price Dillard, "The Goals-Plans-Action Model of Interpersonal Influence," in *Perspectives on Persuasion, Social Influence, and Compliance Gaining,* John Seiter and Robert Gass (eds.), Pearson, Boston, MA, 2003, pp. 185–206.

In-depth listening: Brant R. Burleson, "A Constructivist Approach to Listening," *International Journal of Listening,* in press.

Social support: Wendy Samter, "How Gender and Cognitive Complexity Influence the Provision of Emotional Support: A Study of Indirect Effects," *Communication Reports,* Vol. 15, 2002, pp. 5–16.

Relationship maintenance: Brant R. Burleson and Wendy Samter, "A Social Skills Approach to Relationship Maintenance," in *Communication and Relationship Maintenance,* Daniel Canary and Laura Stafford (eds.), Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 1994, pp. 61–90.

Developing cognitive complexity: Brant R. Burleson, Jesse Delia, and James Applegate, "The Socialization of Person-Centered Communication: Parental Contributions to the Social-Cognitive and Communication Skills of Their Children," in *Perspectives in Family Communication,* Mary Anne Fitzpatrick and Anita Vangelisti (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995, pp. 34–76.

Review and critique: John Gastil, "An Appraisal and Revision of the Constructivist Research Program," in *Communication Yearbook 18*, Brant R. Burleson (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995, pp. 83–104.

To access a chapter on Greene's action assembly theory that appeared in a previous edition, click on Theory List at *www.afirstlook.com.*

Relationship Development

Think about your closest personal relationship. Is it one of "strong, frequent and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time?"[1] That's how UCLA psychologist Harold Kelley and eight co-authors define the concept of close relationship. Though their definition could apply to parties who don't even like each other, most theorists reserve the term *close* for relationships that include a positive bond—usually romantic, friend, and family. All three types of intimacy can provide enjoyment, trust, sharing of confidences, respect, mutual assistance, and spontaneity.[2] The question is, *How do we develop a close relationship?*

Two distinct approaches have dominated the theory and practice of relational development. One *experiential approach* is typified by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. Based upon his years of nondirective counseling, Rogers described three necessary and sufficient conditions for relationship growth. When partners perceived (1) congruence; (2) unconditional positive regard; and (3) empathic understanding of each other, they could and would draw closer.[3]

Congruence is the match or fit between an individual's inner feelings and outer display. The congruent person is genuine, real, integrated, whole, transparent. The noncongruent person tries to impress, plays a role, puts up a front, hides behind a facade. "In my relationship with persons," Rogers wrote, "I've found that it does not help, in the long run, to act as though I was something I was not."[4]

Unconditional positive regard is an attitude of acceptance that isn't contingent upon performance. Rogers asked, "Can I let myself experience positive attitudes toward this other person—attitudes of warmth, caring, liking, interest, and respect?"[5] When the answer was *yes,* both he and his clients matured as human beings. They also liked each other.

Empathic understanding is the caring skill of temporarily laying aside our views and values and entering into another's world without prejudice. It is an active process of seeking to hear the other's thoughts, feelings, tones, and meanings as if they were our own. Rogers thought it was a waste of time to be suspicious or to wonder, *What does she really mean?* He believed that we help people most when we accept what they say at face value. We should assume that they describe their world as it really appears to them.

Rogerian ideas have permeated the textbooks and teaching of interpersonal communication.[6] The topics of self-disclosure, nonverbal warmth, empathic listening, and trust are mainstays of an introductory course.

The other approach assumes that relationship behavior is shaped by the *rewards and costs of interaction.* In 1992, University of Chicago economist Gary Becker won the Nobel Prize in economics on the basis of his application of supply-and-demand market models to predict the behavior of everyday living, including love and marriage.[7] News commentators expressed skepticism that matters of the heart could be reduced to cold numbers, but the economic metaphor has dominated social science discussions of interpersonal attraction and behavior for the last five decades. The basic assumption of most relational theorists is that people interact with others in a way that maximizes their personal benefits and minimizes their personal costs.

Numerous parallels exist between the stock market and relationship market:

Law of supply and demand. A rare, desirable characteristic commands higher value on the exchange.

Courting a buyer. Most parties in the market prepare a prospectus that highlights their assets and downplays their liabilities.

Laissez-faire rules. Let the buyer beware. All's fair in love and war. It's a jungle out there.

Expert advice. Daily newspapers around the country carry syndicated advice columns by Michelle Singletary ("The Color of Money") and Abigail Van Buren ("Dear Abby"). Whether the topic is money or love, both columnists suggest cautious risk taking.

Investors and traders. Investors commit for the long haul; traders try to make an overnight killing.

Even from these brief summaries, you can tell that a humanistic model of relational development is quite different from an economic model of social exchange. Yet both models affect each of the theories presented in this section.

All three regard communication as the means by which people can draw close to one another. Each considers instant intimacy a myth; relationships take time to develop and they don't always proceed on a straight-line trajectory toward that goal. In fact, most relationships never even get close. Yet some people do have deep, satisfying, long-lasting relationships. Why do they develop close ties when others don't? Each of the theories in this section offers an answer.

"I've done the numbers, and I will marry you."

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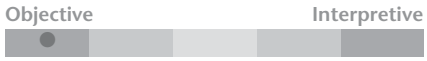
CHAPTER 9



Socio-psychological tradition

Social Penetration Theory

of Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor

A friend in need is a friend indeed.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be.

A soft answer turns away wrath.
Don't get mad, get even.

To know him is to love him.
Familiarity breeds contempt.

Proverbs are the wisdom of the ages boiled down into short, easy-to-remember phrases. There are probably more maxims about interpersonal relationships than about any other topic. But are these truisms dependable? As we can see in the pairings above, the advice they give often seems contradictory.

Consider the plight of Pete, a freshman at a residential college, as he enters the dorm to meet his roommate for the first time. Pete has just waved good-bye to his folks and already feels pangs of loneliness as he thinks of his girlfriend back home. He worries how she'll feel about him when he goes home at Thanksgiving. Will she illustrate the reliability of the old adage "absence makes the heart grow fonder," or will "out of sight, out of mind" be a better way to describe the next few months?

Pete finds his room and immediately spots the familiar shape of a lacrosse stick. He's initially encouraged by what appears to be a common interest, but he's also fascinated by a campaign button that urges him to vote for a candidate for Congress who is on the opposite end of the political spectrum from Pete. Will "birds of a feather flock together" hold true in their relationship, or will "opposites attract" better describe their interaction?

Just then Jon, his roommate, comes in. For a few minutes they trade the stock phrases that give them a chance to size up each other. Something in Pete makes him want to tell Jon how much he misses his girlfriend, but a deeper sense of what is an appropriate topic of conversation when first meeting someone prevents him from sharing his feelings. On a subconscious level, perhaps even a conscious one, Pete is torn between acting on the old adage "misery loves company" or on the more macho "big boys don't cry."

Social penetration
The process of developing deeper intimacy with another person through mutual self-disclosure and other forms of vulnerability.

Pete obviously needs something more than pithy proverbs to help him understand relational dynamics. About two decades before Pete was born, social psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor proposed a *social penetration process* that explains how relational closeness develops. Altman is distinguished professor of psychology at the University of Utah, and Taylor, now deceased, was provost and professor of psychology at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. They predicted that Pete and Jon would end up best friends only if they proceeded in a "gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of both immediate and forecast outcomes."[1] In order to capture the process, we first have to understand the complexity of people.

PERSONALITY STRUCTURE: A MULTILAYERED ONION

Personality structure
Onion-like layers of beliefs and feelings about self, others, and the world; deeper layers are more vulnerable, protected, and central tos elf-image.

Altman and Taylor compared people to onions. This isn't a commentary on the human capacity to offend. Like the self-description that the ogre in *Shrek* shares with his donkey sidekick in the original film, it is a depiction of the multilayered *structure* of personality. Peel the outer skin from an onion, and you'll find another beneath it. Remove that layer and you'll expose a third, and so on. Pete's outer layer is his public self that's accessible to anyone who cares to look. The outer layer includes a myriad of details that certainly help describe who he is but are held in common with others at the school. On the surface, people see a tall, 18-year-old male business major from Michigan who lifts weights and gets lots of phone calls from home. If Jon can look beneath the surface, he'll discover the semiprivate attitudes that Pete reveals only to some people. Pete is sympathetic to liberal social causes, deeply religious, and prejudiced against overweight people.

Pete's inner core is made up of his values, self-concept, unresolved conflicts, and deeply felt emotions. This is his unique private domain, which is invisible to the world but has a significant impact on the areas of his life that are closer to the surface. Perhaps not even his girlfriend or parents know his most closely guarded secrets about himself.

CLOSENESS THROUGH SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure
The voluntary sharing of personal history, preferences, attitudes, feelings, values, secrets, etc., with another person; transparency.

Pete becomes accessible to others as he relaxes the tight boundaries that protect him and makes himself vulnerable. This can be a scary process, but Altman and Taylor believed it's only by allowing Jon to penetrate well below the surface that Pete can truly draw close to his roommate. Nonverbal paths to openness include mock roughhousing, eye contact, and smiling. But the main route to deep social penetration is through verbal *self-disclosure*.

Figure 9–1 illustrates a wedge being pulled into an onion. It's as if a strong magnetic force were drawing it toward the center. The depth of penetration represents the degree of personal disclosure. To get to the center, the wedge must first separate the outer layers. Altman and Taylor claimed that on the surface level this kind of biographical information exchange takes place easily, perhaps at the first meeting. But they pictured the layers of onion skin tougher and more tightly wrapped as the wedge nears the center.

Recall that Pete is hesitant to share his longing for his girlfriend with Jon. If he admits these feelings, he's opening himself up for some heavy-handed

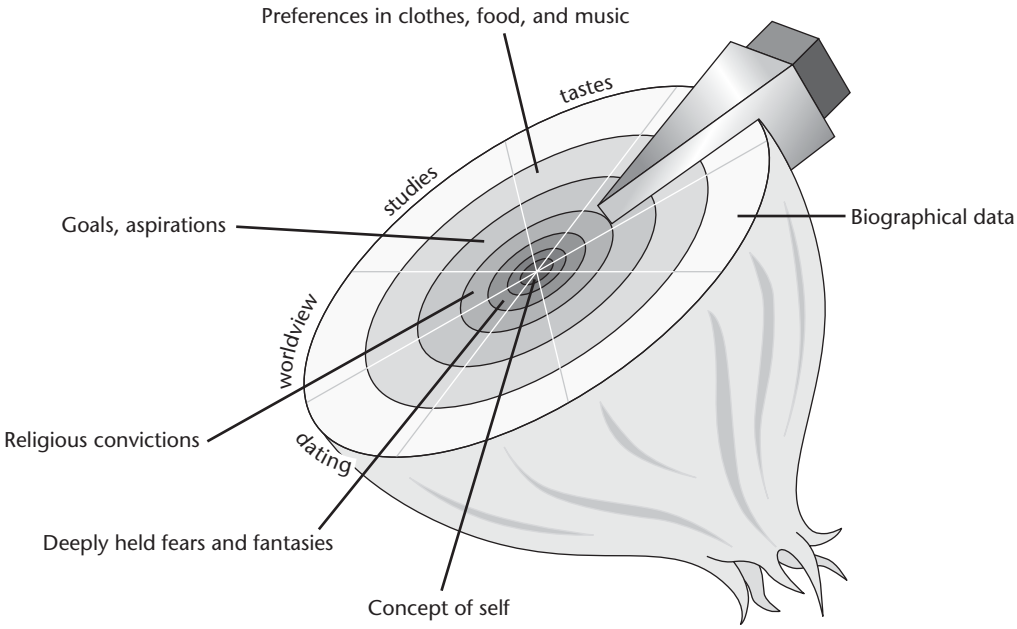


FIGURE 9–1 Penetration of Pete's Personality Structure

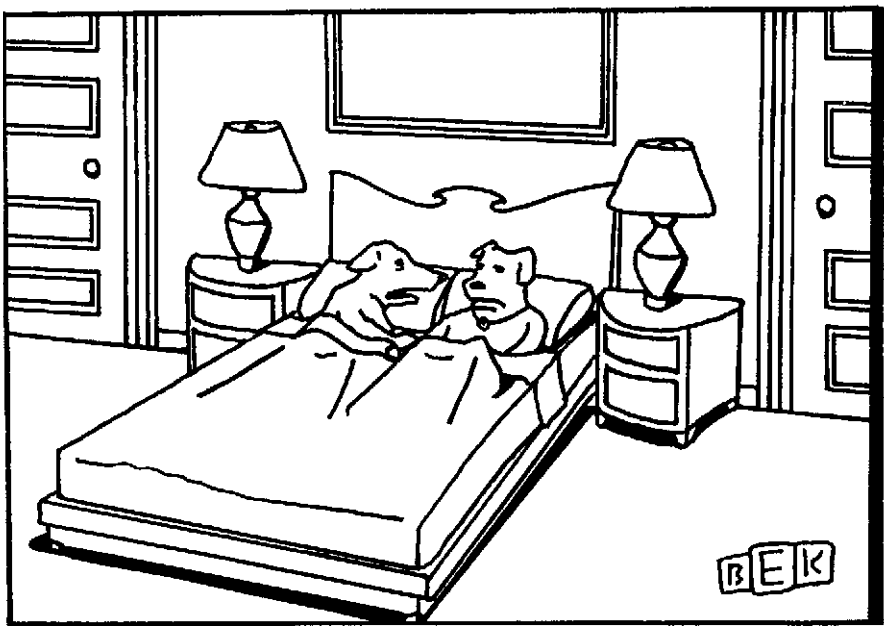
kidding or emotional blackmail. In addition, once the wedge has penetrated deeply, it will have cut a passage through which it can return again and again with little resistance. Future privacy will be difficult. Realizing both of these factors, Pete may be extra cautious about exposing his true feelings. Perhaps he'll fence off this part of his life for the whole school term. According to social penetration theory, a permanent guard will limit the closeness these two young men can achieve.

THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

Depth of penetration
The degree of disclosure in a specific area of an individual's life.

The *depth of penetration* is the degree of intimacy. Although Altman and Taylor's penetration analogy strikes some readers as sexual, this was not their intent. The analogy applies equally to intimacy in friendship and romance. Figure 9–1 diagrams the closeness Jon gains if he and Pete become friends during the year. In their framework of social penetration theory, Altman and Taylor outlined four observations about the process that will bring Pete and Jon to this point:

1. *Peripheral items are exchanged more frequently and sooner than private information.* When the sharp edge of the wedge has barely reached the intimate area, the thicker part has cut a wide path through the outer rings. The relationship is still at a relatively impersonal level ("big boys don't cry"). University of Connecticut communication professor Arthur VanLear analyzed the content of conversations in developing relationships. His study showed that 14 percent of talk revealed nothing about the speaker, 65 percent dwelled on public items, 19 percent shared semiprivate details, and only 2 percent disclosed intimate confidences.[2] Further penetration will bring Pete to the point where he can share deeper feelings ("misery loves company").



"Since we're both being honest, I should tell you I have fleas."

© Bruce Eric Kaplan/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

2. *Self-disclosure is reciprocal, especially in the early stages of relationship development.* The theory predicts that new acquaintances like Pete and Jon will reach roughly equal levels of openness, but it doesn't explain why. Pete's vulnerability could make him seem more trustworthy, or perhaps his initial openness makes transparency seem more attractive. The young men might also feel a need for emotional equity, so a disclosure by Pete leaves Jon feeling uneasy until he's balanced the account with his own payment—a give-and-take exchange in which each party is sharing deeper levels of feeling with the other. Whatever the reason, social penetration theory asserts a *law of reciprocity*.

Law of reciprocity
A paced and orderly process in which openness in one person leads to openness in the other; "You tell me your dream; I'll tell you mine."

3. *Penetration is rapid at the start but slows down quickly as the tightly wrapped inner layers are reached.* Instant intimacy is a myth. Not only is there internal resistance to quick forays into the soul, but there are societal norms against telling too much too fast. Most relationships stall before a stable intimate exchange is established. For this reason, these relationships fade or die easily after a separation or a slight strain. A comfortable sharing of positive and negative reactions is rare. When it is achieved, relationships become more important to both parties, more meaningful, and more enduring.

4. *Depenetration is a gradual process of layer-by-layer withdrawal.* A warm friendship between Pete and Jon will deteriorate if they begin to close off areas of their lives that had earlier been opened. Relational retreat is a sort of taking back of what has earlier been exchanged in the building of a relationship. Altman and Taylor compared the process to a movie shown in reverse. Surface talk still goes on long after deep disclosure is avoided. Relationships are likely to terminate not in an explosive flash of anger but in a gradual cooling off of enjoyment and care.

While depth is crucial to the process of social penetration, *breadth* is equally important. Note that in Figure 9–1 I have segmented the onion much like an orange to represent how Pete's life is cut into different areas—dating, studies, and so forth. It's quite possible for Pete to be candid about every intimate detail of his romance yet remain secretive about his father's alcoholism or his own minor dyslexia. Because only one area is accessed, the relationship depicted in the onion drawing is typical of a summer romance—depth without breadth. Of course, breadth without depth describes the typical "Hi, how are you?" casual relationship. A model of true intimacy would show multiple wedges inserted deeply into every area.

Breadth of penetration
The range of areas in an individual's life over which disclosure takes place.

REGULATING CLOSENESS ON THE BASIS OF REWARDS AND COSTS

Will Pete and Jon become good friends? According to social penetration theory, it all depends on the cost–benefit analysis that each man performs as he considers the possibility of a closer relationship. Right after their first encounter, Pete will sort out the pluses and minuses of friendship with Jon, computing a bottom-line index of relational satisfaction. Jon will do the same regarding Pete. If the perceived mutual benefits outweigh the costs of greater vulnerability, the process of social penetration will proceed.

I previewed this kind of economic analysis in the introduction to the present section on relationship development. Altman and Taylor's version draws heavily on the *social exchange theory* of psychologists John Thibaut (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and Harold Kelley (University of California, Los Angeles).[3] Throughout their lives, both researchers studied the key concepts of social exchange—relational outcome, relational satisfaction, and relational stability. Since Altman and Taylor believed that principles of *social exchange* accurately predict when people will risk self-disclosure, I'll describe these concepts in some detail.

Social exchange
Relationship behavior and status regulated by both parties' evaluations of perceived rewards and costs of interaction with eachother .

Outcome: Rewards Minus Costs

Thibaut and Kelley suggested that people try to predict the *outcome* of an interaction before it takes place. Thus, when Pete first meets his roommate, he mentally gauges the potential rewards and costs of friendship with Jon. He perceives a number of benefits. As a newcomer to campus, Pete strongly desires someone to talk to, eat with, and just hang out with when he's not in class or studying. His roommate's interest in lacrosse, easy laugh, and laid-back style make Jon an attractive candidate.

Pete is also aware that there's a potential downside to getting to know each other better. If he reveals some of his inner life, his roommate may scoff at his faith in God or ridicule his liberal "do-gooder" values. Pete isn't ashamed of his convictions, but he hates to argue, and he regards the risk of conflict as real. Factoring in all the likely pluses and minuses, reaching out in friendship to Jon strikes Pete as net positive, so he makes the first move.

Outcome
The perceived rewards minus the costs of interpersonal interaction.

The idea of totaling potential benefits and losses to determine behavior isn't new. Since the nineteenth century, when philosopher John Stuart Mill first stated his principle of utility,[4] there's been a compelling logic to the *minimax principle of human behavior*. The minimax principle claims that people seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. Thus, the higher we rate a relational outcome, the more attractive we find the behavior that might make it happen.

Minimax principle of human behavior
People seek to maximize their benefits and minimizetheirc osts.

Social exchange theorists assume that we can accurately gauge the payoffs of a variety of interactions and that we have the good sense to choose the action that will provide the best result. Altman and Taylor weren't sure that we always base such decisions on reliable information, but that's not the issue. What mattered to them is that we decide to open up with another person using the perceived benefit-minus-cost outcome.

Lee, a former student of mine, shared how he calculated cost–benefit ratios in one of his friendships. For him, self-disclosure has a higher emotional cost than it does for the average person:

> Self-disclosure makes me uncomfortable. However, the medium of music makes me a bit more comfortable and my desire to write a good song forces me to open up in ways I wouldn't otherwise. For example, I wrote a song for my friend John's birthday party where I put together a series of verses that commemorated all the things in the last year that John and I shared or thought were funny. John and I still had a relatively superficial relationship at that point, but I think by showing that I cared through the song, another layer of the onion was peeled away.

Early in a relationship, we tend to see physical appearance, similar backgrounds, and mutual agreement as benefits ("birds of a feather flock together"). Disagreement and deviance from the norm are negatives. But as the relationship changes, so does the nature of interaction that friends find rewarding. Deeper friendships thrive on common values and spoken appreciation, and we can even enjoy surface diversity ("opposites attract").

If Pete sees much more benefit than cost in a relationship with Jon, he'll start to reveal more of who he is. If the negatives outweigh the positives, he'll try to avoid contact with Jon as much as possible. Even though they're stuck together physically in the same dorm room, a negative assessment could cause him to hold back emotionally for the rest of the year.

Comparison Level (CL)—Gauging Relational Satisfaction

Evaluating outcomes is a tricky business. Even if we mentally convert intangible benefits and costs into a bottom-line measure of overall effect, its psychological impact upon us may vary. A relational result has meaning only when we contrast it with other real or imagined outcomes. Social exchange theory offers two standards of comparison that Pete and others use to evaluate their interpersonal outcomes. The first point of reference deals with relative *satisfaction*—how happy or sad an interpersonal outcome makes a participant feel. Thibaut and Kelley called this the *comparison level.*

Comparison level (CL)
The threshold above which an interpersonal outcome seems attractive; a standard for relationals atisfaction.

A person's comparison level (CL) is the threshold above which an outcome seems attractive. Suppose, for example, that Pete is looking forward to his regular Sunday night phone call with his girlfriend. Since they usually talk for about a half hour, 30 minutes is Pete's comparison level for what makes a pleasing conversation. If he's not in a hurry, a 45-minute call will seem especially gratifying, while a 15-minute chat would be quite disappointing. Of course, the length of the call is only one factor that affects Pete's positive or negative feelings when he hangs up the phone. He also has developed expectations for the topics they'll discuss, his girlfriend's tone of voice, and the warmth of her words when she says good-bye. These are benchmarks that Pete uses to gauge his relative satisfaction with the interaction.

Our CL for friendship, romance, or family ties is pegged by our relational history. We judge the value of a relationship by comparing it to the baseline of past experience. If Pete had little history of close friendship in high school, a relationship with Jon would look quite attractive. If, on the other hand, he's accustomed to being part of a close-knit group of intimate friends, hanging out with Jon could pale by comparison.

Sequence plays a large part in evaluating a relationship. The result from each interaction is stored in the individual's memory. Experiences that take place early in a relationship can have a huge impact because they make up a large proportion of the total relational history. One unpleasant experience out of 10 is merely troublesome, but 1 out of 2 can end a relationship before it really begins. Trends are also important. If Pete first senses coolness from Jon yet later feels warmth and approval, the shift will raise Jon's attractiveness to a level higher than it would be if Pete had perceived positive vibes from the very beginning.

Comparison Level of Alternatives (CL_{alt})—Gauging Relational Stability

Thibaut and Kelley suggested that there is a second standard by which we evaluate the outcomes we receive. They called it the *comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})*, and its position versus actual interpersonal outcomes shows the relative *stability* of the relationship. The level is pegged by the best relational outcome available outside the current relationship. The location of my CL_{alt} answers the twin questions, *Would my relational payoffs be better with another person?* and *What is the worst outcome I'll put up with and still stay in the present relationship?* As more attractive outside possibilities become available, or as existent outcomes slide below an established CL_{alt}, relational instability increases. Here again, a social exchange explanation reads like a stock-market analysis. That's why some advocates label a social exchange approach a *theory of economic behavior.*

Comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})
The best outcome available in other relationships; a standard for relational stability.

Unlike the comparison level, the concept of CL_{alt} doesn't indicate relationship satisfaction. It does explain, however, why people sometimes stay with an abusive partner. For example, social workers describe the plight of the battered wife as "high cost, low reward." Despite her anguish, the woman feels trapped in the distressing situation because being alone in the world appears even worse. As dreadful as her outcomes are, she can't imagine a better alternative. She won't leave until she perceives an outside alternative that promises a better life.

The relative values of outcome, CL, and CL_{alt} go a long way in determining whether a person is willing to become vulnerable in order to have a deeper relationship. The optimum situation is when both parties find

$$\text{Outcome} > CL_{alt} > CL$$

Using Pete as an example, this notation shows that he forecasts a friendship with Jon that will be more than *satisfying.* The tie with Jon will be *stable* because there's no other relationship on campus that is more attractive. Yet Pete won't feel trapped, because he has other satisfying options available should this one turn sour. We see, therefore, that social exchange theory explains why Pete is primed for social penetration. If Jon's calculations are similar, the roommates will begin the process of mutual vulnerability that Altman and Taylor described, and reciprocal self-disclosure will draw them close.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: EPICURUS' ETHICAL EGOISM

Ethical egoism
The belief that individuals should live their lives so as to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their own pain.

The minimax principle that undergirds social exchange theory—and therefore social penetration theory as well—is also referred to as *psychological egoism*. The term reflects many social scientists' conviction that all of us are motivated by self-interest. Unlike most social scientists who limit their study to what *is* rather than what *ought* to be, *ethical egoists* claim we *should* act selfishly. It's right and it's good for us to look out for number one.

Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who wrote a few years after Aristotle's death, defined the good life as getting as much pleasure as possible: "I spit on the noble and its idle admirers when it contains no element of pleasure."[5] Although his position is often associated with the adage "Eat, drink, and be merry," Epicurus actually emphasized the passive pleasures of friendship and good digestion, and above all, the absence of pain. He cautioned that "no pleasure is in itself evil, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail annoyances many times greater than the pleasures themselves."[6] The Greek philosopher put lying in that category. He said that the wise person is prepared to lie if there is no risk of detection, but since we can never be certain our falsehoods won't be discovered, he didn't recommend deception.

A few other philosophers have echoed the Epicurean call for selfish concern. Thomas Hobbes described life as "nasty, brutish and short" and advocated political trade-offs that would gain a measure of security. Adam Smith, the spiritual father of capitalism, advised every person to seek his or her own profit. Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God and stated that the noble soul has reverence for itself. Egoist writer Ayn Rand dedicated her novel *The Fountainhead* to "the exultation of man's self-esteem and the sacredness of his happiness on earth."[7] Of course, the moral advice of Epicurus, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Rand may be suspect. If their counsel consistently reflects their beliefs, their words are spoken for their own benefit, not ours.

Most ethical and religious thinkers denounce the selfishness of egoism as morally repugnant. How can one embrace a philosophy that advocates terrorism as long as it brings joy to the terrorist? When the egoistic pleasure principle is compared to a life lived to reduce the suffering of others, as with the late Mother Teresa, ethical egoism seems to be no ethic at all. Yet the egoist would claim that the Nobel Peace Prize winner was leading a sacrificial life because she took pleasure in serving the poor. If charity becomes a burden, she should stop.

DIALECTICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Viewing increased self-disclosure as the path to intimacy is a simple idea—one that's easily portrayed in the onion model of Figure 9–1. It can also be summarized in less than 40 words:

> Interpersonal closeness proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange, motivated by current and projected future outcomes. Lasting intimacy requires continual and mutual vulnerability through breadth and depth of self-disclosure.

But Altman later had second thoughts about his basic assumption that openness is the predominant quality of relationship development. He began to speculate that the desire for privacy may counteract what he first thought was

a unidirectional quest for intimacy. He now proposes a *dialectical model,* which assumes that "human social relationships are characterized by openness or contact and closedness or separateness between participants."[8] He believes that the tension between openness and closedness results in cycles of disclosure or withdrawal.

Dialectical model
The assumption that people want both privacy and intimacy in their social relationships; they experience a tension between disclosure and withdrawal.

Altman also identifies the *environment* as a factor in social penetration.[9] Sometimes the environment guides our decision to disclose—a quiet, dimly lit sit-down restaurant might make us more willing to open up than when sitting on stools under the harsh lights of a noisy fast food joint. Other times we actively manipulate our environment to meet our privacy and disclosure goals. Thus, we might choose a quiet booth in the corner if we don't want others to overhear a sensitive conversation.

Pete and Jon face choices about how to manage their room's environment. For Altman, this is more than just deciding whether to put a mini-fridge under the desk or next to the bed. He believes the way the two manage their dorm room says a lot about their relationship with each other and with their peers. Will they keep the door open on weeknights? Will they lock the room when they're away? Will they split the room down the middle, or will their possessions intermingle? Each decision shapes how the roommates manage the ongoing tension between openness and closedness during the year.

Because college freshmen face so many decisions about disclosure, privacy, and their physical environment, Altman studied social penetration in dorm living at the University of Utah.[10] He asked college freshmen how they used their environment to seek out and avoid others. To probe deeper into how students managed their space, he visited their rooms and photographed the wall above their beds. Two years later he examined school records to see if students' choices about their physical space predicted success and satisfaction at college. Overall, Altman found that students were more likely to remain at the university when they honored their need for *territoriality,* or the human (and animalistic) tendency to claim a physical location or object as our own. This need shows that the onion of social penetration includes both our mind and our physical space.

Territoriality
The tendency to claim a physical location or object as our own.

Some students in Altman's study crafted a dorm room environment that welcomed others. They kept their doors open, invited others to visit, and even used music to draw people into the room. Their wall decorations promoted mutual self-disclosure by showing multiple facets of their identity, ranging from calendars and schedules to hobbies and photographs of friends. Just like verbal disclosure, environmental disclosure can vary in its breadth. If Pete and Jon decorate their room with several facets of their identities, the law of reciprocity suggests that visitors might feel more comfortable disclosing verbally as well. The students who created this kind of warm atmosphere tended to succeed at college.

The students who later dropped out used wall decorations that didn't reveal a range of interests, like one student who only displayed ballet-related images, or another with only ski posters. Such students tended to shut out potential visitors and play loud music that discouraged discussion. Also, students who eventually left the university didn't honor their need for personal territory. Compared to those who remained, they were less likely to arrange the furniture to create some private spaces or occasionally retreat from the dorm room for time alone. To explain this curious finding, Altman reasoned that "the dormitory environment inherently provides many opportunities for social contact," and therefore

"it may be more important to develop effective avoidance techniques in such a setting."[11] Consequently, Pete and Jon would be wise to recognize each other's need for clearly defined territory. Each of them might be unwilling to let the other penetrate his physical space until they've first penetrated each other's psychological space—their onion.

Altman's results demonstrate the importance of both psychological and territorial boundaries in the process of social penetration. Students who were successful at college honored their dialectical needs for both contact and separateness. Sandra Petronio, a communication theorist at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, was intrigued by Altman's use of territoriality to explain dialectical forces. She later crafted *communication privacy management theory* to further explain the intricate ways people manage boundaries around their personal information. You can read about her insights in Chapter 13.

CRITIQUE: PULLING BACK FROM SOCIAL PENETRATION

Social penetration theory is an established and familiar explanation of how closeness develops in ongoing relationships. Altman and Taylor's image of multiple wedges penetrating deeply into a multilayered onion has proved to be a helpful model of growing intimacy. But just as these theorists described people continually reappraising their relationships in light of new experiences, it makes sense for us to reconsider the basic assumptions and claims of their theory. Social penetration theory has many critics.

As you will read in Chapter 13, Petronio challenges some core assumptions of social penetration theory. She thinks it's simplistic to equate self-disclosure with relational closeness. It can *lead* to intimacy, but a person may reveal private information merely to express oneself, to release tension, or to gain relational control. In these cases the speaker doesn't necessarily desire nor achieve a stronger bond with the confidant. And if the listener is turned off or disgusted by what was said, depenetration can be swift. Petronio also questions Altman and Taylor's view of personality structure. The onion-layer model of social penetration theory posits fixed boundaries that become increasingly thick as one penetrates toward the inner core of personality. In contrast, for Petronio, our privacy boundaries are personally created, often shifting, and frequently permeable.

Other personal relationship scholars are uncomfortable with Altman and Taylor's wholesale use of a reward–cost analysis to explain the differential drive for penetration. Can a complex blend of advantages and disadvantages be reduced to a single numerical index? And assuming that we can forecast the value of relational outcomes, are we so consistently selfish that we always opt for what we calculate is in our own best interest? Julia Wood, a communication theorist associated with standpoint theory (see Chapter 35), is skeptical. She argues, "The focus in exchange theories is one's own gains and outcomes; this focus is incapable of addressing matters such as compassion, caring, altruism, fairness, and other ethical issues that should be central to personal relationships."[12] To her and like-minded scholars, relational life has a human core that pure economic calculus cannot touch.

University of North Dakota psychologist Paul Wright believes that Pete and Jon could draw close enough that their relationship would no longer be driven by a self-centered concern for personal gain. When friendships have what

Wright calls "an intrinsic, end-in-themselves quality," people regard good things happening to their friends as rewards in themselves.[13] When that happens, Jon would get just as excited if Pete had a successful employment interview as he would if he himself had been offered the job. This rare kind of selfless love involves a relational transformation, not just more self-disclosure.[14] Altman and Taylor's theory doesn't speak about the transition from *me* to *we,* but that apparently takes place only after an extended process of social penetration.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. The onion model in Figure 9–1 is sectioned into eight parts, representing the *breadth* of a person's life. How would you label eight regions of interest in your life?

2. Jesus said, "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."[15] Given the *minimax principle* of human behavior used in a *social exchange* analysis, how is such a sacrifice possible?

3. Altman conducted his study of first-year students in the 1970s. How have subsequent technological advances changed the ways students manage contact and privacy in their personal territory?

4. The romantic truism "to know her is to love her" seems to contradict the relational adage "familiarity breeds contempt." Given the principles of social penetration theory, can you think of a way both statements might be true?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor, *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships,* Holt, New York, 1973.

Altman's reflective research summary: Irwin Altman, "Toward a Transactional Perspective: A Personal Journey," in *Environment and Behavior Studies: Emergence of Intellectual Traditions: Advances in Theory and Research, Vol. 11, Human Behavior and Environment, Environment and Behavior Studies,* Irwin Altman and Kathleen Christensen (eds.), Plenum, New York, 1990, pp. 225–255.

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Cycles of self-disclosure: C. Arthur VanLear, "Testing a Cyclical Model of Communicative Openness in Relationship Development: Two Longitudinal Studies," *Communication Monographs,* Vol. 58, 1991, pp. 337–361.

Effects of environment on relationship closeness: Carol Werner, Irwin Altman, and Barbara B. Brown, "A Transactional Approach to Interpersonal Relations: Physical Environment, Social Context and Temporal Qualities," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* Vol. 9, 1992, pp. 297–323.

Environmental study of first-year roommates: Anne Vinsel, Barbara B. Brown, Irwin Altman, and Carolyn Foss, "Privacy Regulation, Territorial Displays, and Effectiveness of Individual Functioning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* Vol. 39, 1980, pp. 1104–1115.

Ethical egoism: Edward Gegis, "What Is Ethical Egoism?" *Ethics,* Vol. 91, 1980, pp. 50–62.

To access a chapter on Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory that appeared in a previous edition, click on Theory List at *www.afirstlook.com.*

CHAPTER 10

Socio-psychological tradition

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

of Charles Berger

No matter how close two people eventually become, they always begin as strangers. Let's say you've just taken a job as a driver for a delivery service over the winter break. After talking with the other drivers, you conclude that your income and peace of mind will depend on working out a good relationship with Heather, the radio dispatcher. All you know for sure about Heather is her attachment to Hannah, a 100-pound Labrador retriever that never lets Heather out of her sight. The veteran drivers joke that it's hard to tell the difference between the voices of Heather and Hannah over the radio. With some qualms you make arrangements to meet Heather (and Hannah) over coffee and donuts before your first day of work. You really have no idea what to expect.

Chuck Berger believes it's natural to have doubts about our ability to predict the outcome of initial encounters. Berger, a professor of communication at the University of California, Davis, notes that "the beginnings of personal relationships are fraught with uncertainties."[1] Unlike social penetration theory, which tries to forecast the future of a relationship on the basis of projected rewards and costs (see Chapter 9), Berger's uncertainty reduction theory (URT) focuses on how human communication is used to gain knowledge and create understanding.

> Central to the present theory is the assumption that when strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction.[2]

Interpersonal ignorance is not bliss; it's frustrating! Berger contends that our drive to reduce uncertainty about new acquaintances gets a boost from any of three prior conditions:[3]

1. *Anticipation of future interaction:* We know we will see them again.
2. *Incentive value:* They have something we want.
3. *Deviance:* They act in a weird way.

Heather hooks you on all three counts. You know you're going to be dealing with her for the next few weeks, she can make you or break you financially

according to the routes she assigns, and she has this strange attachment to Hannah. According to Berger, when you add these three factors to your natural curiosity, you'll *really* want to solve the puzzle of who she is.

Berger believes that our main purpose in talking to people is to "make sense" out of our interpersonal world. That's why you're having breakfast with a stranger and her dog. If you brought your own hound to the meeting, chances are the two dogs would circle and sniff each other, trying to get some idea of what their counterpart was like. Humans are no different; we're just a bit more subtle, using symbols instead of smells to reach our conclusions.

UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION: TO PREDICT AND EXPLAIN

Berger focuses on predictability, which he sees as the opposite of uncertainty. "As the ability of persons to predict which alternative or alternatives are likely to occur next decreases, uncertainty increases."[4] He owes a debt to Fritz Heider's view of people as intuitive psychologists. Heider, the father of *attribution theory*, believed that we constantly draw inferences about why people do what they do.[5] We need to predict *and* explain. If Heather's going to bark at you on the radio, you want to understand why.

Attribution theory
A systematic explanation of how people draw inferences about the character of others based upon observed behavior.

Berger notes that there are at least two kinds of uncertainty you face as you set out for your first meeting with Heather. Because you aren't sure how you

"What say we find another way to say hello?"

© Peter Steiner/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

should act, one kind of uncertainty deals with *behavioral* questions. Should you shake hands? Who pays for the donuts? Do you pet the dog? Often there are accepted procedural protocols to ease the stress that behavioral uncertainty can cause. Good manners go beyond common sense.

Uncertainty reduction
Increased knowledge of what kind of person another is, which provides an improved forecast of how a future interaction will turn out.

A second kind of uncertainty focuses on *cognitive* questions aimed at discovering who the other person is as a unique individual. What does Heather like about her job? What makes her glad, sad, or mad? Does she have other friends, or does she lavish all her attention on Hannah? When you first meet a person, your mind may conjure up a wild mix of potential traits and characteristics. Reducing cognitive uncertainty means acquiring information that allows you to discard many of these possibilities. That's the kind of uncertainty reduction Berger's theory addresses—cognitive rather than behavioral uncertainty.

AN AXIOMATIC THEORY: CERTAINTY ABOUT UNCERTAINTY

Berger proposes a series of axioms to explain the connection between his central concept of uncertainty and eight key variables of relationship development: *verbal communication, nonverbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, liking,* and *shared networks.*[6] *Axioms* are traditionally regarded as self-evident truths that require no additional proof. (All people are created equal. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. What goes up must come down.) Here are Berger's eight truths about initial uncertainty.

Axiom
A self-evident truth that requires no additional proof.

> ***Axiom 1, Verbal Communication:*** Given the high level of uncertainty present at the onset of the entry phase, as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty for each interactant in the relationship will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase.

When you first sit down with Heather, the conversation will be halting and somewhat stilted. But as words begin to flow, you'll discover things about each other that make you feel more confident in each other's presence. When your comfort level rises, the pace of the conversation will pick up.

> ***Axiom 2, Nonverbal Warmth:*** As nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease in an initial interaction situation. In addition, decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.

When initial stiffness gives way to head nods and tentative smiles, you'll have a better idea of who Heather is. This assurance leads to further signs of warmth, such as prolonged eye contact, forward body lean, and pleasant tone of voice.

> ***Axiom 3, Information Seeking:*** High levels of uncertainty cause increases in information-seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information-seeking behavior decreases.

What is it about Heather that prompted the other drivers to warn you not to start off on the wrong foot? You simply have no idea. Like a bug with its antennae twitching, you carefully monitor what she says and how she acts in order to gather clues about her personality. But you become less vigilant after she explains that her pet peeve is drivers who complain about their assignments

on the radio. Whether or not you think her irritation is justified, you begin to relax because you have a better idea of how to stay on her good side.

> ***Axiom 4, Self-Disclosure:*** High levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. Low levels of uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy.

Like Altman and Taylor (see Chapter 9), Berger equates intimacy of communication with depth of self-disclosure. Demographic data revealing that Heather was raised in Toledo and that you are a communication major are relatively nonintimate. They typify the opening gambits of new acquaintances who are still feeling each other out. But Heather's comment that she feels more loyalty from Hannah than from any person she knows is a gutsy admission that raises the intimacy level of the conversation to a new plane. Most people wait to express attitudes, values, and feelings until they have a good idea what the listener's response will be.

> ***Axiom 5, Reciprocity:*** High levels of uncertainty produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low levels of reciprocity.

Self-disclosure research confirms the notion that people tend to mete out the personal details of their lives at a rate that closely matches their partner's willingness to share intimate information.[7] Reciprocal vulnerability is especially important in the early stages of a relationship. The issue seems to be one of power. When knowledge of each other is minimal, we're careful not to let the other person one-up us by being the exclusive holder of potentially embarrassing information. But when we already know some of the ups and downs of a person's life, an even flow of information seems less crucial. Berger would not anticipate long monologues at your first get-together with Heather; future meetings might be a different story.

> ***Axiom 6, Similarity:*** Similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty.

The more points of contact you establish with Heather, the more you'll feel you understand her inside and out. If you are a dog lover, the two of you will click. If, however, you are partial to purring kittens, Heather's devotion to this servile beast will cause you to wonder if you'll ever be able to figure out what makes her tick.

> ***Axiom 7, Liking:*** Increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty produce increases in liking.

This axiom suggests that the more you find out about Heather, the more you'll appreciate who she is. It directly contradicts the cynical opinion that "familiarity breeds contempt" and affirms instead the relational maxim that "to know her is to love her."

> ***Axiom 8, Shared Networks:*** Shared communication networks reduce uncertainty, while lack of shared networks increases uncertainty.

This axiom was not part of Berger's original theory, but his ideas triggered extensive research by other communication scholars who soon moved uncertainty reduction theory beyond the confines of two strangers meeting for the first time. Berger applauds this extension: "The broadening of the theory's scope suggests the potential usefulness of reconceptualizing and extending the original formulation."[8] For example, Malcolm Parks (University of Washington) and

Mara Adelman (Seattle University) discovered that men and women who communicate more often with their romantic partners' family and friends have less uncertainty about the person they love than do those whose relationships exist in relative isolation.[9] Networking couples also tend to stay together. On the basis of these findings, Berger incorporated this axiom into his formal design.

THEOREMS: THE LOGICAL FORCE OF UNCERTAINTY AXIOMS

Once we grant the validity of the eight axioms, it makes sense to pair two of them together to produce additional insight into relational dynamics. The combined axioms yield an inevitable conclusion when inserted in the well-known pattern of deductive logic:

Theorem
A proposition that logically and necessarily follows from two axioms.

If $A = B$
and $B = C$
then $A = C$

Berger does this for all possible combinations, thereby generating 28 theorems—for example:

> If similarity reduces uncertainty (axiom 6)
> and reduced uncertainty increases liking (axiom 7)
> then similarity and liking are positively related (theorem 21)

In this case, the result isn't exactly earthshaking. The connection between similarity and liking is a long-established finding in research on interpersonal attraction.[10] When viewed as a whole, however, these 28 logical extensions sketch out a rather comprehensive theory of interpersonal development—all based on the importance of reducing uncertainty in human interaction.

Instead of listing all 28 theorems, I've plotted the relationships they predict in Figure 10–1. The chart reads like a mileage table you might find in a road

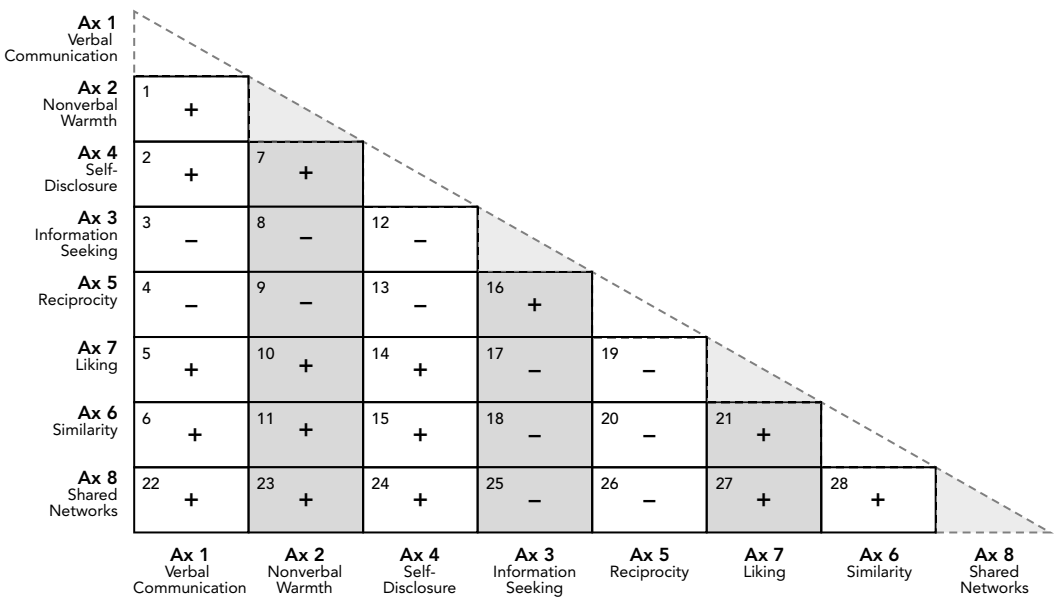

FIGURE 10–1 Theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory
Adapted from Berger and Calabrese, "Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond"

atlas. Select one axiom along the bottom and another down the side. The intersection between the two shows the number of Berger's theorem and the type of correlation it asserts. A plus sign (+) shows that the two interpersonal variables rise or fall together. A minus sign (−) indicates that as one increases, the other decreases. Will the warmth of Heather's nonverbal communication increase as the intimacy of her self-disclosure deepens? Theorem 7 says it will. Suppose you grow fond of Heather as a friend. Will you seek to find out more about her? Theorem 17 makes the surprising prediction that you won't (more on this later).

Recall from Malcolm Parks' research that good friends who have overlapping social networks communicate more frequently with each other than those who don't have those connections (see the cybernetic tradition in Chapter 4). You and Heather aren't good friends, but suppose you unexpectedly discover that her parents and your folks attend the same church service and sometimes play cards together. Does URT predict that you'll be talking with each other more in the future? Check the intersection between axioms 1 and 8 on the chart for Berger's prediction.

MESSAGE PLANS TO COPE WITH UNCERTAIN RESPONSES

Ten years after introducing uncertainty reduction theory, Berger switched his research focus to the thought processes people go through in order to produce the messages they speak. He concluded that most social interaction is goal-driven; we have reasons for saying what we say. Berger labeled his work "A Plan-Based Theory of Strategic Communication" because, like the cognitive theorists discussed in Chapter 8 (*constructivism*), he was convinced that we continually construct cognitive plans to guide our social action.[11] According to Berger, "*plans* are mental representations of action sequences that may be used to achieve goals."[12] Figure 10–2 offers a possible example of a strategic plan for your breakfast with Heather.

Message plans
Mental representations of action sequences that may be used to achieve goals.

Your main reason for getting together with the dispatcher is to maximize your income over the holidays. Your overall strategy to reach that goal is to build a good working relationship with Heather, since she assigns the routes. The term *overall* is appropriate because Berger claims that plans are "hierarchically

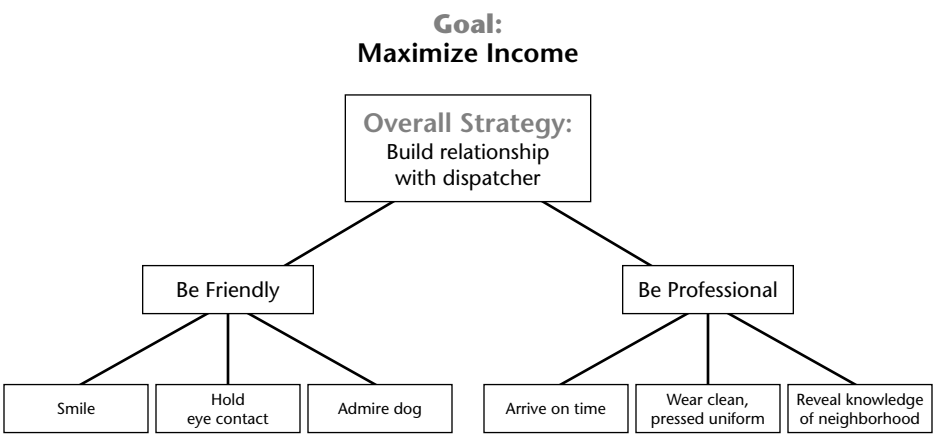

FIGURE 10–2 A Hierarchical Plan of Goal-Directed Communication

organized with abstract action representations at the top of the hierarchy and progressively more concrete representations toward the bottom."[13] In order to build that relationship, you intend to converse in a *friendly* and *professional* manner. In this case, friendly means smiling, holding eye contact when she speaks, and admiring her dog. You'll show professionalism by arriving on time; wearing a clean, pressed uniform; and revealing knowledge of the neighborhood.

If you switch strategies at the top—seeking pity for a poor, struggling college student, for example—the alteration will cascade down the hierarchy, requiring changes in many of the behaviors below. Thus, a top-down revision of an action plan requires great amounts of cognitive capacity.

Even if you are a cognitively complex person (see Chapter 8), Berger claims you can't be sure you'll reach your goal. You may have a great plan but execute it poorly. Heather may interpret words that you meant one way to mean something else. Or she may have her own goals and plans that will inevitably thwart yours. Berger has come to the conclusion that uncertainty is central to *all* social interaction: "The probability of perfect communication is zero."[14]

Although Berger originally considered uncertainty reduction theory and the study of plan-based message production as separate projects, he now sees an intersection between the two bodies of research. Berger asks, "How do individuals cope with the inevitable uncertainties they must face when constructing messages?" And again, "How can a person hedge against embarrassment, anger, rejection and other downside risks associated with deploying a given message?"[15] The following strategies are some of his answers.

Passive strategy
Impression formation by observing a person interacting with others.

Active strategy
Impression formation by asking a third party about a person.

Interactive strategy
Impression formation through face-to-face discussion with a person.

Seeking Information. Berger outlines three approaches we can use to find out how others might react to our messages. Using a *passive strategy,* we unobtrusively observe others from a distance. This fly-on-the-wall tactic works best when we spot others reacting to people in informal, or "backstage," settings. (The strategy sounds like normal "scoping" behavior on any college campus.) In an *active strategy,* we ask a third party for information. We realize that our mutual acquaintance will probably give a somewhat slanted view, but most of us have confidence in our ability to filter out the bias and gain valuable information. With an *interactive strategy,* we talk face-to-face with the other person and ask specific questions. This is the quickest route to reducing uncertainty, but continual probing in social settings begins to take on the feel of a cross-examination or the third degree. Our own self-disclosure offers an alternative way to elicit information from others without seeming to pry. By being transparent, we create a safe atmosphere for others to respond in kind—something the "law of reciprocity" suggests they will do (see Chapter 9).

Plan complexity
A characteristic of a message plan based on the level of detail it provides and the number of contingencies it covers.

Choosing Plan Complexity. The complexity of a message plan is measured in two ways—the level of detail the plan includes and the number of contingency plans prepared in case the original one doesn't work. If it's crucial that you make top dollar in your holiday delivery job, you're likely to draw upon a plan from memory or create a new one far more complex than the sample shown in Figure 10–2. You're also likely to have a fallback plan in case the first one fails. On the other hand, you don't know much about Heather's goals or feelings, and high uncertainty argues for a less complex plan that you can adjust in the moment, once you get a feel for who she is and what she wants. This simpler approach is preferred for another reason. Enacting a complex plan takes so much cognitive effort that there's usually a deterioration in verbal and nonverbal fluency, with

a resultant loss in credibility. Jeff, a student athlete, used an interactive strategy that has low complexity:

> I thought of URT this afternoon in the trainer's room where I again made eye contact with a girl I'd never met. We were the only two people in the room and I realized I needed a plan of action. I quickly ran through several strategies to reduce uncertainty. I chose a tried-and-true icebreaker line: "Hi, I know I've seen you around a ton of times, but I don't think I've ever met you. What's your name?" I hoped for the best, but prepared for a negative reaction. My contingency plan was to simply end the attempt at conversation and seem preoccupied with my treatment. Fortunately she responded with a look of relief, her name, and then a smile. Let the conversation begin. As Berger said, "Uncertainty is central to all social interaction." It sure makes life interesting.

Hedging
Use of strategic ambiguity and humor to provide a way for both parties to save face when a message fails to achieve its goal.

Hedging. The possibility of plan failure suggests the wisdom of providing ways for both parties to save face when at least one of them has miscalculated. Berger catalogs a series of planned hedges that allow a somewhat gracious retreat. For instance, you may be quite certain about what you want to accomplish in your meeting with Heather yet choose words that are *ambiguous* so as not to tip your hand before you find out more about her. You might also choose to be equivocal in order to avoid the embarrassment that would come from a refusal of a specific request for preferred treatment in route assignment. *Humor* can provide the same way out. You could blatantly propose to use a portion of the saved time and good tips that come from prime assignments to stop at the butcher shop for a juicy bone for Hannah—but make the offer in a joking tone of voice. If Heather takes offense, you can respond, "Hey, I was just kidding."

Hierarchy hypothesis
The prediction that when people are thwarted in their attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower-level elements of their message.

The Hierarchy Hypothesis. What happens to action choices when plans are frustrated? Berger's *hierarchy hypothesis* asserts that "when individuals are thwarted in their attempts to achieve goals, their first tendency is to alter lower level elements of their message."[16] For example, when it's obvious the person we're talking to has failed to grasp what we are saying, our inclination is to repeat the same message—but this time louder. The tactic seldom works, but it takes less mental effort than altering strategic features higher up in the action plan. Berger describes people as "cognitive misers" who would rather try a quick fix than expend the effort to repair faulty plans.[17] There's no doubt that in-the-moment modifications are taxing, but when the issue is important, the chance to be effective makes it worth the effort. An additional hedge against failure is to practice in front of a friend who will critique your action plan before you put it into effect.[18] As a Hebrew proverb warns, "Without counsel, plans go wrong."[19]

ANXIETY/UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT (AUM) THEORY

Inspired by Berger's theory, the late California State, Fullerton, communication professor William Gudykunst began to apply some of the axioms and theorems of uncertainty reduction theory to intercultural settings. In many ways, Berger's original emphasis on the interaction of strangers was a natural fit for Gudykunst, who assumed that at least one person in an intercultural encounter is a *stranger*.[20] Through a series of initial crises, strangers undergo both anxiety and uncertainty—they don't feel secure and they aren't sure how to behave. He noted that strangers and in-group members experience some degree of anxiety and

AUM theory
An intercultural theory that claims high levels of uncertainty and anxiety lead to greater misunderstanding when strangers don't communicate mindfully.

uncertainty in any new interpersonal situation, but when the encounter takes place between people of different cultures, strangers are hyperaware of cultural differences. They then tend to overestimate the effect of cultural identity on the behavior of people in an alien society, while blurring individuals' distinctions. Despite their common axiomatic format and parallel focus on the meeting of strangers, Gudykunst's *anxiety/uncertainty management theory* differs in five significant ways from Berger's uncertainty reduction theory.

Anxiety
The feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen.

Anxiety. Whereas Berger treats *uncertainty* as the key communication variable, Gudykunst elevated *anxiety* to an equal status. He defined anxiety as "the feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried or apprehensive about what might happen."[21] As the title of his theory suggests, and Figure 10–3 depicts, Gudykunst believed that uncertainty and anxiety are the twin threats that must be managed to achieve effective communication. They are the basic cause of intercultural misunderstanding. His research shows that anxiety and uncertainty usually go together,[22] yet he saw them as different in that uncertainty is cognitive, whereas anxiety is affective—an emotion.

Effective communication
The extent to which a person interpreting a message does so in a way that's relatively similar to what was intended; minimizing misunderstanding.

Effective Communication. The end goal of AUM theory is *effective communication* rather than closeness or relational satisfaction. Gudykunst used the term to refer to the process of minimizing misunderstandings. He wrote that "communication is effective to the extent that the person interpreting the message attaches a meaning to the message that is relatively similar to what was intended by the person transmitting it."[23] Other authors use a variety of terms to convey the same idea—accuracy, fidelity, mutual understanding.[24]

Multiple Causes of Anxiety/Uncertainty. The third way AUM theory differs from Berger's theory is the vast array of axioms, not shown, which cluster under the seven categories on the left side of Figure 10–3. There are 34 of them, each linking a separate variable to the rise or fall of anxiety and uncertainty. For example, a large measure of any of the following factors reduces anxiety and uncertainty: self-esteem, cognitive complexity, perceived similarity, positive expectations, interdependence, attraction, respect from the other, a sense of power, shared networks, and cooperative tasks to complete. When these personal

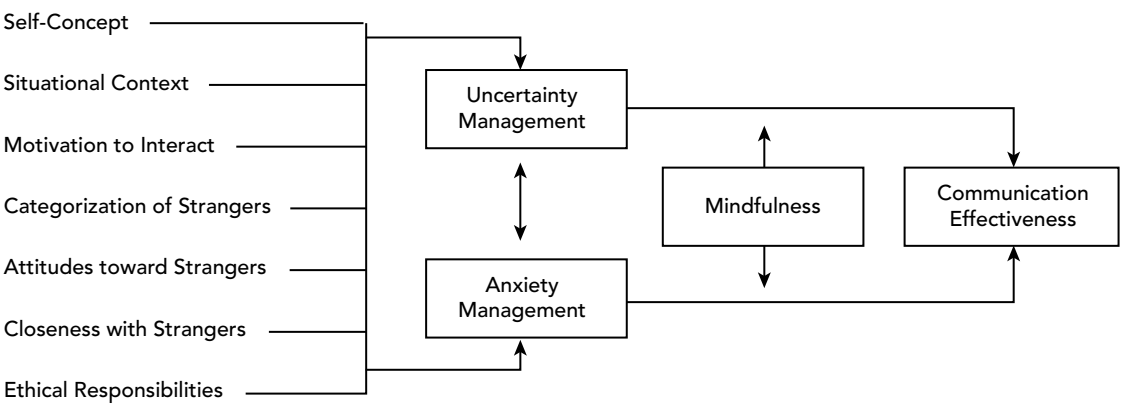

FIGURE 10–3 Basic Components of AUM Theory
Based on "An Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory of Effective Communication"

and situational factors are in short supply, anxiety and uncertainty rise. This, of course, makes effective intercultural communication that much harder.

Lower and Upper Thresholds for Fear and Doubt. According to Gudykunst, anxiety and uncertainty aren't always bad—a small amount of both makes us more vigilant. He suggested that we have a minimum threshold of apprehension that will guarantee that adrenaline runs through our veins and prods us to communicate effectively. But there's also a threshold of high anxiety above which we become paralyzed with fear. Above that level of angst we can't concentrate on the message or the messenger, and fall back on negative stereotypes or simply withdraw from the conversation.

In like manner, the minimum threshold for uncertainty is the lowest amount of doubt we can have and yet not feel bored or overconfident about our predictions of strangers' behavior.[25] If we aren't curious about the stranger, we'll go on automatic pilot and likely misinterpret the words we hear. On the other hand, if uncertainty crosses the upper threshold, we lose all confidence that we can predict others' behavior, and then communication no longer seems worthwhile. Effective intercultural communication is possible only when participants' levels of doubt and fear fall somewhere between these upper and lower thresholds. Unfortunately, Gudykunst died before he could work out a way to measure where a person's thresholds lie.

Mindfulness. According to AUM theory, *mindfulness* is the way in-group members and strangers can reduce their anxiety and uncertainty to optimum levels. We are mindful when we consciously think about our communication and continually work at changing what we do in order to become more effective. Following Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer's notion of *mindful learning*,[26] Gudykunst suggested that being mindful involves the creation of new categories rather than simply classifying people according to their ethnicity, gender, age, wealth, or rules (see Chapter 8). It also means being open to information and recognizing that the other person may have a different perspective than we do.

Mindfulness
The process of thinking in new categories, being open to new information, and recognizing multiple perspectives.

The concept of mindfulness provides a potential solution to the age-old dilemma concerning free will and determinism. Most theorists tacitly plant their flag somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes, but neither they nor their readers seem particularly comfortable with their selection. In what I regard as a potentially brilliant move, Gudykunst made it possible to embrace both sides of the scale. Each axiom that predicts a change in anxiety or uncertainty explicitly states that it holds only if the people involved aren't mindful. When they aren't, the axioms have the force of law, and doubt and fear in intercultural situations is inevitable (determinism). But when strangers are mindful about their encounter, their mindfulness trumps the axioms, therefore reducing anxiety and uncertainty to manageable levels (free will). It's an idea that transcends the cause-and-effect logic of Berger's uncertainty reduction theory.

CRITIQUE: NAGGING DOUBTS ABOUT UNCERTAINTY

Berger's uncertainty reduction theory is an early prototype within the communication discipline of what an objective theory should be. His theory makes specific testable predictions, and offers the human need to reduce interpersonal uncertainty as the engine that drives its axioms. Although combining the axioms

generates a slew of theorems, they are straightforward, logically consistent, and simple to understand. As for practical utility, readers interested in promoting interpersonal ties can regard the linkages the theorems describe as a blueprint for constructing solid relationships. Subsequent survey and experimental research supports most of URT's axioms and has expanded the scope of the theory to cover development of established relationships. There are, however, continuing questions about Berger's reliance on the concept of *uncertainty* and his assumption that we're motivated to reduce it.

A dozen years after publishing the theory, Berger admitted that his original statement contained "some propositions of dubious validity."[27] Critics quickly point to theorem 17, which predicts that the more you like people, the less you'll seek information about them.

> Frankly, it is not clear why information-seeking would decrease as liking increased other than being required by deductive inference from the axiomatic structure of uncertainty reduction theory. In fact, it seems more reasonable to suggest that persons will seek information about and from those they like rather than those they dislike.[28]

That's the blunt assessment of Kathy Kellermann at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who originally participated in Berger's research program. We might be willing to dismiss this apparent error as only one glitch out of 28 theorems, but the tight logical structure that is the genius of the theory doesn't give us that option. Theorem 17 is dictated by axioms 3 and 7. If the theorem is wrong, one of the axioms is suspect. Kellermann targets the motivational assumption of axiom 3 as the problem.

Axiom 3 assumes that lack of information triggers a search for knowledge. But as Kellermann and Rodney Reynolds at Pepperdine University discovered when they studied motivation to reduce uncertainty in more than a thousand students at 10 universities, "wanting knowledge rather than lacking knowledge is what promotes information-seeking in initial encounters with others."[29] The distinction is illustrated by the story of a teacher who asked a boy, "What's the difference between *ignorance* and *apathy?*" The student replied, "I don't know, and I don't care." (He was right.)

Kellermann and Reynolds also failed to find that anticipated future interaction, incentive value, or deviance gave any motivational kick to information seeking, as Berger claimed they would. Thus, it seems that Berger's suggestion of a universal drive to reduce uncertainty during initial interaction is questionable at best. Yet along with the suspect third axiom, it, too, remains part of the theory.

Another attack on the theory comes from Michael Sunnafrank at the University of Minnesota in Duluth. He challenges Berger's claim that uncertainty reduction is the key to understanding early encounters. Consistent with Altman and Taylor's social penetration model presented in the previous chapter, Sunnafrank insists that the early course of a relationship is guided by its *predicted outcome value (POV).*[30] He's convinced that the primary goal of our initial interaction with another is maximizing our relational outcomes rather than finding out who he or she is. If this is true, you'll be more concerned with establishing a smooth working relationship with Heather at your initial meeting than you will be in figuring out why she does what she does.

Predicted outcome value
A forecast of future benefits and costs of interaction based on limited experience with the other.

Who's right—Berger or Sunnafrank? Berger thinks there's no contest. He maintains that any predictions you make about the rewards and costs of working with Heather are only as good as the quality of your current knowledge. To the

extent that you are uncertain of how an action will affect the relationship, predicted outcome value has no meaning. Leanne Knobloch (University of Illinois) and Laura Miller (University of Tennessee) think the assumptions underlying *both* URT and POV are too narrow. They suggest that we're not just uncertain about our new partner, we're uncertain about ourselves and the future of the relationship. They also claim that uncertainty can be rewarding as well as costly, and so we often cultivate uncertainty, ambiguity, or novelty in our relationships.[31] You'll encounter these ideas again in relational dialectics theory (see Chapter 12).

Even though the validity of Berger's theory is in question, his analysis of initial interaction is a major contribution to communication scholarship. Berger notes that "the field of communication has been suffering and continues to suffer from an intellectual trade deficit with respect to related disciplines; the field imports much more than it exports."[32] Uncertainty reduction theory was an early attempt by a scholar trained within the discipline to reverse that trend. His success at stimulating critical thinking among his peers can be seen in the fact that every scholar cited in this chapter is a member of a communication faculty.

Although some of Berger's axioms may not perfectly reflect the acquaintance process, his focus on the issue of reducing uncertainty is at the heart of communication inquiry. Appealing for further dialogue and modification rather than wholesale rejection of the theory, Berger asks:

> What could be more basic to the study of communication than the propositions that (1) adaptation is essential for survival, (2) adaptation is only possible through the reduction of uncertainty, and (3) uncertainty can be both reduced and produced by communicative activity?[33]

It's a sound rhetorical question.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. An *axiom* is a self-evident truth. Which one of Berger's axioms seems least self-evident to you?

2. Check out *theorem 13* in Figure 10–1. Does the predicted relationship between *self-disclosure* and *reciprocity* match the forecast of social penetration theory?

3. What is your goal for the class period when *uncertainty reduction theory* will be discussed? What is your *hierarchical action plan* to achieve that goal?

4. The relationship between *information seeking* and *liking* in *theorem 17* is only one of 28 predictions. Why do critics take doubts about its validity so seriously?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www. a firstlook.com.

Chuck Berger would not be surprised if you were confused by the mid-chapter switch from axioms of uncertainty reduction to plan-based strategic communication. In our conversation he describes why he originally viewed the two lines of research as separate but now sees them as tightly linked. Many students find this interview especially fascinating because of Berger's strongly stated opinions. For example, he dismisses CMM's idea of co-creation of social reality because it offers a "total amnesia model." He also criticizes social scientists who purposely create ambiguity so that they can never be proved wrong. Berger's explicit and forthright statements show that he's willing to risk being wrong.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Charles R. Berger, "Communicating Under Uncertainty," in *Interpersonal Processes: New Directions in Communication Research,* Michael Roloff and Gerald Miller (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1987, pp. 39–62.

Original statement: Charles R. Berger and Richard Calabrese, "Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 1, 1975, pp. 99–112.

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Plan-based strategic communication: Charles R. Berger, *Planning Strategic Interaction,* Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1997.

Planning messages when response is uncertain: Charles R. Berger, "Producing Messages Under Uncertainty," in *Message Production: Advances in Communication Theory,* John O. Greene (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1997, pp. 221–244.

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Uncertainty reduction in close relationships: Leanne K. Knobloch and Denise H. Solomon, "Information Seeking Beyond Initial Interaction: Negotiating Relational Uncertainty Within Close Relationships," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 28, 2002, pp. 243–257.

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Critique of axiom 3: Kathy Kellermann and Rodney Reynolds, "When Ignorance Is Bliss: The Role of Motivation to Reduce Uncertainty in Uncertainty Reduction Theory," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 17, 1990, pp. 5–75.

Summary and critique of URT and POV: Leanne K. Knobloch and Laura E. Miller, "Uncertainty and Relationship Initiation," in *Handbook of Relationship Initiation,* Susan Sprecher, Amy Wenzel, and John Harvey (eds.), Psychology Press, London, 2008, pp. 121–134.

To access a chapter on Heider's attribution theory
that appeared in a previous edition, click on Theory List at
www.afirstlook.com.

CHAPTER 11

Socio-psychological tradition

Social Information Processing Theory

of Joseph Walther

In 1992, I was working at home on the relationship development section of an early edition of this text when two computer-savvy friends dropped by. One of them asked what I was writing. About a minute into my description of *social penetration* and *uncertainty reduction,* the other friend blurted out, "I've got it. How 'bout a chapter on intimacy through email?" We all roared with laughter at this crazy idea and headed off to Starbucks for an enjoyable time chatting together over coffee.

Our derisive attitude toward building close relationships through computer-mediated communication (CMC) was shared by many in the early 1990s. CMC might be fine for task-related purposes such as information processing, news dissemination, and long-distance conferencing. But as a place to bond with others, cyberspace seemed to be a relational wasteland—stark and barren. Scholars who studied new electronic media had already offered a variety of theories to explain the inherent differences between CMC and face-to-face communication. I'll mention three.

CMC
Computer-mediated communication; text-based messages, which filter out most nonverbal cues.

Social presence theory suggests that text-based messages deprive CMC users of the sense that other warm bodies are jointly involved in the interaction.[1] To the extent that we no longer feel that anyone is *there,* our communication becomes more impersonal, individualistic, and task-oriented.

Social presence theory
Suggests that CMC deprives users of the sense that another actual person is involved in the interaction.

Media richness theory classifies each communication medium according to the complexity of the messages it can handle efficiently.[2] For example, the theory suggests that face-to-face communication provides a rich mix of verbal and nonverbal cue systems that can convey highly nuanced emotions, and even double meanings. By contrast, the limited bandwidth of CMC makes it rather lean—appropriate for transacting everyday business, but not for negotiating social relations.

Media richness theory
Purports that CMC bandwidth is too narrow to convey rich relational messages.

A third theory concentrates on the *lack of social context cues* in online communication.[3] It claims that CMC users have no clue as to their relative status, and norms for interaction aren't clear, so people tend to become more self-absorbed and less inhibited. The result is increased *flaming*—hostile language that zings its target and creates a toxic climate for relational growth on the Internet.

All of these theories share a *cues filtered out* interpretation of CMC. In other words, they assume that most online communication is text-only, without visual or auditory cues, and this limits its usefulness for developing interpersonal relationships.[4] To users accustomed to browsing Facebook photos, watching YouTube videos, or roaming Second Life, this no doubt sounds like a strange assumption. But in 1992, when my friends and I laughed at the idea of online intimacy, text ruled the online world. At that time, the Internet was the province of scientific and academic users—the first web browser for home use, Mosaic, was not released until the following year. The relatively few home users connected with dial-up modems that were too slow to transmit images or sound, so the most popular forms of online communication were text-only emails and discussion boards. In this historical context, it's not surprising that the public and communication theorists were skeptical about close relationships online.

Cues filtered out
Interpretation of CMC that regards lack of nonverbal cues as a fatal flaw for using the medium for relationship development.

Yet in 1992, communication professor Joe Walther published a theory that countered this conventional wisdom. Now at Michigan State University, Walther claimed that CMC users can adapt to this restricted medium and use it effectively to develop close relationships. He argued that given the opportunity for a sufficient exchange of social messages and subsequent relational growth, *as goes face-to-face communication, so goes CMC.* At first, Walther limited his theory to text-only online communication; this is an example of a *boundary condition,* or a statement that limits the context in which a theory holds true. Today, Walther admits that many new forms of online communication, such as social networking sites, do not meet the requirement of this boundary condition.[5] Nevertheless, he is hopeful that careful thinking can expand his theory to account for online communication that transcends the limitations of text.[6] After first explaining his original theory, we'll consider recent extensions that explain communication on Facebook, one of the Internet's most popular social networking sites.

Boundary condition
A statement that limits the context a theory is meantt o describe.

CMC VERSUS FACE-TO-FACE: A SIP INSTEAD OF A GULP

Walther labeled his theory *social information processing (SIP)* because he believes relationships grow only to the extent that parties first gain information about each other and use that information to form interpersonal impressions of who they are. In taking this view, SIP theory is consistent with *social penetration theory* and *uncertainty reduction theory* (see Chapters 9 and 10). With these more or less defined impressions in mind, the interacting parties draw closer if they both like the image of the other that they've formed. Walther's SIP focuses on the first link of the chain—the personal information available through CMC and its effect on the composite mental image of the other that each one creates.

Interpersonal Information → Impression Formation → Relationship Development

Impression formation
The composite mental image one person forms ofanother .

Walther acknowledges that nonverbal cues are filtered out of the interpersonal information we send and receive through text-only CMC. Physical context, facial expression, tone of voice, interpersonal distance, body position, appearance, gestures, touch, and smell are all missing. But unlike *cues filtered out* theorists, he doesn't think this loss is necessarily fatal or even injurious to

a well-defined impression of the other or the relational development that it triggers. Walther highlights two features of CMC that provide a rationale for SIP theory:[7]

1. *Verbal cues.* When motivated to form impressions and develop relationships, communicators employ any cue system that's available. Thus, CMC users can create fully formed impressions of others based solely on the linguistic content of online messages.
2. *Extended time.* The exchange of social information through text-only CMC is much slower than it is face-to-face, so impressions are formed at a reduced rate. Yet given enough time, there's no reason to believe that CMC relationships will be weaker or more fragile than those developed with the benefit of nonverbal cues.

The SIP acronym suggests a liquid analogy that can help us understand Walther's thinking.[8] Suppose someone hands you a 12-ounce glass of water, cola, or beer—whatever drink you find refreshing. You could hoist the glass and chug the contents in a matter of seconds. That big gulp is similar to being face-to-face with someone you've just met and want to know better. The flood of verbal and nonverbal information makes it possible to form a vivid interpersonal impression that will affect your future interaction. But what if you had to drink your beverage through a straw—one *sip* at a time? You'd still be able to drain the entire 12 ounces, but it would take much longer. That's the situation for CMC users who are thirsty for social information. They end up with the same quantity and quality of interpersonal knowledge, but it accumulates at a slower rate.

VERBAL CUES OF AFFINITY REPLACE NONVERBAL CUES

Walther claims that the human need for affiliation is just as active when people communicate online as when they are with each other face-to-face. But because computer-mediated communication eliminates the nonverbal cues that typically signal relational affinity, CMC users must rely on text-only messages to convey the same social information. He's convinced that verbal and nonverbal cues can be used interchangeably.

If Walther's claim strikes you as far-fetched, remember that prior to electronic communication, people developed pen-pal relationships by discovering similarities and expressing affection through the written word alone. Long-distance romantic relationships thrived as the casual exchange of friendly notes progressed to a stream of passionate love letters, and the same relational development can take place through CMC. During World War II, postal letters so powerfully boosted soldier morale that the United States government launched a campaign encouraging citizens to write to loved ones serving abroad. When the mass of letters became too expensive to transport, a technology known as "v-mail" reduced letters to small pieces of film that could be expanded to readable size upon reaching soldiers.[9] History supports SIP's claim that people creatively adapt their communication to connect across cue-limited media.

Pen pal exchanges or wartime letters may seem strange to you. If so, maybe you'll identify more closely with the words of Katie, a former student of mine

who wrote an application log entry for Walther's theory that describes closeness with family across CMC:

> I do have many relationships that I primarily maintain online. One of these is with my grandparents who I don't get to see as much as I wish I could. They are both quite hard of hearing and have old phones with lots of noise, so email is a much better way to communicate with them. Our phone conversations are always short, but we write lengthy emails several times a week. Also Walther's idea that CMC allows people to communicate at their convenience applies here. We have a four-hour time difference and very different schedules, so CMC allows us to communicate more and to do it on our own terms and times.

Experimental Support for a Counterintuitive Idea

Are the verbal strategies adopted by pen pals, soldiers abroad, and geographically distant family members typical of the way CMC users pursue their social goals? Can affinity for another person be expressed just as well through a digital medium as it can when face-to-face? Walther and two of his students ran an experiment that suggests the answer to both questions is yes.[10]

Walther asked 28 pairs of students who didn't know each other to discuss moral dilemmas—a communication task used in many previous experiments. Half the pairs talked face-to-face, while the other half communicated online. In both cases, one member of each pair was a student accomplice—someone the researchers recruited ahead of time. Half of these confederates were asked to communicate in a friendly, positive way, while the other half were told to act unfriendly. Since Walther designed the experiment to find out what communication strategies people would use, he didn't specify any particular way that the confederates should act to accomplish their goal.

During the experiment, video cameras recorded the face-to-face conversations from behind a one-way mirror, and all computer messages were saved. Afterward, trained raters categorized the different ways confederates communicated both verbal and nonverbal emotion. The naïve participants rated their partners on the degree of affection expressed during the discussion.

SIP theory claims that human beings are creative communicators, able to use text-only channels to convey a level of relational warmth that eventually equals that expressed when face-to-face. The experiment's results supported that claim. The mode of communication made no difference in the emotional tone perceived by naïve participants. Any discrepancy in warmth was due to the intention of each confederate—nice confederates successfully conveyed warmth, and grouchy confederates were perceived as mean. What verbal behaviors did confederates use in CMC to show that they were friendly? As you might expect, self-disclosure, praise, and statements of affection topped the list. These are core strategies of making an impression by reducing uncertainty and drawing close through social penetration (see Chapters 10 and 9). Yet surprisingly, indirect disagreement, a change of subject, and compliments offered while proposing a contrasting idea were also associated with friendliness. Each of these verbal techniques allows a partner to save face and defuse potential conflict.

Of course, face-to-face confederates could have used these same verbal behaviors—and indeed, some of them did. But *what* confederates said when physically present seemed insignificant compared to *how* they showed it nonverbally. Consistent with previous research, confederates relied on facial expression,

eye contact, tone of voice, body position, and other nonverbal cues to convey how they felt about their partners.[11] In sum, the study supports Walther's claim that people meeting online can begin a relationship just as effectively as if they had met face-to-face, but instead of forming their impressions of each other through nonverbal cues, they do so through the words they write.

EXTENDED TIME: THE CRUCIAL VARIABLE IN CMC

Walther is convinced that the length of time CMC users have to send their messages is the key factor that determines whether their text-only messages can achieve the level of intimacy that others develop face-to-face. Over an extended period, the issue is not the *amount* of social information that can be conveyed online; rather, it's the *rate* at which that information mounts up. Because typing is slower than talking, text-based messages take longer to compose. How much longer? Walther finds that any message spoken in person will take at least four times longer to say through CMC.[12]

This four-to-one time differential explains why many early studies, conducted in controlled laboratories, seem to show that CMC is task-oriented and impersonal. With both modes of communication artificially limited to 15–20 minutes, CMC users don't have time to garner enough social information to form a distinct impression of their partner. (They've had only a few sips rather than a gulp of relational cues.) Walther says a fair test for different channels of relational communication would extend the time limit for unacquainted online users so they could have the opportunity to send the same number of messages as strangers in the face-to-face condition. That's how he designed the content-cues experiment reported in the previous section. When comparing 10 minutes of face-to-face conversation with 40 minutes of CMC, there was no difference in partner affinity between the two modes.

In real life, there's usually no imposed time limit on online communication, whether in length or frequency. Since CMC conveys social information more slowly than face-to-face communication does, Walther advises online users to make up for the rate difference by sending messages more often. Not only does this practice help impression formation in personal relationships, but it's also reassuring to virtual group partners who naturally wonder who their colleagues are, what they're thinking, and if they're going to do the work they've promised.

Two other temporal factors can contribute to intimacy on the Internet—anticipated future interaction and chronemic cues. *Anticipated future interaction* wasn't part of Walther's original conception of SIP, but he now sees it as a way of extending psychological time. Recall that Chuck Berger claims our drive to reduce uncertainty about someone we've just met gets an added boost when we think we're going to see each other again (see Chapter 10). Through his empirical research, Walther's discovered that members of an online conference or task group start to trade relational messages when they are scheduled for multiple meetings. It's as if the "shadow of the future" motivates them to encounter others on a personal level.[13] Although Berger's prediction was made with a face-to-face context in mind, Walther finds that anticipation of future interaction is a better predictor of relational development than whether people meet online or in the flesh.

Anticipated future interaction
A way of extending psychological time; the likelihood of future interaction motivates CMC users to develop arelations hip.

Chronemics is the label nonverbal researchers use to describe how people perceive, use, and respond to issues of time in their interaction with others. Unlike tone of voice, interpersonal distance, or gestures (*vocalics, proxemics,*

Chronemics
The study of people's systematic handling of time in their interaction with others.

kinesics), time is the one nonverbal cue that's not filtered out in text-only CMC. A recipient can note the time of day an email was sent and then gauge the elapsed time between messages. Does this knowledge really affect a relationship? Walther's research suggests that a late-night request sent to a teacher or boss will seem demanding, but a social message sent to a friend at the same hour will signal affection. As for time lag, Andrew Ledbetter, a former student of mine who is now a communication professor at Ohio University, recently followed up on Walther's work with a study of reply rate between college-age friends. In the study, participants read an email message and a reply to that message. The text of the email exchange was the same for each participant, but the time stamp varied randomly: Participants either saw messages separated by one hour, one day, one week, or one month. The study revealed that replying within an hour yielded the most positive impressions, with some evidence that women may be more attuned to reply rate than men are.[14] So if you want to convey a positive impression, a fast reply is probably best, though you also may want to consider the tone conveyed by the time of day the message is sent.

You now have the basic predictions of social information processing theory. SIP claims that CMC users can get to know each other and develop a mutual affinity by using the medium's available cues to manage their relational development—and throughout the 1990s, that was mostly text. The process will probably take longer than is typical in face-to-face bonding, but there's no reason to believe their relationship will be any less personal. After offering a similar summary, Walther asks, "Is this the best that one can hope to attain when communicating electronically—the mere potential for intimacy where time permits?"[15] His answer is no—*in a number of instances, CMC actually surpasses the quality of relational communication that's available when parties talk face-to-face.* Walther's hyperpersonal perspective shows how this works.

HYPERPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: CLOSER THROUGH CMC THAN IN PERSON

Hyperpersonal perspective
The claim that CMC relationships are often more intimate that those developed when partners are physically together.

Walther uses the term *hyperpersonal* to label CMC relationships that are more intimate than romances or friendships would be if partners were physically together. Under the familiar *sender-receiver-channel-feedback* categories, he classifies four types of media effects that occur precisely because text-only CMC users aren't face-to-face and don't have a full range of communication cues with which to work. Specifically, Walther's hyperpersonal perspective depicts "how senders select, receivers magnify, channels promote, and feedback increases enhanced and selective communication behaviors in CMC."[16] As you read through these four types of media effects, think about whether these apply beyond the text-based communication Walther originally addressed when he built this perspective.

Sender: Selective Self-Presentation

Selective self-presentation
An online positive portrayal without fear of contradiction, which enables people to create an overwhelmingly favorableimpr ession.

Walther claims that through *selective self-presentation,* people who meet online have an opportunity to make and sustain an overwhelmingly positive impression. That's because they can write about their most attractive traits, accomplishments, thoughts, and actions without fear of contradiction from their physical appearance, their inconsistent actions, or the objections of third parties who know their dark side. As a relationship develops, they can carefully edit the

breadth and depth of their self-disclosure to conform to their cyber image, without worrying that nonverbal leakage will shatter their projected persona.

Receiver: Overattribution of Similarity

Attribution is a perceptual process whereby we observe what people do and then try to figure out what they're really like. Our basic interpretive bias is to assume that the specific action we see reflects the personality of the person who did it. People who *do* things like that *are* like that. But when it comes to reading a newsgroup post or email, we have very little to go on. Our only basis for judgment is the verbal behavior of the person who sent the message. Walther says that the absence of other cues doesn't keep us from jumping to conclusions. To the contrary, he's convinced that we'll likely overattribute the meager information we have and create an idealized image of the sender.

Walther draws on SIDE theory, developed by European social psychologists Martin Lea and Russell Spears, to explain this kind of over-the-top identification.[17] SIDE is their acronym for *social identity-deindividuation.* As the title implies, some CMC relationships start when parties meet in online groups that center on a common interest, problem, or passion. Whether participants discuss documentary films, breastfeeding, or the chances of the Chicago Cubs reaching the World Series, they assume that others visiting the site are like them in one important way. In the absence of cues that focus on individual differences, their commonality is all they have to go on as they form their impressions of each other. The result is an exaggerated sense of similarity and group solidarity. When this excessively positive image of others is paired with the anticipation of future interaction, virtual partners can *SIP* and *SIDE* into a hyperpersonal relationship.

Social identity-deindividuation (SIDE) A theory that suggests CMC users overestimate their similarity with others they meet in online interestgro ups.

Channel: Communicating on Your Own Time

Most forms of interpersonal communication require that parties synchronize their schedules in order to talk with each other. Although face-to-face interaction and phone conversations offer a sense of immediacy, co-presence is achieved at a high price. One partner's desire to communicate often comes at a bad time for the other. An overture to talk that might be welcome one day can be an inconvenience, interruption, or intrusion the next. Parties may make a date to talk, of course, but locking in a time for communication raises expectations for significance that may be hard to meet. And relationships are at risk when appointments are frequently canceled or, worse, forgotten.

In contrast, online communication is mediated through a channel that gives partners the opportunity to communicate without having to attend to each other at the same time. Walther refers to some forms of CMC (such as email) as *asynchronous* channels of communication, meaning that parties can use them nonsimultaneously. With time constraints relaxed, CMC users are free to write person-centered messages, knowing that the recipient will read the message at a convenient time. This is a big plus, especially when, like my student Katie and her grandparents, they are communicating across time zones, or their waking hours are out of sync.

Asynchronous channel A nonsimultaneous medium of communication that each individual can use when he or she desires.

Walther notes an added benefit of nonsimultaneous CMC over face-to-face communication: "In asynchronous interaction one may plan, contemplate, and edit one's comments more mindfully and deliberatively than one can in more

"I can't wait to see what you're like online."

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spontaneous, simultaneous talk."[18] This is a tremendous advantage when dealing with touchy issues, misunderstandings, or conflict between parties.

Feedback: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Self-fulfilling prophecy The tendency for a person's expectation of others to evoke a response from them that confirms what was originally anticipated.

Self-fulfilling prophecy is the tendency for a person's expectation of others to evoke a response from them that confirms what he or she anticipated. Believing it's so can make it so. This process creates hyperpersonal relationships only if CMC parties first form highly favorable impressions of each other. As we've seen in the preceding sections, Walther thinks that's likely to happen. *Senders* self-select what they reveal, *receivers* create an idealized image of their partner, and the *channel* lets users express themselves the way they want, when they want. What's not to like?

Self-fulfilling prophecy is triggered when that hyperpositive image is intentionally or inadvertently *fed back* to the other, creating the CMC equivalent of the *looking-glass self* (see Chapter 5). Walther even suggests that this phenomenon may improve relationships between groups with a strong history of tension and conflict, such as those between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. As Walther asks, "In CMC, when the turban and the yarmulke need not be visible during

interactions, can [similarities] be made more [meaningful] than differences?"[19] A recent test in the Israeli education system suggests the answer may be yes, as one Jewish student reported after spending more than a year communicating online in a multicultural course: "This coming year, I will begin teaching . . . and when I use the word 'Arab' in my class, it will sound different than it would have before the course."[20] Walther suspects hyperpersonal communication may explain why this student's attitude changed after prolonged online contact with people from another culture.

The hyperpersonal perspective assumes that people communicate through text-only CMC. Although this still happens in international business meetings, online support groups, and hobby-focused discussion boards, Walther acknowledges that the web has moved far beyond text.[21] Do the propositions of SIP theory still apply when communicators have more nonverbal cues available? Walther and his colleagues have turned to Facebook, one of the Internet's most popular social networking sites, to explore how users process social information across newer forms of CMC.

THE WARRANTING VALUE OF INFORMATION: WHAT TO TRUST?

Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn—known as *social networking sites*—are now popular means of interpersonal CMC. Facebook, one of the most frequently visited social networking sites, launched in 2004 with a focus on college students. By 2006, anyone on the Internet could create a profile on the site.

What sets social networking sites apart from the text-only CMC Walther originally studied is not only the inclusion of photos and video, but also the ability to create a personal profile, build network connections (on Facebook, called "friends"), and add information to other people's profiles. When users post information on their profiles, other users can supplement, or even contradict, that information. For Facebook users, such added information might include text-based comments on profile content or links to photographs and video. In other words, sites such as Facebook display two types of information—that which is controlled by the profile owner and that beyond the profile owner's direct control. Walther believes this is a difference that truly makes a difference in how Facebook users process social information.

As an example, let's say you view a new classmate's Facebook profile for the first time. The classmate describes herself as "quiet and studious," lists her interests as "reading philosophy" and "playing solitaire," and is part of a group titled "I'd rather stay in and read a good book." Yet many of her friends' comments describe her as "the life of the party," with links to photographs of her socializing with large groups of people. If you think these messages contradict each other, who are you likely to believe—your classmate or her friends? Answering this question is at the heart of Walther's investigation of the *warranting value* of personal information, or what he describes as "the perceived validity of information presented online with respect to illuminating someone's offline characteristics."[22] For both Walther and scholars of debate, the word "warrant" has a similar meaning to the word "reason": If the information we're reading has warranting value, then it gives us reason to believe the information is true.

Warranting value
Reason to believe that information is accurate, typically because the target of the information cannotmani pulate it.

If communicating via traditional text-based CMC is like sipping through a straw, SIP assumes that "all water passing through the [straw] is the same sort of water."[23] But Walther believes Facebook lets users sip two different kinds of

liquid at the same time. Like email messages, whose content is under the sole control of the sender, information posted by a profile owner is *low warrant information* because he or she can manipulate it with ease. Walther argues that we may not trust this information: "Because online impressions are controllable, they are often suspect."[24] But since the profile owner can't easily change what's posted by friends, we're more likely to accept this *high warrant information* as true. As Walther notes, this happens offline, too: You might believe a classmate who says he'll work hard with you on a group project, but you'll probably give even greater weight to the testimony of his lab partner last term. For the purpose of impression formation, low warrant information is like a sip of grape juice, but high warrant information is like a taste of fine wine.

Walther and his colleagues have tested warranting value through a series of experiments, with participants randomly assigned to view different versions of fake Facebook profiles. These experiments confirm that people trust high warrant information. In one study, the content of friends' comments, or *wall posts*, influenced evaluations of the profile owner's credibility and social attractiveness. Another experiment directly compared low and high warrant information, finding that friends' comments overrode the profile owner's claims when forming impressions of extroversion and physical attractiveness.[25] These studies suggest that, unlike email, interpersonal information comes from both the self and other social networking site users. An outside observer won't give those two sources equal weight.

CRITIQUE: WALTHER'S CANDID ASSESSMENT

Throughout this chapter, I've emphasized just how much online communication has changed since Walther began developing his theory. But you probably don't need me to tell you that. In the past 10 years you've seen the rise of new forms of online communication, ranging from web-based video and text messaging to massively multiplayer online games. For this reason, some say CMC is one of the most difficult communication contexts to study. Just as theorists begin to understand one technology, along comes the next.[26] Yet in this train of high-tech innovation, Walther's theory stands strong. SIP remains popular among new media scholars because it meets all the criteria for a good social science theory outlined in Chapter 3. It offers clear, *testable hypotheses* about a *relatively simple* set of variables. It clearly *explains* differences and similarities between face-to-face and online communication. The theory *predicts* communication behavior across media that didn't even exist when the theory was born, and SIP's advice is *practically useful* to many, ranging from spatially separated soulmates to international business partners.

For all the theory's success, Walther openly admits the existence of gaps and weaknesses in his analysis of CMC. For example, some studies suggest that online relationships form at the same pace or even faster than they do for people who meet face-to-face[27]—a finding that contradicts one of SIP's central claims. Walther also questions his original assumption that no matter what media people use, they are motivated by a similar desire to affiliate with others. Within a few years he had second thoughts about this claim and wrote, "A weakness apparent in the social information processing perspective is that it has not allowed for differences in the affiliation drive."[28] He was specifically referring to the motivating

effect of anticipated future interaction. But Walther still doesn't deal with the possibility that there could be basic personality differences between those who like to communicate online and those who don't. Perhaps CMC users who join online discussion groups or enter chat rooms have a higher need for affiliation than the typical person whose relationships are developed through multichannel modes of communication. If so, that stronger desire might offset the limitations of using a restricted medium.

Referring to his four-factor hyperpersonal perspective, Walther takes pains to label the sender-receiver-channel-feedback model a *perspective* rather than a *theory.* As a rigorous social scientist, he understands that a good theory should offer a central explanatory mechanism to drive a synthesis of the observed effects. Because the hyperpersonal perspective doesn't have this kind of conceptual engine, he admits that it's open to significant criticism:

> It is not clear at all whether there are any necessary theoretical linkages among and between the four major components and the more detailed processes that the model specifies. In other words, its constructs and propositions are poorly interrelated, and its status as a robust theory is therefore tenuous.[29]

Without a theoretical glue to hold together selective self-presentation, overattribution, nonsimultaneous communication, and self-fulfilling prophecy, it's difficult, if not impossible, to test how these variables work together.

Though SIP remains popular with CMC scholars, Walther argues that time and technological development have limited the theory's scope.[30] His exploration of warranting value represents one attempt to expand SIP to newer forms of CMC. Like the core of SIP, a strength of Walther's warranting work is its relative simplicity—but perhaps it is too simple. One series of experiments suggests that warranting may differ depending on the kind of information under scrutiny. For example, Walther speculates that warranting might depend on the information's *social desirability,* or value in the eyes of society—somewhat like Mead's concept of the *generalized other* (see Chapter 5). Physical attractiveness is one such socially desirable trait, and so we may even suspect that Facebook members alter their profile pictures, erasing wrinkles and facial blemishes (or, for some older members, posting a picture of their younger self).[31] But society doesn't care as much about other characteristics, like favorite restaurants or TV shows. For such qualities, Walther suspects that "the warranting principle may not as strongly apply."[32] And so the idea of warranting remains a work in progress.

Rather than being disheartened by Walther's assessment of his theory, I'm encouraged by his candor. All theories have flaws and limitations. His honest evaluation gives me confidence in his upbeat summary of relational opportunities through CMC:

> The "Information Superhighway" is clearly not just a road for moving data from one place to another, but a roadside where people pass each other, occasionally meet, and decide to travel together. You can't see very much of other drivers at first, unless you do travel together for some time. There are highway bandits, to be sure, who are not as they appear to be—one must drive defensively—and there are conflicts and disagreements online as there are off-road too. While early research suggested that numerous interpersonal collisions were impending, recent research finds that interpersonal information moves at slower speeds, and in doing so, the roadway is not as dangerous as once thought. It can even offer a relational joyride.[33]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *SIP* proposes that *CMC* conveys relational information just as well as *face-to-face communication,* with only one difference. What is that difference?

2. Recall a time when you felt particularly drawn to another person when communicating through email, Facebook, or some other type of CMC. Why did you feel drawn to this person? Does the presence (or absence) of verbal cues or extended time explain your attraction?

3. The *hyperpersonal perspective* suggests that CMC effects of *sender, receiver, channel,* and *feedback* promote greater intimacy. Which factor do you think has the greatest relational impact? Which has the least?

4. Your online partner seems wonderful—but, because it's possible to create a *fictitious persona* through CMC, you want to make sure he or she is "for real." How would you find out? What might the warranting principle suggest you do to get trustworthy information?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

Most of my conversation with Joe Walther centers on CMC users who have a great affinity for the Internet. Granted, they can develop strong impressions of others online, but does true intimacy require face-to-face communication? Are heavy CMC users more in love with the medium than with their partners? Can those who are socially shy develop better relationships through CMC? What code of ethical online behavior would he suggest? Walther offers advice to CMC partners who want to meet in person. He also discusses the scope of SIP and the hyperpersonal perspective—whether they apply to partners who want to sustain a long-distance relationship after first meeting face-to-face.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Joseph B. Walther, "Interpersonal Effects in Computer-Mediated Interaction: A Relational Perspective," *Communication Research,* Vol. 19, 1992, pp. 52–90.

Hyperpersonal perspective: Joseph B. Walther, "Computer-Mediated Communication: Impersonal, Interpersonal, and Hyperpersonal Interaction," *Communication Research,* Vol. 23, 1996, pp. 3–43.

State of the art: Joseph B. Walther, "Social Information Processing Theory: Impressions and Relationship Development Online," in *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives,* Leslie A. Baxter and Dawn O. Braithwaite (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, pp. 391–404.

Capsule summary of SIP and hyperpersonal perspective: Joseph B. Walther and Lisa C. Tidwell, "Computer-Mediated Communication: Interpersonal Interaction On-Line," in *Making Connections: Readings in Relational Communication,* 2nd ed., Kathleen M. Galvin and Pamela J. Cooper (eds.), Roxbury, Los Angeles, CA, 2000, pp. 322–329.

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Online dating: Jennifer L. Gibbs, Nicole B. Ellison, and Rebecca D. Heino, "Self-Presentation in Online Personals: The Role of Anticipated Future Interaction, Self-Disclosure, and Perceived Success in Internet Dating," *Communication Research*, Vol. 33, 2006, pp. 152–177.

To check your understanding of SIP and other theories, click on Theory Resources and then Self-Help Quizzes at *www.afirstlook.com.*

Relationship Maintenance

The term *maintenance* may call to mind an auto repair shop where workers with oil-stained coveralls and grease under their fingernails struggle to service or fix a well-worn engine. The work is hard, the conditions are messy, and the repair is best performed by mechanics who have a good idea what they're doing.

This image of rugged work is appropriate when thinking about the ongoing effort required to maintain a close relationship. Forming a relational bond is often easier than sustaining it. The beginning stages of intimacy are typically filled with excitement at discovering another human being who sees the world as we do, with the added touch of wonder that the person we like likes us as well. As the relationship becomes more established, however, irritating habits, conflict, jealousy, and boredom can be the friction that threatens to pull the engine apart. The owner's manual of a new "Intimacy" should warn that periodic maintenance is necessary for friends, romantic partners, and even blood relatives to make it for the long haul.

Of course, personal relationships aren't inanimate machines with interchangeable parts that can be adjusted with a wrench. Expanding the *maintenance* metaphor to living organisms underscores the importance of individualized attention in relational health. Humanist communication writer John Stewart refers to a pair's

"They're a perfect match—she's high-maintenance, and he can fix anything."

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personal relationship as a "spiritual child," born as the result of their coming together.[1] His analogy stresses that a relationship requires continual care and nurture for sustained growth. Stewart thinks it's impossible to totally kill a relationship as long as one of the "parents" is still alive. Yet when people ignore or abuse the spiritual children they've created, the results are stunted or maimed relationships.

What does a healthy relationship look like? Through an extensive research program on relationship maintenance, Dan Canary (Arizona State University) and Laura Stafford (Ohio State University) conclude that long-term satisfying relationships have at least four characteristics—*liking, trust, commitment,* and *control mutuality*.[2] The first three seem like old relational friends. But control mutuality is a less familiar concept. According to Canary and Stafford, it is "the degree to which partners agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behavioral routines."[3] They may have an egalitarian relationship, or perhaps one person regularly defers to the other but is genuinely happy to do so. Either way, they could each embrace the following statement: *Both of us are satisfied with the way we handle decisions.*

Stafford and Canary surveyed 662 married and single men and women involved in extended romantic relationships to find out what maintenance behaviors promoted liking, trust, commitment, and control mutuality. They consistently discovered five interpersonal actions that contribute to long-term relational satisfaction:[4]

Positivity—Cheerful, courteous talk, avoiding criticism. This upbeat form of communication is particularly linked to liking and control mutuality.

Openness—Self-disclosure and frank talk about their relationship. The effect of transparency is roughly equal across the board.

Assurances—Affirming talk about the future of their relationship. These words especially promote commitment and liking.

Networking—Spending time together with mutual friends and family. This joint social activity contributes to overall relational stability and satisfaction.

Sharing tasks—Working together on routine jobs, chores, and assignments. This cooperation seems to affect control mutuality the most.

Canary and Stafford note that not much relational maintenance research is theory-driven—including their work cited above. There are, however, at least three well-known theories that speak to the issue. I've already presented Thibaut and Kelley's *social exchange* approach, which is an integral part of *social penetration theory* (see Chapter 9). These theorists regard interpersonal behavior and attitudes as the result of rewards and costs. Accordingly, when mutual benefits outweigh partners' costs, and these outcomes are well above each party's comparison level (CL), liking and relational satisfaction should be high. And when parties perceive that their option for a closer relationship with someone else is dim—each one's outcome exceeding the comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})—commitment will be strong and the relationship correspondingly stable. Finally, when both partners have invested a great deal of time, energy, and emotional resources in the relationship, the prospect of abandoning this investment becomes a barrier to breakup. You'll find that liking, trust, commitment, and control mutuality are also concerns of the two relationship maintenance theories I introduce in this section.

CHAPTER 12

Relational Dialectics

of Leslie Baxter & Barbara Montgomery

Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery are central figures in a growing group of communication scholars who study how communication creates and constantly changes close relationships. Baxter directs an extensive program of research at the University of Iowa. Montgomery is provost and vice president for academic affairs at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

The first time Baxter conducted a series of in-depth interviews with people about their personal relationships, she quickly gave up any hope of discovering scientific laws that neatly ordered the experiences of friends and lovers.

> I was struck by the contradictions, contingencies, non-rationalities, and multiple realities to which people gave voice in their narrative sense-making of their relational lives.[1]

Baxter saw no law of gravitational pull to predict interpersonal attraction, no co-efficient of friction that would explain human conflict. She found, instead, people struggling to interpret the mixed messages about their relationship that they both spoke and heard. Although Montgomery worked independently of Baxter, her experience was much the same.

Baxter and Montgomery each analyzed tensions inherent in romantic relationships and began to catalog the contradictions that couples voiced. They soon recognized the commonality of their work and co-authored a book on relating based on the premise that personal relationships are indeterminate processes of ongoing flux.[2]

Both scholars make it clear that the forces that strain romantic relationships are also at work among close friends and family members. They applaud the work of William Rawlins at Ohio University, who concentrates on the "communicative predicaments of friendship," and the narrative analysis of Art Bochner at the University of South Florida, who focuses on the complex contradictions within family systems. Whatever the form of intimacy, Baxter and Montgomery's basic claim is that "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies."[3]

Relational dialectics
A dynamic knot of contradictions in personal relationships; an unceasing interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies.

Relational dialectics highlight the tension, struggle, and general messiness of close personal ties. According to Baxter, the best way we can grasp relationship dialectics is to look at a narrative in which competing discourses are etched in bold relief. The 2002 movie *Bend It Like Beckham* is especially helpful in illustrating tensions within family, friendship, and romantic ties. Audiences of all ages and every ethnicity can identify with the relational struggles of Jesminder Bhamra, an Indian teenage girl brought up in the west end of London.

Like many British teenage males, Jess is passionate about soccer, but she's better than any of the guys she plays with in pickup games at the park. A poster of England's football superstar David Beckham hangs on her bedroom wall and she often talks to his image about her game and her life. In the close-knit Indian expat community, Jess is at an age where girls are supposed to focus on marrying a well-regarded Indian boy—a union often arranged by their parents. Her mother insists that Jess quit "running around half-naked in front of men." Her dad reluctantly agrees. "Jess, your mother's right. It's not nice. You must start behaving as a proper woman. OK?"

Jules, an English girl who sees Jess play, recruits her to play for an amateur women's soccer team. Jess and Jules quickly become "mates," bonded together by their goal-scoring ability and joint efforts to keep Jess' participation a secret from her mom and dad. Their friendship is soon ruptured by Jules' jealousy over a romantic interest between Jess and Joe, the team's coach. Of course, that kind of relationship is out of bounds for Jess. The resulting tensions in Jess' conversations with her dad, best friend, and admired coach allow us to see the oppositional pull of contrasting forces, which is relational dialectics at work.

THE TUG-OF-WAR DIALECTICS OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Some viewers might assume that Jess's up-again, down-again relationships with Joe, Jules, and her dad are due to her age, sex, birth order, ethnicity, or obsession with soccer. But Baxter and Montgomery caution us not to look at demographics or personal traits when we want to understand the nature of close relationships. Neither biology nor biography can account for the struggle of contradictory tendencies that Jess and her significant others experience in this story. The tensions they face are common to all personal relationships, and those opposing pulls never quit.

Contradiction is a core concept of relational dialectics. *Contradiction* refers to "the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions."[4] A contradiction is formed "whenever two tendencies or forces are interdependent (the dialectical principle of unity) yet mutually negate one another (the dialectical principle of negation)."[5] According to Baxter, every personal relationship faces the same tension. Rather than bemoaning this relational fact of life, Baxter and Montgomery suggest that couples take advantage of the opportunity it provides: "From a relational dialectics perspective, bonding occurs in both interdependence with the other and independence from the other."[6] One without the other diminishes the relationship.

Baxter and Montgomery draw heavily on the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian intellectual who survived the Stalinist regime. Bakhtin saw dialectical tension as the "deep structure" of all human experience. On the one hand, a centripetal, or centralizing, force pulls us together with others. On the other hand, a centrifugal, or decentralizing, force pushes us apart.

In order to picture Bakhtin's simultaneous and conflicting forces, imagine yourself playing "crack the whip" while skating with a group of friends. You

volunteer to be the outermost person on a pinwheeling chain of skaters. As you accelerate, you feel the centripetal pull from the skater beside you, who has a viselike grip on your wrist. You also feel the opposing centrifugal force that threatens to rip you from your friend's grasp and slingshot you away from the group. Skill at skating doesn't reduce the conflicting pressures. In fact, the more speed you can handle, the greater the opposing forces.

Baxter emphasizes that Bakhtin's fusion-fission opposites have no ultimate resolution. Unlike the thesis-antithesis-synthesis stages of Hegelian or Marxist dialectics, there is no final synthesis or end stage of equilibrium. Relationships are always in flux; the only certainty is certain change. For Bakhtin, this wasn't bad news. He saw dialectical tension as providing an opportunity for dialogue, an occasion when partners could work out ways to mutually embrace the conflict between unity *with* and differentiation *from* each other.

Many Westerners are bothered by the idea of paradox, so Baxter and Montgomery work hard to translate the concept into familiar terms. At the start of her research interviews, Baxter introduces a dialectical perspective without ever using the phrase itself. She talks about people experiencing certain "pulls" or "tugs" in different directions. Her words call up the image of parties engaged in an ongoing *tug-of-war* created through their conversations. Within this metaphor, their communication exerts simultaneous pulls on both ends of a taut line—a relational rope under tension.

It's important to understand that when Baxter uses the term *relational dialectics,* she is not referring to *being of two minds*—the cognitive dilemma within the head of an individual who is grappling with conflicting desires. Instead, she's describing the contradictions that are "located in the relationship between parties, produced and reproduced through the parties' joint communicative activity."[7] So dialectical tension is the natural product or unavoidable result of our conversations rather than the motive force guiding what we say in them. And despite the fact that we tend to think of any kind of conflict as detrimental to our relationships, Baxter and Montgomery believe that these contradictions can be constructive. That's fortunate, because these theorists are convinced that dialectics in relationships are inevitable.

THREE DIALECTICS THAT AFFECT RELATIONSHIPS

While listening to hundreds of men and women talk about their relationships, Baxter spotted three recurring contradictions that challenge the traditional wisdom of the theories described in the relationship development section. Recall that Rogers' phenomenological approach assumes that *closeness* is the relational ideal, Berger's uncertainty reduction theory posits a quest for interpersonal *certainty,* and Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory valorizes the *transparent* or *open self* (see the introduction to Relationship Development, Chapter 10, and Chapter 9). But from the accounts she heard, Baxter concluded that these pursuits are only part of the story.

Although most of us embrace the traditional ideals of closeness, certainty, and openness in our relationships, our actual communication within family, friendship, and romance seldom follows a straight path toward these goals. Baxter and Montgomery believe this is the case because we are also drawn toward the exact opposite—autonomy, novelty, and privacy. These conflicting forces can't be resolved by simple "either/or" decisions. The "both/and" nature of

	Internal Dialectic (within the relationship)	**External Dialectic** (between couple and community)
Integration – Separation	Connection – Autonomy	Inclusion – Seclusion
Stability – Change	Certainty – Uncertainty	Conventionality – Uniqueness
Expression – Nonexpression	Openness – Closedness	Revelation – Concealment

FIGURE 12–1 Typical Dialectical Tensions Experienced by Relational Partners
Based on Baxter and Montgomery, *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*

dialectical pressures guarantees that our relationships will be complex, messy, and always somewhat on edge.

Baxter and Montgomery's research has focused on three overarching relational dialectics that affect almost every close relationship: *integration–separation, stability–change,* and *expression–nonexpression.* These oppositional pairs are listed on the left side of Figure 12–1. The terms within the chart label these contrasting forces as they are experienced in two different contexts. The Internal Dialectic column describes the three dialectics as they play out *within a relationship.* The External Dialectic column lists similar pulls that cause tension *between a couple and their community.* Unlike a typical Hollywood love story, the portrayals of Jess' key relationships in *Bend It Like Beckham* are credible due to each pair's continual struggles with these contradictions. Since Baxter insists that dialectics are created through conversation, I'll quote extensively from the characters' dialogue in the film.

Internal dialectics
Ongoing tensions played out within a relationship.

External dialectics
Ongoing tensions between a couple and their community.

All researchers who explore contradictions in close relationships agree that there is no finite list of relational dialectics. Accordingly, the ragged edge at the bottom of the figure suggests that these opposing forces are just the start of a longer list of contradictions that confront partners as they live out their relationship in real time and space. For example, Rawlins finds that friends continually have to deal with the paradox of judgment and acceptance. In this section, however, I'll limit my review to the "Big Three" contradictions that Baxter and Montgomery discuss.

Integration and Separation

Baxter and Montgomery regard the contradiction between connection and autonomy as a primary strain within all relationships. If one side wins this *me-we* tug-of-war, the relationship loses:

Integration–separation
A class of relational dialectics that includes connection–autonomy, inclusion–seclusion, and intimacy–independence.

> No relationship can exist by definition unless the parties sacrifice some individual autonomy. However, too much connection paradoxically destroys the relationship because the individual identities become lost.[8]

Throughout *Bend It Like Beckham,* Jess and her father portray a "stay-away close" ambivalence toward each other that illustrates the connection–autonomy dialectic. Through much of the story she defies his "no soccer" ban, going so far as taking a stealthy overnight trip with the team to play in Germany. As for her father, his words to her suggest that he's more worried about what the Indian community thinks than he is about her—an external dialectic. Yet when an Indian friend offers to rush her away from her sister's wedding reception to play in the championship game, Jess turns to her father and says, "Dad, it doesn't matter. This is much more important. I don't want to spoil the day for you." He in turn tells her to go and "play well and make us proud." Later that night at home with the extended family he strengthens his connection with Jess by defending his decision to his irate wife: "Maybe you could handle her long face. I could not. I didn't have the heart to stop her."

Bakhtin wrote that dialectical moments are occasions for dialogue. Perhaps the best example in the film comes after Jess receives a red card in a tournament game for retaliating against an opponent who fouled her. Although her shorthanded team holds on to win, Joe reads her the riot act in the locker room: "What the hell is wrong with you, Bhamra? I don't ever want to see anything like that from you ever again. Do you hear me?" Without waiting for an answer, he turns and marches out. Jess runs after him and their dialogue reflects the ongoing tension between connection and autonomy in their relationship:

JESS: Why did you yell at me like that? You knew that the ref was out of order.

JOE: You could have cost us the tournament.

JESS: But it wasn't my fault! You didn't have to shout at me.

JOE: Jess, I am your coach. I have to treat you the same as everyone else. Look, Jess, I saw it. She fouled you. She tugged your shirt. You just overreacted. That's all.

JESS: That's not all. She called me a Paki, but I guess you wouldn't understand what that feels like, would you?

JOE: Jess, I'm Irish. Of course I'd understand what that feels like. [Joe then holds a sobbing Jess against his chest, a long hug witnessed by her father.]

Baxter and Montgomery maintain that even as partners struggle with the stresses of intimacy in their relationship vis-à-vis each other, as a couple they also face parallel yin–yang tensions with people in their social networks. The seclusion of private togetherness that is necessary for a relationship to gel runs counter to the inclusion of the couple with others in the community. The observed embrace certainly complicates Jess and Joe's relationship. And unless they find a way to work through the dilemma between inclusion with outsiders and seclusion for themselves, the future of their relationship is in doubt. These opposing external forces surface again when Jess runs into Joe's arms on a dimly lit soccer field to tell him that her parents will allow her to go to an American university on a soccer scholarship. But as Joe seeks their first kiss, she stops him, saying, "I'm sorry Joe. I can't." To a baffled Joe she explains, "Letting me go is a really big step for my mum and dad. I don't know how they'd survive if I told them about you."

Stability and Change

Berger's uncertainty reduction theory makes a strong case for the idea that people strive for predictability in their relationships (see Chapter 10). Baxter and Montgomery don't question our human search for interpersonal certainty, but

"Would you guys mind if I slept alone for a change?"

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Stability–change
A class of relational dialectics that includes certainty–uncertainty, conventionality–uniqueness, predictability–surprise, and routine–novelty.

they are convinced that Berger makes a mistake by ignoring our simultaneous efforts toward its opposite, novelty. We seek the bit of mystery, the touch of spontaneity, the occasional surprise that is necessary for having fun. Without the spice of variety to season our time together, the relationship becomes bland, boring, and, ultimately, emotionally dead.

Early in their friendship, Jess asks about Jules' romantic interest in Joe. Their brief conversation can be seen as a *novel* fantasy expressed in the imagery of the *familiar*—a conventional marriage to a partner who is out of bounds:

JESS: Jules . . . you know Joe, do you like him?

JULES: Nah, he'd get sacked if he was caught shagging one of his players.

JESS: Really?

JULES: I wish I could find a bloke like him. Everyone I know is a prat. They think girls can't play as well as them, except Joe of course.

JESS: Yeah, I hope I marry an Indian boy like him, too.

The girls then laugh together—a tension release—and hug before they part. But dealing with dialectics is always tenuous. When the romantically unthinkable becomes possible for Jess, Jules lashes out: "You knew he was off-limits. Don't pretend to be so innocent. . . . You've really hurt me, Jess! . . . You've betrayed me."

It would be easy to see Jess' family relationships as a simplistic face-off between the *conventionality* of life in their culture versus the shocking *uniqueness* of an Indian girl playing soccer. That's because so much of what Jesminder's

sister and parents say reproduces time-honored Indian norms and practices. As her sister warns, "Look, Jess . . . do you want to be the one that everyone stares at, at every family [gathering], 'cause you've married the English bloke?" And Jess' dream to go to college in California, play pro soccer, and have the freedom to fall in love with her Irish coach seem a unified pull in the opposite direction.

But neither Jess nor her father speak in a single voice. In conversations with friends Jess depicts herself as a dutiful daughter who gets top grades and doesn't sleep around with guys. She also describes her parents' real care for her, her desire not to hurt them, and her fear that her dad might no longer talk with her. And despite his apparently firm stance against Jess playing English football, her father goes to watch her play and says he doesn't want to see her disappointed. In compelling drama and in real life, the contradictory forces created through dialogue are quite complex.

Expression and Nonexpression

Expression–nonexpression A class of relational dialectics that includes openness–closedness, revelation–concealment, candor–secrecy, and transparency–privacy.

Recall that Irwin Altman, one of the founders of social penetration theory, ultimately came to the conclusion that self-disclosure and privacy operate in a cyclical, or wavelike, fashion over time.[9] Baxter and Montgomery pick up on Altman's recognition that relationships aren't on a straight-line path to intimacy. They see the pressures for openness and closedness waxing and waning like phases of the moon. If Jess' communication to her parents seems somewhat schizophrenic, it's because the dialectical forces for transparency and discretion are hard to juggle.

Through most of the movie, Jess is closemouthed with her parents about the extent of her soccer playing and her romantic attraction to Joe, even after her dad discovers both secrets. But on the night following her sister's wedding (and the tournament final) she decides to come clean about one of them:

> Mum, Dad . . . I played in the final today, and we won! . . . I played the best ever. And I was happy because I wasn't sneaking off and lying to you. . . . Anyway, there was a scout from America today, and he's offered me a place at a top university with a free scholarship and a chance to play football professionally. And I really want to go. And if I can't tell you what I want now then I'll never be happy whatever I do.

Just as the openness-closedness dialectic is a source of ongoing tension within a relationship, a couple also faces the *revelation* and *concealment* dilemma of what to tell others. Baxter and Montgomery note that each possible advantage of "going public" is offset by a corresponding potential danger. For example, public disclosure is a relational rite of passage signaling partners and others that the tie that binds them together is strong. Jess seems to sense this relational fact of life when she tells Joe on the soccer field that her parents wouldn't be able to handle the news of their attraction for each other. She doesn't buy much time for their romance to develop because she's leaving for school, and Joe can't stand the uncertainty. As Jess and Jules say goodbye to their families before boarding the plane to America, Joe comes running down the concourse calling to Jess. They move a few feet away from the others and Joe implores, "Look. I can't let you go without knowin'. . . . that even with the distance—and the concerns of your family—we still might have something. Don't you think?" She gives Joe

(and her parents, if they turn to look) the answer through a long first kiss. At this climactic point in the film, the viewer realizes that the force field of dialectics has irrevocably changed, but will never disappear.

RDT 2.0: DRILLING DOWN ON BAKHTIN'S CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE

Baxter says theories are like relationships—they aren't stagnant. The good ones change and mature over time. As you know, Baxter's early emphasis with Montgomery was on contradictory forces inherent in all relationships. But without abandoning anything said so far, Baxter now backgrounds the language of *contradiction* and *dialectics,* even to the point of referring to the second generation of the theory as RDT 2.0 rather than *relational dialectics*.

In her recent book *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective,* Baxter focuses on the relational implications of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of *dialogue*. She explains that she uses the verb form of the word *voice* in the title "to suggest that relationships achieve meaning through the active interplay of multiple, competing discourses or voices."[10] RDT 2.0 highlights five dialogic strands within Bakhtin's thought, as the Russian writer insisted that without dialogue, there is no relationship.

Dialogue
Communication that is constitutive, always in flux, capable of achieving aesthetic moments.

Dialogue as Constitutive—Relationships in Communication

Baxter states that a "constitutive approach to communication asks how communication defines or constructs the social world, including our selves and our personal relationships."[11] This dialogical notion is akin to the core commitments of *symbolic interactionism* and *coordinated management of meaning* (see Chapters 5 and 6). Recall that Mead claimed our concept of self is formed by interaction with others. Pearce and Cronen state that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create. If Baxter and these other theorists are right, it's confusing to talk about "communication in relationships," as if communication were just a feature of a couple's relationship. A constitutive approach suggests that it works the other way around—communication creates and sustains the relationship. If a pair's communication practices change, so does their relationship.

Constitutive dialogue
Communication that creates, sustains, and alters relationships and the social world; social construction.

Perhaps nowhere is the constitutive nature of dialogue more fascinating than in the study of interpersonal similarities and differences.[12] Traditional scholarship concentrates on similarities, regarding common attitudes, backgrounds, and interests as the positive glue that helps people stick together. ("My idea of an agreeable person is a person who agrees with me.") Within this framework, self-disclosure is seen as the most valuable form of communication because, by mutual revelation, people can discover similarities that already exist.

In contrast, a dialogic view considers differences to be just as important as similarities and claims that both are created and evaluated through a couple's dialogue. For example, a relative of mine married a man who is 20 years older than she is. The difference in their age is a chronological fact. But whether she and her husband regard their diverse dates of birth as a difference that makes a difference is the result of the language they use to talk about it. So is the extent to which they see that age gap as either positive or negative. Meaning is created

through dialogue. Amber, a student in my communication theory class, gives voice to the tension created by conflicting discourses.

> My boyfriend Tyler is on the swim team and I know most of the guys well. The exceptions are the new freshmen, who Tyler said refer to me as "the girlfriend." When I heard this I was surprised how much it irritated me. I obviously value my connection with him, otherwise we wouldn't be dating. But as I told Tyler, I also have my own separate, independent identity outside of our relationship. This has become a very real tension.

Dialogue as Utterance Chain—Building Block of Meaning

An utterance is what a person says in one conversational turn. For example, we've already looked at the statement Jess makes to her friend Jules about her coach, Joe: "I hope I marry an Indian boy like him." According to Bakhtin and Baxter, that's an utterance. But it isn't simply a statement reflecting her autonomous desire for a certain type of man. The utterance is embedded in an utterance chain that includes things Jess has heard in the past and responses she anticipates hearing in the future. In that sense, the utterance chain that Baxter describes looks something like the CMM model of communication shown on page 74. Baxter highlights four links on the chain where the struggle of competing discourses can be heard.

Utterance chains
The central building blocks of meaning-making, where utterances are linked to competing discourses already heard as well as those yet to be spoken.

1. Cultural ideologies (throughout Jess' past):
   Collectivism says, *Marry an Indian man; honor your family's wishes.*
   Individualism says, *It's your choice; marry the man who makes you happy.*
   Romanticism says, *Marry for love; only one man is right for you.*
   Rationalism says, *Cross-cultural marriages are risky; don't be impulsive.*
2. Relational history (from the immediate past):
   Jules is a friend, a valued teammate.
   Jules is a co-conspirator, keeping your soccer secret from your folks.
   Jules is your rival for Joe's affection.
3. Not-yet spoken response of partner to utterance (immediate future):
   Jules says I'm silly and laughs at me.
   Jules tells me to stay away from Joe.
   Jules swears that she'll keep my secrets.
   Jules shares her frustration that Joe is off-limits.
4. Normative evaluation of third party to utterance (further in future):
   Mother may say, *Jesminder was selfish.*
   Sister may say, *Jess was setting herself up for a fall.*
   Her children may say, *Jess was courageous.*

All of these competing voices within the utterance chain are in play with Jess' statement about the man she hopes to marry. It's as if she's had an inner dialogue with all of these discourses, probably listening more to some than to others. Baxter regards the utterance chain as the basic building block in the construction project of creating meaning through dialogue. That's why she says, "The core premise of dialogically grounded RDT is that meanings are wrought from the struggle of competing, often contradictory discourses."[13]

Dialogue as Dialectical Flux—The Complexity of Close Relationships

Dialectical flux
The unpredictable, unfinalizable, indeterminate nature of personal relationships.

We've already explored Bakhtin's and Baxter's conviction that all social life is the product of "a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies."[14] The existence of these contrasting forces means that developing and sustaining a relationship is bound to be an unpredictable, unfinalizable, indeterminate process—more like playing improvisational jazz than following the score of a familiar song. Since a relationship is created through dialogue that's always in flux, Baxter thinks we shouldn't be surprised that the construction project moves "by fits and starts, in what can be an erratic process of backward-forward, up-and-down motion."[15] It's messy.

Figure 12–2 is an attempt to capture the complexity of relationships as seen through the lens of dialectical flux. Note that each of the relational forces discussed in the chapter is shown in tension with every other pole. For example, *autonomy* is in opposition not only with *connection* but also with *certainty* and all the other relational forces. This chaotic jumble of contradictions is far removed from such idyllic notions of communication as a one-way route to *interpersonal closeness, shared meaning,* or *increased certainty.*

Simultaneous expression of opposing voices is the exception rather than the rule, according to Baxter. At any given time, most relationship partners bring one voice to the foreground while pushing the other one to the background. Baxter and Montgomery have identified two typical conversational strategies for responding to relational dialectics:

Spiraling inversion
Switching back and forth between two contrasting voices, responding first to one pull, then the other.

1. ***Spiraling inversion*** is switching back and forth between two contrasting voices, responding first to one pull, then the other. This spiraling shift describes the inconsistency of Jess' communication with her family. Her lies about what she's doing are followed by incredible candor. Her open admissions precede times of silence and deception.

Segmentation
A compartmentalizing tactic by which partners isolate different aspects of their relationship.

2. ***Segmentation*** is a compartmentalizing tactic by which partners isolate different aspects of their relationship. Some issues and activities resonate with one dialectical tug, while other concerns and actions resonate with the opposing pull. For example, Joe seeks to separate his roles as coach and boyfriend, a distinction Jess tries to duplicate. His "I am your coach" statement makes a clear-cut distinction. When Jules askes Jess whether Joe is treating her too hard, her response is more mixed. "He was really nice. Just really professional." Viewers may smile at this mixed message, but from a dialogical perspective, her answer is a healthy reflection of the multiple discourses that create her ever-changing relationship with Joe.

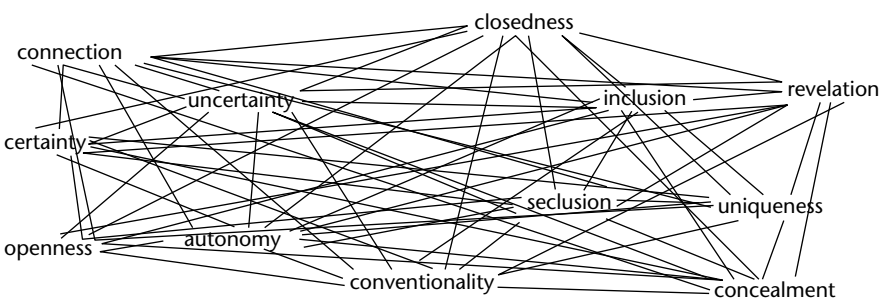


FIGURE 12–2 The Messiness of Personal Relationships

Dialogue as Aesthetic Moment—Creating Unity in Diversity

Aesthetic moment
A fleeting sense of unity through a profound respect for disparate voices in dialogue.

Taking her lead from Bakhtin's work, Baxter describes dialogue as an *aesthetic accomplishment*, "a momentary sense of unity through a profound respect for the disparate voices in dialogue."[16] Parties are fully aware of their discursive struggle and create something new out of it. That mutual sense of completion or wholeness in the midst of fragmented experience doesn't last. It's a fleeting moment that can't be sustained. Yet memories of that magic moment can support a couple through the turbulence that goes with the territory of any close relationship.

For romantic partners, turning points such as the relationship-defining talk or the first time they make love may be aesthetic moments. Baxter suggests that a meaningful ritual can be an aesthetic moment for all participants because it's "a joint performance in which competing, contradictory voices in everyday social life are brought together simultaneously."[17] For example, a marriage renewal ceremony where a couple exchanges newly crafted vows is often the occasion of an aesthetic moment for all participants.[18] So too the communion rail where people with diverse beliefs and practices may feel that they are one before the same God.

The turning point in *Bend It Like Beckham* occurs in a moving scene in the Bhamra home after Jess has fervently made known her dream of playing soccer in America. Hers is a desire that clearly rejects the traditional role of women in this close-knit Indian enclave—a role that her sister has enthusiastically embraced in her wedding earlier that day. As one family friend whispers to another after Jess' declaration, "She's dead meat." Yet the sisters' father takes these polar-opposite visions of life and integrates them into a unified whole. He recounts a story of his own timidity and suffering when he experienced rejection, and then says:

> I don't want Jessie to suffer. I don't want her to make the same mistakes her father made of accepting life, or accepting situations. I want her to fight. I want her to win. Because I've seen her playing. She's—She's brilliant. I don't think anybody has the right stopping her. Two daughters made happy on one day. What else could a father ask for?

Dialogue as Critical Sensibility—A Critique of Dominant Voices

Critical sensibility
An obligation to critique dominant voices, especially those that suppress opposing viewpoints; a responsibility to advocate for those who are muted.

The fifth sense of dialogue is an obligation to critique dominant voices, especially those that suppress opposing viewpoints. Bakhtin's analysis of a medieval carnival laid the groundwork for Baxter's understanding of this function.[19] Much like the court jester, the carnivalesque eye is characterized by "mockery of all serious, 'closed' attitudes about the world."[20] Power imbalances, hierarchal relationships, and judgments are set aside. The lofty and low, the wise and the foolish co-mingle. Competing discourses are still present, but opposition is temporarily suspended in a playful quality of interplay.

Within the scholarly study of personal relationships, Baxter believes that a critical sensitivity provides a needed correction to the theories of relationship development presented in Chapters 9 through 11. Each of these theories offers a single path to romance, friendship, or close family ties. And within relational practice, she is critical of those who regard their partners as objects of influence. This manipulative mindset frames a relationship as one of power and domination, which then ridicules or silences opposing points of view.[21] Baxter opposes any communication practice that ignores or gags another's voice.

Consistent with this multivocal emphasis, the entirety of *Bend It Like Beckham* can be seen as the triumphant story of a young girl who resists traditional forces that would keep her silenced—a journey from monologue to dialogue. The director and co-writer of the film, Gurinder Chadha, admits it's autobiographical. She notes that "Beckham's uncanny ability to 'bend' the ball around a wall of players into the goal is a great metaphor for what young girls (and film directors) go though. You see your goal, you know where you want to go, but you've got to twist and turn and bend the rules to get there."[22]

ETHICAL REFLECTION: SISSELA BOK'S PRINCIPLE OF VERACITY

Does lying only bend the rules, or does it break and trash them as well? By looking at lies from the perspective of all who are affected by them, philosopher Sissela Bok hopes to establish when, or if, lies can be justified.

Consequentialist ethics Judging actions solely on the basis of their beneficial or harmful outcomes.

Bok rejects an absolute prohibition of lying. She believes that "there are at least some circumstances which warrant a lie . . . foremost among them, when innocent lives are at stake, and where only a lie can deflect the danger."[23] But she also rejects *consequentialist ethics,* which judge acts on the basis of whether we think they will result in harm or benefit. That approach represents a kind of bottom-line accounting that treats an act as morally neutral until we figure out if it will have positive or negative outcomes. Bok doesn't view lies as neutral. She is convinced that all lies drag around an initial negative weight that must be factored into any ethical equation. Her *principle of veracity* asserts that "truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special considerations."[24]

Principle of veracity Truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special circumstances that overcome the negative weight.

Bok contends that we need the principle of veracity because liars engage in a tragic self-delusion. When they count the cost of deceit, they usually anticipate only their own short-term losses. Liars downplay the impact of their falsehood on the persons deceived and almost always ignore the long-term effects on themselves and everyone else. Bok warns, "Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity."[25] Jess may not be dead meat, but the things she says to her folks in the future might be tough for them to swallow.

CRITIQUE: MEETING THE CRITERIA FOR A GOOD INTERPRETIVE THEORY

Some communication scholars question whether relational dialectics should be considered a theory at all:

> It lacks the structural intricacies of formal theories of prediction and explanation; it offers no extensive hierarchical array of axiomatic or propositional arguments. It does not represent a single unitary statement of generalizable predictions.[26]

You may be surprised that Baxter and Montgomery agree with that judgment. In fact, they are the ones who wrote those words. That's because the traditional goals of a scientific theory that they mention are not at all what these theorists are trying to accomplish. They don't even think these goals are plausible when theorizing about relationships. Instead, they offer relational dialectics as a *sensitizing theory,* one that should be judged on the basis of its ability to help us see close relationships in a new light.[27] So an appropriate critique of their theory should apply the standards for evaluating an *interpretive* theory that I introduced in Chapter 3.

As I briefly address these five criteria, you'll find that I think relational dialectics stacks up quite well.

1. A new understanding of people. Baxter and Montgomery offer readers a whole new way to make sense out of their close relationships. I find that many students feel a tremendous sense of relief when they read about relational dialectics. That's because the theory helps them realize that the ongoing tensions they experience with their friend, family member, or romantic partner are an inevitable part of relational life. Competing discourses aren't necessarily a warning sign that something is terribly wrong with their partner or themselves.

2. A community of agreement. Leslie Baxter's two decades of work in relational dialectics has received high acclaim from scholars who study close personal ties. The International Association for Relationship Research designated her monograph "Relationships as Dialogues" as its 2004 Distinguished Scholar Article, an honor bestowed only once a year. Baxter's research has changed the landscape within the field of study known as *personal relationships.*

3. Clarification of values. By encouraging a diverse group of people to talk about their relationships, and taking what they say seriously, Baxter and Montgomery model the high value that Bakhtin placed on hearing multiple voices. Yet Baxter continues to critique her own research for heavy reliance on self-report data from surveys and interviews, and she laments the relative lack of dialogue studies focusing on talk between relational parties. Given her increasing emphasis on dialogue, however, this disconnect between theory and research methodology will hopefully soon be bridged.[28]

4. Reform of society. Not only does Baxter listen to multiple voices, but her theory seeks to carve out a space where muted or ignored voices can be heard. Relational dialectics creates a *critical sensibility* that encourages dialogue rather than monologue. In this way the theory is a force for change—not only in personal relationships, but in the public sphere as well.

5. Aesthetic appeal. Figure 12–2 illustrates the difficulty of crafting an artistic representation when the objects of study—in this case, relationships—are inherently messy. Baxter's task becomes even more difficult given her commitment to unraveling Bakhtin's multistranded conception of dialogue. Since the Russian philosopher wrote in his native language, it's difficult to translate his nuanced ideas into English in an elegant way. Accuracy has to come before artistry. Baxter's *Voicing Relationships* is a tough read as well. Yet in describing *fleeting moments of wholeness,* Baxter holds out the promise of an aesthetic ideal to which all of us can aspire—an image that could make slogging through the morass of relational contradictions feel less frustrating. And Montgomery's imagery suggests that dealing with dialectics can actually be fun:

> I have been told that riding a unicycle becomes enjoyable when you accept that you are constantly in the process of falling. The task then becomes one of continually playing one force against another, countering one pull with an opposing motion and adapting the wheel under you so that you remain in movement by maintaining and controlling the fall. If successful, one is propelled along in a state of sustained imbalance that is sometimes awkward and sometimes elegant. From a dialectical perspective, sustaining a relationship seems to be a very similar process.[29]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How many different synonyms and equivalent phrases can you list that come close to capturing what Baxter and Montgomery mean by the word *dialectic?* What do these words have in common?

2. Which of the seven theories discussed in previous chapters would Baxter and Montgomery consider simplistic or nondialogical?

3. What *conflicting pulls* place the most strain on your closest personal relationship? To what extent do you and your partner use *spiraling inversion, segmentation,* and *dialogue* to deal with that *tension?*

4. Why wouldn't typical scale items like the following reveal opposing discourses in a close relationship, even if they exist?

What characterizes your relationship?

Intimacy :____:____:____:____:____:____:____: Independence

SELF-QUIZ

www.mhhe.com/griffin8

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

At the start of our conversation, Leslie Baxter states that all communication involves the interplay of differences, which are often competing or in opposition to each other. She explains why this dialectic tension isn't a problem to be solved, but an occasion for a relationship to change and grow. Baxter cautions that we've been seduced into thinking relating is easy, when in fact it's hard work. Most of our discussion centers on ways to cope with the interplay of differences we experience. She urges partners to reflect carefully on rituals that celebrate both their unity and diversity, and offers other practical suggestions as well.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Leslie A. Baxter and Barbara M. Montgomery, *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics,* Guilford, New York, 1996.

RDT 2.0: Leslie A. Baxter, *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogical Perspective,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011.

Dialogue: Leslie A. Baxter, "Relationships as Dialogues," *Personal Relationships,* Vol. 11, 2004, pp. 1–22.

Summary statement: Leslie A. Baxter and Dawn O. Braithwaite, "Relational Dialectics Theory," in *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives,* Leslie A. Baxter and Dawn O. Braithwaite (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, pp. 349–361.

Personal narrative of the theory's development: Leslie A. Baxter, "A Tale of Two Voices," *Journal of Family Communication,* Vol. 4, 2004, pp. 181–192.

Bakhtin on dialectics: Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin,* Cary Emerson and Michael Holquist (trans.), University of Texas, Austin, TX, 1981, pp. 259–422.

Bakhtin on utterance chain: Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays,* Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds.), V. W. McGee (trans.), University of Texas, Austin, TX, 1986, pp. 60–102.

Friendship dialectics: William Rawlins, *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course,* Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1992.

Comparing, contrasting, and critiquing different dialectical approaches: Barbara M. Montgomery and Leslie A. Baxter (eds.), *Dialectical Approaches to Studying Personal Relationships,* Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1998.

Critique: Leslie A. Baxter, "Relational Dialectics Theory: Multivocal Dialogues of Family Communication," in *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives,* Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie A. Baxter (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, pp. 130–145.

To access titles and cue points from feature films that illustrate relational dialectics and other theories, click on Suggested Movie Clips under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com.*

CHAPTER 13

Socio-cultural tradition
Cybernetic tradition

Communication Privacy Management Theory

of Sandra Petronio

Altman and Taylor's *social penetration theory* focused on self-disclosure as the primary way to develop close relationships (see Chapter 9). Yet Altman, as well as Baxter and Montgomery, eventually concluded that openness is only part of the story. We also have a desire for privacy (see Chapter 11). Suppose you visit your school's health center because you're concerned about abnormal bleeding or a suspicious lump below the belt. Upon careful examination, the doctor says that you may have cervical or testicular cancer; exploratory surgery will be necessary. While not life-threatening if caught in time, it is cancer, and you fear that it could put at risk your ability to have children. Who will you tell right away—an immediate family member, a romantic partner, a good friend, maybe all three, or perhaps none of them?

Sandra Petronio, a communication professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis agrees with Altman that revealing this private information might strengthen your relationships with these significant people in your life. The disclosure would also give them a chance to offer you comfort and perhaps help you figure out a course of action to deal with this disturbing diagnosis. However, disclosing your medical condition could stress your relationships if it turns out that people can't handle your scary and potentially embarrassing news, or if they carelessly blab about it to others. And even if people you confide in respond well, sharing confidential information always reduces your privacy.

Privacy boundaries
A metaphor to show how people think of the borders between private and publicinfo rmation.

Petronio sees *communication privacy management theory* (CPM) as a map of the way people navigate privacy. She wants us to think of *privacy boundaries* that encompass information we have but others don't know. Privacy boundaries can range from thin and porous filters to thick, impenetrable barriers that shield deep, dark secrets. But whenever we share a portion of that information with someone, we are reshaping a privacy boundary. Having a mental image of protective boundaries is central to understanding the five core principles of Petronio's CPM:[1]

1. People believe they own and have a right to control their private information.

2. People control their private information through the use of personal privacy rules.
3. When others are told or given access to a person's private information, they become co-owners of that information.
4. Co-owners of private information need to negotiate mutually agreeable privacy rules about telling others.
5. When co-owners of private information don't effectively negotiate and follow mutually held privacy rules, boundary turbulence is the likely result.

Although these five statements seem deceptively simple, the management processes they describe are often quite complex. In the rest of the chapter I'll unpack the mental considerations and communication behaviors that each principle summarizes. The evidence for their validity comes from more than 100 research studies over a wide range of face-to-face situations where there's a dialectical tension between privacy and disclosure. Since Petronio's own research has cut across interpersonal, family, and health communication contexts, I'll continue to use a variety of medical issues to illustrate how people manage their private information.

1. OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL OF PRIVATE INFORMATION

People believe they own and have a right to control their private information.

Private information
The content of potential disclosures; information that can be owned.

Instead of talking about *self-disclosure* as many relational theorists do, Petronio refers to the *disclosure of private information*. There are four reasons she favors this term. In the first place, a lot of the private information we tell others isn't about ourselves. The revelation may be about other people or convey news of an impersonal nature. Another reason she avoids the self-disclosure label is that it's usually associated with interpersonal intimacy. For example, all three theories in the Relationship Development section assume that self-disclosure is a primary way to develop close personal ties (see Chapters 9–11). Yet Petronio notes that there are many other motives for disclosing private information.[2] For example, we could desire to relieve a burden, prevent a wrong, make an impression, gain control, or simply enjoy self-expression.

A third reason Petronio chooses to talk about the *disclosure of private information* is that the phrase has a neutral connotation, as opposed to *self-disclosure*, which has a positive feel. The outcome of disclosing private information may turn out well, but as bartenders and hairdressers can attest, it might be unwelcome—a real downer. Finally, while the term *self-disclosure* focuses on the unilateral act of the discloser, Petronio's preferred description directs attention to the content of what's said and how the confidant handles this now not-so-private information. In that sense it's a more complete communication theory.

Privacy
The feeling that one has the right to own private information.

How do we regard the private information we manage? The first principle of communication privacy management theory is quite clear: We see it as ours; we believe it belongs to us. Whether that perception is accurate isn't the issue. Our conviction is so strong that Petronio defines *privacy* as "the feeling one has the right to own private information."[3] You may feel that way about your overall GPA or even the grade you get in this course.

Ownership conveys both rights and obligations. Privacy bolsters our sense of autonomy and makes us feel less vulnerable. That's the upside. But Petronio also suggests that ownership of private information can be a liability. She claims that when we are privy to something others don't know, we understand that we are responsible for that information and will be held accountable for how we handle it. That's why we seek to control who else gets to know.

Within the context of medical privacy, probably no group faces more pressure for disclosure than those who have an observable stigma. For example, complete strangers often ask intrusive questions of those who are paralyzed that they wouldn't think of asking an able-bodied person. In a research study entitled "Just How Much Did That Wheelchair Cost?" University of Nebraska communication professor Dawn Braithwaite reports how the physically disabled manage their privacy boundaries. She found that in most cases paraplegics will answer a question if they deem it appropriate to the discussion or if it's posed by a kid. But if they think it comes out of sheer nosiness or morbid curiosity, they avoid answering or respond to the question with sarcasm. One respondent reported that there are "times that people come up to me and say point blank . . ., 'How did you get in that wheelchair?' 'Well,' I'll ask, 'Which story do you want? Do you want the real story, do you want my story of Vietnam, or do you want my story about my romantic endeavors?'" Another person confined to a wheelchair admitted, "I'm not beyond rolling over toes, really. I have been in situations where . . . there's really no other alternative."[4]

The people Braithwaite interviewed obviously believe they own their private information, and they actively work to maintain control of what, when, and with whom it is shared. The first principle of CPM says that's true for all of us. Our sense of ownership motivates us to create boundaries that will control the spread of what we know. The second principle of CPM addresses how thick those boundaries might be.

2. RULES FOR CONCEALING AND REVEALING

People control their private information through the use of personal privacy rules.

Petronio refers to communication privacy management theory as a *rule-based theory.*[5] By this she means CPM offers an interpretive approach that runs counter to an objective or scientific quest to discover universal laws that accurately predict where people will draw their privacy boundaries. Instead, a rules perspective tries to discern why individuals make the choices they do about concealing or revealing private information. When Petronio spots a pattern of disclosure within a group of people and these folks offer similar explanations for their actions, she articulates the internalized rules that appear to guide their decisions. These rules are guides for interpretation rather than ironclad laws. Yet in practice, they help people feel they have control over their private information.

Rule-based theory
A theory that assumes we can best understand people's freely chosen actions if we study the system of rules they use to interpret and manage theirli ves.

CPM maintains that five factors play into the way we develop our own privacy rules: *culture, gender, motivation, context,* and *risk/benefit ratios.* These foundational criteria are evident in a study Petronio conducted among children and adolescents who reported that they were victims of sexual abuse.[6] After gaining permission from their parents, Petronio asked 38 victims between the ages of 7 and 18 to describe how they made the decision to tell someone what

had happened. I'll draw upon her findings to illustrate the five constants in rule-making for privacy.

Culture. Cultures differ on the value of openness and disclosure. The United States is a patchwork of many subcultures, but Petronio notes that, overall, U.S. citizens are highly individualistic. This means they have a bias toward locking doors, keeping secrets, and preserving privacy. Regarding victims of sexual abuse, there's no firm evidence among Anglos, Hispanics, African Americans, or Asians that one group is more at risk than the others. But other researchers have found that there is a difference about who suffers in silence. Presumably because of the Asian emphasis on submissiveness, obedience, family loyalty, and sex-talk taboos, Asian American children who are sexually abused are less likely than other kids to tell their mothers.[7]

Gender. Popular wisdom suggests that women disclose more than men, yet research on this issue is mixed at best. What is clear, however, is that both men and women more easily reveal private information to a woman than to a man.[8] Perhaps this is especially true when a young girl is sexually abused by an older man. As one female victim explained why she chose to tell her mother, "She's my mom and she's a grown-up, you know, and she's a girl."[9]

Motivation. Petronio emphasizes attraction and liking as interpersonal motives that can loosen privacy boundaries that could not otherwise be breached. That's certainly the case when a sexual perpetrator has sworn the victim to secrecy under threat of dire consequences. Some victims lowered their barriers and provided access when they also felt the additional force of reciprocity. As one girl reported, "A sudden bond formed between [us by] her saying, you know, 'I was molested' and knowing that all of a sudden I wasn't all by myself. . . . I could trust her because I knew that she could feel the scariness. . . ."[10]

Context. Traumatic events can temporarily or permanently disrupt the influence of culture, gender, and motivation when people craft their rules for privacy. Petronio has in mind the diagnosis of AIDS, the suicide or murder of a loved one, the loss of a limb, physical paralysis, experiencing the carnage of war or natural disaster, and sexual abuse as a child. Any of these events can generate privacy boundaries that are initially impenetrable. The sufferer first struggles to cope; talk may come later. The abused children who spoke to Petronio often shared what it took for them to feel secure before they were willing to be open about their experience. The abuser had to be away from the home or out of the car and doors had to be locked, with just the abused child and confidant together. Disclosure usually came while doing ordinary things together such as cooking, washing dishes, watching TV, or shopping. These mundane activities, which require no eye contact, seemed to offer the child a sense of normalcy and control that made a very abnormal conversation possible.

Risk/benefit ratio. Think back to the mental calculations that social exchange theory claims we make before deciding how we'll act (see Chapter 9). We add up the benefits and subtract the costs of each option in order to do what we think will have the best outcome. Risk/benefit ratios do the math for both revealing and concealing private information. Typical benefits for revealing are relief from stress, gaining social support, drawing closer to the person we tell, and

the chance to influence others. Realistic risks are embarrassment, rejection, diminished power, and everyone finding out our secret. All of these benefits and risks can come into play when sexually abused children adopt a rule that will guide their decision to speak out or keep silent. Because the stakes are high and it's so hard for them to know what response they'll get, many of these kids use partial disclosure to test the waters before fully diving in. For example, one girl in Petronio's study said to her mother, "Mom, I've got to tell you something. He's been walking around the house with no clothes on."[11] When the mother showed that she believed her daughter, the girl then told her what her stepfather had done.

3. DISCLOSURE CREATES A CONFIDANT AND CO-OWNER

When others are told or discover a person's private information, they become co-owners of that information.

Sandra Petronio regards CPM as a full-fledged communication theory. By this she means that a person can't just consider self in deciding whether to conceal or reveal. The act of disclosing private information creates a confidant and draws that person into a *collective privacy boundary*, whether willingly or reluctantly.

Collective privacy boundary
An intersection of personal privacy boundaries of co-owners of private information, all of whom are responsible for the information.

What does co-ownership mean? First, the discloser must realize that the personal privacy boundary encompassing the information has morphed into a collective boundary that seldom shrinks back to being solely personal. That would only be possible if the confidant were to die or suffer loss of memory. Once you let the cat out of the bag, it's hard to stuff him back in. Thus, those who own private information should consider carefully before sharing it with others. Second, as co-owners, people tend to feel a sense of responsibility for the information. That doesn't mean, however, that they perceive an equal responsibility. For example, the original owner may still feel like the sole titleholder and assume that others will follow his or her lead when access to the information is an issue. Despite this perception, "once the information is known, others 'in the know' may have their own interpretation of how the information should be managed."[12] Finally, those who had the information foisted upon them may be much more casual about protecting it than those who sought it.

Petronio's study of how the caregiving staff and elderly residents in nursing homes try to manage their privacy illustrates the complexities of co-owning private information.[13] Through in-depth interviews she found that new residents face a sharp loss of privacy and autonomy when entering the home. For example, they can only bring a few personal possessions with them, many require a caregiver's assistance to go to the bathroom, patients who are confined to wheelchairs are at the mercy of staff as to their dining partners at meals, and seniors with poor vision need a nurse to read them their mail. Although caregivers' loss of privacy is not as great, they are forced to take on responsibilities they'd rather not have. Residents expect them to track down possessions, offer bathroom help without being intrusive, push their wheelchairs slowly when and where they want to go, and keep secret the family's social and financial news that was in the letters. For the nursing home caregivers and the residents to mesh their privacy desires and responsibilities in a way that satisfies both groups is a real achievement.

4. COORDINATING MUTUAL PRIVACY BOUNDARIES

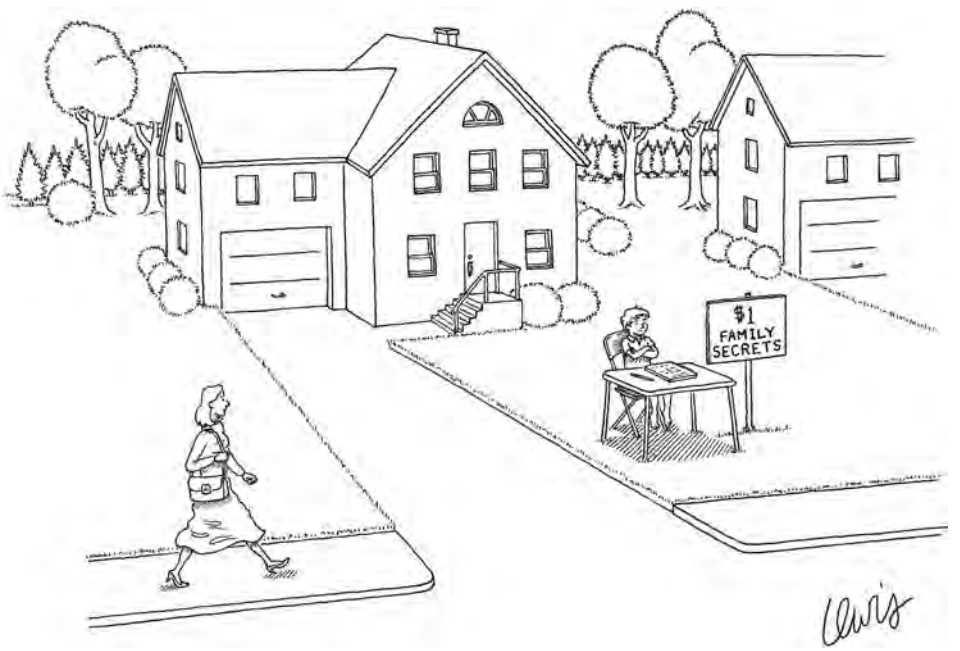
Co-owners of private information need to negotiate mutually agreeable privacy rules about telling others.

This pivotal fourth principle of CPM is where Petronio moves from being descriptive to prescriptive. With the first three principles she's been mapping out how people handle their private information—they think they own it and they control it (Principle 1) through the use of privacy rules (Principle 2). If they disclose some of that private information, the recipients become co-owners of a patch of common informational territory, which entails both rights and responsibilities (Principle 3). Principle 4 assumes that the privacy boundaries co-owners place around this particular piece of information won't necessarily look the same. But she thinks that for the sake of relational harmony they ought to be congruent, so this principle is a plea for co-owners to negotiate *mutual privacy boundaries*. Or, using the map metaphor, she urges parties to collaboratively draw the same borders around their common piece of informational real estate.

Mutual privacy boundary
A synchronized collective privacy boundary that co-owners share because they have negotiated common privacy rules.

The overall process of co-managing collective boundaries that Petronio envisions isn't simple. These negotiations focus on *boundary ownership, boundary linkage,* and *boundary permeability*. In order to illustrate what's involved in coordinating boundary management rules, I'll use the privacy/disclosure issue that's received the most attention from health communication practitioners and scholars—HIV status.

Consider the plight of Nate, who goes to see his doctor because of a persistent fever and swollen glands. After running a series of tests, the doctor regretfully informs Nate that he's HIV positive. She assures Nate that this isn't a death sentence. With the advent of HAART—highly active anti-retroviral therapy—Nate may never have to experience the worsening, telltale symptoms of AIDS.



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But the news comes as a real blow. When he was in college, Nate engaged in risky bisexual behavior that his wife, Becky, knows nothing about. He's embarrassed and dreads telling her. Yet even if his state didn't have a mandatory partner notification program, he feels morally bound to tell her if for no other reason than she needs to be tested and protected from his infection. He believes Becky will "stand by her man," but fears rejection from anyone else who hears about his condition. He doesn't want his extended family, friends, or co-workers to find out. But once he tells Becky, she may have different ideas about who else should hear and how much they should be told. For the sake of their relationship, Petronio believes they need to synchronize their privacy rules.

Boundary Ownership—Who Should Decide?

Boundary ownership
Ther ightsand responsibilities that co-owners of private information have tocontroli ts spread.

Shareholder
A confidant fully committed to handling private information according to the original owner'spri vacy rules.

We've already seen that co-ownership of private information involves a joint responsibility for its containment or release. But not all *boundary ownership* is 50-50. One person may have a greater stake in how the information is handled or feel that they should have total control of how it's used. If so, that person is usually the original owner. When the confidant agrees that the original owner has the right to call the shots, Petronio refers to that recipient as a *shareholder* who is "fully vested in keeping the information according to the original owner's privacy rules."[14] Nate obviously hopes this will be the case, but it doesn't seem that Becky fits well into the shareholder role. So if Nate clings to the belief that he alone should make the rules about how to manage the information, he will lose the chance to negotiate a mutually satisfying agreement with Becky, almost guaranteeing a turbulent future.

Deliberate confidant
A recipient who sought outpri vate information.

Petronio's description of how a person becomes a confidant sheds light on the degree of control this recipient has.[15] The *deliberate confidant* intentionally seeks private information, often in order to help others out. For example, doctors, counselors, attorneys, and clergy solicit personal information only after they assure clients that they have a privacy policy that severely limits their right to reveal the information to others. As a general rule of thumb, the more eager people are to take on the role of confidant, the less control they have over what they hear.

Reluctant confidant
A co-owner of private information who did not seek it nor want it.

Conversely, a *reluctant confidant* doesn't want the disclosure, doesn't expect it, and may find the revealed information an unwelcome burden. Picture the hapless airplane travelers who must listen to their seatmates' life stories. Even though reluctant confidants often feel a vague sense of responsibility when they hear someone else's private information, they usually don't feel a strong obligation to follow the privacy guidelines of the discloser. If the reluctant recipient comes across the information by accident, he or she will be even less likely to cede control of revealing/concealing to the original owner. So if someone comes across our private thoughts jotted in a journal or encoded in an email, those thoughts may become quite public.

As for Becky, her role as Nate's confidant probably shifts when he makes his startling revelation. She didn't initiate this health conversation and, like many long-term partners, she may at first listen with half an ear out of a sense of obligation. But once he drops his bombshell, she'll be all ears and deliberately probe for more details. Given Becky's probable fear, hurt, and anger that Nate never told her of his possible exposure to HIV, we might expect her to follow her own privacy rules rather than being constrained by his. If she later discovers that Nate has infected her with HIV, his rules will be history.

Boundary Linkage—Who Else Gets to Know?

Boundary linkage
An alliance formed by co-owners of private information as to who else should be able to know.

Boundary linkage is the process of the confidant being linked into the privacy boundary of the person who revealed the information. When Nate discloses his HIV status to Becky, she'll share responsibility for what happens in the future with that information. As for Nate, his privacy boundary will morph into an expanded, joint boundary of a different shape. He clearly wants his condition to remain the couple's secret, but will that happen?

The major consideration in boundary linkage is the nature of the pair's relationship. When the revealer and recipient have a close, trusting relationship, there's a good chance that the recipient will deal with the new information the way the discloser wants. But even though Nate and Becky would both say they've had five years of a loving marriage, news that her husband is HIV positive is likely to rock Becky's world. Her first question will probably be, *How did this happen?* and she won't be satisfied with a vague answer or a claim that it came from a blood transfusion. As Nate reveals a sexual past that he always felt he alone owned, Becky's trust in Nate may take a big hit. From her perspective, she had a right to know about anything that could so profoundly affect her life and their relationship. She might indeed be committed to stay with Nate "in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live," but that doesn't mean she'll agree to a shroud of secrecy.

If the couple follows Petronio's advice to negotiate who else gets to know, they might bring up the following considerations, each of which is supported by research on the privacy and disclosure of HIV status.[16] Becky might insist that she can't live with the stress of keeping Nate's infection secret; she's willing to keep her father in the dark but needs to tell her mother. She also wants the ongoing social support of at least one close friend who knows what she's living with and can help her cope.

For his part, Nate voices his fear of the prejudice that he knows HIV victims encounter.[17] When people find out that he has HIV, he's apt to lose his job, his insurance, his buddies, and the respect of others. He can't possibly tell his folks about the diagnosis because they know nothing of his bisexual past. Nate imagines his shocked father bemoaning, "My son's a homo," and then slamming the door on him forever. As for Becky telling her mother, he's seen her close-knit family in action. If his mother-in-law finds out, he's sure the rest of the family will know by the end of the day. At this point, Nate and Becky aren't even close to agreeing on who else can know what they know.

Boundary Permeability—How Much Information Can Flow?

Boundary permeability
The extent to which a boundary permits private information to flow to thirdpar ties.

Boundary permeability refers to the degree that privacy boundaries are porous. Some boundaries are protected by ironclad rules with those in-the-know sworn to secrecy. These barriers are impervious to penetration. Petronio refers to such informational barriers as *closed, thick,* or *stretched tight*. Often that information is quarantined because public revelation would be highly embarrassing for those in the inner circle.

At the other extreme, some boundaries are quite porous. Petronio describes them as *open, thin,* or *loosely held*. Information permeates them easily. As barriers to disclosure, they are a façade. To the extent that privacy rules are supposed to check the flow of insider information, they are honored in the

breach. As the movie *Mean Girls* illustrates, some confidences are meant to be spread.

Permeability is a matter of degree. Many coordinated access rules are crafted to be filters, letting some private information seep through, while other related facts are closely guarded. You may wonder how this could apply to Nate and Becky's situation. Isn't HIV infection like pregnancy—an either/or thing? Biologically, yes, but Petronio describes a number of ways that disclosure could be partial. For example, Nate might talk about movies that sympathetically portray AIDS victims, enthusing about the Oscar-winning performances of Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia* and Sean Penn in *Milk*. Or, similar to the sexually abused children that Petronio interviewed, he could drop hints about his condition and watch for signs that others would handle further disclosure well. Along that line, some gay and lesbian victims reveal their sexual orientation to others first, later speaking of their HIV status only if the response to the first disclosure is nonjudgmental. As with boundary linkage and boundary ownership, collaborative boundary permeability doesn't happen by accident. The practical takeaway that CPM offers is an insistence that disclosers and their confidants need to negotiate mutual rules for possible third-party dissemination.

5. BOUNDARY TURBULENCE—RELATIONSHIPS AT RISK

When co-owners of private information don't effectively negotiate and follow jointly held privacy rules, boundary turbulence is the likely result.

When boundary coordination fails, turbulence is the result. Petronio uses the metaphor of *boundary turbulence* to refer to "disruptions in the way that co-owners control and regulate the flow of private information to third parties."[18] The examples she offers make it clear that turbulence can quickly destroy the trust between revealers and recipients that has built up over time. Communication scholar Leanne Knobloch (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) defines relational turbulence as "people's increased reactivity to relationship circumstances, which is manifest in extreme cognitive appraisals, intense emotional reactions, and zealous behavioral responses."[19] Our response to turbulence isn't always negative, but the way it affects our thoughts, feelings, and actions can radically alter our relationships with others.

Boundary turbulence Disruption of privacy management and relational trust that occurs when collective privacy boundaries aren't synchronized.

Petronio lists a variety of factors that can lead to boundary turbulence, which I'll lump into three categories—fuzzy boundaries, intentional breaches, and mistakes.[20] I'll illustrate the first two from research she's conducted on family and friends as health care advocates—the triangular interactions that occur when patients bring someone with them to their doctor's appointments.[21]

Fuzzy Boundaries

Typical of many interactions where private information is shared, Petronio has found that patients and the advocates they bring with them have rarely discussed what can and can't be revealed. She places the onus on the friend or family member: "Curiously, these informal advocates did not appear to confer with the patient before entering the medical situation to find out when or if the advocate should disclose private medical information."[22] Having no recognized mutual boundaries and only a vague idea of the patient's expectations, advocates

resort to using their own privacy rules to guide what they say. The result is turbulence and a patient who is often embarrassed or unhappy.

In like manner, doctor–patient confidentiality can be compromised. As one doctor admitted, "When the patient is accompanied by a friend or relative, we're often unclear about that companion's function in the interview."[23] From the legal standpoint, once the patient invites someone else into the mix, the physician no longer has to be concerned about confidentiality. But the patient may be shocked when his wife hears the doctor reveal alarming test results, offer a depressing prognosis, or refer to a previous medical condition that she knew nothing about.

Intentional Breaches

Sometimes those who are now-in-the-know understand that the original owner will be horrified if they blab it about, yet they reveal the secret anyway. They may do so to actually hurt the original owner or simply because breaking the confidence works to their personal advantage. A painful romantic breakup is the classic case when the spurned partner lashes out by revealing intimate details that make the other look bad. Petronio didn't run across disloyal breaches in her study of unofficial health advocates, but she did discover intentional boundary crossings when advocates faced a *confidentiality dilemma*. These occurred when patients said things to their doctor that advocates knew weren't true or avoided revealing embarrassing medical information that advocates knew was important for the physician to know.

Petronio cites the example of a man who tells his cardiologist that he quit smoking after his heart surgery. His daughter who's present is in a quandary. She could respect her father's privacy but by her silence put his health at risk. Or she could violate family privacy rules by revealing his continued smoking so that the doctor can make an informed medical decision. She faces a tragic moral choice where whatever she does is wrong. Petronio found that advocates placed in this position opt for health over privacy, and speculates, "Perhaps in cases when safety or well-being is at stake, privacy issues seem less significant for those trying to help."[24] In support of this interpretation, she notes that one man poignantly explained why he breached his wife's privacy boundary—*because I did not want my wife to die.*

Confidentiality dilemma
The tragic moral choice confidants face when they must breach a collective privacy boundary in order to promote the original owner's welfare.

Mistakes

Not all boundary and relational turbulence comes from privacy rules out of sync or the intentional breach of boundaries. Sometimes people create turmoil by making mistakes, such as letting secrets slip out when their guard is down after having a few drinks. Medical personnel are just as prone to committing communication blunders as the rest of us. For instance, doctors make *errors of judgment* when they discuss private cases in public places. Petronio cites a report of two doctors on a crowded hospital elevator debating the merits of removing a portion of a man's lung. One of the passengers who heard them was the patient's wife.[25] We commit the same type of mistake if we assume that only friends will access private information we post on Facebook or we don't recognize that people around us can hear our end of a cell phone conversation. A *miscalculation in timing* can cause similar distress. Doctors and nurses have been known to phone

people in the middle of the workday to tell them that they have cancer. There's no good way to deliver that devastating news. But to do it at a time when the person may be interacting with co-workers takes away the chance to process the stark reality in private.

I have my own medical example of what Petronio calls the *bungling of topic rules,* although *bungling* is too strong a term for the brief words of a woman who meant to put me at ease. As I was rolled into the operating room in a tranquilized state, I saw that the surgical nurse was a former student who'd taken all of my classes and had babysat my children. She bent down to me and whispered, "Don't worry, Em, people under anesthesia say all sorts of bizarre things, but we never take them seriously." I was no longer tranquil.

CRITIQUE: KEEN DIAGNOSIS, GOOD PRESCRIPTION, LESS AMBIGUITY

CPM is a communication theory that nicely fulfills five of the six criteria for a good interpretive theory. Petronio painstakingly maps out the different ways people handle private information and discerns why they make the choices they do. This *understanding of people* is furthered by the *qualitative research* that she and other communication scholars conduct to expand their knowledge of privacy management. Typically their research takes the form of open-ended interviews such as those Petronio conducted with sexually abused children, but Petronio also draws on the results of quantitative research to support the theory's conclusions. This extensive research and the fact that CPM provides a needed focus on privacy, where before there had been a theoretical void, has created a *community of agreement* on the worth of the theory among communication scholars. In medical terms, CPM provides an astute diagnosis of the use and abuse of privacy rules.

As for *clarification of values*, CPM presents privacy as valuable in its own right, not relationally inferior to openness, transparency, or self-disclosure. Additionally, Petronio upholds mutually coordinated privacy rules as the best way to establish effective boundaries that protect co-owned private information. It's a bit of a stretch to say that the theory calls for a radical *reform of society* the way some critical theories do, but Petronio clearly believes that healthy relationships within a community depend on trust and that they'll be less at risk when people follow her research-based prescription for the prevention of turbulence.

The interpretive criterion that CPM does not meet well is *aesthetic appeal,* which is a matter of both style and clarity. Petronio's organizational style is one of arranging her insights into multiple lists. The result is a confusing array of classifications where the connection between the lists isn't always apparent, nor is the relationship among items within a given category. Clarity is a problem as well. For example, in Principle 4 and throughout much of her writing, Petronio indicates that people who co-own private information should negotiate mutual privacy rules. Yet in another summary version of CPM, Petronio seems to directly contradict this principle. She writes, "As co-owners, the recipients have a responsibility to care for the information in the way that the original owner desires."[26] That's acquiescence or submission, not negotiation. It's also confusing, as is Petronio's frequent use of qualifiers such as *may be, tend to be, possibly, perhaps,* and *sometimes.*

Petronio is aware of these problems. In 2004, she wrote a wonderfully transparent article entitled "Road to Developing Communication Privacy Management Theory: Narrative in Process, Please Stand By." She describes "a stage of

theory building where much is in place and many of the conceptual blocks are identified, yet the way they fit together shift and change, rendering the connections temporarily ambiguous."[27] I regard that as an accurate description of where the theory was then, but since that time she has further developed CPM to reduce the ambiguity. For example, her recent repackaging of the theory under the five basic principles I've presented is a major organizational improvement. And the three subtitle questions I used to clarify the functions of *boundary ownership, linkage,* and *permeability* came straight from that same chapter, which she co-authored with Ashley Duggan in 2009.[28]

There are two gaps in the theory coverage that bear mention. Petronio writes convincingly about the value of co-owner negotiation and how quickly trust can be lost when privacy rules are breached.[29] Yet she currently doesn't offer insight on how to conduct those negotiations, nor does she describe after-the-fact remedies for the mistrust that boundary turbulence stirs up. I believe Petronio needs to expand CPM to suggest *how* to effectively negotiate mutual boundaries and offer *ways and means* to settle the turbulence that occurs when collective privacy boundaries are violated. Petronio is now working on a new book about CPM, with chapters entitled "Diagnostic Method" and "Repair Tool" that will address these thorny issues. In the spirit of her 2004 narrative cited above, she urges us to "stay tuned."[30]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. In Principle 2, Petronio cites five foundational criteria that affect our *personal privacy rules*. Which factor most shapes the rules you adopt? Is there one factor that seems to include or trump the other four?

2. Petronio states that *ownership* and *control of private information* don't always go together. Can you imagine a situation where you are the sole owner of a secret yet have no control over its disclosure or discovery?

3. CPM states that those who are privy to private information can avoid *boundary turbulence* by *negotiating mutual privacy rules*. Why do you think that many *disclosers* and their *confidants* fail to have this discussion?

4. CPM is a *rules theory* that is supported by *qualitative research*. Why would a *quantitative* researcher have a problem testing the theory using an experimental design?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Sandra Petronio, *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Discourse,* State University of New York, Albany, NY, 2002.

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Summary statement: Mary Claire Morr Serewicz and Sandra Petronio, "Communication Privacy Management Theory," in *Explaining Communication: Contemporary Theories and Exemplars,* Bryan Whaley and Wendy Samter (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2007, pp. 257–273.

Five principles of CPM applied: Ashley Duggan and Sandra Petronio, "When Your Child Is in Crisis: Navigating Medical Needs with Issues of Privacy Management," in *Parent*

and Children Communicating with Society, Thomas J. Socha (ed.), Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 117–132.

Initial version: Sandra Petronio, "Communication Boundary Management: A Theoretical Model of Managing Disclosure of Private Information Between Married Couples," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 1, 1991, pp. 311–335.

Privacy/disclosure dialectic: Kathryn Greene, Valerian Derlega, Gust Yep, and Sandra Petronio, *Privacy and Disclosure of HIV in Interpersonal Relationships: A Sourcebook for Researchers and Practitioners,* Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2003.

Research review on secrecy: Sandra Petronio (ed.), *Balancing the Secrets of Private Disclosure,* Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2000.

Development of CPM: Sandra Petronio, "Road to Developing Communication Privacy Management Theory: Narrative in Process, Please Stand By," *Journal of Family Communication,* Vol. 4, 2004, pp. 193–207.

Confidants: Sandra Petronio and Jennifer Reierson, "Regulating the Privacy of Confidentiality: Grasping the Complexities through Communication Privacy Management Theory," in *Uncertainty, Information Management, and Disclosure Decisions: Theories and Applications*, Tamara D. Afifi and Walid A. Afifi (eds.), Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 365–383.

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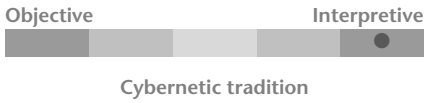
CHAPTER 14



The Interactional View

of Paul Watzlawick

The Franklin family is in trouble. A perceptive observer could spot their difficulties despite their successful façade. Sonia Franklin is an accomplished pianist who teaches advanced music theory and keyboard technique in her home. Her husband, Stan, will soon become a partner in a Big Four accounting firm. Their daughter, Laurie, is an honor student, an officer in her high school class, and the number two player on the tennis team. But Laurie's younger brother, Mike, has dropped all pretense of interest in studies, sports, or social life. His only passion is drinking beer and smoking pot.

Each of the Franklins reacts to Mike's substance abuse in different but less than helpful ways. Stan denies that his son has a problem. Boys will be boys, and he's sure Mike will grow out of this phase. The only time he and Mike actually talked about the problem, Stan said, "I want you to cut back on your drinking—not for me and your mother—but for your own sake."

Laurie has always felt responsible for her kid brother and is scared because Mike is getting wasted every few days. She makes him promise that he'll quit using and continues to introduce him to her straightlaced friends in the hope that he'll get in with a good crowd.

Sonia worries that alcohol and drugs will ruin her son's future. One weekday morning when he woke up with a hangover, she wrote a note to the school saying Mike had the flu. She also called a lawyer to help Mike when he was stopped for drunk driving. Although she promised never to tell his father about these incidents, she chides Stan for his lack of concern. The more she nags, the more he withdraws.

Mike feels caught in a vicious circle. Smoking pot helps him relax, but then his family gets more upset, which makes him want to smoke more, which. . . . During a tense dinner-table discussion he lashes out: "You want to know why I use? Go look in a mirror." Although the rest of the family sees Mike as "the problem," psychotherapist Paul Watzlawick would have described the whole family system as disturbed. He formed his theory of social interaction by looking at dysfunctional patterns within families in order to gain insight into healthy communication.

THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM

Picture a family as a mobile suspended from the ceiling. Each figure is connected to the rest of the structure by a strong thread tied at exactly the right place to keep the system in balance. Tug on any string and the force sends a shock wave throughout the whole network. Sever a thread and the entire system tilts in disequilibrium.

The threads in the mobile analogy represent communication rules that hold the family together. Paul Watzlawick believed that in order to understand the movement of any single figure in the *family system,* one has to examine the communication patterns among all its members. He regarded the communication that the family members have among themselves about their relationships as especially important.

Family system
As elf-regulating, interdependent network of feedback loops guided by members' rules; the behavior of each person affects and is affected by the behavior of another.

Watzlawick (pronounced VAHT-sla-vick) was a senior research fellow at the Mental Research Institute of Palo Alto, California, and clinical professor of psychiatry at Stanford University. He was one of about 20 scholars and therapists who were inspired by and worked with anthropologist Gregory Bateson. The common denominator that continues to draw the Palo Alto Group together is a commitment to studying interpersonal interaction as part of an entire system. They reject the idea that individual motives and personality traits determine the nature of communication within a family. In fact, the Palo Alto researchers care little about *why* a person acts in a certain way, but they have a great interest in *how* that behavior affects everyone in the group.

A systems approach to family relationships defies simplistic explanations of why people act as they do. For example, some pop psychology books on body language claim that a listener standing in a hands-on-hips position is skeptical about what the speaker is saying. Watzlawick was certainly interested in the reaction others have to this posture, but he didn't think that a particular way of standing should be viewed as part of a cause-and-effect chain of events:

$$a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$$

Relationships are not simple, nor are they "things," as suggested by the statement "We have a good relationship." Relationships are complex functions in the same sense that mathematical functions link multiple variables:

$$x = b^2 + \frac{2c}{a} - 5d$$

Just as x will be affected by the value of a, b, c, or d, so the hands-on-hips stance can be due to a variety of attitudes, emotions, or physical conditions. Maybe the stance does show skepticism. But it also might reflect boredom, a feeling of awkwardness, aching shoulder muscles, or self-consciousness about middle-aged "hip-handles."

Watzlawick used the math metaphor throughout his book *Pragmatics of Human Communication.* Along with co-authors Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don Jackson, he presented key axioms that describe the "tentative calculus of human communication." These axioms make up the *grammar of conversation,* or, to use another analogy that runs through the book, the *rules of the game.*

There is nothing particularly playful about the game the Franklins are playing. Psychologist Alan Watts says that "life is a game where rule No. 1 is: This

Games
Sequences of behavior governed by rules.

is no game, this is serious."[1] Watzlawick defined *games* as *sequences of behavior governed by rules.* Even though Sonia and Stan are involved in an unhealthy *game without end* of nag-withdrawal-nag-withdrawal, they continue to play because it serves a function for both of them. (Sonia feels superior; Stan avoids hassles with his son.) Neither party may recognize what's going on, but their rules are a something-for-something bargain. Mike's drinking and his family's distress may fit into the same category. (Getting drunk not only relieves tension temporarily, it's also a great excuse for sidestepping the pressure to excel, which is the name of the game in the Franklin family.)

Lest we be tempted to see the Franklins' relationships as typical of all families dealing with addiction, Watzlawick warned that each family plays a one-of-a-kind game with homemade rules. Just as CMM claims that persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social worlds (see Chapter 6), the Palo Alto Group insists that each family system creates its own reality. That conviction shapes its approach to family therapy:

> In the systemic approach, we try to understand as quickly as possible the functioning of this system: What kind of reality has this particular system constructed for itself? Incidentally, this rules out categorizations because one of the basic principles of systems theory is that "every system is its own best explanation."[2]

AXIOMS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Family homeostasis
The tacit collusion of family members to maintain the status quo.

The network of communication rules that governs the Franklins' interaction makes it extremely difficult for any of them to change their behavior. Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson used the label *family homeostasis* to describe what many family counselors agree is the tacit collusion of family members to maintain the status quo. Interactional theorists believe that we'll fail to recognize this destructive resistance to change unless we understand the following axioms, or rules, of communication.[3]

One Cannot Not Communicate

You've undoubtedly been caught in situations where you feel obliged to talk but would rather avoid the commitment to respond that's inherent in all communication—like in high school when you come home from a date or a party and your mother meets you inside the door and says, "Tell me all about it." Or perhaps you currently need to study but your roommate wants to chat.

In an attempt to avoid communication, you could bluntly state that your test the following morning makes studying more important than socializing. But voicing your desire for privacy can stretch the rules of good behavior and result in awkward silence that speaks loudly about the relationship.

Symptom strategy
Ascribing our silence to something beyond our control that renders communication justifiably impossible—sleepiness, headache, drunkenness, etc.

You could flood your mother with a torrent of meaningless words about the evening, merely say it was "fine" as you duck into your room, or plead fatigue, a headache, or a sore throat. Watzlawick called this the *symptom strategy* and said it suggests, "*I* wouldn't mind talking to you, but something stronger than *I,* for which I cannot be blamed, prevents me." Whatever you do, however, it would be naïve not to realize that your mother will analyze your behavior for clues about the evening's activities. His face an immobile mask, Mike Franklin may mutely encounter his parents. But he communicates in spite of himself by his

facial expression and his silence. Communication is inevitable. Those nonverbal messages will obviously have an impact on the rest of his family. A corollary to the first axiom is that "one cannot *not* influence."[4]

Communication = Content + Relationship

Content
The report part of a message; *what* is said verbally.

Relationship
The command part of the message; *how* it's said nonverbally.

The heading is a shorthand version of the formal axiom "Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore metacommunication."[5] Watzlawick chose to rename the two aspects of communication that Gregory Bateson had originally called *report* and *command.* Report, or *content,* is *what* is said. Command, or *relationship,* is *how* it's said. Edna Rogers, University of Utah communication professor and early interpreter of the interactional view, illustrates the difference with a two-word message:

> The content level provides information based on what the message is about, while the relational level "gives off" information on how the message is to be interpreted. For example, the content of the comment "You're late" refers to time, but at the relational level the comment typically implies a form of criticism of the other's lack of responsibility or concern.[6]

Figure 14–1 outlines the content–relationship distinction that is crucial to the interactional model. Yet neither the equation in the heading above nor the terms in the figure quite capture the way relationship surrounds content and provides a context, or atmosphere, for interpretation. It's the difference between data fed into a computer and the program that directs how the data should be processed. In written communication, punctuation gives direction as to how the words should be understood. Shifting a question mark to an exclamation point alters the meaning of the message. Right? Right! In spoken communication, however, tone of voice, emphasis on certain words, facial cues, and so forth direct how the message was meant to be interpreted.

Metacommunication
Communication about communication.

Watzlawick referred to the relational aspect of interaction as *metacommunication.* It is communication about communication. Metacommunication says, "This is how I see myself, this is how I see you, this is how I see you seeing me. . . ." According to Watzlawick, relationship messages are always the most important element in any communication—healthy or otherwise. But when a family is in trouble, metacommunication dominates the discussion. Mike

Content	Relationship
Report	Command
What is said	How it is said
Computer data	Computer program
Words	Punctuation
Verbal channel	Nonverbal channel
Communication	Metacommunication

FIGURE 14–1 The Content and Relationship Levels of Communication

Franklin's dinner-table outburst is an example of pathological metacommunication that shakes the entire family system. The Palo Alto Group is convinced it would be a mistake for the Franklins to ignore Mike's attack in the hope that the tension will go away. Sick family relationships get better only when family members are willing to talk with each other about their patterns of communication.

The Nature of a Relationship Depends on How Both Parties Punctuate the Communication Sequence

Consider the relational tangle described in one of the *Knots* composed by British psychotherapist R. D. Laing to describe disturbed relationships.

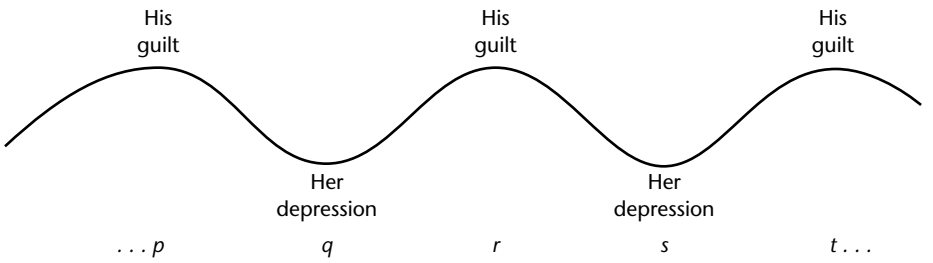
He can't be happy
    when there's so much suffering in the world
She can't be happy
    if he is unhappy
    She wants to be happy
He does not feel entitled to be happy
She wants him to be happy
    and he wants her to be happy
He feels guilty if he is happy
    and guilty if she is not happy
She wants both to be happy
He wants her to be happy
So they are both unhappy[7]

The poem describes a couple tied in knots, and their communication about unhappiness and guilt is the cord that binds them. An outsider who observes the sequence of interaction in the diagram below will spot a reciprocal pattern of guilt and depression that has no beginning or end. But the woman enmeshed in the system *punctuates* or cleaves the sequence with point *p, r,* or *t* as the starting point. She's convinced that the man's guilt is the cause of her unhappiness.

Punctuate
Interpreting an ongoing sequence of events by labeling one event as the cause and the following event as the response.

Equally ensnared in the system, the man punctuates the sequence by designating the woman's need for happiness at point *q* or *s* as the initial event. He's quite sure that her depression is the reason he feels guilty. Asking either of them, *Who started it?* wouldn't help because the question merely feeds into their fruitless struggle for control.

Watzlawick suggested that "what is typical about the sequence and makes it a problem of punctuation is that the individual concerned conceives of him or herself only as reacting to, but not as provoking, these attitudes."[8] This is true for both adult Franklins. Stan sees himself as withdrawing from Sonia only



because of her constant nagging. Sonia feels certain that she wouldn't harp on the issue if Stan would face the problem of Mike's drinking.

All Communication Is Either Symmetrical or Complementary

This axiom continues to focus on metacommunication. While definitions of relationships include the issues of belongingness, affection, trust, and intimacy, the interactional view pays particular attention to questions of control, status, and power. Remember that Bateson's original label for relationship communication was *command.* According to Watzlawick, *symmetrical* interchange is based on equal power; *complementary* communication is based on differences in power. He makes no attempt to label one type as good and the other as bad. Healthy relationships have both kinds of communication.

Symmetrical interchange
Interaction based on equal power.

In terms of ability, the women in the Franklin family have a *symmetrical* relationship; neither one tries to control the other. Sonia has expertise on the piano; Laurie excels on the tennis court. Each of them performs without the other claiming dominance. Fortunately, their skills are in separate arenas. Too much similarity can set the stage for an anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better competition.

Complementary interchange
Interaction based on accepted differences of power.

Sonia's relationship with Mike is *complementary.* Her type of mothering is strong on control. She hides the extent of Mike's drinking from his father, lies to school officials, and hires a lawyer on the sly to bail her son out of trouble with the police. By continuing to treat Mike as a child, she maintains their dominant–submissive relationship. Although complementary relationships aren't always destructive, the status difference between Mike and the rest of the Franklins is stressing the family system.

The interactional view holds that there is no way to label a relationship on the basis of a single verbal statement. Judgments that an interaction is either symmetrical or complementary require a sequence of at least two messages—a statement from one person and a response from the other. While at Michigan State University, communication researchers Edna Rogers and Richard Farace devised a coding scheme to categorize ongoing marital interaction on the crucial issue of who controls the relationship.

One-up communication
A conversational move to gain control of the exchange; attempted domination.

One-down communication
A conversational move to yield control of the exchange; attempted submission.

One-across communication
A conversational move to neutralize or level control within the exchange; when just one party uses it, the interchange is labeled *transitory*.

One-up communication (↑) is movement to *gain* control of the exchange. A bid for dominance includes messages that instruct, order, interrupt, contradict, change topics, or fail to support what the other person said. *One-down communication* (↓) is movement to *yield* control of the exchange. The bid for submission is evidenced by agreement with what the other person said. Despite Watzlawick's contention that all discourse is either symmetrical or complementary, Rogers and Farace code *one-across communication* (→) as well. They define it as *transitory* communication that moves toward *neutralizing* control.

Figure 14–2 presents the matrix of possible relational transactions. The pairs that are circled show a symmetrical interaction. The pairs in triangles indicate complementary relations. The pairs in squares reveal transitory communication. As Rogers' later research shows, bids for dominance (↑) don't necessarily result in successful control of the interaction (↑↓).[9] Matt, a student in my comm theory class, gained new insight about his relationship with his mother when he read this section:

> I'm really pumped on the interactional view. What makes me wide-eyed is how Watzlawick breaks down family communication into symmetrical and

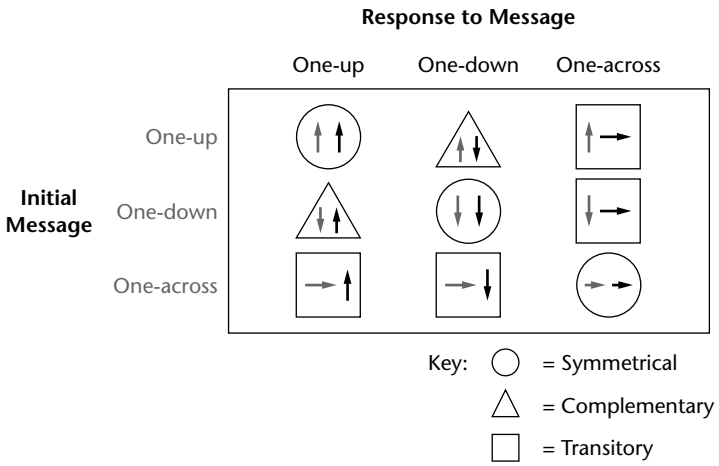


FIGURE 14–2 Matrix of Transactional Types

Adapted from Rogers and Farace, "Analysis of Relational Communication in Dyads: New Measurement Procedures"

complementary. It brings to mind a statement my father would often say: "You and your mother argue and have heated arguments because you are so similar." I usually dismissed this idea as baloney. I'd respond, "What, Mom and I similar? Yeah, right—look how often we disagree!" Looking back through the eyes of Watzlawick, Dad was right. Mom and I were both shooting out one-up messages, thus forming an ongoing symmetrical interaction that wasn't very comfortable.

TRAPPED IN A SYSTEM WITH NO PLACE TO GO

Enabler
Within addiction culture, a person whose nonassertive behavior allows others to continue in their substance abuse.

Family systems are highly resistant to change. This inertia is especially apparent in a home where someone has an addiction. Each family member occupies a role that serves the status quo. In the Franklin family, Mike, of course, is the one with "the problem." With the best of intentions, Sonia is the *enabler* who cushions Mike from feeling the pain caused by his chemical abuse. Stan is the "deny-er," while Laurie is the family "hero" who compensates for her brother's failure. Family therapists note that when one person in a distressed family gets better, another member often gets worse. If Mike stopped drinking and using pot, Laurie might quit the tennis team, ignore her studies, or start smoking marijuana herself. Dysfunctional families confirm the adage "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Double bind
A person trapped under mutually exclusive expectations; specifically, the powerful party in a complementary relationship insists that the low-power party act as if it were symmetrical.

Watzlawick saw family members as often caught in the *double bind* of mutually exclusive expectations, which Bateson originally described. Parental messages such as "You ought to love me" or "Be spontaneous" place children in an untenable position. The children are bound to violate some aspect of the injunction no matter how they respond. (Love can only be freely given; spontaneity on demand is impossible.) The paradox of the double bind is that the high-status party in a complementary relationship insists that the low-status person act as if the relationship were symmetrical—which it isn't. Stan's *demand* that his son stay sober for his *own sake* places Mike in a no-win situation. He can't obey his dad and be autonomous at the same time.

REFRAMING: CHANGING THE GAME BY CHANGING THE RULES

How can the members of the Franklin family break out of their never-ending game and experience real change in the way they relate to each other? According to Watzlawick, effective change for the whole family will come about only when members are helped to step outside the system and see the self-defeating nature of the rules under which they're playing. He calls this process *reframing:*

> To reframe . . . means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning.[10]

Reframing
The process of instituting change by stepping outside of a situation and reinterpreting what it means.

Watzlawick compared reframing to the process of waking up from a bad dream. He pointed out that during a nightmare you may run, hide, fight, scream, jump off a cliff, or try dozens of other things to make the situation better, but nothing really changes. Relief comes only when you step outside the system by waking up. Without the intervention of a timely alarm clock or a caring roommate, relief can be a long time coming.

Reframing is the sudden "aha" of looking at things in a new light. Suppose you could talk with Watzlawick about your struggles to keep up with the assignments for your comm theory class. You've chosen to be a communication major, so you believe you ought to *like* studying the material. Since you don't, you think there's something wrong with you. You also know that your family is making a financial sacrifice for you to be in college, so you feel guilty that you aren't getting good grades or experiencing deep gratitude for their help. In fact, you resent having to be grateful.

If you described these dilemmas to Watzlawick, he would want you to reframe your attitudes as *unrealistic* and *immature*—nightmarish interpretations for most college students. Even under the best of circumstances, he'd explain, studying is an unpleasant necessity and to believe that it should be fun is ridiculous. As far as your folks are concerned, they have a right to your gratitude, but this doesn't mean you have to *enjoy* being thankful. So it's up to you. You can "continue in these immature outlooks or have the adult courage to reject them and to begin to look at life as a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant things."[11] The *facts* haven't changed, but he's given you a new way to *interpret* them. If you accept Watzlawick's frame, you'll probably cope better and feel less pain.

For the Franklins, reframing means they must radically change their perspective. One way to do this is by adopting the view of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) that Mike's addiction is a disease over which he has no control. His drinking is not a sign of moral weakness or an intentional rebuff of his family's values—he drinks because he's an alcoholic. The AA interpretation would imply that the Franklins need to abandon their fruitless search for someone to blame. Despite Mike's look-in-the-mirror accusation, the members of his family aren't responsible for his addiction. They didn't cause it, they can't cure it, and they can't control it. It's a disease. Does that mean Mike's not responsible for being chemically dependent? Right . . . but he *is* responsible for putting all of his energy into getting well.

Accepting a new frame implies rejecting the old one. The Franklins must admit that their so-called solutions are as much a problem as their son's drinking. Mike will never seek treatment for his illness as long as his family continues

"Instead of 'It sucks' you could say, 'It doesn't speak to me.'"

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to shield him from the consequences of his behavior. Reframing will help Sonia see that writing excuses and hiring lawyers may be less caring than letting her son get kicked out of school or allowing his driver's license to be suspended.

Adopting a tough-love perspective or any new interpretive frame is usually accomplished only with outside help. For Watzlawick, that meant therapy. As a social constructionist, he wouldn't try to discover the "real" reason Mike drinks or worry if it's "true" that some people are genetically predisposed to addiction. In his view, the purpose of therapy is the lessening of pain. He would regard the disease model of addiction as an alternative construction—a fiction, perhaps, but for the Franklin family a useful and less painful one.[12]

Addiction model
Assumes alcoholism and other addictions are diseases to be cured rather than character disorders to be condemned.

Conversely, self-help groups called Families Anonymous (FA) are intensely committed to the *addiction model* as *the* way to realign the family network. Just as AA gives support to the recovering alcoholic, FA offers support for those who face chemical dependency within their own families. At each meeting, participants read aloud a brief selection entitled "Helping," in which they pledge to avoid manipulation, control, overprotectiveness, or any other effort to make the addicted family member fit a standard or an image. The reading closes with radical words for worried parents: "I can change myself. Others I can only love."[13] That's changing the game by changing the rules.

CRITIQUE: ADJUSTMENTS NEEDED WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Janet Beavin Bavelas co-authored *Pragmatics of Human Communication* with Watzlawick in 1967. Twenty-five years later, she reviewed the status of the axioms that are the central focus of the interactional view.[14] Based on the research program she conducted at the University of Victoria in Canada, Bavelas recommends

modifying some axioms of the theory. Her proposal serves as an informed critique of the original theory.

The first axiom claims that *we cannot not communicate.* Perhaps because of the catchy way it's stated, this axiom has been both challenged and defended more than the others. Although Bavelas is fascinated by the way people avoid eye contact or physically position themselves to communicate that they don't want to communicate, she now concedes that not all nonverbal behavior is communication. Observers may draw inferences from what they see, but in the absence of a sender–receiver relationship and the intentional use of a shared code, Bavelas would describe nonverbal behavior as *informative* rather than *communicative.*

As Figure 14–1 shows, the Palo Alto Group treated the verbal and nonverbal channels as providing different kinds of information. Bavelas now thinks that the notion of functionally separate channels dedicated to different uses is wrong. She suggests a *whole-message model* that treats verbal and nonverbal acts as completely integrated and often interchangeable. In effect, she has erased the broken vertical line that divides Figure 14–1 down the middle—a major shift in thinking.

Whole-message model
Regards verbal and nonverbal components of a message as completely integrated and often interchangeable.

The content/relationship distinction of another axiom is still viable for Bavelas. As did Watzlawick, she continues to believe that the content of communication is always embedded in the relationship environment. Looking back, however, she thinks they confused readers by sometimes equating the term *metacommunication* with all communication about a relationship. She now wants to reserve the word for explicit communication about the *process of communicating.* Examples of metacommunication narrowly defined would be Laurie Franklin telling her brother, "Don't talk to me like a kid," and Mike's response, "What do you mean by that?" Laurie's raised eyebrows and Mike's angry tone of voice would also be part of their tightly integrated packages of meaning.

Systems theories involving people are difficult to evaluate because of their *equifinality*—a characteristic that means a given behavioral outcome could be caused by any or many factors that are interconnected. Due to this feature, it's hard to know when the system is out of whack. However, I find Bavelas' disenchantment with a theoretical system that she helped create disquieting and a reason to question its validity.

Equifinality
A systems-theory assumption that a given outcome could have occurred due to any or many interconnected factors rather than being a result in a cause-effect relationship.

Despite these doubts, I'm impressed with the impact that Watzlawick and his associates have had on the field of interpersonal communication. The publication of *Pragmatics of Human Communication* marked the beginning of widespread study of the way communication patterns sustain or destroy relationships. The interactional view has also encouraged communication scholars to go beyond narrow cause-and-effect assumptions. The entanglements Watzlawick described reflect the complexities of real-life relationships that most of us know. In that way, the interactional view is similar to the other two theories covered in this section on relationship maintenance.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Systems theorists* compare the family system to a mobile. What part of the mobile represents *metacommunication?* If you were constructing a mobile to model your family, how would you depict *symmetrical* and *complementary* relationships?

2. For decades, the United States and the former Soviet Union were engaged in a nuclear arms race. How does Watzlawick's axiom about the *punctuation of communication sequences* explain the belligerence of both nations?

3. Can you make up something your instructor might say that would place you in a *double bind?* Under what conditions would this be merely laughable rather than frustrating?

4. Read one of the letters printed in the "Ask Amy" or "Dear Abby" column of your daily newspaper. How could you *reframe* the situation the writer describes?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication,* W. W. Norton, New York, 1967.

Seminal ideas of the Palo Alto Group: Gregory Bateson, "Information and Codification," in *Communication,* Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson (eds.), W. W. Norton, New York, 1951, pp. 168–211.

System theory: B. Aubrey Fisher, "The Pragmatic Perspective of Human Communication: A View from System Theory," in *Human Communication Theory,* Frank E. X. Dance (ed.), Harper & Row, New York, 1982, pp. 192–219.

Relational control: L. Edna Rogers and Richard Farace, "Analysis of Relational Communication in Dyads: New Measurement Procedures," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 1, 1975, pp. 222–239.

Relational control in families: L. Edna Rogers, "Relational Communication Theory: An Interactional Family Theory," in *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives,* Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie A. Baxter (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, pp. 115–129.

Reframing: Paul Watzlawick, John H. Weakland, and Richard Fisch, *Change,* W. W. Norton, New York, 1974, pp. 92–160.

Pathological punctuation: R. D. Laing, *Knots,* Pantheon Books, New York, 1970.

Whether one cannot not communicate: Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "Can One Not Communicate? A Conflict of Models," *Communication Studies,* Vol. 42, 1991, pp. 340–353.

Social construction approach to therapy: Paul Watzlawick and Michael Hoyt, "Constructing Therapeutic Realities: A Conversation with Paul Watzlawick," in *Handbook of Constructive Therapies,* Michael Hoyt (ed.), Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 1997, pp. 183–196.

Theory adjustments: Janet Beavin Bavelas, "Research into the Pragmatics of Human Communication," *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies,* Vol. 11, No. 2, 1992, pp. 15–29.

Dawn of communication theory: Wolfram Lutterer, "The Two Beginnings of Communication Theory," *Kybernetes,* Vol. 36, 2007, pp. 1022–1025.

Current face of the theory: L. Edna Rogers and Valentin Escudero (eds.), *Relational Communication: An Interactional Perspective to Study Process and Form,* Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2004.

Critique: Carol Wilder, "The Palo Alto Group: Difficulties and Directions of the Interactional View for Human Communication Research," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 5, 1979, pp. 171–186.

Getting a person to play a role in an unfamiliar situation can be a powerful method of influence. To explore its effectiveness, Yale social psychologists Irving Janis and Leon Mann surveyed students at a women's college to find out their attitudes and behavior toward smoking—a practice quite resistant to change.[1] They later asked many who smoked to take part in a role play that supposedly assessed their acting ability. Each woman was to take the role of a patient who had gone to the doctor because of a continual cough. She was now back in his office to get the results of a battery of tests the doctor had ordered. She had no script to follow and could respond to the other actor in whatever way she desired.[2]

One researcher then ushered her into a room that was decked out with a scale, sterilizer, fluorescent light for reading X-rays, and a medical school diploma on the wall. The room even smelled of disinfectant. The second experimenter wore a white lab coat with a stethoscope around his neck. Speaking in an authoritative tone of voice, the "doctor" came right to the point. Her chest X-ray gave a positive indication of lung cancer and the diagnosis was confirmed by lab tests. Without question, this condition had developed over a long time. He then paused to let the young woman respond. Often she would say that she'd been smoking too much. Most students eventually asked what they could do.

The doctor wasn't optimistic, "We need to operate immediately. Can you be prepared to check into the hospital tomorrow afternoon?" The surgery only had a 50-50 chance of success of stopping the cancer's spread. At this point the mini drama could go in a number of directions. The student might express fear for her life, anguish over broken plans for graduation, hesitancy over what to tell her parents or fiancé, anger at God, or disbelief that it was happening to her. No matter how the dialogue went, the young woman got caught up in the situation and emotionally involved with the link between smoking and cancer.

Janis and Mann waited two weeks for the effects of the role play to take hold and then rechecked attitudes toward cigarette smoking. They found that role-play students expressed less favorable opinions toward smoking than they had before. They also discovered that the average cigarettes-per-day habit had dropped from 24 (more than a pack a day) to 14—a dramatic decrease in actual smoking behavior. The attitudes of smokers in the control group who didn't have the role-play experience remained the same as before. So did their 24 cigarettes-per-day habit.

Relapse is common when smokers try to cut back or quit "cold turkey." Many find the force of nicotine addiction, cigarette advertising, and friends who smoke hard to resist. Yet after eight months the slippage was slight. On average, those who participated in the emotional role play lit up 15 times a day—only one cigarette more.

Why is role play so effective in this case? In their book, *New Techniques of Persuasion,* the late Gerald Miller (Michigan State University) and Michael Burgoon (University of Arizona) suggest three possibilities. Role play makes for *immediacy.* The cigarette–cancer connection becomes more real to the smoker when she can't get the image of the doctor delivering bad news out of her mind. There's also *personal involvement.* The smoker can no longer stand aloof from the threat of

cancer when she's actively stating her fears to the doctor. Finally, Miller and Burgoon suggest we consider the effect of *nonverbal messages,* such as the doctor pointing to the patient's X-ray. "The impact of this simple behavioral sequence may well transcend the effects of an extended medical lecture on the dangers of cigarette smoking."[3]

I've recounted this experiment because it illustrates and measures what influence theorists, researchers, and many practitioners value. Will a persuasive approach change people's inner attitudes—their beliefs, their emotional response, and what they intend to do? Will that attitude shift be matched by a change in actual behavior? Are these changes so deep-seated that they will resist forces that tend to draw them back into old patterns of thinking and behavior? And will they last over time? The three theories that follow suggest different routes to this kind of effective interpersonal influence and, most important, explain why they work.

"I'm through playing doctor.
With insurance forms, co-payments,
and malpractice suits, it's just no fun!"

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CHAPTER 15

Socio-psychological tradition

Social Judgment Theory

of Muzafer Sherif

My son, Jim, is an airline pilot—a job that has changed dramatically since the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. When he walks through the airport he overhears a variety of comments about the safety of air travel. I've listed 11 statements that reflect the range of attitudes he's heard expressed. Read through these opinions and consider the diversity of viewpoints they represent.

a. Airlines aren't willing to spend money on tight security.
b. All life is risk. Flying is like anything else.
c. Anyone willing to die for a cause can hijack an airplane.
d. Air marshals with guns can deter terrorists.
e. There are old pilots and bold pilots; there are no old, bold pilots.
f. Pilots drink before they fly to quell their fears of skyjacking.
g. Getting there by plane is safer than taking the train or bus.
h. American pilots are trained to handle any in-flight emergency.
i. It's easy to get into the cockpit of a jet airplane.
j. Passenger screening is better since checkers were federalized.
k. The odds of a plane crash are 1 in 10 million.

Take a few minutes to mark your reactions to these statements. If you follow each instruction before jumping ahead to the next one, you'll have a chance to experience what social judgment theory predicts.

1. To begin, read through the items again and underline the single statement that most closely represents your point of view.
2. Now look and see whether any other items seem reasonable. Circle the letters in front of those acceptable statements.
3. Reread the remaining statements and cross out the letters in front of any that are objectionable to you. After you cross out these unreasonable ideas, you may have marked all 11 statements one way or another. It's also possible that you'll leave some items unmarked.

THREE LATITUDES: ACCEPTANCE, REJECTION, AND NONCOMMITMENT

I've just taken you through on paper what social judgment theory says happens in our heads. We hear a message and immediately judge where it should be placed on the attitude scale in our minds. According to the late Muzafer Sherif, a social psychologist at the University of Oklahoma, this subconscious sorting out of ideas occurs at the instant of perception. We weigh every new idea by comparing it with our present point of view. He called his analysis of attitudes the *social judgment–involvement approach,* but most scholars refer to it simply as *social judgment theory.*

Social judgment–involvement
Perception and evaluation of an idea by comparing itwith current attitudes.

Sherif believed that the three responses you made on the previous page are necessary to determine your attitude toward airline safety, or any other attitude structure. In all probability you circled a range of statements that seemed reasonable to you and crossed out a number of opinions you couldn't accept. That's why Sherif would see your attitude as a *latitude* rather than as any single statement you underlined. He wrote that an "individual's stand is not represented adequately as a point along a continuum. Different persons espousing the same position may differ considerably in their tolerance around this point."[1]

He saw an attitude as an amalgam of three zones. The first zone is called the *latitude of acceptance.* It's made up of the item you underlined and any others you circled as acceptable. A second zone is the *latitude of rejection.* It consists of the opinions you crossed out as objectionable. The leftover statements, if any, define the *latitude of noncommitment.* These were the items you found neither objectionable nor acceptable. They're akin to marking *undecided* or *no opinion* on a traditional attitude survey. Sherif said we need to know the location and width of each of these interrelated latitudes in order to describe a person's attitude structure.

Latitude of acceptance
The range of ideas that a person sees as reasonable or worthy of consideration.

Latitude of rejection
The range of ideas that a person sees as unreasonableor objectionable.

Latitude of noncommitment
The range of ideas that a person sees as neither acceptable nor objectionable.

Suppose Jim encounters a man in the airport named Ned, who is complaining about the dangers of flight as evidenced by 9/11 terrorism. Assume that Jim would like to persuade Ned that flying is absolutely safe, or at least much less risky than anxious Ned believes. Social judgment theory recommends that Jim try to figure out the location and breadth of the man's three latitudes before presenting his case. Figure 15–1 shows where Ned places those 11 statements along the mental yardstick he uses to gauge safety. As you will discover in the next few pages, if my son has a good idea of this cognitive map, he'll have a much better chance of crafting a message that will persuade Ned to be more optimistic about flying.

EGO-INVOLVEMENT: HOW MUCH DO YOU CARE?

There's one other thing about Ned's attitude structure that Jim needs to know—how *important* the issue of air safety is in Ned's life. Sherif called this concept *ego-involvement. Ego-involvement* refers to how crucial an issue is in our lives. Is it central to our well-being? Do we think about it a lot? Does our attitude on the matter go a long way toward defining who we are? In Figure 15–1, I've used an anchor to represent the position that most closely represents Ned's point of view—that flying is dangerous because fanatics are willing to die for their cause. Sherif said that's what our favored position does; it anchors all our other thoughts about the topic.

Ego-involvement
The importance or centrality of an issue to a person's life, often demonstrated by membership in a group with a known stand.

If air safety were only a casual concern for Ned, it would be fitting to represent his stance with a small anchor that could easily be dragged to a new position. That's probably the case for some of the nonfliers in the terminal who

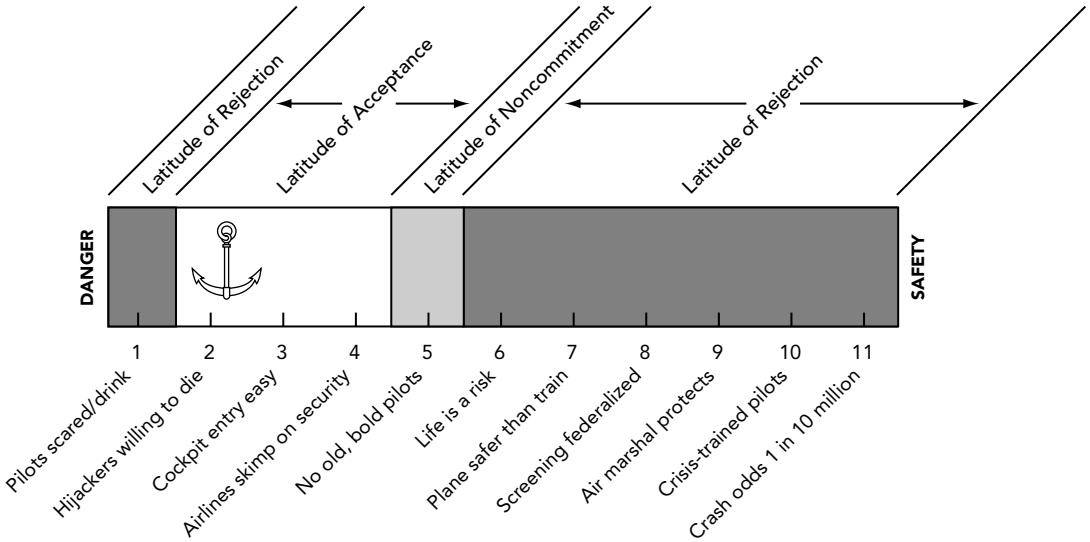

FIGURE 15–1 Ned's Cognitive Map Regarding Air Safety

are simply picking up a rental car, dropping off Aunt Juanita for her flight, or perhaps retrieving a lost bag for a friend. These folks are for safe flights and against crashes, but for them air safety isn't a major personal concern.

Despite the fact that images of airplanes slamming into the twin towers of the World Trade Center are stenciled into most people's minds, not everyone who flies dwells on the topic. Those people don't argue about it, stew over it, or get sweaty palms when their jet roars down the runway. As long as everything seems normal, their ego-involvement is moderate.

But for Ned and others like him, the issue is crucial. They are fearful fliers who swap horror stories of knowing someone who died on a hijacked plane. They experience panic when three swarthy men board their flight to Chicago. Others may experience only passing anxiety about flying, but since Ned's fear is deep-seated, the hefty anchor shown in Figure 15–1 is appropriate.

People with attitude profiles similar to Ned's are highly ego-involved. Some join an airline passenger association that lobbies Congress for stricter safety regulations. One way Sherif defined high ego-involvement was *membership in a group with a known stand.* My son's pilot's license, Air Line Pilots Association union card, and employment with a major airline are indications that he's at least as ego-involved in the issue as Ned. Of course, his confidence in airline safety is at the other end of the spectrum.

Three features of Ned's attitude structure are typical of people with high ego-involvement in an issue. The first indication is that his latitude of noncommitment is almost nonexistent. People who don't care about an issue usually have a wide latitude of noncommitment, but Ned has only one statement in that category. He may not be sure about old, bold pilots, but he has definite opinions on everything else.

Second, Ned rejects all five statements that offer assurances of safety. According to social judgment theory, a wide latitude of rejection is a typical sign of high ego-involvement. Ned has intense feelings about the potential dangers of flying;

he sees safety as a black-and-white issue. Persons with low ego-involvement would probably see more gray area. Note that the effects of high ego-involvement on perception may be similar to those of low cognitive complexity on the perception of personal characteristics (see Chapter 8). The person with high ego-involvement may have trouble distinguishing between actual improvements in safety and empty assurances. The person with low cognitive complexity may perceive groups of people as all the same. In both cases, the observer blurs differences that could make a difference.

Finally, people who hold extreme opinions on either side of an issue almost always care deeply. While it's possible to feel passionate about middle-of-the-road positions, social judgment researchers find that massive attitude anchors are usually located toward the ends of the scale. Extreme positions and high ego-involvement go together. That's why religion, sex, and politics are traditionally taboo topics in the wardroom of a U.S. Navy ship at sea. When passions run deep, radical opinions are common, and there's little tolerance for diversity.

Everything I've presented up to this point is how social judgment theory describes the cognitive *structure* of a person's attitude. We now turn to the two-step mental *process* that Sherif said is triggered when that person hears or reads a message. Ned will first evaluate the content of the message to see where it falls vis-à-vis his own position—how far it is from his anchor. That's the *judgment* phase of social judgment theory. In the second stage of the process, Ned will adjust his anchored attitude toward or away from the message he's just encountered. The next two sections explain the way Sherif said the two stages of this influence process work.

JUDGING THE MESSAGE: CONTRAST AND ASSIMILATION ERRORS

Sherif claimed that we use our own anchored attitude as a comparison point when we hear a discrepant message. He believed there is a parallel between systematic biases in the judgments we make in the physical world and the way we determine other people's attitudes. I recently set up three pails of water in my class to illustrate this principle. Even though the contents looked the same, the water in the left bucket was just above freezing, the water in the right bucket was just below scalding, and the water in the middle bucket was lukewarm. A student volunteered to plunge her left hand into the left bucket and her right hand into the right bucket at the same time. Twenty seconds was about all she could take. I then asked her to plunge both hands into the middle bucket and judge the temperature of the water. Of course, this produced a baffling experience, because her left hand "told" her the water was hot, while her right hand sent a message that it was cold.

Contrast
A perceptual error whereby people judge messages that fall within their latitude of rejection as further from their anchor than they really are.

Sherif hypothesized a similar *contrast* effect when people who are "hot" for an idea hear a message on the topic that doesn't have the same fire. Judged by their standard, even warm messages strike them as cold. Sherif's *social judgment–involvement* label nicely captures the idea of a link between ego-involvement and perception. Highly committed people have large latitudes of rejection. Any message that falls within that range will be perceived by them as more discrepant from their anchor than it really is. The message is mentally pushed away to a position that is farther out—not within the latitude of acceptance—so the hearer doesn't have to deal with it as a viable option.

All of this is bad news for Jim as he tries to dispel Ned's fears. He'll probably address Ned's concerns head on:

> Look, Ned, statistics show you're much safer flying than taking the train or bus. In fact, the most dangerous part of flying is the drive to the airport. I know you worry about terrorists, but with the new full-body scanners the TSA is using, there's no way that guns, knives, or explosives can get on board. And you should know there's been an undercover air marshal riding shotgun back in coach on my last three trips.

Jim hopes these points will be reassuring. If Ned hears them as they were intended, they will register at 7, 8, and 9 on his mental scale, where a 1 represents total danger and an 11 indicates complete safety. However, social judgment theory says Ned won't hear them that way. Because the message falls within Ned's latitude of rejection, he's likely to judge the words as even further away from his anchor, perhaps at 9, 10, and 11. The words will strike Ned as unbelievable, self-serving, pilot propaganda—a false guarantee of safety that he's quick to reject.

Contrast is a perceptual distortion that leads to polarization of ideas. But according to Sherif, it happens only when a message falls within the latitude of rejection. *Assimilation* is the opposite error of judgment. It's the rubberband effect that draws an idea toward the hearer's anchor so it seems that she and the speaker share the same opinion. Assimilation takes place when a message falls within the latitude of acceptance. For example, suppose Jim tells Ned that his airline isn't willing to spend money on effective security. Although that message is at 4 on Ned's cognitive map, he will hear it as more similar to his anchoring attitude than it really is, perhaps at 3.

Assimilation
A perceptual error whereby people judge messages that fall within their latitude of acceptance as less discrepant from their anchor than theyreallyar e.

Sherif was unclear about how people judge a message that falls within their latitude of noncommitment. Most interpreters assume that perceptual bias will not kick in and that the message will be heard roughly as intended.

DISCREPANCY AND ATTITUDE CHANGE

Judging how close or how far a message is from our own anchored position is the first stage of attitude change. Shifting our anchor in response is the second. Sherif thought that both stages of the influence process usually take place below the level of consciousness.

According to social judgment theory, once we've judged a new message to be within our latitude of acceptance, we will adjust our attitude somewhat to accommodate the new input. The persuasive effect will be positive but partial. We won't travel the whole distance, but there will be some measurable movement toward the speaker's perceived position. How much movement? Sherif wasn't specific, but he did claim that *the greater the discrepancy, the more hearers will adjust their attitudes.* Thus, the message that persuades the most is the one that is most discrepant from the listener's position yet falls within his or her *latitude of acceptance* or *latitude of noncommitment.*

If we've judged a message to be within our *latitude of rejection,* we will also adjust our attitude, but in this case *away from* what we think the speaker is advocating. Since people who are highly ego-involved in a topic have a broad range of

Boomerang effect
Attitude change in the opposite direction of what the message advocates; listeners driven away from rather than drawn to an idea.

rejection, most messages aimed to persuade them are in danger of actually driving them further away. This predicted *boomerang effect* suggests that people are often *driven* rather than *drawn* to the attitude positions they occupy.

The mental processes Sherif described are automatic. He reduced interpersonal influence to the issue of the distance between the message and the hearer's position:

> Stripped to its bare essential, the problem of attitude change is the problem of the degree of discrepancy from communication and the felt necessity of coping with the discrepancy.[2]

So the only space for volition in social judgment theory is the choice of alternative messages available to the person who's trying to persuade.

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR THE PERSUADER

Sherif would have advised Jim to avoid messages that claim flying is safer than taking the bus or train. Ned simply won't believe them, and they may push him deeper into his anti-aviation stance. To make sure his words have a positive effect, Jim should select a message that falls at the edge of Ned's latitude of acceptance. Even after the perceptual process of assimilation kicks in, Ned will

"We think you could gain much wider support simply by re-languaging your bigotry."

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still judge Jim's message to be discrepant from his point of view and shift his attitude slightly in that direction.

> Ned, you're right. For years the airlines—mine included—didn't invest the money it takes to successfully screen passengers. But 9/11 has changed all that. Every ticket you buy has a surcharge to pay for tight security. And the days of the cowboy pilot are over. Because it's my job to protect hundreds of lives in a 100-million-dollar airplane, I do it by the book every flight. I know that if I get my butt there safely, yours will get there that way too.

Jim might try a riskier strategy to produce greater attitude shift. He could use the rather ambiguous statement about there being no old, bold pilots. Ambiguity can often serve better than clarity. When George W. Bush started campaigning for president, he called himself a "compassionate conservative." Nobody knew exactly what the label meant, so the term stayed out of voters' latitude of rejection. Tanya Donelly, former lead singer for Belly, takes the same approach. She says she writes lyrics that are intentionally vague so as to appeal to a wider audience.[3] If Jim goes this route and Ned presses for clarification on the absence of old, bold pilots, Jim can explain that rigorous cockpit check-rides weeded out those who take chances. But this approach could backfire and feed Ned's fears if the statement calls to mind an image of reckless pilots about to crash and burn.

The idea of crafting a message to fall within Ned's latitude of acceptance or noncommitment is frustrating to Jim. He wants more change than these strategies offer. But it's all he can get in a one-shot attempt. If he were talking to an open-minded person with wide latitudes of acceptance and noncommitment, a bigger shift would be possible. Toby, a student in my class, saw himself that way over a wide range of issues:

> Time and time again I find myself easily persuaded. Afterward I wonder, *How did I get talked into this one?* Credit it to my flexibility, willingness to try, or naïve trust in people's motives. I always pay attention to advice given by a friend or an expert. Social judgment theory would say that I simply have a wide latitude of noncommitment. That's because I have low ego-involvement most of the time. The situation is not a hill to die on, so why should I get my pride involved?

Toby isn't typical. We're more likely to encounter people who are dogmatic on every issue. "Don't confuse me with the facts," they say. "My mind is made up." These cantankerous souls have chronically wide latitudes of rejection. This probably doesn't describe Ned. His highly skeptical attitude is likely limited to fear of flying. But when Jim is dealing with a highly ego-involved traveler, he has to work within a narrow range. True conversion from one end of the scale to the other is a rare phenomenon. The only way to stimulate large-scale change is through a series of small, successive movements. Persuasion is a gradual process.

Reference groups
Groups that members use to define their identity.

It's also a *social* process. The lack of an interpersonal bond between Jim and Ned limits the amount of influence that's possible. If Ned heard strong reassurances of airline safety from his friends and family, it might occasion a major shift. Sherif noted that "most dramatic cases of attitude change, the most widespread and enduring, are those involving changes in reference groups with differing values."[4]

ATTITUDES ON SLEEP, BOOZE, AND MONEY: EVIDENCE SUPPORTING SJT

Research on the predictions of social judgment theory (SJT) requires highly ego-involving issues where strong resistance to some persuasive messages is likely. The topics of sufficient sleep, alcohol consumption, and asking for money seem to be ripe for checking out the theory's validity.

Sufficient sleep. In an early experiment testing social judgment theory, psychologists Stephen Bochner (University of New South Wales) and Chester Insko (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) queried college students about how much sleep they thought a person should get each night.[5] Before the study, most college students accepted the conventional wisdom that the human body functions best with eight hours of sleep. They then read an article written by an expert in the field that claimed young adults actually need much less. The message was the same for all with one crucial difference. Some students were told they needed eight hours, some seven, some six, and so on, right down the line. The final group actually read that humans need no sleep at all! Then each group had a chance to give their opinions.

Sherif's theory suggests that the fewer hours recommended, the more students will be swayed until they begin to regard the message as patently ridiculous. The results shown in Figure 15–2 confirm this prediction. Persuasion increased as the hours advocated were reduced to 3, a message that caused students to revise their estimate of optimum sleep down to 6.3 hours. Anything less than 3 hours apparently fell outside their latitude of acceptance and became progressively ineffective. But a highly credible speaker can shrink the hearer's latitude of rejection. When the "expert" in the sleep study was a Nobel Prize-winning physiologist rather than a YMCA director, persuasion increased.

Alcohol consumption. In the fall of 2004, Michigan State University communication professors Sandi Smith, Charles Atkin, and three other university colleagues measured students' perception of drinking behavior at the school.[6] They found a campus-wide *pluralistic ignorance* of the actual amount of booze

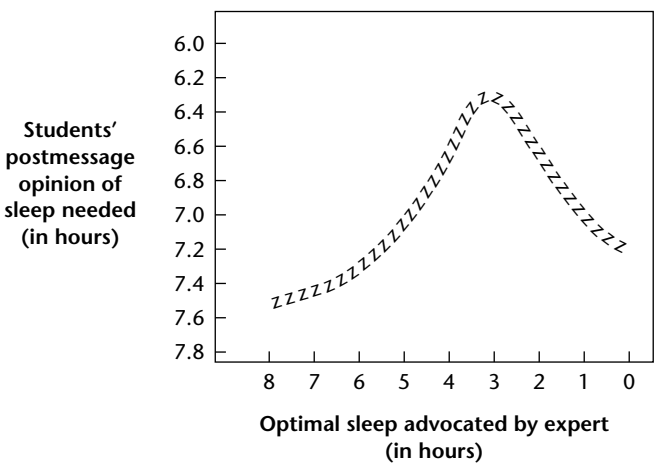

FIGURE 15–2 Sleep Study Results

Adapted from Bochner and Insko, "Communicator Discrepancy, Source Credibility and Opinion Change"

Pluralistic ignorance
The mistaken idea that everyone else is doing or thinking something thattheyar en't.

consumed by students who drink at a party. Whereas reported alcohol consumption averaged 5.3 drinks—with 63 percent downing five drinks or less—students thought the norm was closer to six drinks (5.9 percent). This gap concerned health center officials because perceived social norms affect behavior—in this case, the idea encouraged risky binge drinking. In preparation for a campus-wide social norm campaign to correct the misperception, Smith and Atkin measured student body latitudes of acceptance, noncommitment, and rejection of various messages to publicize the actual norm. Based on their research they selected the following true phrase to be included in every communication about student drinking behavior: "Most (63 percent) drink zero to five when they party." The message fell within most students' latitude of noncommitment—as discrepant from campus opinion as possible while still being believable.

The intensive, three-month campaign involved posters across campus, table tents in the cafeteria, and multiple ads in the campus newspaper and in a news magazine handed out at orientation. Almost all students reported seeing the zero-to-five-drinks message many times. The campaign was a success. When Smith and Atkin measured perception of drinking in the spring, they found that students had lowered their estimate to 4.9—one drink less than they had thought in the fall. Even more impressive, the average of number of drinks consumed at a party during that time span fell from 5.3 to 4.5—almost a full glass or mug.

Like the lung-cancer role-play experiment reported in the introduction to this section, this research validates an effective strategy to induce lasting change in beliefs and behavior, even when the issue is highly ego-involving. But Smith and Atkin are quick to note that the campaign was not a rigorous test of social judgment theory. They didn't design the campaign to see if messages presented within students' latitudes of acceptance or rejection would have had an equal or even greater positive effect. Yet their effort certainly affirms the wisdom of checking how prior beliefs affect the credibility of messages meant to persuade.

Asking for money. An anecdotal story of SJT in action comes from a university development director I know who was making a call on a rich alumnus. He anticipated that the prospective donor would give as much as $10,000. He made his pitch and asked what the wealthy businessman could do. The man protested that it had been a lean year and that times were tough—he couldn't possibly contribute more than $20,000. The fundraiser figured that he had seriously underestimated the giver's latitude of acceptance and that $20,000 was on the low end of that range. Without missing a beat he replied, "Trevor, do you really think that's enough?" The alumnus wrote a check for $25,000.

How do you feel about the fundraising ploy just described? The persuasive technique obviously worked, but the application of social judgment theory raises some thorny ethical questions. Is it legitimate for fundraisers to alter their pitch based on a potential donor's latitude of acceptance? Is it all right for politicians to be intentionally vague so that their message has broad appeal? Or consider my son's genuine desire to allay the fears of the flying public. The theory claims Jim will be more effective by presenting a soft-sell message at mid-scale rather than stating his genuine conviction that flying is safer than driving. Are these choices you want to make, or want others to make when they try to influence you?

CRITIQUE: A THEORY WELL WITHIN THE LATITUDE OF ACCEPTANCE

The social norm campaign on alcohol consumption and the college fundraiser's appeal for a generous contribution demonstrate that social judgment theory has *practical utility*—one of the six criteria of a good scientific theory. The trick for the influence practitioner is figuring out where the other person's latitudes of acceptance, noncommitment, and rejection lie. That's what audience analysis, market research, and focus groups are all about, but it's hard to imagine Jim handing a questionnaire to every jittery traveler in the departure lounge.

Social judgment theory offers specific *predictions* about what happens in the mind of someone who hears or reads a message that falls within his or her latitude of acceptance or rejection. Sherif's appeal to the perceptual distortions of assimilation and contrast, as well as the crucial role of ego-involvement, offer a compelling *explanation* of what goes on behind the eyes. Yet like all cognitive explanations put forth in this section of the book, these mental structures and processes can't be seen. We can only infer what's going on inside the head by observing the input and the output—the message and a person's response. The SJT explanation of persuasion is complex, but given Sherif's claim that an attitude can't be identified by a single point on a continuum, it's hard to imagine a *simpler* account of what's happening.

As the studies I've described demonstrate, social judgment theory requires *quantitative research,* and that's the kind social scientists have designed. But compared to the hundreds of empirical studies run to test and refine other leading theories of persuasion, the research base of SJT is relatively small. That may be because it's hard to locate a wide range of experimental subjects who run the gamut of high to low ego-involvement and hold widely different opinions on the same topic. And once they are willing to participate, the process of locating their three latitudes can be tedious for everyone involved. Even so, specific predictions of SJT are *testable;* some have been supported and a few found to fail. For example, Bochner and Insko's sleep experiment confirms that as long as a message remains outside people's latitudes of rejection, the more discrepant it is from the anchor and the greater the attitude shift in the desired direction will be. On the other hand, the boomerang effect that SJT predicts can happen when a message is delivered in the latitude of rejection is not often found. (Students who read the bizarre claim that the body thrives with zero hours of sleep per day didn't then decide that eight hours were too few.)

Despite the questions that surround social judgment theory, it is an elegant conception of the persuasion process that falls well within my latitude of acceptance. There's an intuitive appeal to the idea of crafting a message just short of the latitude of rejection in order to be as effectively discrepant as possible. That would be my message to Jim as he confronts a variety of air travelers. I wonder in what latitude of attitude my advice will fall?

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How does the concept of *attitudes as latitudes* help you understand your attitude toward the various requirements of this course?

2. Suppose you find out that the fellow sitting next to you is *highly ego-involved* in the issue of gun control. Based on social judgment theory, what three predictions about his attitude structure would be reasonable to make?

3. What practical advice does social judgment theory offer if you want to ask your boss for a raise?

4. Do you have any *ethical qualms* about applying the wisdom of social judgment theory? Why or why not?

SELF-QUIZ

www.mhhe.com/griffin8

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resources: Donald Granberg, "Social Judgment Theory," in *Communication Yearbook 6,* Michael Burgoon (ed.), Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1982, pp. 304–329; Daniel J. O'Keefe, "Social Judgment Theory," in *Persuasion: Theory and Research,* Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1990, pp. 29–44.

Original conception: Carolyn Sherif, Muzafer Sherif, and Roger Nebergall, *Attitude and Attitude Change: The Social Judgment–Involvement Approach,* W. B. Saunders, Philadelphia, PA, 1965.

Attitudes as latitudes: Kenneth Sereno and Edward Bodaken, "Ego-Involvement and Attitude Change: Toward a Reconceptualization of Persuasive Effect," *Speech Monographs,* Vol. 39, 1972, pp. 151–158.

Ego-involvement: William W. Wilmot, "Ego-Involvement: A Confusing Variable in Speech Communication Research," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vol. 57, 1971, pp. 429–436.

Test of two-stage hypothesis: Gian Sarup, Robert Suchner, and Gitanjali Gaylord, "Contrast Effects and Attitude Change: A Test of the Two-Stage Hypothesis of Social Judgment Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly,* Vol. 54, 1991, pp. 364–372.

Assimilation and contrast: Alison Ledgerwood and Shelly Chaiken, "Priming Us and Them: Automatic Assimilation and Contrast in Group Attitudes," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 93, 2007, pp. 940–956.

Message discrepancy: Stan Kaplowitz and Edward Fink, "Message Discrepancy and Persuasion," in *Progress in Communication Sciences: Advances in Persuasion, Vol. 13,* George Barnett and Frank Boster (eds.), Ablex, Greenwich, CT, 1997, pp. 75–106.

Boomerang effect: Hilobumi Sakaki, "Experimental Studies of Boomerang Effects Following Persuasive Communication," *Psychologia,* Vol. 27, No. 2, 1984, pp. 84–88.

Sleep study: Stephen Bochner and Chester Insko, "Communicator Discrepancy, Source Credibility and Opinion Change," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* Vol. 4, 1966, pp. 614–621.

Changing social norms for drinking on campus: Sandi Smith, Charles Atkin, Dennis Martell, Rebecca Allen, and Larry Hembroff, "A Social Judgment Theory Approach to Conducting Formative Research in a Social Norms Campaign," *Communication Theory*, Vol. 16, 2006, pp. 141–152.

Critique: Hee Sun Park, Timothy Levine, Catherine Y. K. Waterman, Tierney Oregon, and Sarah Forager, "The Effects of Argument Quality and Involvement Type on Attitude Formation and Attitude Change," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 33, 2007, pp. 81–102.

CHAPTER 16

Socio-psychological tradition

Elaboration Likelihood Model

of Richard Petty & John Cacioppo

Like a number of women whose children are out of the home, Rita Francisco has gone back to college. Her program isn't an aimless sampling of classes to fill empty hours—she has enrolled in every course that will help her become a more persuasive advocate. Rita is a woman on a mission.

Rita's teenage daughter was killed when the car she was riding in smashed into a stone wall. After drinking three cans of beer at a party, the girl's 18-year-old boyfriend lost control on a curve while driving 80 miles per hour. Rita's son walks with a permanent limp as a result of injuries sustained when a high school girl plowed through the parking lot of a 7-Eleven on a Friday night. When the county prosecutor obtained a DUI (driving under the influence) conviction, it only fueled Rita's resolve to get young drinking drivers off the road. She has become active with Mothers Against Drunk Driving and works to convince anyone who will listen that zero-tolerance laws, which make it illegal for drivers under the age of 21 to have *any* measurable amount of alcohol in their system, should be strictly enforced. Rita also wants to persuade others that young adults caught driving with more than 0.02 percent blood alcohol content should automatically lose their driver's licenses until they are 21.

This is a tough sell on most college campuses. While her classmates can appreciate the tragic reasons underlying her fervor, few subscribe to what they believe is a drastic solution. As a nontraditional, older student, Rita realizes that her younger classmates could easily dismiss her campaign as the ranting of a hysterical parent. She's determined to develop the most effective persuasive strategy possible and wonders if she would have the most success by presenting well-reasoned arguments for enforcing zero-tolerance laws. Then again, couldn't she sway students more by lining up highly credible people to endorse her proposal?

THE CENTRAL AND PERIPHERAL ROUTES TO PERSUASION

Ohio State psychologist Richard Petty thinks Rita is asking the right questions. He conducted his Ph.D. dissertation study using the topic of teenage driving to test the relative effectiveness of strong-message arguments and high source credibility. He found that the results varied depending on which of two mental routes to attitude change a *listener* happened to use. Petty labeled the two cognitive processes the *central route* and the *peripheral route.* He sees the distinction as helpful in reconciling much of the conflicting data of persuasion research. Along with his University of Chicago colleague John Cacioppo, he launched an intensive program of study to discover the best way for a persuader to activate each route.

Central route
Message elaboration; the path of cognitive processing that involves scrutiny of message content.

The central route involves message elaboration. Elaboration is "the extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant arguments contained in a persuasive communication."[1] In an attempt to process new information rationally, people using the central route carefully scrutinize the ideas, try to figure out if they have true merit, and mull over their implications. Similar to Berger's characterization of strategic message plans, elaboration requires high levels of cognitive effort (see Chapter 10).

Peripheral route
A mental shortcut process that accepts or rejects a message based on irrelevant cues as opposed to actively thinking about the issue.

The peripheral route offers a mental shortcut path to accepting or rejecting a message "without any active thinking about the attributes of the issue or the object of consideration."[2] Instead of doing extensive cognitive work, recipients rely on a variety of cues that allow them to make quick decisions. Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University lists six cues that trigger a "click, whirr" programmed response.[3] These cues allow us to fly the peripheral route on automatic pilot:

1. Reciprocation—"You owe me."
2. Consistency—"We've always done it that way."
3. Social proof—"Everybody's doing it."
4. Liking—"Love me, love my ideas."
5. Authority—"Just because I say so."
6. Scarcity—"Quick, before they're all gone."

Message elaboration
The extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant arguments contained in a persuasive communication.

Figure 16–1 shows a simplified version of Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model (ELM) as it applies to Rita's situation. Although their model with its twin-route metaphor seems to suggest two mutually exclusive paths to persuasion, the theorists stress that the central route and the peripheral route are poles on a cognitive processing continuum that shows the degree of mental effort a person exerts when evaluating a message.[4] The elaboration scale at the top represents effortful scrutiny of arguments on the left-hand side and mindless reliance on noncontent cues on the right. Most messages receive middle-ground attention between these poles, but there's always a trade-off. The more Rita's listeners work to discern the merits of strict zero tolerance enforcement, the less they'll be influenced by peripheral factors such as their friends' scoffing laughter at her suggestion. Conversely, the more her hearers are affected by content-irrelevant factors such as Rita's age, accent, or appearance, the less they will be affected by her ideas. We'll work down the model one level at a time in order to understand Petty and Cacioppo's predictions about the likelihood of Rita's message being scrutinized by students at her college.

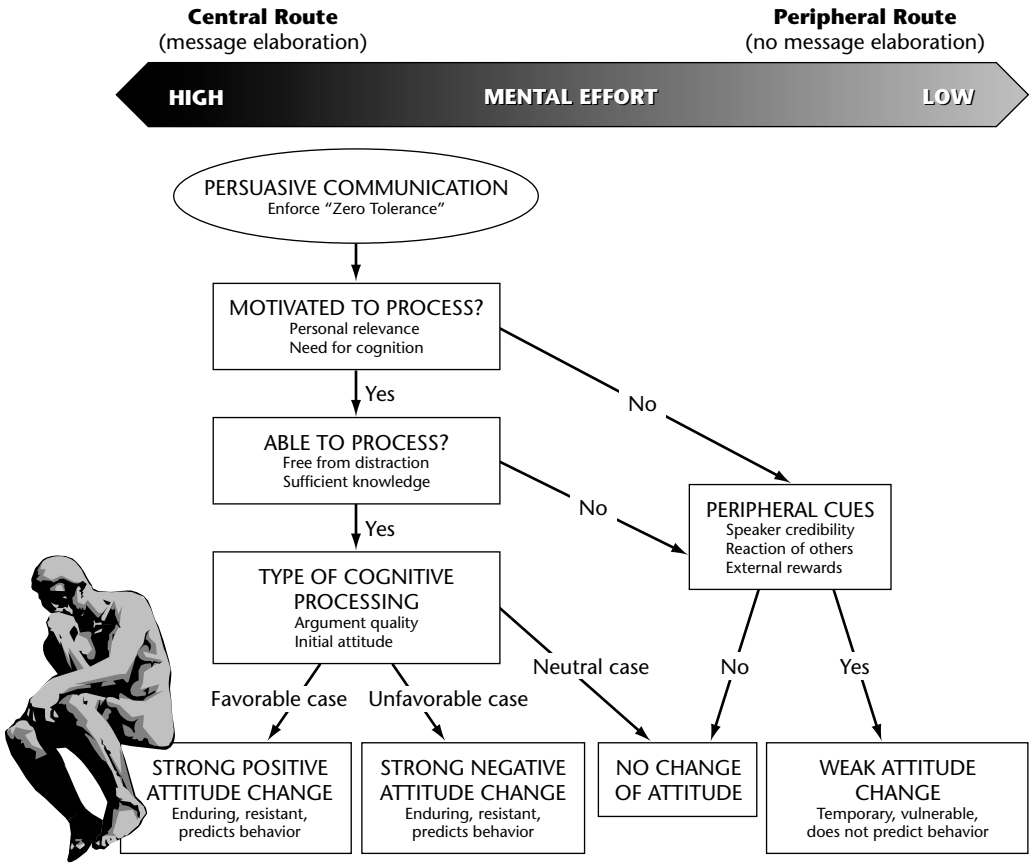

FIGURE 16–1 The Elaboration Likelihood Model

Adapted from Petty and Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Current Status and Controversies"

MOTIVATION FOR ELABORATION: IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

Petty and Cacioppo assume that people are motivated to hold correct attitudes. The authors admit that we aren't always logical, but they think we make a good effort not to kid ourselves in our search for truth. We want to maintain reasonable positions.

But a person can examine only a limited number of ideas. We are exposed to so many persuasive messages that we would experience a tremendous information overload if we tried to interact with every variant idea we heard or read about. The only way to solve this problem is by being "lazy" toward most issues in life. Petty and Cacioppo claim we have a large-mesh mental filter that allows items we regard as less important to flow through without being processed very carefully. But statements about things that are personally relevant get trapped and tested. In the terminology of social judgment theory (see Chapter 15), we're motivated to elaborate only ideas with which we are highly ego-involved.

There are few things in life more important to young Americans than the right to drive. A license is the closest thing our society has to an adolescent rite

of passage; for some it is a passport to freedom. It seems unlikely, therefore, that students would regard Rita's zero-tolerance proposal as trivial. Yet threatening the loss of license may have less personal relevance to students who don't drink, or to those who already make sure they don't drive when they drink. And if students over 21 aren't worried about who's driving on the road, they too may feel that Rita's proposal has little to do with them. So ELM's authors would regard teenage students who drive after drinking a few beers as especially motivated to grapple with arguments about automatic driver's license suspension.

Petty and Cacioppo maintain that as long as people have a personal stake in accepting or rejecting an idea, they will be much more influenced by what a message says than by the characteristics of the person who says it. But when a topic is no longer relevant, it gets sidetracked to the periphery of the mind, where credibility cues take on greater importance. Without the motivation of personal relevance, there probably will be little elaboration.

The theorists do recognize, however, that some people have a need for cognitive clarity, regardless of the issue. In fact, they've developed a *Need for Cognition Scale* to identify individuals who are most likely to carefully consider message arguments.[5] Four of the items state:

Need for cognition
Desire for cognitive clarity; an enjoyment of thinking through ideas even when they aren't personally relevant.

I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.

I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.

I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them.

Thinking is not my idea of fun.

If you substantially agree with the first two statements and take issue with the last two, Petty and Cacioppo would anticipate that you'd be a person who works through many of the ideas and arguments you hear.

ABILITY FOR ELABORATION: CAN THEY DO IT?

Once people have shown an inclination to think about the content of a message (motivation), the next issue is whether they are *able* to do so. Since Rita's immediate audience consists of young men and women who have duly impressed a college admissions officer with their ability to think, you would imagine that the question of ability would be moot. But issue-relevant thinking (elaboration) takes more than intelligence. It also requires concentration.

Distraction disrupts elaboration. Rita's classmates will be hard-pressed to think about her point of view if it's expressed amid the din of a student union snack bar where you can't hear yourself think. Or perhaps she presents her solution for highway safety when students are trying to concentrate on something else—an upcoming exam, a letter from home, or a mental replay of the winning shot in an intramural basketball game.

Rita may face the same challenge as television advertisers who have only the fleeting attention of viewers. Like them, Rita can use repetition to ensure that her main point comes across, but too much commotion will short-circuit a reasoned consideration of the message, no matter how much repetition is used. In that case, students will use the peripheral route and judge the message by cues that indicate whether Rita is a competent and trustworthy person.

TYPE OF ELABORATION: OBJECTIVE VERSUS BIASED THINKING

As you can see from the downward flow in the central path of their model (Figure 16–1), Petty and Cacioppo believe that motivation and ability strongly increase the likelihood that a message will be elaborated in the minds of listeners. Yet as social judgment theory suggests, they may not process the information in a fair and objective manner. Rita might have the undivided attention of students who care deeply about the right to drive, but discover that they've already built up an organized structure of knowledge concerning the issue.

When Rita claims that the alcohol-related fatal crash rate for young drivers is double that of drivers over 21, a student may counter with the fact that teenagers drive twice as many miles and are therefore just as safe as adults. Whether or not the statistics are true or the argument is valid isn't the issue. The point is that those who have already thought a lot about drinking and driving safety will probably have made up their minds and be biased in the way they process Rita's message.

Biased elaboration
Top-down thinking in which predetermined conclusions color the supporting data.

Petty and Cacioppo refer to biased elaboration as top-down thinking in which a predetermined conclusion colors the supporting data underneath. They contrast this with objective elaboration, or bottom-up thinking, which lets facts speak for themselves. Biased elaboration merely bolsters previous ideas.

Objective elaboration
Bottom-up thinking in which facts are scrutinized without bias; seeking truth wherever it might lead.

Perhaps you've seen a picture of Rodin's famous statue, *The Thinker,* a man sitting with his head propped in one hand. If the thinker already has a set of beliefs to contemplate, Petty and Cacioppo's research shows that additional thought will merely fix them in stone. Rita shouldn't assume that audience elaboration will always help her cause; it depends on whether it's biased elaboration or objective elaboration. It also depends on the quality of her arguments.

ELABORATED ARGUMENTS: STRONG, WEAK, AND NEUTRAL

If Rita manages to win an unbiased hearing from students at her school, Petty and Cacioppo say her cause will rise or fall on the perceived strength of her arguments. The two theorists have no absolute standard for what distinguishes a cogent argument from one that's specious. They simply define a strong message as one that generates favorable thoughts when it's heard and scrutinized.

Strong arguments
Claims that generate favorable thoughts when examined.

Petty and Cacioppo predict that thoughtful consideration of strong arguments will produce major shifts in attitude in the direction desired by the persuader. Suppose Rita states the following:

> National Safety Council statistics show that drivers in the 16–20 age group account for 15 percent of the miles driven in the United States, yet they are responsible for 25 percent of the highway deaths that involve alcohol.

This evidence could give students cause for pause. They may not be comfortable with the facts, but some of them might find the statistics quite compelling and a reason to reconsider their stance. According to ELM, the enhanced thinking of those who respond favorably will cause their change in position to *persist over time*, *resist counterpersuasion*, and *predict future behavior*—the "triple crown" of interpersonal influence.

However, persuasive attempts that are processed through the central route can have dramatically negative effects as well. If, despite her strong convictions, Rita isn't able to come up with a strong argument for changing

the current law, her persuasive attempt might actually backfire. For example, suppose she makes this argument:

> When underage drinkers are arrested for violating zero-tolerance rules of the road, automatic suspension of their licenses would allow the secretary of state's office to reduce its backlog of work. This would give government officials time to check driving records so that they could keep dangerous motorists off the road.

This weak argument is guaranteed to offend the sensibilities of anyone who thinks about it. Rather than compelling listeners to enlist in Rita's cause, it will only give them a reason to oppose her point of view more vigorously. The elaborated idea will cause a boomerang effect that will last over time, defy other efforts to change it, and affect subsequent behavior. These are the same significant effects that the elaborated strong argument produces, but in the opposite direction.

Rita's ideas could produce an ambivalent reaction. Listeners who carefully examine her ideas may end up feeling neither pro nor con toward her evidence. Their neutral or mixed response obviously means that they won't change their attitudes as a result of processing through the central route. For them, thinking about the pros and cons of the issue reinforces their original attitudes, whatever they may be.

PERIPHERAL CUES: AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE OF INFLUENCE

Although the majority of this chapter has dealt with the central cognitive route to attitude change, most messages are processed on the less-effortful peripheral path. Signposts along the way direct the hearer to favor or oppose the persuader's point of view without ever engaging in what Petty and Cacioppo call "issue-relevant thinking."[6] There is no inner dialogue about the merits of the proposal.

As explained earlier, the hearer who uses the peripheral route relies on a variety of cues as an aid in reaching a quick decision. The most obvious cues are tangible rewards linked to agreement with the advocate's position. Food, sex, and money are traditional inducements to change. I once overheard the conclusion of a transaction between a young man and a college senior who was trying to persuade him to donate blood in order to fulfill her class assignment. "Okay, it's agreed," she said. "You give blood for me today, and I'll have you over to my place for dinner tomorrow night." Although this type of social exchange has been going on for centuries, Petty and Cacioppo would still describe it as peripheral. Public compliance to the request for blood? Yes. Private acceptance of its importance? Not likely.

For many students of persuasion, source credibility is the most interesting cue on the peripheral route. Four decades of research confirm that people who are likable and have expertise on the issue in question can have a persuasive impact regardless of what arguments they present. Rita's appearance, manner of talking, and background credentials will speak so loudly that some students won't really hear what she says. Which students? According to Petty and Cacioppo, those students who are unmotivated or unable to scrutinize her message and therefore switch to the peripheral path.

Listeners who believe that Rita's twin tragedies have given her wisdom beyond their own will shift to a position more sympathetic to her point of view. The same holds true for those who see her as pleasant and warm. But there are students who will regard her grammatical mistakes as a sign of ignorance, or they'll be turned off by a maternal manner that reminds them of a lecture from mom. These peripheral route critics will become more skeptical of Rita's position.

"In the interest of streamlining the judicial process, we'll skip the evidence and go directly to sentencing."

© J.B. Handelsman/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

Note that attitude change on this outside track can be either positive or negative, but it lacks the robust persistence, invulnerability, or link to behavior that we see in change that comes from message elaboration.

Nicely illustrating the fragility of peripheral route change, Holly wrote the following entry in her application log:

> In his short story "Salvation," Langston Hughes recounts his childhood experience at a religious revival in his town. For days the old ladies of the church had been praying for the conversion of all the "little lambs" of the congregation. After working the congregation to a fever pitch, the preacher gave an altar call aimed at the children, and one after another they cried and went forward to be saved from hell. The author and his friend didn't feel anything, but after what seemed like forever, his friend went up so all the hubbub would finally stop. Langston knew that his friend hadn't really been converted, but since God didn't smite him for lying, he figured it would be safe for him to fake it as well, which he did. When the revival was over, the congregation calmed down and everyone went home praising the Lord. Langston says that was the day he stopped believing in God.

The preacher relied on peripheral cues. Langston went forward because of the expectation of authority figures, heightened emotion, and conformity pressure. But there was no elaboration of the message, no grappling with the issue, and certainly no encounter with God. The result of this peripheral route processing was as ELM predicts—his "salvation" didn't even last through the night.

PUSHING THE LIMITS OF PERIPHERAL POWER

Understanding the importance of role models for persuasion, Rita scans the pages of *Rolling Stone* to see if singer Dave Matthews might have said something about teenage drivers. The music of the Dave Matthews Band is widely acclaimed by students at her college, and Matthews recently put on a live concert near the school. By somehow associating her message with credible people, she can achieve change in many students' attitudes. But it probably won't last long, stand up to attack, or affect their behavior. Petty and Cacioppo say that a fragile change is all that can be expected through the peripheral route.

Yet what if Dave Matthews' tour bus were run off the road by a drunk teenage fan, and a band member met the same fate as Rita's daughter? Would that tragic death and Matthews' avowal that "friends don't let friends drive drunk" cue students to a permanent shift in attitude and behavior? Fortunately, the band is still intact, but a high-profile tragedy in the sports world suggests that the effect of even powerful peripheral cues is short-lived at best.

In 1991, basketball superstar Magic Johnson held a candid press conference to announce that he had tested positive for HIV. At the time, such a diagnosis seemed like a death sentence; the story dominated network news coverage for days. University of South Florida psychologists Louis Penner and Barbara Fritzsche had just completed a study showing that many people had little sympathy for AIDS victims who had contracted the disease through sexual transmission. When asked to volunteer a few hours to help a patient stay in school, a little more than half of the women and none of the men in the study volunteered. Penner and Fritzsche extended their study when they heard of Magic Johnson's illness.[7] They wondered if the tragedy that had befallen this popular star and his pledge to become an advocate for those with the disease would cause students to react more positively toward people with AIDS.

For a while it did. The week after Johnson's announcement, 80 percent of the men offered assistance. That number tapered off to 30 percent, however, within a few months. The proportion of women helping dipped below 40 percent in the same period. Penner and Fritzsche observed that people didn't grapple with the substance of Magic Johnson's message; rather, they paid attention to the man who was presenting it. Consistent with ELM's main thesis, the researchers concluded that "changes that occur because of 'peripheral cues' such as . . . being a well liked celebrity are less permanent than those that occur because of the substantive content of the persuasion attempt."[8]

Penner and Fritzsche could have added that the effects of star performer endorsements are subject to the sharp ups and downs of celebrity status. For example, the Dave Matthews Band has been so environmentally "green" that a Ben and Jerry's flavor of ice cream was named after one of the band's songs. Yet that image was besmirched when their tour bus dumped 80 gallons of human waste through a grated bridge over the Chicago River. Much of the foul-smelling

sewage doused tourists having dinner on the deck of a sightseeing boat passing under the bridge. So any comment by Matthews on safe and sane driving might be treated with derision rather than help Rita's cause.[9] Nike feared the same reaction when Tiger Woods publicly fell from grace.

Although most ELM research has measured the effects of peripheral cues by studying credibility, a speaker's competence or character could also be a stimulus to effortful message elaboration. For example, the high regard that millions of sports fans had for Magic Johnson might for the first time have made it possible to scrutinize proposals for the prevention and treatment of AIDS without a moral stigma biasing each idea. Or the fact that Johnson's magic wasn't strong enough to repel HIV might cause someone to think deeply, "If it happened to a guy like Magic, it could happen to me." Even though Figure 16–1 identifies *speaker credibility, reaction of others,* and *external rewards* as variables that promote mindless acceptance via the peripheral route, Petty and Cacioppo emphasize that it's impossible to compile a list of cues that are strictly peripheral.[10]

Speaker credibility
Audience perception of the message source's expertise, character, and dynamism; typically a peripheral cue.

To illustrate this point, consider the multiple roles that the *mood* of the person listening to Rita's message might play in her attempt to persuade. Rita assumes that her classmate Sam will be a more sympathetic audience if she can present her ideas when he's in a good mood. And she's right, as long as Sam processes her message through the peripheral route without thinking too hard about what she's saying. His positive outlook prompts him to see her proposal in a favorable light.

Yet if Sam is somewhat willing and able to work through her arguments (moderate elaboration), his upbeat mood could actually turn out to be a disadvantage. He was feeling up, but he becomes depressed when he thinks about the death and disfigurement Rita describes. The loss of warm feelings could bias him against Rita's arguments. Petty suggests that Sam might process her arguments more objectively if his original mood had matched the downbeat nature of Rita's experience.[11] Many variables like *perceived credibility* or the *mood of the listener* can act as peripheral cues. Yet if one of them motivates listeners to scrutinize the message or affects their evaluation of arguments, it no longer serves as a "no-brainer." There is no variable that's always a shortcut on the peripheral route.

CHOOSING A ROUTE: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR THE PERSUADER

Petty and Cacioppo's advice for Rita (and the rest of us) is clear. She needs to determine the likelihood that her listeners will give their undivided attention to evaluating her proposal. If it appears that they have the motivation and ability to elaborate the message, she had best come armed with facts and figures to support her case. A pleasant smile, an emotional appeal, or the loss of her daughter won't make any difference.

Since it's only by thoughtful consideration that her listeners can experience a lasting change in attitude, Rita probably hopes they can go the central route. But even if they do, it's still difficult to build a compelling persuasive case. If she fails to do her homework and presents weak arguments, the people who are ready to think will shift their attitude to a more antagonistic position.

If Rita determines that her hearers are unable or unwilling to think through the details of her plan, she'll be more successful choosing a delivery strategy that emphasizes the package rather than the contents. This could include a

heartrending account of her daughter's death, a smooth presentation, and an ongoing effort to build friendships with the students. Perhaps bringing homemade cookies to class or offering rides to the mall would aid in making her an attractive source. But as we've already seen, the effects will probably be temporary.

It's not likely that Rita will get many people to elaborate her message in a way that ends up favorable for her cause. Most persuaders avoid the central route because the audience won't go with them or they find it is too difficult to generate compelling arguments. But Rita really doesn't have a choice.

Driver's licenses (and perhaps beer) are so important to most of these students that they'll be ready to dissect every part of her plan. They won't be won over by a friendly smile. Rita will have to develop thoughtful and well-reasoned arguments if she is to change their minds. Given the depth of her conviction, she thinks it's worth a try.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: NILSEN'S SIGNIFICANT CHOICE

ELM describes persuasion that's effective. University of Washington professor emeritus Thomas Nilsen is concerned with what's ethical. Consistent with the democratic values of a free society, he proposes that persuasive speech is ethical to the extent that it maximizes people's ability to exercise free choice. Since many political, religious, and commercial messages are routinely designed to bypass rather than appeal to a listener's rational faculties, Nilsen upholds the value of significant choice in unequivocal terms:

> When we communicate to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of others, the ethical touchstone is the degree of free, informed, rational and critical choice—significant choice—that is fostered by our speaking.[12]

For Nilsen, truly free choice is the test of ethical influence because "only a self-determining being can be a moral being; without significant choice, there is no morality."[13] To support his claim, he cites two classic essays on the freedom of speech. John Milton's *Areopagitica*[14] argues against prior restraint of any ideas, no matter how heretical. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*[15] advocates a free marketplace of ideas because the only way to test an argument is to hear it presented by a true believer who defends it in earnest.

Philosophers and rhetoricians have compared persuasion to a lover making fervent appeals to his beloved—wooing an audience, for example. Nilsen's ethic of significant choice is nicely captured in the courtship analogy because true love cannot be coerced; it must be freely given. Inspired by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's description of the ethical religious persuader as lover,[16] I have elsewhere presented a typology of false (unethical) lovers:[17]

> *Smother lovers* won't take no for an answer; their persistence is obnoxious.
> *Legalistic lovers* have a set image of what the other should be.
> *Flirts* are in love with love; they value response, not the other person.
> *Seducers* try deception and flattery to entice the other to submit.
> *Rapists* use force of threats, guilt, or conformity pressure to have their way.

In differing degrees, all five types of unethical persuader violate the human dignity of the persons they pursue by taking away choice that is informed and free.

Nilsen obviously would approve of persuasive appeals that encourage message elaboration through ELM's central route. But his standard of significant choice is not always easy to apply. Do emotional appeals seductively short-circuit our ability to make rational choices, or does heightened emotion actually free us up to consider new options? Significant choice, like beauty and credibility, may be in the eye of the beholder.

CRITIQUE: ELABORATING THE MODEL

For the last 20 years, ELM has been a leading, if not *the* leading, theory of persuasion and attitude change. Petty, Cacioppo, and their students have published more than a hundred articles on different parts of the model, and their initial dual-process conception has stimulated additional research, application, and critique. In a recent status review, the theorists state that "the term 'elaboration' is used to suggest that people add something of their own to the specific information provided in the communication."[18] Consistent with their definition, Petty and Cacioppo have elaborated their original theory by making it increasingly more complex, less predictive, and less able to offer definitive advice to the influence practitioner. This is not the direction in which a scientific theory wants to go.

I have been unable to capture all of these elaborations in a short chapter, but Miami University communication researcher Paul Mongeau and communication consultant James Stiff believe that Petty and Cacioppo face an even greater problem. They charge that "descriptions of the ELM are sufficiently imprecise and ambiguous as to prevent an adequate test of the entire model."[19] One place this stands out is in ELM's silence as to what makes a strong or weak argument.

Petty and Cacioppo define a good message as "one containing arguments such that when subjects are instructed to think about the message, the thoughts they generate are fundamentally favorable."[20] In other words, the arguments are regarded as strong if the people are persuaded but weak if folks are turned off. Like my childhood friend described in Chapter 3, ELM seems to have its own "never-miss shot." Until such time as the ELM theorists can identify what makes a case weak or strong apart from its ultimate effect on the listener, it doesn't make much sense to include strength of argument as a key variable within the model.

Yet even if Petty and Cacioppo's theory is too vague or their view of argument strength is too slippery, their elaboration likelihood model is impressive because it pulls together and makes sense out of diverse research results that have puzzled communication theorists for years. For example, why do most people pay less attention to the communication than they do to the communicator? And if speaker credibility is so important, why does its effect dissipate so quickly? ELM's explanation is that few listeners are motivated and able to do the mental work required for a major shift in attitude. The two-path hypothesis also helps clarify why good evidence and reasoning can sometimes have a life-changing impact but usually make no difference at all.

Attitude-change research often yields results that seem confusing or contradictory. Petty and Cacioppo's ELM takes many disjointed findings and pulls them together into a unified whole. This integrative function makes it a valuable theory of influence.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Can you think of five different words or phrases that capture the idea of *message elaboration?*

2. What *peripheral cues* do you usually monitor when someone is trying to influence you?

3. Petty and Cacioppo want to persuade you that their elaboration likelihood model is a mirror of reality. Do you process their arguments for its accuracy closer to your *central route* or your *peripheral route?* Why not the other way?

4. Students of persuasion often wonder whether *high credibility* or *strong arguments* sway people more. How would ELM theorists respond to that question?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: "Richard E. Petty, John T. Cacioppo, Alan J. Strathman, and Joseph R. Priester, "To Think or Not to Think: Exploring Two Routes to Persuasion," in *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives,* 2nd ed., Timothy Brock and Melanie Green (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005, pp. 81–116.

Full statement: Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change,* Springer-Verlag, New York, 1986.

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Postulates and research: Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 19,* Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Academic Press, Orlando, FL, 1986, pp. 124–205.

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Effects of evidence: John Reinard, "The Empirical Study of the Persuasive Effects of Evidence: The Status After Fifty Years of Research," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 15, 1988, pp. 3–59.

Effects of credibility: Richard E. Petty, "Multiple Roles for Source Credibility Under High Elaboration: It's All in the Timing," *Social Cognition,* Vol. 25, 2007, pp. 536–552.

Mindless cues: Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice,* 4th ed., Allyn and Bacon, Needham Heights, MA, 2001.

Cues that affect elaboration: Duane Wegener and Richard E. Petty, "Understanding Effects of Mood Through the Elaboration Likelihood and Flexible Correction Models," in *Theories of Mood and Cognition: A User's Guidebook,* L. L. Martin and G. L. Clore (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2001, pp. 177–210.

Major developments in the history of persuasion theory: Richard E. Petty and Pablo Brinol, "Persuasion: From Single to Multiple to Metacognitive Processes," *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* Vol. 3, 2008, pp. 137–147.

Status and controversies: Richard E. Petty and Duane Wegener, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Current Status and Controversies," in Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope (eds.), *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology,* Guilford, New York, 1999, pp. 41–72.

Critiques of ELM: "Forum: Specifying the ELM," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 3, 1993. (Paul Mongeau and James Stiff, "Specifying Causal Relationships in the Elaboration Likelihood Model," pp. 65–72; Mike Allen and Rodney Reynolds, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model and the Sleeper Effect: An Assessment of Attitude Change over Time," pp. 73–82.)

CHAPTER 17

Socio-psychological tradition

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

of Leon Festinger

Aesop tells a story about a fox that tried in vain to reach a cluster of grapes dangling from a vine above his head. The fox leaped high to grasp the grapes, but the delicious-looking fruit remained just out of reach of his snapping jaws. After a few attempts the fox gave up and said to himself, "These grapes are sour, and if I had some I would not eat them."[1]

DISSONANCE: DISCORD BETWEEN BEHAVIOR AND BELIEF

Aesop's fable is the source of the phrase *sour grapes.* The story illustrates what former Stanford University social psychologist Leon Festinger called *cognitive dissonance.* It is the distressing mental state that people feel when they "find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold."[2]

Cognitive dissonance
Thedi stressing mental state caused by inconsistency between a person's two beliefs or a belief and an action.

The fox's retreat from the grape arbor clashed with his knowledge that the grapes were tasty. By changing his attitude toward the grapes, he provided an acceptable explanation for abandoning his efforts to reach them.

Festinger considered the need to avoid dissonance to be just as basic as the need for safety or the need to satisfy hunger. It is an *aversive drive* that goads us to be consistent. The tension of dissonance motivates us to change either our behavior or our belief in an effort to avoid that distressing feeling. The more important the issue and the greater the discrepancy between our behavior and our belief, the higher the magnitude of dissonance we will feel. In extreme cases cognitive dissonance is like our cringing response to fingernails being scraped on a blackboard—we'll do anything to get away from the awful sound.

HEALTH-CONSCIOUS SMOKERS: DEALING WITH DISSONANCE

When Festinger first published his theory in 1957, he chose the topic of smoking to illustrate the concept of dissonance. Although authoritative medical reports on the link between smoking and lung cancer were just beginning to surface,

there was already general concern across the United States that cigarette smoking might cause cancer. Ten years prior, country-and-western singer Tex Williams recorded Capitol Records' first million-seller, "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)." The gravelly voiced vocalist expressed doubt that smoking would affect his health, but the chorus was unambiguous:

> Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette
> Puff, puff, puff until you smoke yourself to death
> Tell St. Peter at the Golden Gate
> That you hate to make him wait
> But you just gotta have another cigarette.[3]

At the time, many smokers and nonsmokers alike laughingly referred to cigarettes as "coffin nails." But as the number and certainty of medical reports linking smoking with lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease increased, humorous references to cigarettes no longer seemed very funny. For the first time in their lives, a hundred million Americans had to grapple with two incompatible cognitions:

1. Smoking is dangerous to my health.
2. I smoke cigarettes.

Consider the plight of Cliff, a habitual smoker confronted by medical claims that smoking is hazardous to his health—an idea that strongly conflicts with his pack-a-day practice. Festinger said the contradiction is so clear and uncomfortable that something has to give—either the use of cigarettes or the belief that smoking them will hurt him. "Whether the behavior or the cognition changes will be determined by which has the weakest resistance to change."[4] For Cliff it's no contest. He lights up and dismisses the health risk. In his discussion of smoking, Festinger suggested a number of mental gymnastics that Cliff might use to avoid dissonance while he smokes.[5]

Perhaps the most typical way for the smoker to avoid mental anguish is to trivialize or simply deny the link between smoking and cancer. *I think the research is sketchy, the results are mixed, and the warnings are based on junk science.* After the surgeon general's report on smoking was issued in 1964, denial became an uphill cognitive path to climb, but many smokers continue to go that route.

Smokers may counter thoughts of scary health consequences by reminding themselves of other effects they see as positive. *Smoking helps me relax, I like the taste, and it gives me a look of sophistication.* These were the motives that cigarette advertising appealed to when Festinger first published his theory. For example, Old Gold was the primary radio sponsor for Chicago Cubs baseball: "We're tobacco men, not medicine men," their ads proclaimed. "For a treat instead of a treatment, try Old Gold. . . . There's not a cough in a carload."

Although it's hard for smokers to pretend they aren't lighting up, they can elude nagging thoughts of trauma by telling themselves that the dire warnings don't apply to them since they are *moderate* smokers, or because they'll soon quit. *My boyfriend is a chain smoker, but I smoke less than a pack a day. As soon as I finish school, I'll have no problem stopping.* Conversely, other smokers manage dissonance by disclaiming any ongoing responsibility for a habit they can't kick. *Let's face it, cigarettes are addictive. I'm hooked.* To be sure, most behaviors are not as difficult to change as the habit of smoking, but Festinger noted that almost all of our actions are more entrenched than the thoughts we have about them. Thus the

focus of his theory is on the belief and attitude changes that take place because of cognitive dissonance.

REDUCING DISSONANCE BETWEEN ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Festinger hypothesized three mental mechanisms that people use to ensure that their actions and attitudes are in harmony. Dissonance researchers refer to them as *selective exposure, postdecision dissonance,* and *minimal justification.* I'll continue to illustrate these cognitive processes by referring to the practice of smoking, but they are equally applicable to other forms of substance abuse or addiction—alcohol, drugs, food, sex, pornography, gambling, money, shopping, workaholism. Most of us can spot at least one topic on that list where we struggle with an inconsistency between our thoughts and our actions. So if smoking isn't an issue for you, apply these ways of reducing dissonance in an area that is.

Hypothesis 1: Selective Exposure Prevents Dissonance

Festinger claimed that people avoid information that's likely to increase dissonance.[6] Not only do we tend to listen to opinions and select reading materials that are consistent with our existing beliefs, we usually choose to be with people who are like us. By taking care to "stick with our own kind," we can maintain the relative comfort of the status quo. Like-minded people buffer us from ideas that could cause discomfort. In that sense, the process of making friends is a way to select our own propaganda.

Selective exposure
The tendency people have to avoid information that would create cognitive dissonance because it's incompatible with their current beliefs.

The *selective exposure* hypothesis explains why most political conservatives only watch TV broadcasts of the Republican convention and liberals stick to coverage of the Democratic conclave. That's why media-effects scholars who hold that the mass media have a minimal effect on their audience were quick to embrace Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance.[7] So we should expect smokers to turn a blind eye to information about the dangers of cigarettes. But once the surgeon general's health warning was stamped on every pack of cigarettes, it was difficult for smokers to avoid dissonant information. Would that enforced exposure induce smokers to quit—or at least admit they were slowly killing themselves? Apparently not. Festinger reported an early Minnesota study that showed the more people smoked, the less they were convinced that smoking caused cancer.[8] That finding held true even after the government mandated that every cigarette ad prominently display the surgeon general's warning.

Four decades later, two communication researchers looked back over 18 experiments where people were put in dissonant situations and then had to choose what kind of information they would listen to or read. Dave D'Alessio (University of Connecticut-Stamford) and Mike Allen (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) discovered that the results consistently supported the selective exposure hypothesis.[9] People tended to select information that lined up with what they already believed and ignored facts or ideas that ran counter to those beliefs. But the strength of this tendency was relatively small. Selective exposure explained only about 5 percent of why they chose the information they did. That leaves 95 percent unexplained.

That modest finding hasn't deterred the sponsors of two media persuasion campaigns from taking the power of selective exposure quite seriously. A University of California, San Francisco, survey taken in 2006 documented that

75 percent of Hollywood films show attractive actors smoking, and that this modeling encourages young teens raised in smoke-free homes to adopt the practice. With some success, Harvard School of Public Health researchers are now proactively challenging directors not to introduce smoking into their films. For example, none of the fashion models nor any other characters in *The Devil Wears Prada* smoked. Audiences didn't seem to notice or mind.[10]

The "Don't Pass Gas" broadcast campaign of the American Legacy Foundation uses barnyard humor to convince the public of the intrusiveness of putrid gas. Presented in the style of a Dr. Seuss rhyme, one ad goes:

> I will not pass gas on a train. I will not pass gas on a plane.
> I will not pass gas in my house. I will not pass gas near my spouse.
> I will not pass gas in a bar. I will not pass gas in a car.
> I will not pass gas where little ones are, no matter how near or how far.
> I will not pass gas in your face, because the gas I pass is worse than mace.[11]

Only after listeners are either laughing or totally grossed out by the image of passing gas are they told that the limerick refers to secondhand smoke. It's a message most people would tune out had it not been for the use of humor with a twist.

German psychologist Dieter Frey surveyed all the pertinent research on selective exposure and concluded that even when we know we're going to hear discrepant ideas, the avoidance mechanism doesn't kick in if we don't regard the dissonant information as a threat.[12] Warm personal relationships are probably the best guarantee that we'll consider ideas that would otherwise seem threatening.

Hypothesis 2: Postdecision Dissonance Creates a Need for Reassurance

Postdecision dissonance Strong doubts experienced after making an important, close-call decision that is difficult to reverse.

According to Festinger, close-call decisions can generate huge amounts of internal tension after the decision has been made. Three conditions heighten *postdecision dissonance:* (1) the more important the issue, (2) the longer an individual delays in choosing between two equally attractive options, and (3) the greater the difficulty involved in reversing the decision once it's been made. To the extent that these conditions are present, the person will agonize over whether he or she made the right choice.[13] Sometimes referred to as "morning-after-the-night-before" regrets, the misgivings or second thoughts that plague us after a tough choice motivate us to seek reassuring information and social support for our decision.

A classic example of postdecision dissonance is the mental turmoil a person experiences after signing a contract to buy a new car. The cost is high, there are many competing models from which to choose, and the down payment commits the customer to go through with the purchase. It's not unusual to find a customer in the library, poring over the pages of the *Consumer Reports* auto issue *after* placing an order. The buyer is seeking information that confirms the decision already made and quiets nagging doubts.

The toughest decision a smoker makes is whether or not to stop smoking—cold turkey. It's an agonizing decision, and one often delayed. Many who recover from multiple addictions testify that quitting smoking is harder than giving up booze. Just as many alcoholics turn to Alcoholics Anonymous for social support, people who try to give up tobacco often need at least one friend, family member, romantic partner, or co-worker who's also going through the pangs of withdrawal. They can remind each other that it's worth the effort.

The decision to stop smoking doesn't fulfill Festinger's third condition of a once-and-for-all, no-going-back, final choice. One can always go back to smoking. In fact, those who swear off cigarettes typically have a few lapses, and total relapses are common. Encouragement and social support are necessary to tamp down the doubts and fears that follow this tough decision.

Smokers who consciously decide *not* to quit face similar qualms and anxieties. They are bombarded with messages telling them they are putting their health at risk. People who care for them deeply are urging them to stop, and they may be surrounded by nonsmokers who look down on them because they don't. University of Kentucky communication professor Alan DeSantis describes the camaraderie he found among regular customers at a Kentucky cigar shop. Just as smoke from cigars drives some folks away, DeSantis concludes that the friendship and collective rationalization of those who smoke cigars together hold post-decision dissonance at bay. He also sees *Cigar Aficionado* as serving the same function. He writes that although the magazine professes to simply celebrate the good life, it actually serves "to relieve the cognitive dissonance associated with the consumption of a potentially dangerous product by adding cognitions, trivializing dissonant information, selectively exposing readers to pro-smoking information, and creating a social support network of fellow cigar smokers."[14]

Hypothesis 3: Minimal Justification for Action Induces a Shift in Attitude

Suppose someone wanted to persuade an ex-smoker who is dying of lung cancer to stop publicly bashing the tobacco industry and to respect cigarette companies' right to market their product. That is one of the assignments given to Nick Naylor, the chief spokesman for tobacco companies in the movie *Thank You for Smoking*. His job is to convince "Big Tobacco's" former advertising icon—the Marlboro Man—to switch from outspoken critic to silent partner. Before cognitive dissonance theory, conventional wisdom would have suggested that Naylor work first to change the bitter man's *attitude* toward the industry. If he could convince the cowboy that the cigarette companies are well-intentioned, then the man would change his communication *behavior.* It seemed natural to think of attitude and behavior as the beginning and end of a cause-and-effect sequence.

Attitude → Behavior

But Festinger's *minimal justification hypothesis* reversed the sequence. That hypothesis suggests that the best way for Naylor to change the Marlboro Man's attitude toward his former employers is to get him to quit speaking out against them.

Minimal justification hypothesis
A claim that the best way to stimulate an attitude change in others is to offer just enough incentive to elicit counterattitudinal behavior.

Behavior → Attitude

Festinger attached one important condition, however. Instead of giving the cowboy massive incentives to abandon his public critique ($100,000 in cash, lifetime health care for his wife, or a threat to harm his kids), Naylor should offer the minimum enticement necessary to induce him to quietly step off his soap box. Festinger concluded:

> Thus if one wanted to obtain private change in addition to mere public compliance, the best way to do this would be to offer just enough reward or punishment to elicit overt compliance.[15]

Naylor does it the old-fashioned way by throwing lots of money at him. He goes to the Marlboro Man's rundown ranch with a briefcase filled with bundles of hundred-dollar bills, which he pours out on the floor. He labels the money a gift rather than a bribe, but makes it clear that the cowboy can't keep the money if he continues to denounce the tobacco companies. As it turns out, the offer is more than enough because the dying man is worried about how his family will manage after he's gone. So the Marlboro Man takes both the money and a vow of silence, but remains antagonistic toward his former employers. *Compliance* without inner conviction. Of course for Naylor, that is enough.

Compliance
Public conformity to another's expectation without necessarily having a private conviction that matches the behavior.

There is, however, a brief moment in their discussion that suggests the potential of a minimal justification strategy. When the Marlboro Man looks longingly at the cash, he wonders out loud if he might keep half the money and still denounce the tobacco companies. His question reveals that somewhere between 50 percent and 100 percent of the cash on the floor there's a tipping point where the cowboy becomes willing to be bought off. Festinger predicted that if Naylor were to offer that "just-enough" amount, not only would the Marlboro Man alter his communication behavior, but the dissonance he would feel would cause him to be less angry at the cigarette companies. Festinger's startling $1/$20 experiment shows how this might work.

A CLASSIC EXPERIMENT: "WOULD I LIE FOR A DOLLAR?"

There is nothing particularly radical about Festinger's first two hypotheses. His selective exposure prediction nicely explains why political rallies attract the party faithful and why the audience for religious radio and television tends to be made up of committed believers. As for postdecision dissonance, all of us have tried to convince ourselves that we've made the right choice after facing a close-call decision. But Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis is counterintuitive. Will a small incentive to act really induce a corresponding attitude change when heaping on the benefits won't? Festinger's famous $1/$20 experiment supported his claim that it will.

Festinger and James Carlsmith recruited Stanford University men to participate in a psychological study supposedly investigating industrial relations.[16] As each man arrived at the lab, he was assigned the boring and repetitive task of sorting a large batch of spools into sets of 12 and turning square pegs a quarter turn to the right. The procedure was designed to be both monotonous and tiring. At the end of an hour the experimenter approached the subject and made a request. He claimed that a student assistant had failed to show up and that he needed someone to fill in by telling a potential female subject in the waiting room how much fun the experiment was. Dissonance researchers call this *counterattitudinal advocacy.* We'd call it lying.

Counterattitudinal advocacy
Publicly urging others to believe or do something that is opposed to what the advocate actually believes.

Some of the men were promised $20 to express enthusiasm about the task; others were offered only $1. It is comforting to know that six of the men refused to take part in the deception, but most students tried to recruit the young woman. The gist of the typical conversation was similar for both payment conditions:

She: "I heard it was boring."

He: "Oh no, it's really quite fun."

What differed were privately expressed attitudes after the study was over. Students who lied for $20 later confessed that they thought the task of sorting spools was dull. Those who lied for $1 maintained that it was quite enjoyable. (Festinger and Carlsmith practiced their own form of deception in the study—subjects never received the promised money.)

By now you should have a pretty good idea how Festinger analyzed the results. He noted that $20 was a huge sum of money (worth more than $100 in today's economy). If a student felt qualms about telling a "white lie," the cash was a ready justification. Thus, the student felt little or no tension between his action and his attitude. But the men who lied for a dollar had lots of cognitive work to do. The logical inconsistency of saying a boring task was interesting had to be explained away through an internal dialogue:

> I'm a Stanford man. Am I the kind of guy who would lie for a dollar? No way. Actually, what I told the girl was true. The experiment was a lot of fun.

Festinger said that $1 was just barely enough to induce compliance to the experimenter's request, and so the students had to create another justification. They changed their attitude toward the task to bring it into line with their behavior.

THREE STATE-OF-THE-ART REVISIONS: THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF DISSONANCE

The $1/$20 study has been replicated and modified many times in an effort to figure out why minimal incentives for inconsistent behavior cause a change in attitude when large rewards don't. Dissonance researchers also seek to close off loopholes that would admit other explanations for the attitude change that follows induced compliance. Based on hundreds of experimental studies, most persuasion researchers today subscribe to one of three revisions of Festinger's original theory. In order to understand each of the options described in the following sections, it will help if you picture the overall dissonance arousal and reduction process as Festinger imagined it. Figure 17–1 shows that four-step sequence.

1. Self-Consistency: The Rationalizing Animal

University of California social psychologist Elliot Aronson was attracted to cognitive dissonance theory because of Festinger's startling minimal justification prediction, but he quickly determined that the theory in its original form had some "conceptual fuzziness." Specifically, it failed to state the conditions under which a person would definitely experience dissonance, the A→B link in Figure 17–1. For example, when early disciples of Festinger were uncertain what the theory predicted, their advice to each other was, "If you want to be sure, ask Leon."

Aronson concluded that the issue isn't *logical* inconsistency—as Festinger maintained—but *psychological* inconsistency. We aren't rational animals; we are

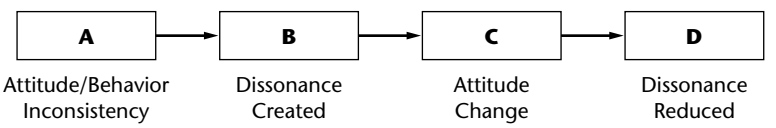


FIGURE 17–1 Festinger's Process Model of Cognitive Dissonance
Based on Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

rationalizing animals who want to appear reasonable to ourselves. Aronson interprets the $1/$20 experiment as a study of self-esteem maintenance. "If dissonance exists, it is because the individual's behavior is inconsistent with his self-concept."[17] The Stanford men were in a bind because they regarded themselves as decent, truthful human beings. In fact, the higher their self-esteem, the more dissonance they would feel when they told the waiting woman that the study was fun. Conversely, if they had seen themselves as liars, cheats, or jerks, they would have felt no tension. As Aronson puts it, "If a person conceives of himself as a 'schnook,' he will be expected to behave like a 'schnook.'"[18]

Following the lead of Festinger's $1/$20 experiment, most research on his minimum justification hypothesis involves public counterattitudinal advocacy. University of Oregon marketing professor Lynn Kahle measured college students' self-esteem and then asked them to write a brief essay advocating cigarette smoking, which they thought would be read to junior high students. Similar to Festinger, he offered participants either $2 or $10 for writing the essays. If Aronson's version of dissonance theory is right, college students who received the minimal justification of $2 for fabricating a pro-smoking essay and who also possessed high self-esteem to protect should have experienced the most dissonance at point B in Figure 17–1. And when their attitude change toward smoking was measured at point C, they should have been more favorable toward the idea of kids smoking. That's what Kahle found. He concludes that "the interaction between Esteem and Pay follows directly from Aronson's refinement of dissonance theory that dissonance results from a discrepancy between cognitions about self and cognitions about behavior."[19]

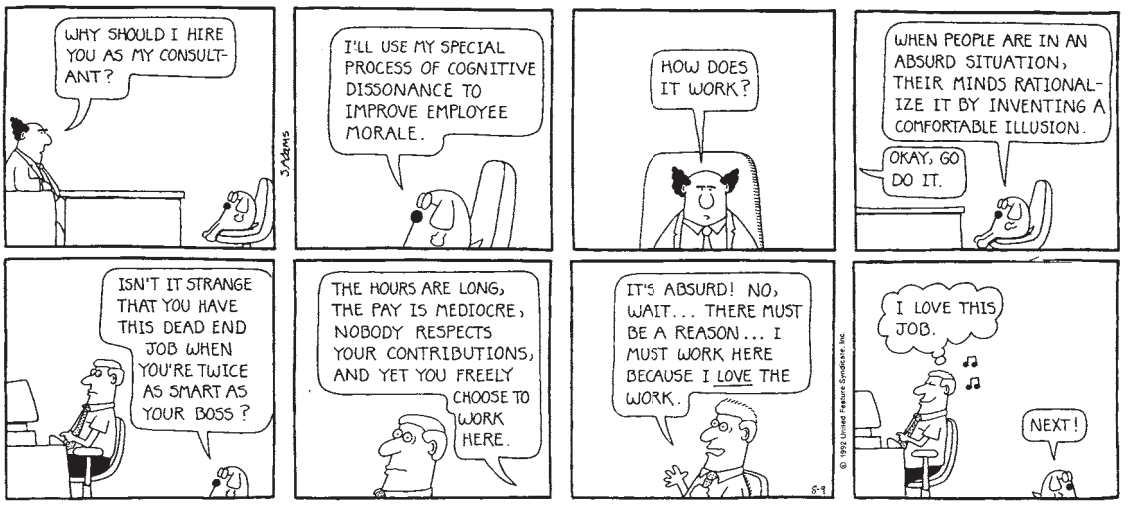
According to Aronson, the amount of dissonance a person can experience is directly proportional to the effort he or she has invested in the behavior. This idea prompted Esther to offer two examples in her class application log:

> When I think of cognitive dissonance, I immediately think of my college friends who joined a fraternity or sorority. Those who experienced little hazing don't think house membership is a big deal. But those who had to go through weeks of hazing, embarrassment, and performing illegal or immoral tasks are quite loyal to their chapter. They see Greek brotherhood or sisterhood as the coolest thing ever. In order to self-justify the things they voluntarily endured, they heightened their love for their fraternity or sorority.
>
> I fear that the Marines operate in the same way. Every Marine I know seems obsessed with the Corps and likely has a tattoo to prove it. I wish I thought this was purely due to their love of what the Marines stand for, but I think much of it has to do with the terrible things they went through to make the grade. In order to feel better about their decision to put themselves through pain, they decide being a Marine is the greatest thing in the world.

Even the reactions of Aesop's fox make sense in light of the animal's low investment of energy. Aronson points out that the fox wouldn't think the grapes were sour if he had spent the whole afternoon jumping to get them. Attitudes follow behavior when the investment of effort is high.

2. Personal Responsibility for Bad Outcomes (the New Look)

Princeton psychologist Joel Cooper agrees with Aronson that logical inconsistency at point A in Figure 17–1 doesn't automatically create dissonance at point B.



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Yet he's not convinced that Aronson's concern for self-consistency captures the real cause of the acute mental discomfort. In his "new-look" model of cognitive dissonance, Cooper argues that it's the knowledge that one's actions have unnecessarily hurt another person that generates dissonance. For example, in the minimal justification condition of the $1/$20 experiment, the Stanford men willingly "duped a fellow student to look forward to an exciting experience" while knowing "full well that the waiting participant was in for an immense letdown."[20]

Cooper concludes that dissonance is "a state of arousal caused by behaving in such a way as to feel personally responsible for bringing about an aversive event."[21] Note that the acceptance of personal *responsibility* requires that the person know ahead of time that his or her action will have negative consequences for someone else and yet still choose to do the dirty deed. The reactions of participants in minimal justification experiments show that they often feel bad about the potential effects of their messages.

Purdue University social psychologists Richard Heslin and Michael Amo also used a pro-smoking message prepared for junior high kids, but in this case the setup was more involving and potentially more harmful. Students in college public speaking classes were induced to deliver impromptu speeches to tell uninformed and uncommitted seventh grade kids that smoking pot wouldn't hurt them. The speakers saw their videotaped speeches and were reminded that they'd be identified as actually having pro-marijuana sentiments. The speakers were quite aware that their message might harm kids. One speaker blurted out, "What would my church say if they knew I was doing this?" Another pleaded, "Please don't use my speech. I don't want the course credit; just don't use my speech!"[22] Yet they changed their attitude in the direction of their advocacy. As Heslin and Amo note, their fears and attitude shift also give credence to Aronson's self-consistency interpretation of dissonance.

3. Self-Affirmation to Dissipate Dissonance

While the revisions offered by Aronson (self-consistency) and Cooper (new look) address dissonance *creation* at the front end of Festinger's model, Stanford psychologist Claude Steele's self-affirmation approach speaks to the question of dissonance *reduction* at the back end of the model—point D of Figure 17–1. Steele doesn't assume that dissonance always drives people to justify their actions by changing their attitudes. He thinks that some fortunate people can call up a host of positive thoughts about themselves that will blot out a concern for restoring consistency. If he's right, high self-esteem is a resource for dissonance reduction.

According to Steele, most people are greatly motivated to maintain an overall self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy. For a participant in the $1/$20 experiment, there's no question that lying to a fellow student makes it harder to preserve that favorable self-concept. But if the guy ignores the ethical slip and focuses instead on his good grades, athletic ability, social skills, and helpfulness to friends who are hurting, the dissonance will be only a blip on the radar screen of his mind and will quickly fade away. Thus, Steele believes that denial, forgetfulness, and trivialization of the incident are alternatives to attitude change, but only for the person who already has high self-esteem.

At the start of his presidential campaign, Senator Barack Obama announced on *The Late Show with David Letterman* that he'd quit smoking. If he later relapses—as he has—the potential for cognitive dissonance is great. But according to Steele's self-affirmation approach, Obama might remind himself of his esteem-raising qualities, which include "gifted orator, award winning author, and proven intellect who was the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*,"[23] not to mention president of the United States and winner of the Nobel peace prize. In light of his charismatic personality and these accomplishments, Obama might regard relapse as a mere blip rather than a major contradiction.

Aronson, Cooper, and Steele offer their respective revisions as more accurate accounts of what goes on in people's heads than Festinger's original theory provided. But we don't have to pick one and trash the others. Self-consistency, personal responsibility for bad outcomes, and self-affirmation aren't mutually exclusive explanations. As Cooper suggests, "They each describe a distinct and important piece of the overall dissonance process and, in doing so, make a unique contribution to our understanding of how cognitions about the self mediate cognitive dissonance and arousal and reduction."[24]

THEORY INTO PRACTICE: PERSUASION THROUGH DISSONANCE

I've placed this chapter in the section on interpersonal influence because Festinger and his followers focus on attitude change as an end product of dissonance. Suppose you know someone named Sam who holds an opinion that you're convinced is harmful or wrong. What practical advice does the theory offer that might help you alter Sam's conviction?

For openers, don't promise lavish benefits if Sam abandons that attitude or warn of dire consequences if he doesn't. A massive reward–punishment strategy may gain behavioral compliance, but the hard sell seldom wins the heart or mind of the person being bribed or pressured. Instead, work to develop a

friendly relationship with Sam. That way your own position will tend to bypass the *selective exposure* screen that Sam and the rest of us put up to avoid threatening ideas. And if Sam eventually adopts your viewpoint, an ongoing bond means you'll be around to offer reassurance when *postdecision dissonance* kicks in.

To be an effective agent of change, you should offer just enough encouragement *(minimal justification)* for Sam to try out novel behavior that departs from his usual way of thinking. Avoid making an offer that Sam can't refuse. As long as *counterattitudinal actions* are freely chosen and publicly taken, people are more likely to adopt beliefs that support what they've done. The greater the effort involved in acting this way, the greater the chance that their attitudes will change to match their actions.

Finally, as you seek to *induce compliance,* try to get Sam to count the cost of doing what you want and to grasp the potential downside of that behavior for others *(personal responsibility for negative outcomes).* That kind of understanding will increase the probability that Sam's attitude will shift to be consistent with his actions. And if things turn sour, your relationship won't.

CRITIQUE: DISSONANCE OVER DISSONANCE

When Festinger died in 1989, his obituary in *American Psychologist* testified to the impact of his work:

> Like Dostoyevski and like Picasso, Festinger set in motion a *style* of research and theory in the social sciences that is now the common property of all creative workers in the field. . . . Leon is to social psychology what Freud is to clinical psychology and Piaget to developmental psychology.[25]

As the *Dilbert* cartoon in this chapter suggests, cognitive dissonance is one of the few theories in this book that has achieved name recognition within popular culture. Yet despite this wide influence, Festinger's original theory and its contemporary revisions contain a serious flaw. Like my boyhood friend's never-miss shot in his driveway basketball court (see Chapter 3), it's hard to think of a way that the theory can be proved wrong.

Look again at the four stages of the dissonance process diagram in Figure 17–1. Almost all the creative efforts of dissonance researchers have been aimed at inducing counterattitudinal advocacy at point A—getting people to say something in public that is inconsistent with what they believe in private. When researchers find an attitude shift at point C, they automatically *assume* that dissonance was built up at point B and is gone by point D. But they don't test to see whether dissonance is actually there.

Festinger never specified a reliable way to detect the degree of dissonance a person experiences, if any. Psychologist Patricia Devine and her University of Wisconsin–Madison colleagues refer to such an instrument as a *dissonance thermometer.* They applaud researchers' occasional attempts to gauge the *arousal* component of dissonance through physiological measures such as galvanic skin response. (When our drive state increases, we have sweaty palms.) But they are even more encouraged at the possibility of assessing the *psychological discomfort* component of dissonance by means of a self-report measure of affect. Until some kind of dissonance thermometer is a standard part of dissonance research, we will never know if the distressing mental state is for real.

Dissonance thermometer A hypothetical, reliable gauge of the dissonance a person feels as a result of inconsistency.

Cornell University psychologist Daryl Bem doesn't think it is. He agrees that attitudes change when people act counter to their beliefs with minimal justification, but he claims that *self-perception* is a much simpler explanation than cognitive dissonance. He believes we judge our internal dispositions the same way others do—by observing our behavior.

Bem ran his own $1/$20 study to test his alternative explanation.[26] People heard a recording of a Stanford man's enthusiastic account of the spool-sorting, peg-turning task. Some listeners were told he received $1 for recruiting the female subject. Since he had little obvious reason to lie, they assumed that he really liked the task. Other listeners were told that the man received $20 to recruit the woman. These folks assumed that the man was bored with the task and was lying to get the money. Bem's subjects didn't speculate about what was going on inside the Stanford man's head. They simply judged his attitude by looking at what he did under the circumstances. If people don't need an understanding of cognitive dissonance to forecast how the men would react, Bem asks, why should social scientists? Bem is convinced that cognitive dissonance theory is like the mousetrap pictured on page 27—much too convoluted. He opts for simplicity.

Self-perception theory The claim that we determine our attitudes the same way outside observers do—by observing our behavior; an alternative to cognitive dissonance theory.

Advocates of cognitive dissonance in the field of communication counter that nothing about mental processes is simple. When we deal with what goes on behind the eyes, we should expect and appreciate complexity. Festinger's theory has energized scientifically oriented communication scholars for more than 50 years. I feel no dissonance by including cognitive dissonance theory in this text.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Cognitive dissonance is a *distressing mental state.* When did you last experience this *aversive drive?* Why might you have trouble answering that question?

2. The results of Festinger's famous *$1/$20 experiment* can be explained in a number of different ways. Which explanation do you find most satisfying?

3. Suppose you want your friends to change their sexist attitudes. What advice does the *minimal justification hypothesis* offer?

4. I see cognitive dissonance theory as a "never-miss shot." What would it take to make the theory *testable?*

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Joel Cooper, Robert Mirabile, and Steven Scher, "Actions and Attitudes: The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance," in *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives,* 2nd ed., Timothy Brock and Melanie Green (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005, pp. 63–79.

Original statement: Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,* Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1957.

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Engaging account of theory's development: Elliot Aronson, "The Evolution of Cognitive Dissonance Theory: A Personal Appraisal," in *The Science of Social Influence: Advances and Future Progress,* Anthon Prankanis (ed.), Psychology Press, New York, 2007, pp. 115–135.

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Self-consistency revision: Ruth Thibodeau and Elliot Aronson, "Taking a Closer Look: Reasserting the Role of the Self-Concept in Dissonance Theory," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* Vol. 18, 1992, pp. 591–602.

New-look revision: Joel Cooper and Russell Fazio, "A New Look at Dissonance Theory," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 17,* Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Academic Press, Orlando, FL, 1984, pp. 229–262.

Self-affirmation revision: Claude Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 21,* Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, 1988, pp. 261–302.

Role of weapons of mass destruction and dissonance in the invasion of Iraq: Jeff Stone and Nicholas Fernandez, "How Behavior Shapes Attitudes: Cognitive Dissonance Processes," in *Attitudes and Attitude Change,* William Crano and Radmila Prislin (eds.), Psychology Press, New York, 2008, pp. 313–334.

Critique: Daryl Bem, "Self-Perception: An Alternative Interpretation of Cognitive Dissonance Phenomena," *Psychological Review,* Vol. 74, 1967, pp. 183–200.

Critique: Daniel O'Keefe, "Cognitive Dissonance Theory," in *Persuasion: Theory and Research,* 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, pp. 77–100.

Experiencing cognitive dissonance may require a strong need for esteem.
To access a chapter on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs that
appeared in a previous edition, click on Theory List at
www.afirstlook.com.

DIVISION THREE

Group and Public Communication

GROUP COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER 18. Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making (Hirokawa & Gouran)
CHAPTER 19. Symbolic Convergence Theory (Bormann)

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER 20. Cultural Approach to Organizations (Geertz & Pacanowsky)
CHAPTER 21. Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations (Deetz)

PUBLIC RHETORIC

CHAPTER 22. The Rhetoric (Aristotle)
CHAPTER 23. Dramatism (Burke)
CHAPTER 24. Narrative Paradigm (Fisher)

Group Communication

On the morning of January 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* blasted off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. For the first time, the flight carried a civilian schoolteacher, Christa McAuliffe, as part of the crew. Seventy-three seconds after liftoff, millions of school children watched on television as the rocket disintegrated in a fiery explosion, and the capsule with its crew of seven plunged into the Atlantic Ocean. For many Americans, the *Challenger* disaster marked the end of a love affair with space. As they learned in the months that followed, the tragedy could have been—and should have been—avoided.

An independent presidential commission identified the primary cause of the accident as failure in an O-ring that was supposed to seal a joint, thus allowing volatile rocket fuel to spew out during the "burn." But the commission also concluded that a highly flawed decision process was an important contributing cause of the disaster. Communication, as well as combustion, was responsible for the tragedy. The day before the launch, rocket engineers had talked about the flight being risky. They worried that the O-ring seals had never been tested below 53 degrees Fahrenheit. As one of them later testified, with launch-time temperature in the 20s, getting the O-rings to seal gaps would be like "trying to shove a brick into a crack versus a sponge."[1] Yet during the final "go/no-go" conference, all agreed that the rocket was ready to fly.

Yale social psychologist Irving Janis was convinced that this grievous error wasn't an isolated incident. He had spotted the same group dynamic in other tragic government and corporate decisions. Janis didn't regard chief executives or their advisors as stupid, lazy, or evil. Rather he saw them as victims of "groupthink." He defined *groupthink* as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action."[2] This concurrence-seeking tendency emerges only when the group is characterized by "a warm clubby atmosphere" in which members desire to maintain relationships within the group at all costs. As a result, they automatically apply the "preserve group harmony" test to every decision they face.[3] Janis maintained that the superglue of solidarity that bonds people together can also cause their mental processes to get stuck.

Janis' concept of groupthink highlights the accepted wisdom in the field that there are two functions that communication needs to address in any group—a *task function* and a *relationship function.* Task-focused communication moves the group along toward its goal; relational communication holds the group together. Some people concentrate on getting the job done, while others are much more concerned about relationships within the group. Task-oriented individuals are the pistons that drive the group machine. Relationship-oriented members are the lubricant that prevents excessive friction from destroying the group. Good groups require both kinds of people.

Harvard social psychologist Robert Bales was an early theorist who formally made the connection between specific types of communication and accomplishing these two functions.[4] Bales said group locomotion won't happen unless

members both *ask for* and *offer* information, opinions, and suggestions on how the group should proceed. Bales claimed that the most effective groups are those in which the verbal requests and responses are roughly equal in number. If everyone is asking and nobody's offering answers, the group won't make progress toward the goal. If, on the other hand, no one asks and everyone declares, the group will still be stuck.

As for *socio-emotional* communication (Bales' label for relational concern), he regarded showing agreement, showing solidarity, and reducing tension by storytelling as positive forms of communication that make the group cohesive. He saw showing disagreement, antagonism, and tension as negative moves that tend to pull the group apart. Yet Bales found that groups work best when there are a few negative voices. That squares with Janis' recommendation. He suggests that skepticism and blunt critiques are correctives to groupthink. That kind of communication could have saved the lives of the *Challenger* crew and Americans' support for the space shuttle program.

"Now, let's hear it for good old Al, whose idea this Group Think was in the first place."

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CHAPTER 18

Socio-psychological tradition
Cybernetic tradition

Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making

of Randy Hirokawa & Dennis Gouran

A cynic once said that a camel is a horse put together by a committee. Others upset by their experience with group decision making give voice to their frustration with equally disparaging quips:[1]

"If you want something done, do it yourself."

"Too many cooks spoil the broth."

"A committee is a group that keeps minutes and wastes hours."

"Committees lure fresh ideas down a cul-de-sac and quietly strangle them."

Randy Hirokawa (dean of liberal arts, University of Hawaii at Hilo) and Dennis Gouran (professor of communication, Pennsylvania State University) believe that these pessimistic views are unwarranted. Assuming that group members care about the issue, are reasonably intelligent, and face a challenging task that calls for more facts, new ideas, or clear thinking, Hirokawa and Gouran are convinced that group interaction has a positive effect on the final decision. Hirokawa seeks *quality* solutions.[2] Gouran desires decisions that are *appropriate*.[3] Both scholars regard talk as the social tool that helps groups reach better conclusions than they otherwise would. As the Hebrew proverb suggests, "Without counsel plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed."[4]

Functional perspective
A prescriptive approach that describes and predicts task-group performance when four communication functionsare fulfilled.

The *functional perspective* specifies what communication must accomplish for jointly made decisions to be wise. Gouran laid the groundwork for the theory with his early writing on group decision making. Hirokawa developed the core principles of the theory during his graduate studies, and for 20 years his research tested and refined the theory. On the chance that you might be intrigued by a behind-the-scenes look at real-life group decisions made by college students living together, I'll illustrate the functional perspective by drawing on my experience conducting a two-week off-campus class that students called the "Island Course."

For 20 years I taught a group dynamics seminar limited to eight students on a remote island in northern Lake Michigan. Travel to and from the island was by a single-engine airplane, and we lived together in a cabin—the only structure on the island. Except when a few of us flew off the island to the mainland to get food, our sole communication was with each other. There's no cell phone service or Internet access on the island. Course alumni look back and consider our isolation as similar to the original *Survivor* series, yet with a cooperative rather than a competitive agenda. No one was ever voted off the island.

The island course was primarily a venture in experiential education. We learned about group dynamics by studying our own interaction. I asked students to adopt the role of participant-observer. Whatever happened among us became a subject for group discussion. Still, the course maintained traditional academic features—four hours of class per day, assigned readings, and final grades. Within that hybrid framework, class members had to decide on a daily schedule, who would do each job necessary for group living, how limited funds for food and fuel would be spent, and on what basis I would assign grades. They understood that they had to live with their decisions for the first half of the course, but could change things for the second week.

As for my role, I let them know that I wouldn't be an active participant in the choices they made—they were really free to decide as they saw fit. I'd provide any information they asked for, with the exception of revealing how other island-course groups had handled these issues or disclosing my own personal preferences. In the survey that alums filled out up to two decades after the course, Kelly's response reflected the general consensus:

> I remember Em's role best for what he didn't do. It was my first real experience with a leader who laid back intentionally so that we had to come to our own conclusion—a real democracy. It was refreshing to deal with someone in charge who didn't give all the answers. We were responsible for how things turned out.

As Hirokawa and Gouran predict, how things turned out hinged on the absence or presence of four types of communication.

FOUR FUNCTIONS OF EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

Consistent with the approach of Bales and other pioneer researchers, Hirokawa and Gouran draw an analogy between small groups and biological systems. Complex living organisms must satisfy a number of functions, such as respiration, circulation, digestion, and elimination of bodily waste, if they are to survive and thrive in an ever-changing environment. In like manner, Hirokawa and Gouran see the group decision-making process as needing to fulfill four task requirements if members are to reach a high-quality solution. They refer to these conditions as *requisite functions* of effective decision making—thus the "functional perspective" label.[5] The four functions are (1) problem analysis, (2) goal setting, (3) identification of alternatives, and (4) evaluation of positive and negative characteristics of each alternative.

Requisite functions
Requirements for positive group outcome; problem analysis, goal setting, identification of alternatives, and evaluation of pluses and minuses for each.

1. Analysis of the Problem

Is something going on that requires improvement or change? To answer that question, group members must take a realistic look at current conditions. Defenders of

Problem analysis
Determining the nature, extent, and cause(s) of the problem facing the group.

the status quo are fond of saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But, as Hirokawa warns, any misunderstanding of the situation tends to be compounded when the members make their final decision. He also notes that the clearest example of faulty analysis is the failure to recognize a potential threat when one really exists.[6] After people acknowledge a need to be addressed, they still must figure out the nature, extent, and probable cause(s) of the problem that confronts the group.

The first night on the island, students faced the task of drawing up a daily schedule. Because that decision affected other choices, I'll describe how two groups in different summers handled problem analysis and how they fulfilled the other three requisite functions that Hirokawa and Gouran identify. I'll refer to them as the *blue group* and the *green group*.

The blue group never did any overt problem analysis. To them, scheduling seemed a simple matter. They jumped to pooling suggestions for what would make the two weeks ideal without ever considering the unique problems that island living posed. Their conversation centered on building in as much time as possible to go outside to enjoy the island during the day and each other at night. Most class members noted that sleeping in late most mornings was also an idea with great appeal.

Conversely, the green group started out by exploring what situational limitations they had to factor into their decision. The close quarters of the small cabin proved to be a problem because it provided no aural—and very little visual—privacy. A few light sleepers admitted that it would be impossible for them to get to sleep at night, or to stay asleep in the morning, if someone was talking or walking around. Despite hundreds of dollars budgeted for food and fuel, they also analyzed the potential problem of running the all-terrain cycle. Their cost figures showed that they'd run out of money before the end of the course unless they could limit the use of the diesel generator to no more than 10 hours a day. This problem analysis strongly informed the schedule they finally worked out.

2. Goal Setting

Goal setting
Establishing criteria by which to judge proposed solutions.

Because group members need to be clear on what they are trying to accomplish, Hirokawa and Gouran regard discussion of goals and objectives as the second requisite function of decision making. A group needs to establish criteria by which to judge proposed solutions. These criteria must set forth the minimal qualities that an acceptable solution must possess. If the group fails to satisfy this task requirement, it's likely that the decision will be driven by power or passion rather than reason.[7]

Even before they began discussing alternatives, the green group reached a consensus on the specific criteria their schedule had to meet. They agreed that the schedule should include four hours of class as well as windows wide enough for students to prepare and enjoy decent meals and clean up afterward. Members insisted that there be a minimum of six hours of free time to play, study, or chill out. They also specified a nighttime block of at least seven hours for sleeping, where both the generator and conversation in the cabin would be turned off. And based upon their problem analysis, they wanted to craft an energy-sensitive schedule that wouldn't require the generator to be used for more than 10 hours a day. With the possible exceptions of *decent meals* and *energy sensitive,* these were measurable goals that could be used to gauge the quality of their final decision.

Unlike the green group, the blue group never spoke of goals, objectives, targets, or criteria. Their discussion made it clear that fun-in-the-sun and lots of casual time together were high priorities. But these overlapping desires are quite subjective and open to multiple interpretations. With no definitive goals to focus their discussion, it's difficult for group members to know whether they're making an appropriate decision. Or, as sports enthusiasts put it, *You don't know you're winning if you don't keep score.*

3. Identification of Alternatives

Hirokawa and Gouran stress the importance of marshaling a number of alternative solutions from which group members can choose:

Identification of alternatives
Generation of options to sufficiently solve the problem.

> If no one calls attention to the need for generating as many alternatives as is realistically possible, then relatively few may be introduced, and the corresponding possibility of finding the acceptable answer will be low.[8]

Both island-course groups wanted to schedule time when they could enjoy the island. Swimming, sunbathing, stone-skipping contests, playing volleyball and

"Gentlemen, the fact that all my horses and all my men couldn't put Humpty together again simply proves to me that I must have more horses and more men."

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soccer, trailblazing, riding the ATC, treasure hunting, bird watching, picking wild raspberries, building tree forts in the woods, and just lolling in the hammock were a few of the daylight activities suggested by blue and green course members alike. But the groups varied greatly on the number of options they generated for scheduling class and meals. The blue group seemed to have tunnel vision and could only picture a schedule with two hours of class in the morning and two hours at night. No other options were seriously considered. They were equally locked into the traditional practice of lunch at noon and dinner at six. One tentatively suggested alternative was shot down before it could be explained.

A girl in the green group had read an article on brainstorming before the course and urged classmates, "Let's see how many different ideas we can think of for when we'll eat." They took her up on it and suggested a dozen meal plans: late breakfast; no breakfast; brunch instead of breakfast and lunch; one big meal a day at noon; dinner at noon and light supper in the evening; a picnic snack to eat in the afternoon; four light meals a day; and a mix of these options.

The green group wasn't quite as creative with alternatives for class, yet they went beyond the two-hours-in-the-morning-and-two-at-night plan that seemed written in stone for the blue group. Different class members suggested three hours in the morning and one at night; four hours in the morning with two breaks; three class sessions of 80 minutes in the morning, afternoon, and night; three hours of class at night when the generator would be on anyway; all classes during daylight hours so the generator wouldn't have to be on. Their final decision turned out to be a combination of three of these ideas.

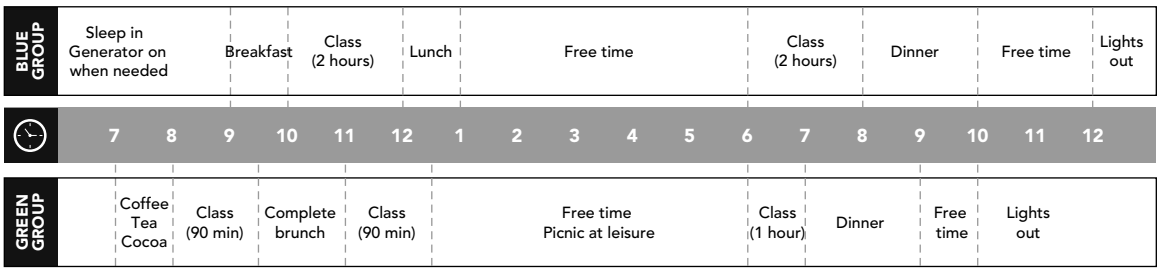
4. Evaluation of Positive and Negative Characteristics

Evaluation of positive and negative characteristics
Testing the relative merits of each option against the criteria selected; weighing the benefits and costs.

After a group has identified alternative solutions, the participants must take care to test the relative merits of each option against the criteria they believe are important. This point-by-point comparison doesn't take place automatically. Hirokawa and Gouran warn that groups get sloppy and often need one member to remind the others to consider both the positive and negative features of each alternative.

Because blue group members concentrated on only one schedule option, their evaluation of its characteristics was rather brief. They did a nice job of articulating the benefits they saw in their plan—a similarity to campus schedule, afternoons free for outdoor recreation, late-night opportunity to strengthen relationships, and a chance to sleep in before a late morning class. What's not to like? The blue group never addressed that issue. Hirokawa notes that some group tasks have a negative *bias* in that spotting the downside of each alternative is more important than identifying its positive qualities.[9] Since students were new to island living, it turned out that focusing on the disadvantages inherent in any plan would have been time well spent.

The green group discussed the pluses and minuses of every alternative. They concluded that late-night activity came at the cost of money they'd rather spend on food. They also saw that long class sessions in this idyllic setting could result in boredom and resentment. And for many of the meal plans they were considering, the amount of time spent in preparation, eating, and cleanup struck them as excessive. These realizations led them to adopt the novel schedule displayed on the left side of Figure 18–1. Note that the three shorter classes meet in daylight hours. Since there are only two sit-down meals with prep and cleanup,



[The Green Group time line depicts their proposal before advancing it an hour to "Island Daylight Saving Time."]

FIGURE 18–1 Blue and Green Group Schedules for the Island Course

there's more free time for whatever people want to do. And there are more than eight hours of darkness for course members and the generator to be at rest.

When the green group members first looked at their schedule shown in Figure 18–1, some had second thoughts. For them, it seemed bizarre to be going to bed at 10 P.M., with some folks rising at 6:30 in the morning. But one girl suggested advancing all clocks, watches, and times on the schedule ahead by one hour. "We'll feel better about going to bed at 11, and our schedule will still be in sync with the sun," she explained. The others were intrigued by the elegant simplicity of her idea, so before turning in that night, we switched to Island Daylight Saving Time. Our body clocks were quick to adjust as well.

Predictable Outcomes

So what difference did Hirokawa and Gouran's four requisite functions make for these two island groups? Over the course of two weeks, how did these contrasting schedules turn out in practice? Both groups stuck to their plan for the first week, but by the fifth day, the class that didn't address the four functions was struggling. No one in the blue group went to sleep before midnight, and once someone got up early in the morning, no one else could sleep. Students slept only six or seven hours, and those who planned to sleep in were irritated at others who woke them up. The two-hour class at night became a real drag; no one looked forward to that time together.

Perhaps the biggest problem triggered by the blue group's decision was prolonged use of the generator. Extended activity in the cabin resulted in the generator running more than 12 hours a day, at a cost that took a big bite out of the food budget. The blue group made some adjustments the second week, but the menu for our last few meals seemed to consist of grubs and yucca roots.

On the other hand, the eight students in the green group were quite satisfied with the schedule they crafted. They saved time and energy by eating only two meals in the cabin, holding all classes during daylight hours, and preparing the afternoon picnic snack and the brunch at the same time. They had more time for fun in the sun than the blue group did, and looked forward to the abbreviated evening class as a lead-in to a relaxed dinner.

The well-rested green group took great pride in limiting generator use to eight hours per day and celebrated with a T-bone steak dinner the last night with the money they'd saved. In addition, there was enough room in the budget to guarantee unlimited rides on the ATC. As Hirokawa and Gouran suggest, it took

discussion of all four requisite functions to hammer out a quality solution that was appropriate for the island course.

PRIORITIZING THE FOUR FUNCTIONS

The word *prioritizing* refers to addressing the four requisite functions in a logical progression. Hirokawa originally thought that no one sequence or group agenda does the job better. As long as the group ends up dealing with all four functions, the route its members take won't make much difference. Yet he's discovered the groups that successfully resolve especially difficult problems usually take a common decision-making path.[10]

The term *prioritizing* in the title also refers to the question of which function is most important in order for a group to maximize the probability of a high-quality decision. Hirokawa and Gouran originally thought that no single function is inherently more important than any of the others.[11] But as Hirokawa admits, in a paper entitled, "To Err Is Human, To Correct for It Divine," they were wrong. The paper reports on a meta-analysis of 60 empirical research studies on the functional perspective. The study concludes that of the four functions, *evaluation of negative consequences of alternative solutions* is by far the most crucial to ensure a quality decision.[12] Perhaps to stress its importance, Hirokawa now splits up the overall evaluation function into a positive one and a negative one, and speaks of five requisite functions rather than four.

Figure 18–2 portrays the path that seems to offer a natural problem-solving progression. Groups start with problem analysis, then deal with goal setting and identifying alternatives, and end by evaluating the positive and negative characteristics of each alternative before making a final choice. This decision-making flow parallels the advice I once heard on National Public Radio's *Car Talk.* Asked how car owners should handle close-call decisions on auto repair, mechanics Tom and Ray Magliozzi ("Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers") gave a street-smart answer that ran something like this:

> First, figure out what's broke. Then, make up your mind how good you want to fix it. Or before that ask your mechanic to list the choices you've got. Either way, you gotta do both. Finally, weigh the bang-for-the-buck that each job gives. Then decide.

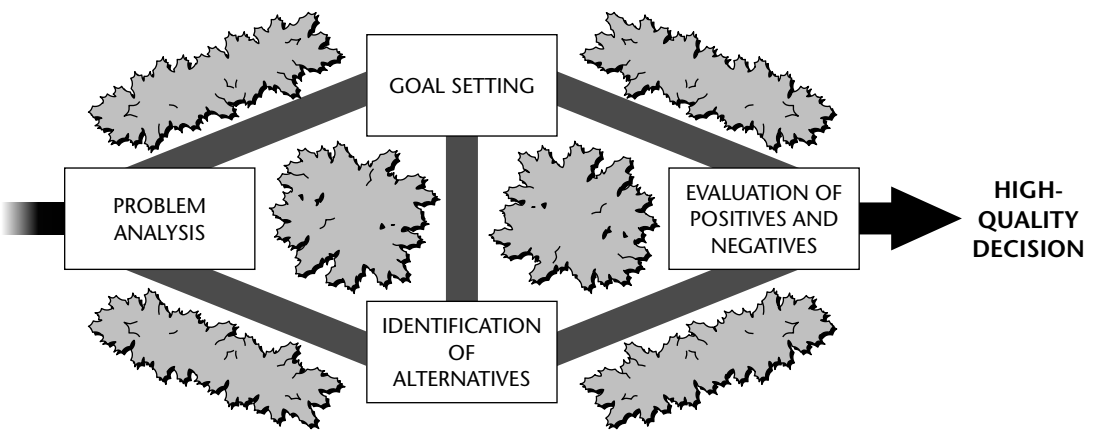


FIGURE 18–2 An Effective Decision-Making Path from the Functional Perspective

After reading about these three types of communication in her comm theory course, Lydia recognized that her comments had been disruptive rather than counteractive during a crucial discussion:

> I think group decision making is important, even vital, yet I am the worst at it. When I was in high school, I applied to be a foreign exchange student to Germany. For our final selection task the six finalists had to come up with a solution to a problem, then present it to the directors. Based on the group process, the directors would select the four of us who would go. Judging by Hirokawa and Gouran's theory, I see why I never went to Germany. I'd like to say it's because I tend to promote different alternatives, however, I can see how my smart/sarcastic comments tend to disrupt and take away from the task of problem analysis and goal setting. I wish I had a chance to do it over—after my big personality change, of course.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN FULFILLING THE FUNCTIONS

Most communication scholars believe that discussion among members has a significant effect on the quality of group decisions. Traditional wisdom suggests that talk is the medium, channel, or conduit, through which information travels between participants.[13] Verbal interaction makes it possible for members to (1) distribute and pool information, (2) catch and remedy errors, and (3) influence each other. But distractions and nonproductive conversation create channel noise causing a loss of information. Group researcher Ivan Steiner claimed that[14]

$$\begin{array}{c}\text{Actual Group}\\ \text{Productivity}\end{array} = \begin{array}{c}\text{Potential}\\ \text{Productivity}\end{array} - \begin{array}{c}\text{Losses Due}\\ \text{to Processes}\end{array}$$

It follows that communication is best when it doesn't obstruct or distort the free flow of ideas.

While not rejecting this traditional view, Hirokawa believes that communication plays a more active role in crafting quality decisions. Like social constructionists (see Chapters 6, 12, and 14), he regards group discussion as a tool or instrument that group members use to create the social reality in which decisions are made.[15] Discussion exerts its own impact on the end product of the group.

How does this work in practice? Think of the dark, wide lines in Figure 18–2 as safe trails through a dense thicket—paths that connect the four key task functions and lead ultimately to the goal of a high-quality group decision. Members can easily wander off that goal path and get caught up in a tangle of prickerbushes that thwart the group's progress. The bushes in this analogy represent distractions or barriers that retard movement toward the goal. Hirokawa and Gouran list a number of thorny obstacles—ignorance of the issue, faulty facts, misguided assumptions, sloppy evaluation of options, illogical inferences, disregard of procedural norms, and undue influence by powerful members. They believe that people go astray through talk, but they also believe that communication has the power to pull them back onto the goal-directed path.

Consistent with these convictions, Hirokawa and Gouran outline three types of communication in decision-making groups:

> **1.** Promotive—interaction that moves the group along the goal path by calling attention to one of the four requisite decision-making functions.

	Problem Analysis	Goal Setting	Identification of Alternatives	Evaluation of Positives/Negatives
Promote				
Disrupt				
Counteract				

FIGURE 18–3 Function-Oriented Interaction Coding System (FOICS) Checklist

2. Disruptive—interaction that diverts, retards, or frustrates group members' ability to achieve the four task functions.
3. Counteractive—interaction that members use to get the group back on track.

Hirokawa and Gouran suggest that most comments from group members disrupt rather than promote progress toward the goal. They conclude, therefore, that "effective group decision-making is perhaps best understood as a consequence of the exercise of counteractive influence."[16] In other words, someone has to say something that will get the group back on track.

Hirokawa has made repeated efforts to develop a conversational coding system that classifies the function of specific statements. Much like Bales' interaction categories outlined in the introduction to group communication, Hirokawa's Function-Oriented Interaction Coding System (FOICS) requires researchers to categorize each *functional utterance,* which is "an uninterrupted statement of a single member that appears to perform a specified function within the group interaction process."[17]

Functional utterance
An uninterrupted statement of a single member that appears to perform a specific function.

Figure 18–3 shows a FOICS checklist that researchers might use to analyze communication within a group. As you can see, raters are asked to make two judgments: (1) Which of the four requisite functions, if any, does an utterance address? and (2) Does the remark facilitate (*promote*), inhibit (*disrupt*), or redirect (*counteract*) the group's focus on that function? Ideally, this 4 × 3 classification scheme provides 12 discrete categories of group discussion. With that information, researchers could determine the effect of communication on the quality of the decision the group makes.

FOICS
Function Oriented Interaction Coding System; a tool to record and classify the function of utterances during a group's discussion.

In practice, however, analyzing the content of group discussion is fraught with difficulty. In the first place, independent raters find it hard to agree on how a statement should be coded. Extensive training boosts the reliability of their judgments, but Hirokawa is keenly aware that a single comment may serve multiple functions. In addition, words that appear helpful on the surface may have hidden power to disrupt, or vice versa. The process of coding comments has turned out to be an ongoing problem for all researchers who want to study the nature and effects of group communication.

THOUGHTFUL ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO KNOW THEY ARE RIGHT

How can you and I use the functional perspective to facilitate better group decisions? We can start with a healthy dose of humility concerning the wisdom of our own opinions. Hirokawa and Gouran report that groups often abandon the rational path due to the persuasive efforts of members who are convinced that

they alone have the right answer. Their discussion style proclaims, "Don't confuse me with the facts; my mind's made up," and they wear down the opposition. We can make sure we don't come to the table with the sort of closed-minded attitude that torpedoes honest discussion. Additionally, we should be wary of pushing any "intuitive hunch" or "gut feeling" that we can't back up with reasonable evidence. These are errors to avoid.

We can also take proactive measures to promote clear thinking within the group. In almost every article they write, Hirokawa and Gouran acknowledge their intellectual debt to early-twentieth-century American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey.[18] Dewey's pragmatism was based on the hopeful assumption that practical decisions can be brought under more intelligent control through the process of rational inquiry.[19] He advocated a six-step process of *reflective thinking* that parallels a doctor's approach to treating a patient:[20]

Reflective thinking
Thinking that favors rational consideration over intuitive hunches or pressure from those with clout.

1. Recognize symptoms of illness.
2. Diagnose the cause of the ailment.
3. Establish criteria for wellness.
4. Consider possible remedies.
5. Test to determine which solutions will work.
6. Implement or prescribe the best solution.

Note that Hirokawa and Gouran's four requisite functions are almost exact replicas of steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 in Dewey's reflective-thinking process. Both lists recommend that group members discuss issues in a way that promotes problem analysis, goal setting, discovery of alternatives, and evaluation of these options. When we're tempted to make remarks that will detract from the process, Hirokawa and Gouran suggest we bite our tongues. And when others say things that sidetrack the group from fulfilling the four functional requisites, the theorists urge us to counter with a comment aimed at getting the group back on a rational path.

You may be hesitant to counteract the dubious logic of a powerful leader or a high-status member of the group, but Hirokawa and Gouran don't advocate direct criticism. Instead, they recommend a strategy of insisting on a careful process. By raising questions, calling for more alternatives, and urging a thorough evaluation of evidence, a low-status member can have a high-power impact on the quality of the final decision.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: HABERMAS' DISCOURSE ETHICS

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas suggests a rational group process through which people can determine right from wrong—a different kind of decision than Hirokawa and Gouran usually study. In order to develop guidelines for ethical action, the Frankfurt School critical theorist pictures a diverse group of people engaged in public discourse. Habermas' ethical approach seeks an after-the-fact discussion about what we did in a particular situation and why we decided to do it. Being ethical means being accountable.[21]

Habermas assumes that people within a given culture or community can pretty much agree on the good they want to accomplish, and over time they've built up practical wisdom on how to achieve it. For example, your campus newspaper reporters assume that it's good for students to know more about what's

going on within the school's administration ("the people's right to know") and that guaranteeing confidentiality to insiders is the best way to find out ("protecting their sources"). This newsroom common sense is a good place to start doing journalistic ethics, but reporters' justification of the practice typically lacks reflective rigor. It often doesn't take into account the interests of everyone affected by their stories.

Discourse ethics
Jürgen Habermas' vision of the ideal speech situation in which diverse participants could rationally reach a consensus on universal ethical standards.

Habermas' *discourse ethics* sets up a discursive test for the validity of any moral claim. The person who performed an act must be prepared to discuss what he or she did and why he or she did it in an open forum. This deliberative process is a two-stage process of justification and application. The actor must reveal the general ethical principle that he or she used to justify the action and then show why it was the appropriate thing to do in those particular circumstances. Habermas imagines an *ideal speech situation* where participants are free to listen to reason and speak their minds without fear of constraint or control.[22] He's convinced that the validity of any ethical consensus can be reached only to the extent that three requirements are met:[23]

Ideal speech situation
A discourse on ethical accountability in which discussants represent all who will be affected by the decision, pursue discourse in a spirit of seeking the common good, and are committed to finding universal standards.

1. *Requirement for access.* All people affected by the ethical norm being debated can attend and be heard, regardless of their status. That means that donors, administrators, professors, students, and minimum-wage staff at the school are welcome at the table without prejudice.
2. *Requirement for argument.* All participants are expected to exchange their points of view in the spirit of genuine reciprocity and mutual understanding. They aren't merely trying to advance their own interests but are trying to figure out whether an action serves the common good.
3. *Requirement for justification.* Everyone is committed to a standard of universalization. What makes ethical claims legitimate is their "acceptance not only among those who agree to live with and by them but by anyone *affected* by them."[24]

Habermas understands that thoroughly noncoercive dialogue is a utopian dream, yet he finds his conception of the ideal speech situation helpful in gauging the degree to which a discussion is rational. This, of course, is a major goal of Hirokawa's, Gouran's, and Dewey's. The trick is getting group members to do it.

CRITIQUE: IS RATIONALITY OVERRATED?

In their review of small-group communication literature, John Cragan and David Wright conclude that there are three leading theories.[25] One is Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory,* discussed in the next chapter. The second is Scott Poole's *adaptive structuration theory,* which you can read about in the theory list section of *www.afirstlook.com.* The third is Hirokawa and Gouran's functional perspective. In their critique of the functional perspective, Purdue University communication researchers Cynthia Stohl and Michael Holmes explain why it is so highly regarded:

> The basic premise of the perspective, that communication serves task functions and the accomplishment of those functions should be associated with effective group decisions, is intuitively appealing and sensible. It also meets the standards of an objective theory in that it explains, is testable, simple, and practical.[26]

As a result, many communication scholars endorse the theory as a model for group discussion and decision making. One of my students is so convinced that he wrote, "A list of the four functions should be woven into the carpet of every committee room."

Yet Hirokawa's exclusive focus on rational talk may be the reason researchers get mixed results when they test his theory's predictions.[27] Note that the FOICS method of coding conversation all but ignores comments about relationships inside or outside the group. By treating relational statements as a distraction, Hirokawa commits the same mistake that the late Aubrey Fisher admitted he made in his own task-focused research:[28]

> The original purpose of the investigation . . . was to observe verbal task behavior free from the confounding variables of the socioemotional dimension. That purpose, of course, was doomed to failure. The two dimensions are interdependent.[29]

Stohl and Holmes' critique frames the same issue in a slightly different way. They contend that most real-life groups have a prior decision-making history and are embedded within a larger organization. They advocate adding a *historical function* that requires the group to talk about how past decisions were made. They also recommend an *institutional function* that is satisfied when members discuss the reality of power brokers and stakeholders who aren't at the table, but whose views clearly affect and are affected by the group decision.

Dennis Gouran has recently raised doubts about how useful the functional perspective may be for many small-group discussions.[30] He notes that almost all group dynamics research has dealt with decision making and problem solving. Although he and Hirokawa attempted to craft a one-size-fits-all model for group communication, he now believes it's beneficial for members to fulfill the four requisite functions only when they are addressing *questions of policy.* That's not always the case.

Investigative panels and juries deal with *questions of fact* such as "What happened?" or "Who's responsible?" College admission boards and product design teams face *questions of conjecture,* trying to figure out what's likely to happen in an uncertain future without any current way of knowing if their predictions are right. Religious groups and addiction recovery support groups face emotionally loaded *questions of value,* members sharing or debating what they believe is acceptable, appropriate, ethical, or morally right. None of these questions has a discernable "right" or "high-quality" answer. Gouran doesn't believe that these alternative group goals invalidate the functional perspective, but he does suggest their existence shows that the theory isn't relevant in every situation. The scope of the functional perspective is more limited than first thought.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Hirokawa and Gouran claim that small groups are like living *systems.* Do you see parallels between the four *functional requisites* of task groups and the body's need for respiration, circulation, digestion, and elimination?

2. Given that the functional theory focuses on *decision-making* and *problem-solving* groups, why is its silence on *relationship* issues a problem?

3. Think of a time when you've been part of a task group that strayed from the *goal path.* What *counteractive statement* could you have made that might have brought it back on track?

4. Why might you find it frustrating to use Hirokawa's *Function-Oriented Interaction Coding System (FOICS)* to analyze a group discussion?

SELF-QUIZ

For chapter self-quizzes go to the book's Online Learning Center at *www.mhhe.com/griffin8*

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com

As you might expect from an objective theorist discussing a rational theory, Randy Hirokawa gives clear, concise responses to my opening questions about group decision making. Is it possible he will find a yet undiscovered fifth function? Are jokes a form of distruptive communication? But as the conversation continues, Hirokawa voices ideas not usually heard from thoroughgoing empiricists. He refers to the irony of questionable motives producing beneficial actions, a subjective standard to determine whether a decision is good, and his belief that there are no guarantees in life. Many students consider this conversation the best of the bunch.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Dennis Gouran, Randy Hirokawa, Kelly Julian, and Geoff Leatham, "The Evolution and Current Status of the Functional Perspective on Communication in Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Groups," in *Communication Yearbook 16,* Stanley Deetz (ed.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1993, pp. 573–600.

Original statement: Dennis Gouran and Randy Hirokawa, "The Role of Communication in Decision-Making Groups: A Functional Perspective," in *Communications in Transition,* Mary Mander (ed.), Praeger, New York, 1983, pp. 168–185.

Research review: Randy Hirokawa, "From the Tiny Pond to the Big Ocean: Studying Communication and Group Decision-Making Effectiveness from a Functional Perspective," 1999 B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture, Department of Communication, University of Utah, Salt Lake City UT.

Role of communication: Randy Hirokawa and Dirk Scheerhorn, "Communication in Faulty Group Decision-Making," in *Communication and Group Decision-Making,* Randy Hirokawa and M. Scott Poole (eds.), Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1986, pp. 63–80.

Coding group interaction: Randy Hirokawa, "Functional Approaches to the Study of Group Discussion," *Small Group Research,* Vol. 25, 1994, pp. 542–550.

Additional propositions: Dennis Gouran and Randy Hirokawa, "Effective Decision Making and Problem Solving in Groups: A Functional Perspective," in *Small Group Communication: Theory and Practice,* 8th ed., Randy Hirokawa, Robert Cathcart, et al. (eds.), Roxbury, Los Angeles, CA, 2003, pp. 27–38.

Survey of group theories taking a functional perspective: Andrea B. Hollingshead, Gwen Wittenbaum, et al., "A Look at Groups from the Functional Perspective," in *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* M. Scott Poole and Andrea B. Hollingshead (eds.), Sage, London, 2005, pp. 21–62.

Requisite functions accomplished face-to-face vs. CMC: Shu-Chu Sarrina Li, "Computer-Mediated Communication and Group Decision Making: A Functional Perspective," *Small Group Research,* Vol. 38, 2007, pp. 593–614.

Critique: Cynthia Stohl and Michael Holmes, "A Functional Perspective for Bona Fide Groups," *Communication Yearbook 16,* 1993, pp. 601–614.

Theorist's assessment of limited scope: Dennis Gouran, "Reflections on the Type of Question as a Determinant of the Form of Interaction in Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Discussions," *Communication Quarterly,* Vol. 53, 2003, pp. 111–125.

For a chapter–length description
of Irving Janis' Groupthink,
click on Theory List at
www.afirstlook.com.

CHAPTER 19

Rhetorical tradition
Socio-psychological tradition

Symbolic Convergence Theory

of Ernest Bormann

In the introduction to this section on group communication, I refer to Harvard social psychologist Robert Bales' work to categorize comments made in small-group discussions. On the basis of his research with zero-history problem-solving groups in his lab, Bales discovered that *dramatizing* was a significant type of communication that often fostered group cohesiveness.[1] The late University of Minnesota communication professor Ernest Bormann picked up on Bales' finding and undertook a more extensive study of newly formed groups to examine leadership emergence, decision making, norms, cohesiveness, and a number of other features of group life.[2]

Similar to Bales, Bormann and his team of colleagues observed that group members often dramatized events happening outside the group, things that took place at previous meetings, or what might possibly occur among them in the future. Sometimes these stories fell flat and the discussion moved in a different direction. But at other times group members responded enthusiastically by adding on to the story or chiming in with their own matching narratives. When the drama was enhanced in this way, members developed a common group consciousness and drew closer together. On the basis of extensive case studies, Bormann set forth the central explanatory principle of symbolic convergence theory (SCT):

> *Sharing group fantasies creates symbolic convergence.*[3]

When she read about Bormann's theory, Maggie had no difficulty illustrating this core claim. Two weeks before my communication course began, she served as a student leader in the "Wheaton Passage" program for new freshmen that's held at a camp in Wisconsin's Northwoods. One of the stated goals of this optional offering is to build intentional community. In her application log, Maggie wrote of unplanned communication that achieved this end.

> Cabin 8 was the rustic, run-down cabin that my group of Passage students was assigned to live in for the week. My co-leader and I decked the cabin out with decorations by hanging Christmas lights and origami doves, yet there was no

escaping the massive holes in the screens, sticky messes in the drawers, and the spiders residing in the rafters. The night students arrived, we walked our group of girls past the brand new cabins, arrived at our old cabin, and presented Cabin 8—their home for a week. Needless to say, they were less than pleased.

The next day as our group was trekking to our morning activity, one of the girls brought up what she thought the perfect cabin would look like. Others jumped in with their ideas. For 10 minutes, each girl contributed something to the discussion of the fantasy cabin. Hot tubs, screened-in porches, soft carpet, lounge chairs, and a glass roof for stargazing were all mentioned as features in their ideal cabin. Looking back on this experience, I see how this shared fantasy played a role in our cabin bonding. As the week went on, our dream cabin became a running joke within our group that helped students develop a sense of closeness—what they deemed "hardcoreness." While living in the crummy cabin, they frequently revisited the image of the ideal cabin they created in their conversation.

DRAMATIZING MESSAGES: CREATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THERE-AND-THEN

Many comments in task-oriented discussion groups offer lines of argument, factual information, members' opinions, and suggestions for how the group should proceed. That's the kind of member contribution Hirokawa and Gouran's functional perspective values (see Chapter 18). Advocates of rational discussion believe it's usually disruptive and counterproductive when someone cracks a joke, describes a movie, or starts talking about plans for the upcoming weekend. Not so for Bormann. SCT classifies these examples and many other forms of speaking as *dramatizing messages* and believes that conversations about things outside of what's going on right now can often serve the group well.

A dramatizing message is one that contains imaginative language such as a pun or other wordplay, double entendre, figure of speech (e.g., metaphor, simile, personification), analogy, anecdote, allegory, fable, narrative, or other creative expression of ideas. Whatever the form, the dramatizing message describes events occurring somewhere else and/or at some time other than the here-and-now.[4]

Dramatizing message
Imaginative language by a group member describing past, future, or outside events; creative interpretations of there-and-then.

Notice first that a group member's words must paint a picture or call to mind an image in order to be labeled a dramatizing message. A report that the Dow Jones stock average rose 500 points can be important news for members, but it's not dramatizing in the way that Bormann used the term. Second, a vivid message would qualify as dramatizing if it either describes something outside the group or portrays an event that has happened within the group in the past or might happen to the group in the future. Comments that have no imagery or those that refer to what's currently going on in the group make up the bulk of most group discussions. They aren't dramatizing messages.

When Maggie's girls started to verbally construct their ideal cabin, they were using imaginative language to talk about what they'd like to see in the future, probably wishing it would magically appear that night. If in a darker tone one of the girls expressed her hope that someone would set fire to the cabin before they returned, that message would also be dramatizing. But if the group of girls sat around in the cabin grousing about the spiders, mosquitoes, and sticky goo in the drawers, those comments would be about the here-and-now and wouldn't be defined as dramatizing messages.

Why is this distinction so important to Bormann and SCT advocates? Because dramatizing messages are interpretive. They aren't knee-jerk responses to

experiences of the moment. "Dramatizing accounts of past occurrences artistically organize what are usually more complex, ambiguous, and chaotic experiences."[5] They help the speaker, and sometimes the listeners, make sense out of a confusing situation or bring some clarity to an uncertain future. Whether or not other group members connect with their imagery, dramatizing messages are creative interpretations of the there-and-then.

FANTASY CHAIN REACTIONS: UNPREDICTABLE SYMBOLIC EXPLOSIONS

Some people use the term *fantasy* to refer to children's literature, sexual desire, or things "not true." Bormann, however, reserved the term *fantasy* for dramatizing messages that are enthusiastically embraced by the whole group. Most dramatizing messages don't get that kind of reaction. They often fall on deaf ears, or group members listen but take a ho-hum attitude toward what was said. Of course, an embarrassing silence or a quick change of subject makes it obvious that the dramatizing message has fallen flat. There may even be group members who openly oppose what was said. Yet as Bormann noted, "Some dramatizing messages cause a symbolic explosion in the form of a chain reaction in which members join in until the entire group comes alive."[6] He described what he had seen when a fantasy chains out in this way:

> The tempo of the conversation would pick up. People would grow excited, interrupt one another, blush, laugh, forget their self-consciousness. The tone of the meeting, often quiet and tense immediately prior to the dramatizing, would

"Pardon us, Harrison, if the board fails to share your enthusiasm for the foliage up in Darien."

© Jack Ziegler/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

> become lively, animated, and boisterous, the chaining process, involving both the verbal and nonverbal communication, indicating participation in the drama.[7]

A concrete example of a fantasy chain and its results may be helpful. University of Kentucky communication professor Alan DeSantis asks us to picture a group of Kentucky-born, middle-aged white guys sitting around a cigar store smoking hand-rolled imported cigars. As the topic shifts from college basketball to the risk of smoking, the owner tells the story of a heart surgeon who came into the shop after having been on duty for 36 hours. After lighting up, the doctor blew out a big mouthful of smoke and said, "This is the most relaxed I have felt in days. Now how can that be bad for you?"[8]

Whether or not the doctor really said this isn't the issue. Symbolic convergence theory is concerned with the group's response to the tale. In this case the patrons chuckle in appreciation, nod in agreement, or say "You've got it!" to punctuate the narrative. Some vie to tell their own stories that dismiss the harm of cigar smoking, a pastime that they consider a benign hobby. Bormann said that we can spot a *fantasy chain* through a common response to the imagery. DeSantis, who was a cigar-smoking participant-observer among the shop's regular customers, affirms that the group's response to the owner's story paralleled Bormann's description above.

Symbolic convergence researchers have had little success predicting when a fantasy will ignite and trigger a chain reaction. They've found there's a better chance of a fantasy chaining out when the group is frustrated (as were Maggie's girls) or when they are bogged down in an effort to solve a thorny problem. Also, members with rhetorical skill seem to have a better chance of providing the spark, but there's no guarantee that their words will ignite others. And even when a skillful image-maker does spark a fantasy chain, he or she has little control over where the conversation will go. Fantasy chains seem to have a life of their own. But once a fantasy chain catches fire, symbolic convergence theory predicts that the group will converge around a fantasy theme.

Fantasy chain
A symbolic explosion of lively agreement within a group in response to a member's dramatizing message.

FANTASY THEMES—CONTENT, MOTIVES, CUES, TYPES

Fantasy
The creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group's psychological orrhetorical needs.

Fantasy theme
Content of the fantasy that has chained out within a group; SCT's basic unit of analysis.

Bormann's technical definition of *fantasy* is "the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group's psychological or rhetorical needs."[9]

Think of a *fantasy theme* as the *content* of the dramatizing message that successfully sparks a fantasy chain. As such, it's the theory's basic unit of analysis. Because fantasy themes reflect and create a group's culture, all SCT researchers seek to identify the fantasy theme or themes that group members share. When spotted, fantasy themes are consistently ordered and always interpretive, and they inevitably put the group's slant on things. That is, fantasy themes act as a rhetorical means to sway doubters or naysayers.

When a fantasy chains out among core patrons in the cigar store, we would expect to see that same theme run throughout multiple narratives—à la *Seinfeld*. Perhaps the hero of every man's account is a famous cigar smoker who lived into old age without ill effects—George Burns, Winston Churchill, or Fidel Castro. Or maybe each image reflects a meddling government bureaucrat who wants to limit their right to enjoy a cigar in a public place. Along with examples of long-lived smokers, group fantasies might focus on the difference between cigars and cigarettes, safety in moderation, inconsistent scientific findings concerning

cancer, the greater risks of everyday living, and the health benefits of relaxation that come from smoking a good cigar. All of these fantasies have the same basic theme—*cigar smoking is safe*.

Bormann suggested that group members' *meanings, emotions, motives,* and *actions* are apparent in their fantasy themes. We can see all four of these in DeSantis' description of the angst that the core group of patrons experienced at the premature death of their friend Greg. Like the rest of the store's regulars who sat around smoking, Greg had scoffed at the health risks of their practice. Now they were confronted with the sobering fact of his fatal heart attack. Within a week of the funeral, however, his smoking buddies had constructed a verbal collage of images depicting Greg's stressful lifestyle. The store owner voiced their consensus: "Smoking had nothing to do with his death. He lived, drank and played hard and it took a toll on him at the end."[10] *Meaning:* Hard living killed Greg. *Emotion:* Reduction of fear, relief. *Motive:* Desire to smoke with buddies. *Action:* Not going to quit.

Bormann and symbolic convergence theory advocates have found that many fantasy themes are indexed by a *symbolic cue*. A symbolic cue is "an agreed-upon trigger that sets off the group members to respond as they did when they first shared the fantasy."[11] It could be a code word, nonverbal gesture, phrase, slogan, inside joke, bumper sticker, or any shorthand way of re-establishing the full force of shared fantasy. In the Kentucky smoke shop where these fantasy themes were voiced, any mention of criticism of cigar smoking from family or friends was the cue that set off a new round of protest among store regulars. Their emotional reaction was captured on a T-shirt sold at the store that satirized the Surgeon General's cautionary statement: "Warning—Harassing me about my smoking can be hazardous to your health."[12]

Symbolic cue
An agreed-upon trigger that sets off group members to respond as they did when they first sharedt he fantasy.

The meaning of a given fantasy theme is quite specific. Because clusters of related fantasy themes sometimes surface again and again in different groups, Bormann found it helpful to have a label to classify this phenomenon when it occurs. He used the term *fantasy type* to describe these well-worn symbolic paths. Fantasy types are "greater abstractions incorporating several concrete fantasy themes" and they exist "when shared meaning is taken for granted."[13] The cigar store group's fantasy theme of family and friends criticizing their smoking could be considered part of a larger "get-off-my-case" fantasy type. Perhaps that's a fantasy type that you and your friends have drawn upon when talking about your lifestyle, even if you've never smoked a cigar. Or students at your school may share stock fantasy types about Saturday night parties, the food on campus, professors who never seem to be in their offices, or the guy who always bails out at the last minute on a group project.

Fantasy type
A cluster of related fantasy themes; greater abstractions incorporating several concrete fantasy themes that exist when shared meaning is taken forgr anted.

SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE: GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS AND OFTEN COHESIVENESS

The discussion of dramatizing messages, fantasy chains, and fantasy themes has dealt with the first part of SCT's core principle: *Sharing group fantasies creates symbolic convergence.* We're now ready to look at what that sharing creates—symbolic convergence. For Bormann, *symbolic convergence* meant the way in which "two or more private symbol worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap."[14] As those worlds intersect, group members develop a unique group consciousness. No longer do members think in terms of

Symbolic convergence
Two or more private symbol worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap; group consciousness, cohesiveness.

I, me, and *mine.* As symbolic overlap takes place, they begin to think and speak about *we, us,* and *ours*.

Do shared fantasies really cause this group transformation? Bormann insisted that they do. Some limited commonality of words and images may naturally occur when group members interact often enough over a long period of time. But the process is accelerated and extended way beyond what otherwise might happen when members participate in one or more fantasy chains that create joint fantasy themes. Bormann used a variety of terms to portray the effect of group consciousness—*common ground, meeting of the minds, mutual understanding, groupiness, common social reality,* and *empathic communion.*

Once a group experiences symbolic convergence, Bormann suggested that it's important for members to memorialize their group consciousness with a name and recorded history (*saga*) that recalls moments when fantasies chained out. He did that with his U of M colleagues who met in the Bormann home every Wednesday night to discuss the ideas that make up symbolic convergence theory. They called themselves the *Turtle Racers*—presumably based on an illustrated poster with the caption "Behold the turtle who makes progress only when he sticks his neck out." The image of a turtle race seemed doubly appropriate to their history of theory building when Bormann described the work going forward in fits and starts.

Symbolic convergence usually results in heightened group *cohesiveness*—members attracted to each other and sticking together through thick and thin. But not always. Bormann regarded symbolic convergence as usually a necessary but not sufficient cause of cohesiveness.

> Groups that do little fantasizing are seldom highly attractive and cohesive. Such groups tend to be boring and ordinary. The cohesive groups have usually done considerable fantasizing, but not all groups that fantasize a lot are rewarding and cohesive. The fantasies that chain may contribute to creating a social reality that is warm, friendly and hard working, that provides the group with a strong identity and self image, and that gives members a sense of purpose and meaning for their group's work. On the other hand, the fantasies may develop a group climate that is fascinating, frustrating, and punishing.[15]

Bormann went on to say that fantasy themes in those negative groups are riddled with conflict and that the humor expressed tends to be satire, ridicule, or sarcasm. I was in such a group my sophomore year of college, and he was right—it was fascinating. Fortunately I had enough sense to get out.

RHETORICAL VISION: A COMPOSITE DRAMA SHARED BY A RHETORICAL COMMUNITY

Rhetorical vision
A composite drama that catches up large groups of people into a common symbolicre ality.

Up to this point in the chapter, my description and illustration of symbolic convergence theory has focused on shared fantasies in small-group settings. That's where SCT was spawned. But early in the theory's development, the Turtle Racers discovered that shared fantasies weren't confined to a small-group context. As Bormann explained, "Fantasies that begin in small groups often are worked into public speeches, become picked up by mass media and 'spread out across larger publics.'"[16] Once attuned to the basic concepts of SCT, these scholars spotted swirling batches of related fantasy themes and types in all sorts of communication texts. Bormann coined the term *rhetorical vision* to designate "a

composite drama that catches up large groups of people into a common symbolic reality."[17] He called the wide-ranging body of people who share that reality a *rhetorical community*.

The majority of research conducted using SCT has been aimed at capturing the rhetorical visions of dispersed rhetorical communities and figuring out how their communication created their unified fantasies. Researchers don't have the benefit of sitting in a room with the whole community while waiting for a fantasy to chain out as evidence of a fantasy theme. So Bormann and his colleagues developed a procedure called *fantasy theme analysis* to discover fantasy themes and rhetorical visions that have already been created.

Fantasy Theme Analysis

Fantasy theme analysis is a specific type of rhetorical criticism that's built on two basic assumptions. First, people create their social reality—a premise shared by many interpretive theorists (see Chapters 5, 6, 12, and 13). Second, people's meanings, motives, and emotions can be seen in their rhetoric. So when a dispersed community embraces the same rhetorical vision, that's reality for them. They aren't pretending.

Fantasy theme analysis
A type of rhetorical criticism used to detect fantasy themes and rhetorical visions; the interpretive methodology of SCT.

A rhetorical critic using fantasy theme analysis looks for recurring fantasy themes in the text. If found, the critic should then discern if these shared fantasies are woven together into a rhetorical vision. In addition to using the basic SCT concepts already discussed, Bormann suggested that the critic look for at least four features that are present in all rhetorical visions.[18]

1. **Characters:** Are there heroes to root for and villains to despise?
2. **Plot lines:** Do characters act in a way consistent with the rhetorical vision?
3. **Scene:** How do descriptions of time and place increase the drama's impact?
4. **Sanctioning agent:** Who or what legitimates the rhetorical vision?

I'll describe a fantasy theme analysis of Internet websites to show how these tools can reveal a rhetorical vision and show how it's created and sustained within a dispersed rhetorical community.

The Symbolic Creation of a Pro-Eating Disorder Rhetorical Vision

For those who are anorexic and/or bulimic, the world of face-to-face communication can be a lonely place. Afraid of condemnation if they reveal their eating disorder, they often live a life of secrecy, deception, and guilt. Although 12-step programs extend social support to those who want to overcome their disease, not all people with food disorders want to change. The Internet offers hundreds of pro-eating disorder websites where those who resist recovery can anonymously interact with like-minded others. Wayne State University communication professor Jessi McCabe conducted a fantasy theme analysis to "explore how group exchanges on these websites redefine a reality largely rejected by the cultural norm and what elements contribute to creating this worldview."[19] She chose the 12 most active pro-food disorder sites for her analysis. The message boards on the three most popular sites—Blue Dragon Fly, Pro-Ana Suicide Society, and Fragile Innocence—had a combined membership of more than 25,000 users.

Fantasy types are an SCT category midway between specific fantasy themes and an overall rhetorical vision. McCabe found that two contrasting fantasy types emerged in her analysis—a positive one and a negative one. She labeled the positive fantasy type "The humorous world of Ana and Mia." Within this world, fantasy chains reinforce site users' eating habits and shared reality. Across the message boards, members personify their disorders as characters in an ongoing drama.

> Members depict their own goals, struggles, and emotions through the personification of Ana and Mia. Anorexia and bulimia are given life and attributed human-like emotions and qualities, which are justified by the sanctioning agent, humor. The most favorable depiction is a girl named Ana (anorexia), who represents the goal of the group, the idolization of perfection in this reality. Perfection is about having self-control and being thin. Personified through Ana is a yearning for being untouchable and perfect.[20]

Message-board users write about Ana as their hero. ("Ana knows what to say to make me feel better."[21]) They also confess lapses and seek her forgiveness. ("Dear Ana, I am sorry that I failed you. . . . Not only did I fail you but I binged.")

Unlike Ana, Mia (bulimia) isn't seen as perfect. Her role in the drama is to stir up the emotions users feel as they struggle to get down to the elusive perfect weight. Site users rarely describe Mia in positive terms. One post complains, "Mia is SO loud and annoying . . . my Mom heard Mia because she can't keep her [stinking] mouth shut!" Yet other messages reluctantly suggest Mia is needed. "Sometimes she is all right . . . she lets me eat . . . keeps my body pure." The third character in this ongoing drama is the villainous ED (eating disorder). He represents the social norm of moderation and recovery from addiction. McCabe explains why he's so feared: "Members not only try to avoid ED for fear of recovery but the group knows that accepting ED means a loss of community and a reentry into a reality in which eating disorders are a negative attribute."[22]

The discussion of these three characters constructs an alternative world where high-risk dieters aren't hassled. Despite the lurking presence of ED, who reminds everyone of another reality "out there," this positive fantasy type is a closed world where anorexics and bulimics feel safe. McCabe sees humor as the *sanctioning agent* that makes this constructed reality legitimate for site users. The satirical exchange of experiences turns discussion of a deadly disease into a game that validates what these users are doing, saying, and living.

Conversely, the negative fantasy type portrayed on these message boards is "Surviving encounters with The Real World," a distressing place for those who visit these websites. McCabe notes that almost all users log on to get tips on "safe" foods and how to hide their eating habits and symptoms from friends and family. The *scene* of the struggle in "the real world" is almost always part of this fantasy type. Many posts include references to time and space.

> I hate coming home at night. . . . I am with Ana all day and I cannot eat . . . but when I get home Ana stays at the door and I just binge.
>
> How can I live with Mia if we are sharing community bathrooms in our dorm?

McCabe doesn't explicitly address *plot lines* in her fantasy theme analysis, but from her rich description two plots seem paramount. The first is acting in multiple ways to reduce weight—dieting, exercising, and purging. The second plot is doing whatever one has to do to keep the extent of this obsession with food a secret from those who don't share it.

McCabe concludes that the rhetorical vision of the pro-eating disorder community is the uneasy coexistence of these two contrasting fantasy types—*The humorous world of Ana and Mia* and *Surviving encounters with The Real World.* She writes, "The rhetorical vision shared by this group is the effort to maintain a disease within settings where their belief is challenged and get back to the state where the personification of the disease can proliferate."[23]

THEORY INTO PRACTICE: ADVICE TO IMPROVE YOUR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

As you've gained an understanding of symbolic convergence theory, you've probably thought about its implications for a group in which you take part. No matter what your role in the group, Bormann offered the following advice:[24]

- When the group begins to share a drama that in your opinion would contribute to a healthy culture, you should pick up the drama and feed the chain.
- If the fantasies are destructive, creating group paranoia or depression, cut the chain off whenever possible.
- To build cohesiveness, use personification to identify your group.
- Be sure to encourage the sharing of dramas depicting your group history early in your meetings.
- Remember that a conscious rhetorical effort on your part can succeed in igniting a chain reaction, but the fantasy may take an unexpected turn.

Bormann and his followers have also used fantasy theme analysis to improve organizational communication, conduct market research, and assess public opinion. To illustrate the pragmatic value of the methodology, John Cragan (Illinois State University) and Donald Shields (University of Missouri–St. Louis) require students in their applied research classes to analyze the way that high school seniors talk about college. They find that most rhetorical visions employ one of three competing master analogues—a righteous vision, a social vision, or a pragmatic vision.[25]

Potential applicants who embrace a *righteous* vision are interested in a school's academic excellence, the reputation of its faculty, and special programs that it offers. Those who adopt a *social* vision view college as a means of getting away from home, meeting new friends, and joining others in a variety of social activities. High school seniors who buy into a *pragmatic* vision are looking for a marketable degree that will help them get a good job. (What was your vision when you entered college?) Knowledge of these distinct visions could help admissions officers at your school develop a strategy to appeal to high school students who would most appreciate the character of their campus. That knowledge could also help you figure out if you're at a school that can best meet your needs.

CRITIQUE: JUDGING SCT AS BOTH A SCIENTIFIC AND INTERPRETIVE THEORY

Ernest Bormann claimed that symbolic convergence theory is both objective and interpretive. The theory's basic explanatory hypothesis—*sharing group fantasies creates symbolic convergence*—is framed as a universal principle that holds for all people, in any culture, at any time, in any communication context.[26] Definitely objective. But the methodology of determining fantasy themes, fantasy types,

and rhetorical visions is rhetorical criticism—a humanistic approach that's undeniably interpretive. Perhaps this unusual mix has stimulated many of the 1,000 original research studies that have examined and applied the theory over the last 40 years.[27] Bormann wryly noted that one positive result from SCT has been the collaboration between "muddleheaded anecdotalists and hardheaded empiricists."[28] When the six standards for judging a social science theory and the six criteria for evaluating an interpretive theory are applied to SCT, the theory stacks up remarkably well. I'll single out four of these benchmarks for further discussion.

1. *A good objective theory explains what occurs and why it happened.* The concept of symbolic convergence can help us make sense of chaotic group discussions. Even though group leaders urge members to *speak one at a time* and *stick to the point*, participants often go off on verbal tangents. According to SCT, graphic digressions and boisterous talk aren't signs of a flawed process; rather, they are evidence that the group is chaining out a fantasy and developing a group consciousness. This explanation of how groups become cohesive is a strength of the theory. However, Boston College communication professor James Olufowote doesn't believe Bormann's explanation goes far enough. In a sympathetic critique aimed at making the theory better, he contends that "SCT does not sufficiently explain why humans are predisposed to dramatizing reality and sharing fantasy in the first place."[29]

2. *A good objective theory predicts what's going to happen.* SCT clearly predicts that when a fantasy chain erupts among members, symbolic convergence will occur. The theory even suggests that without shared fantasies, there will be no cohesiveness. But as discussed earlier in the chapter, SCT researchers have had little success predicting when a dramatizing message will trigger a chain reaction. Bormann noted that uncertainty about the future isn't bothersome in other scientific theories. He saw symbolic convergence theory as similar to Darwin's biological theory of evolution in that respect.

> An evolutionary theory can explain the way modern humans evolved from earlier humanoid individuals. But, such theories cannot predict the future path of evolution. . . . SCT involves a careful cataloguing of group consciousness through time. The theory also includes a description of the dynamic forces that provide a necessary and sufficient set of causes to explain the discovered communication patterns. For an evolution theory the dynamic may be the survival of the fittest. For SCT the dynamic is the process of group sharing.[30]

3. *A good interpretive theory clarifies people's values.* There's no doubt that fantasy theme analysis uncovers the values of a rhetorical community. It does that well. But Olufowote is concerned about the unexamined values that undergird SCT.[31] One concern is an ideology of convergence. The terms that describe its effects—*common ground, meeting of the minds, empathic communion,* etc.—make it clear that the theory has a pro-social bias. Shall we look at the convergence of hate groups or pro-eating disorder websites as a positive outcome?

A second concern Olufowote expresses is an egalitarian assumption that ignores issues of power within groups. For example, do all members of a group benefit equally when a fantasy chains out? Does an *inside joke* become a symbolic cue at the expense of one of the members? A final concern is about the way members of a rhetorical community are characterized. The communities described

come across as conflict-free, differences among members are ignored, and there's little discussion of the inner tension a member feels when the multiple rhetorical visions he or she embraces don't mesh.

4. *A good interpretive theory offers a new understanding of people.* SCT's method of fantasy theme analysis does this exceptionally well by directing rhetorical critics to focus on symbolic language. A few scholars charge that the best fantasy theme analyses are the result of critics' astute perception or acumen rather than the method they use.[32] Bormann acknowledged that some critics do it better than others. But he noted that regardless of how perceptive the critic, the method used makes a huge difference. For example, a Marxist critique looks for economic exploitation; a feminist critique looks for patterns of male dominance. Think how different the analyses of cigar store smokers or pro-eating disorder message-board users would be if DeSantis or McCabe hadn't zeroed in on imaginative language. With that lens in place, fantasy theme analysts uncover rhetorical visions as varied as the communities they study. When I read a well-written fantasy theme analysis, I gain a greater appreciation for the fascinating diversity within the human race.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. As a rhetorically sensitive scholar, Bormann defined SCT terms carefully. Can you distinguish the difference between *dramatizing messages* and *fantasies?* Do you understand why it's a difference that makes a difference?

2. Some critics dismiss SCT as a cookie-cutter approach to group analysis. Could this be said of most social science theories? Bormann regarded the charge as a compliment.[33] Can you figure out why he was pleased rather than offended?

3. Bormann insisted that SCT is an objective theory that's valid *any time* and in *any culture,* but that its methodology, *fantasy theme analysis,* is interpretive. Do you regard SCT as a better *objective* or *interpretive* theory? Why?

4. Bormann was intrigued with a T-shirt that proclaims, "I have given up my search for truth. Now I want to find a good fantasy."[34] Based on what you've read, does this slogan reflect the *symbolic world* of SCT advocates? Does it reflect yours?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Ernest G. Bormann, John Cragan, and Donald Shields, "Three Decades of Developing, Grounding, and Using Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT)," in *Communication Yearbook 25,* William Gudykunst (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2001, pp. 271–313.

Brief summary: Ernest Bormann, "Symbolic Convergence Theory," in *Small Group Communication Theory & Practice: An Anthology,* 8th ed., Randy Hirokawa, Robert Cathcart, Larry Samovar, and Linda Henman (eds.), Roxbury, Los Angeles, CA, 2003, pp. 39–47.

Early statement of the theory: Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vol. 58, 1972, pp. 396–407.

Small-group context: Ernest G. Bormann and Nancy C. Bormann, *Effective Small Group Communication,* 5th ed., Burgess, Edina, MN, 1992, pp. 105–126.

Organizational context: Ernest G. Bormann, "Symbolic Convergence: Organizational Communication and Culture," in *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach,* Linda Putnam and Michael Pacanowsky (eds.), Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1983, pp. 99–122.

Fantasy theme analysis: Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice,* 4th ed., Waveland, Prospect Heights, IL, 2009, pp. 97–136.

Practical applications of assessing rhetorical visions: John F. Cragan and Donald C. Shields, *Symbolic Theories in Applied Communication Research: Bormann, Burke, and Fisher,* Hampton, Cresskill, NJ, 1995, pp. 161–198.

Cigar store ethnography: Alan D. DeSantis, "Smoke Screen: An Ethnographic Study of a Cigar Shop's Collective Rationalization," *Health Communication,* Vol. 14, 2002, pp. 167–198.

Pro-eating disorder website analysis: Jessi McCabe, "Resisting Alienation: The Social Construction of Internet Communities Supporting Eating Disorders," *Communication Studies,* Vol. 60, 2009, pp. 1–15.

Early critique: G. P. Mohrmann, "An Essay on Fantasy Theme Criticism" and "Fantasy Theme Criticism: A Peroration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vol. 68, 1982, pp. 109–132, 306–313.

Response to early critics: Ernest G. Bormann, John Cragan, and Donald Shields, "In Defense of Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Look at the Theory and Its Criticisms After Two Decades," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 4, 1994, pp. 259–294.

Contemporary critique: James O. Olufowote, "Rousing and Redirecting a Sleeping Giant: Symbolic Convergence Theory and Complexities in the Communicative Constitution of Collective Action," *Management Communication Quarterly,* Vol. 19, 2006, pp. 451–492.

Will our group stay like this or will it change?
That question is answered by Poole's Adaptive Structuration Theory,
which appeared in previous editions. Click on Theory List at
www.afirstlook.com.

Organizational Communication

What do the following organizations have in common—the *United States Navy, McDonald's, General Motors,* and the *Green Bay Packers*? The first three are gigantic organizations, the middle two sell a tangible product, and the last three are publicly owned corporations that try to make a profit. But in terms of organizational communication, their most important common feature is that each is a prime example of *classical management theory* in action. Figure OC–1 lists some of the principles of this traditional approach to management.

The Mechanistic Approach. Classical management theory places a premium on productivity, precision, and efficiency. As York University (Toronto) distinguished research professor Gareth Morgan notes, these are the very qualities that you expect from a well-designed, smoothly running machine. Morgan uses the machine metaphor because he finds significant parallels between mechanical devices and the way managers traditionally think about their organizations.[1] In classical management theory, workers are seen as cogs in vast machines that function smoothly as long as their range of motion is clearly defined and their actions are lubricated with an adequate hourly wage.

Machines repeat straightforward, repetitive tasks, just as McDonald's workers have cooked more than 100 billion hamburgers, each one in exactly the same way. Machines have interchangeable parts that can be replaced when broken or worn out, just as a National Football League coach can insert a new player into the tight-end slot when the current starter is injured or begins to slow down. A new Chevrolet comes with a thick operator's manual that specifies how the car should be driven, but the General Motors employees' handbook is thicker and contains even more detailed instructions on how things are done within the company. As for the U.S. Navy, the fleet is an integral part of the country's war machine, and officers at every level are most comfortable when it runs like one.

Unity of command—an employee should receive orders from only one superior.

Scalar chain—the line of authority from superior to subordinate, which runs from top to bottom of the organization; this chain, which results from the unity-of-command principle, should be used as a channel for communication and decision making.

Division of work—management should aim to achieve a degree of specialization designed to achieve the goal of the organization in an efficient manner.

Authority and responsibility—attention should be paid to the right to give orders and to exact obedience; an appropriate balance between authority and responsibility should be achieved.

Discipline—obedience, application, energy, behavior, and outward marks of respect in accordance with agreed rules and customs.

Subordination of individual interest to general interest—through firmness, example, fair agreements, and constant supervision.

FIGURE OC–1 Selected Principles of Classical Management Theory
Excerpted from Gareth Morgan, "Organizations as Machines" in *Images of Organizations*

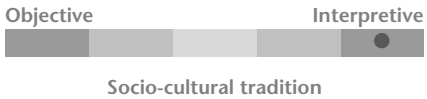
"Human Resources."

© Peter Steiner/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

Both theories in this section view classical management theory as outmoded and reject the mechanistic analogies on which bureaucratic organizations are based. The theorists offer alternative ways of thinking about organizing people and the tasks they do. Each approach is based on a different image of the organization that counters the dominant machine model. The *cultural approach* looks for shared meanings that are unique to a given organization. The *critical approach* looks at organizations as political systems where conflict and power should be negotiated openly.

Karl Weick sees organizations as living organisms that must adapt or die. His information systems approach is a third alternative to mechanistic thinking. For his theory covered in previous editions, click on Theory List at *www.afirstlook.com.*

CHAPTER 20



Cultural Approach to Organizations

of Clifford Geertz & Michael Pacanowsky

Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun."[1] He pictures culture as those webs. In order to travel across the strands toward the center of the web, an outsider must discover the common interpretations that hold the web together. Culture is shared meaning, shared understanding, shared sensemaking.

Geertz has conducted field research in the islands of Indonesia and on the Moroccan highlands, rural settings remote from industrial activity. His best-known monograph is an in-depth symbolic analysis of the Balinese cockfight. Geertz has never written a treatise on the bottom line, never tried to decipher the significance of the office Christmas party, and never met a payroll—a disqualifying sin in the eyes of many business professionals. Despite his silence on the topic of big business, Geertz' interpretive approach has proved useful in making sense of organizational activity.

In the field of communication, former University of Colorado professor Michael Pacanowsky has applied Geertz' cultural insights to organizational life. He says that if culture consists of webs of meaning that people have spun, and if spun webs imply the act of spinning, "then we need to concern ourselves not only with the structures of cultural webs, but with the process of their spinning as well."[2] That process is communication. It is communication that "creates and constitutes the taken-for-granted reality of the world."[3]

CULTURE AS A METAPHOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

The use of culture as a root metaphor was undoubtedly stimulated by Western fascination with the economic success of Japanese corporations in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then, when American business leaders traveled to the Far East to study methods of production, they discovered that the superior quantity and quality of Japan's industrial output had less to do with technology than with

workers' shared cultural value of loyalty to each other and to their corporation. Organizations look radically different depending on how people in the host culture structure meaning. Communal face-saving in Japan is foreign to the class antagonism of Great Britain or the we're-number-one competitive mindset of the United States.

Today the term *corporate culture* means different things to different people. Some observers use the phrase to describe the surrounding environment that constrains a company's freedom of action. (U.S. workers would scoff at singing a corporate anthem at the start of their working day.) Others use the term to refer to a quality or property of the organization. (Acme Gizmo is a friendly place to work.) They speak of *culture* as synonymous with *image, character,* or *climate*. But Pacanowsky is committed to Geertz' symbolic approach and thus considers culture as more than a single variable in organizational research:

> Organizational culture is not just another piece of the puzzle; it is the puzzle. From our point of view, culture is not something an organization has; a culture is something an organization is.[4]

WHAT CULTURE IS; WHAT CULTURE IS NOT

Geertz admits that the concept of culture as *systems of shared meaning* is somewhat vague and difficult to grasp. Unlike popular usage, which equates culture with concerts and art museums, he refuses to use the word to signify *less primitive*. No modern anthropologist would fall into the trap of classifying people as high- or low-culture.

Culture
Webs of significance; systems of shared meaning.

Culture is not whole or undivided. Geertz points out that even close-knit societies have subcultures and countercultures within their boundaries. For example, employees in the sales and accounting departments of the same company may eye each other warily—the first group calling the accountants *number crunchers* and *bean counters*, the accountants in turn labeling members of the sales force *fast talkers* and *glad-handers*. Despite their differences, both groups may regard the blue-collar bowling night of the production workers as a strange ritual compared with their own weekend ritual of a round of golf.

For Pacanowsky, the web of organizational culture is the residue of employees' performances—"those very actions by which members constitute and reveal their culture to themselves and to others."[5] He notes that job performance may play only a minor role in the enactment of corporate culture.

Cultural performance
Actions by which members constitute and reveal their culture to themselves and others; an ensemble of texts.

> People do get the job done, true (though probably not with the singleminded task-orientation communication texts would have us believe); but people in organizations also gossip, joke, knife one another, initiate romantic involvements, cue new employees to ways of doing the least amount of work that still avoids hassles from a supervisor, talk sports, arrange picnics.[6]

Geertz calls these cultural performances "an ensemble of texts . . . which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulder of those to whom they properly belong."[7] The elusive nature of culture prompts Geertz to label its study a *soft science*. It is "not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[8] The corporate observer is one part scientist, one part drama critic.

The fact that symbolic expression requires interpretation is nicely captured in a story about Pablo Picasso recorded by York University (Toronto) professor Gareth Morgan.[9] A man commissioned Picasso to paint a portrait of his wife. Startled by the nonrepresentational image on the canvas, the woman's husband complained, "It isn't how she really looks." When asked by the painter how she really looked, the man produced a photograph from his wallet. Picasso's comment: "Small, isn't she?"

THICK DESCRIPTION: WHAT ETHNOGRAPHERS DO

Ethnography
Mapping out social discourse; discovering who people within a culture think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it.

Geertz refers to himself as an *ethnographer*. You'll recall that I first introduced his name when I presented ethnography as one of the four main communication research methodologies (see Chapter 3). Just as geographers chart the physical territory, ethnographers map out social discourse. They do this "to discover who people think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it."[10] There's no shortcut for the months of participant observation required to collect an exhaustive account of interaction. Without that raw material, there would be nothing to interpret.

Geertz spent years in Indonesia and Morocco, developing his deep description of separate cultures. Pacanowsky initially invested nine months with W. L. Gore & Associates, best known for its Gore-Tex line of sports clothing and equipment. Like Geertz, he was completely open about his research goals, and during the last five months of his research he participated fully in problem-solving conferences at the company. Later, Pacanowsky spent additional time at the W. L. Gore plants in Delaware as a consultant. In order to become intimately familiar with an organization *as members experience it*, ethnographers must commit to the long haul. Later, Pacanowsky committed to the long haul of working full time at Gore, this despite his earlier caution against "going native." He had previously warned that the researcher must

> maintain a posture of radical naïveté and allow himself or herself to experience organizational life as "strange," so that he or she will be sure to prompt organizational members for the resources (or knowledge) they are drawing upon which allow them to take for granted those very same organizational experiences.[11]

Thick description
Arecor d of the intertwined layers of common meaning that underlie what a particular people say and do.

The daily written accounts of intensive observation invariably fill the pages of many ethnographic notebooks. The visual image of these journals stacked on top of each other would be sufficient justification for Geertz to refer to ethnography as *thick description*. The term, however, describes the intertwined layers of common meaning that underlie what a particular people say and do. Thick descriptions are powerful reconstructions, not just detailed observations.[12] Since Geertz popularized the concept, most ethnographers realize that their task is to:

1. Accurately describe talk and actions and the context in which they occur.
2. Capture the thoughts, emotions, and web of social interactions.
3. Assign motivation, intention, or purpose to what people say and do.
4. Artfully write this up so readers feel they've experienced the events.
5. Interpret what happened; explain what it means within this culture.[13]

Thick description is tracing the many strands of a cultural web and tracking evolving meaning. No matter how high the stack of an ethnographer's notes, without interpretation, they would still be *thin* description.

Thick description starts with a state of bewilderment. *What the devil's going on?* Geertz asks himself as he wades into a new culture. The only way to reduce the puzzlement is to observe as if one were a stranger in a foreign land. This can be difficult for a manager who is already enmeshed in a specific corporate culture. He or she might overlook many of the signs that point to common interpretation. Worse, the manager might assume that office humor or the company grapevine has the same significance for people in this culture as it does for those in a previous place of employment. Geertz says it will always be different.

Behaviorists would probably consider employee trips to the office water-cooler or coffee machine of little interest. If they did regard these breaks worth studying, they would tend to note the number of trips and length of stay for each worker. Ethnographers would be more interested in the significance this seemingly mundane activity had for these particular employees. Instead of a neat statistical summary, they'd record pages of dialogue while workers were standing around with a cup in their hands. Pacanowsky fears that a frequency count would only bleach human behavior of the very properties that interest him. Classifying performances across organizations would yield superficial generalizations at the cost of localized insight. He'd rather find out what makes a particular tribal culture unique.

Although Pacanowsky would pay attention to all cultural performances, he would be particularly sensitive to the imaginative language members used, the stories they told, and the nonverbal rites and rituals they practiced. Taken together, these three forms of communication provide helpful access to the unique shared meanings within an organization.

METAPHORS: TAKING LANGUAGE SERIOUSLY

Metaphor
Clarifies what is unknown or confusing by equating it with an image that's more familiar or vivid.

When used by members throughout an organization (and not just management), *metaphors* can offer the ethnographer a starting place for accessing the shared meaning of a corporate culture. Pacanowsky records a number of prominent metaphors used at W. L. Gore & Associates, none more significant than the oft-heard reference within the company to Gore as a *lattice organization*.[14] If one tried to graph the lines of communication at Gore, the map would look like a lattice rather than the traditional pyramid-shaped organizational chart. The crosshatched lines would show the importance of one-on-one communication and reflect the fact that no person within the company needs permission to talk to anyone else. Easy access to others is facilitated by an average plant size of 150 employees, with voice mail and paging systems that encourage quick responses.

This lack of hierarchical authority within the lattice organization is captured in the egalitarian title of *associate* given to every worker. People do have differential status at Gore, but it comes from technical expertise, a track record of good judgment, and evidence of follow-through that leads to accomplishment.

The company's stated objective (singular) is "to make money and have fun."[15] The founder, Bill Gore, was famous for popping into associates' offices and asking, "Did you make any money today? Did you have any fun today?" But work at Gore is not frivolous. The *waterline* operating principle makes it clear that associates should check with others before making significant decisions:

> Each of us will consult with appropriate Associates who will share the responsibility of taking any action that has the potential of serious harm to the reputation, success, or survival of the Enterprise. The analogy is that our Enterprise is like a ship that we are all in together. Boring holes above the waterline is not serious, but below the waterline, holes could sink us.[16]

After nine months of studying communication performances at W. L. Gore & Associates, Pacanowsky floated three different metaphors of his own to describe crucial features of that unique culture.[17] He thought of Gore as a *cluster of peasant villages* in its passion for decentralization and its extraordinary orality. He saw Gore like a *large improvisational jazz group* because of its attraction for people who love to create something new but still want to fit in with other like-minded players. And he compared the people at Gore to *factions in Colonial America* inasmuch as the majority of associates thought that the company's innovative charter was the best thing since the invention of the wheel, yet a significant minority were cynical about the idealistic goals. For both the discovery and the communication of corporate culture, ethnographers find metaphor a valuable tool.

When Kevin read about the emphasis that Pacanowsky placed on metaphors, he analyzed their use among fellow computer-savvy student employees at Wheaton:

> As a student worker at ResNet, the technical support branch of our campus Internet service provider, I have become aware of our corporate culture. One thing I have noticed is we often talk about our department using the metaphor of a fortress wall. Computing Services makes decisions and institutes policy, and it's our responsibility to handle the waves of students with resulting problems. We talk about "stemming the flow" of students with problems and "manning the phones" or "manning the desk." We also talk about how we "take the blow" for the decisions of our superiors.

This realization later served Kevin and Wheaton students well when, after graduation, Kevin was hired to be the manager of the ResNet program. Desiring to change the fortress mentality that had permeated the organization, Kevin in effect "lowered the drawbridge" to give students easy access to computer help. He extended hours into the evening, established help desks in each of the dorms, and did away with the keypad locked door that had prevented face-to-face contact with frustrated users. Two years later, ResNet workers talked about themselves as guiding students on paths through a jungle—a more proactive metaphor that suggests the culture has changed.

THE SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF STORY

Stories that are told over and over provide a convenient window through which to view corporate webs of significance. Pacanowsky asks, "Has a good story been told that takes you to the heart of the matter?"[18] He focuses on the scriptlike qualities of narratives that portray an employee's part in the company play. Although workers have room to improvise, the anecdotes provide clues as to what it means to perform a task in this particular theater. Stories capture memorable performances and pass on the passion the actor felt at the time.

Corporate stories
Talesth at carry management ideology and reinforce company policy.

Personal stories
Talesto ld by employees that put them in a favorablelight .

Pacanowsky suggests three types of narrative that dramatize organizational life. *Corporate stories* carry the ideology of management and reinforce company policy. Every McDonald's franchisee hears about the late Ray Kroc, who, when he was chairman of the board, picked up trash from the parking lot when he'd visit a store.

Personal stories are those that company personnel tell about themselves, often defining how they would like to be seen within the organization. If you've seen NBC's hit television comedy *The Office*, you've witnessed Dwight Schrute's interviews with the camera crew. During these interviews, he talks about his excellence as an employee and how he deserves the respect of others in the Dunder Mifflin paper company. These are Dwight's personal accounts.

Collegial stories
Positiveo r negative anecdotes about others in the organization; descriptions of how things "reallyw ork."

Collegial stories are positive or negative anecdotes told about others in the organization. When the camera crew interviews Dwight's colleagues Jim and Pam, we hear stories of Dwight's eccentricity and lack of basic social awareness. These collegial stories describe Dwight as someone who is not to be taken seriously. Since these tales aren't usually sanctioned by management, collegial accounts pass on how the organization "really works."

Stories at Dixie

Throughout most of my life, I've had access to some of the cultural lore of Dixie Communications, a medium-size corporation that operates a newspaper and a television station in a Southern city. Like so many other regional companies, Dixie has been taken over by an out-of-state corporation that has no local ties. The following three narratives are shorthand versions of stories heard again and again throughout the company.

> Although the original publisher has been dead for many years, old-timers fondly recall how he would spend Christmas Eve with the workers in the press room. Their account is invariably linked with reminders that he initiated health benefits and profit sharing prior to any union demand. (Corporate story)

> The current comptroller is the highest-ranking "local boy" in the corporation. He often tells the story about the first annual audit he performed long before computers were installed. Puzzled when he ran across a bill for 50 pounds of pigeon feed, he discovered that the company used homing pigeons to send in news copy and circulation orders from a town across the bay. The story usually concludes with an editorial comment about pigeons being more reliable than the new machines. His self-presentation reminds listeners that he has always been cost-conscious, yet it also aligns him with the human side of the "warm people versus cold machines" issue. (Personal story)

> Shortly after the takeover, a department head encouraged the new publisher to meet with his people for a few minutes at the end of the day. The new boss declined the invitation on the grounds of efficiency: "To be quite candid, I don't want to know about a woman's sick child or a man's vacation plans. That kind of information makes it harder to fire a person." Spoken in a cold, superior tone, the words *quite candid* are always part of the story. (Collegial story)

Both Geertz and Pacanowsky caution against any analysis that says, "This story means. . . ." Narratives contain a mosaic of significance and defy a simplistic, one-on-one translation of symbols. Yet taken as a whole, the three stories reveal an uneasiness with the new management. This interpretation is consistent with repeated metaphorical references to the old Dixie as *family* and the new Dixie as *a faceless computer*.

Fiction as a Form of Scholarly Discourse

Not only has Pacanowsky shown that narratives are a prime source of cultural wisdom for the ethnographer, he has also demonstrated that scholars can use a fictional format to convey the results of their research. In the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Pacanowsky published an imaginative account that captures the angst felt within a subculture of academics. In the introduction he claims that "fictional descriptions, by the very nature of their implicitness and impressionism can fully capture (can I be so strong?) both the bold outlines and the

Slouching Towards Chicago

He and Radner were such different people, and they were not really close friends. But at every convention, they would get together over dinner and appraise their professional careers and personal lives in a surpisingly intimate manner. One year, Radner had side-splitting tales to tell of his affair with the wife of his department chairman. The next year, he cried as he worked his way through the details of his divorce. For his part, Jack was inclined to reflect on the transitions of his life—how strangely happy he was to have gotten married in a church, how being a father brought him to heights of joy and depths of anger he'd never before felt capable of experiencing, how he would become seized by intense physical cold on those occasions when he really thought about his father's death. "Our lives in review" was the way Jack thought about those dinners with Radner.

"You know," said Radner, "in seven years, I have authored or co-authored 48 convention papers, and published 14 articles in refereed journals, and had 10 chapters invited for various textbooks and readers. . . But you're a known item in the field. People read your work. They talk about it. They get worked up about it. I mean, I hate to admit it, but it's true. Nobody really gets worked up about my stuff. But your stuff—"

"Hype. I get calls in the night from 24-year-old groundbreakers-to-be who can't add. 'I have to put together my prospectus and I don't want to do a traditional, quantitative study, and I read your article in *QJ*, and I wondered if you could send me anything else you've written that I can use to, you know, develop my position, I mean, everybody here is so traditional, I don't know if they'll let me do an interpretive study . . .' on and on."

"But that's what I mean. People get excited."

"I don't. You know what I want? What I want more than 70 articles or people getting excited or calling me up? What I want is to write one good solid book-length piece of interpretive research. No more diddly articles. No more 'this is what we should be doing.' Just one solid book. And then I'd get excited."

"Why don't you then?"

"I can't!" Jack pounded the table with his fist. "I gotta worry about tenure. I gotta worry about building my vita. So I piss away my time on these damned convention papers, on these 'take-a-potshot-at-the-other-guy' articles instead of—"

"Oh, come on. You're going to get tenure. Why don't you stop doing this other shit and work on a book?"

It was not a question that Jack had never heard before, not with the frequency with which he would launch into his 'pissing my life away' refrain. But maybe it was because it was during "life in review" that the question suddenly hit him with a force and an eerieness that he hadn't felt before. He was silent for a moment. "Because," he said finally, shaken with the realization, "I don't know if I really have it in me to write a book. And it scares me to think I might find that out."

FIGURE 20–1 Excerpt from "Slouching Towards Chicago" by Michael Pacanowsky

crucial nuances of cultural ethos."[19] Figure 20–1 features an excerpt of a fictional conversation between two communication professors during an annual convention. Nick Trujillo, a co-author with Pacanowsky on other organizational culture articles, refers to the piece as a *confessional tale*.[20]

RITUAL: THIS IS THE WAY IT'S ALWAYS BEEN AND ALWAYS WILL BE

Geertz wrote about the Balinese rite of cockfighting because the contest represented more than a game. "It is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually it is men." The cockfight is a dramatization of status. "Its function is interpretive: It is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves."[21]

Ritual
Texts that articulate multiple aspects of cultural life, often marking rites of passage or life transitions.

Pacanowsky agrees with Geertz that some rituals (like the Balinese cockfight) are "texts" that articulate *multiple* aspects of cultural life.[22] These rituals are nearly sacred, and any attempt to change them meets with strong resistance. Although the emphasis on improvisation and novelty reduces the importance of ritual at Gore, organizational rites at more traditional companies weave together many threads of corporate culture.

More than a generation ago, workers in the classified advertising department at Dixie created an integrative rite that survives to the present. The department is staffed by more than 50 telephone sales representatives who work out of a large common room. At Dixie, these representatives not only take the "two lines/two days/two dollars" personal ads over the phone, they also initiate callbacks to find out if customers were successful and might want to sell other items. Compared with similar operations at other papers, classified advertising at Dixie is a major profit center with low employee turnover. The department continues to have the *family atmosphere* of premerger Dixie. Most of the phone representatives are women under the age of 40. They regard Max, the male manager who has held his position for 35 years, as a *father confessor*—a warm, nonjudgmental person who has genuine concern for their lives. Whenever a female employee has a baby, Max visits her in the hospital and offers help to those at home preparing for her return. Women announce their pregnancy by taping a dime within a large picture frame on the outer wall of Max' office, inscribing their name and anticipated day of delivery. This rite of integration serves multiple functions for the women:

> At a time of potential anxiety, it is an occasion for public affirmation from the larger community.
>
> The rite is a point of contact between work and those outside Dixie. Employees often take pride in describing the ritual to customers and friends.
>
> Although the dime-on-the-wall practice originated with the workers, the authorized chronicle of decades of expected births proclaims a sense of permanence. It says, in effect: "The company doesn't consider motherhood a liability; your job will be here when you get back."

From the management's standpoint, the rite ensures that there will be no surprises. Max has plenty of time to schedule the employee's maternity leave, arrange for another salesperson to cover her accounts, and anticipate stresses that she might be encountering.

It is tempting to read economic significance into the fact that employees use dimes to symbolize this major change in their lives. But the women involved refer to the small size of the token rather than its monetary value. Geertz and Pacanowsky would caution that this is *their* story; we should listen to *their* interpretation.

CAN THE MANAGER BE AN AGENT OF CULTURAL CHANGE?

The popularity of the cultural metaphor when it was first introduced to the corporate world in the 1980s was undoubtedly due to business leaders' desire to shape interpretation within the organization. Symbols are the tools of management. Executives don't operate forklifts or produce widgets; they cast vision, state goals, process information, send memos, and engage in other symbolic behavior. If they believe that culture is the key to worker commitment, productivity, and sales, the possibility of changing culture becomes a seductive idea.

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Creating favorable metaphors, planting organizational stories, and establishing rites would seem an ideal way to create a corporate myth that would serve managerial interests.

But once a corporate culture exists, can it be altered by a manager? Geertz regards shared interpretations as naturally emerging from all members of a group rather than consciously engineered by leaders. In *The Office*, Jim, Pam, Stanley, and Phyllis all play a part in developing their corporate culture. And you'll notice that, despite his best efforts, manager Michael Scott can't alter it single-handedly. Managers may articulate a new vision in a fresh vocabulary, but it is the workers who smile, sigh, snicker, or scoff. For example, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which will be discussed in Chapter 22, was powerful because he struck a chord that was already vibrating within millions of listeners.

Shared meanings are hard to dispel. Symbol watchers within a company quickly discount the words of management if they don't square with performance. But even if culture *could* be changed, there still remains the question of whether it *should* be. Symbolic anthropologists have traditionally adopted a nonintrusive style appropriate to examining fine crystal—look, admire, but don't touch. So managers who regard themselves as agents of cultural change create bull-in-a-china-shop fears for ethnographers who have ethical concerns about how their corporate analyses might be used. University of Massachusetts management professor Linda Smircich notes that ethnographers would draw back in horror at the idea of using their data to extend a tribal priest's control over the population, yet most communication consultants are hired by top management to do just that.[23]

CRITIQUE: IS THE CULTURAL APPROACH USEFUL?

The cultural approach adopts and refines the qualitative research methodology of ethnography to gain a new understanding of a specific group of people. A crucial part of that understanding is a clarification of values within the culture under study. Ethnographers are also clear about the value they place on being nonjudgmental in their interpretation. Today, however, there isn't the excitement about the cultural approach to organizations that there was when interpretive scholars introduced it in the 1980s. Perhaps that's because many researchers trained in organizational communication are hired as consultants by corporate managers who are looking for change. By now you understand that Geertz

would regard the quest to alter culture as both inappropriate and virtually impossible. This purist position exposes him and his admirers within our discipline to criticism from corporate consultants who not only desire to understand organizational communication but also want to influence it.

A different kind of objection comes from critical theorists who fault the cultural approach because interpretive scholars like Geertz and Pacanowsky refuse to evaluate the customs that they portray. For example, if Pacanowsky were to discover that female associates at Gore hit a glass ceiling when they try to advance, these advocates insist that he should *expose* and *deplore* this injustice rather than merely *describe* and *interpret* it for readers.[24]

For researchers who take a cultural approach to organizational life, both of these objections miss the point of their work. Contrary to the traditional aims of consultants paid by the organizations they study, the purpose of ethnography is not to change the organization or help managers exert more control. Nor is it to pass moral judgment or reform society. The goal of symbolic analysis is to create a better understanding of what it takes to function effectively within a culture. In most organizations, members are free to decide whether they want to belong. A sensitive cultural analysis could help them make an intelligent choice.

There might be another reason why interest in the cultural approach has waned in the last decades. In Chapter 3, I cited *aesthetic appeal* as one of the criteria for a good interpretive theory. The force of an ethnographic analysis depends in large measure on the prose in which it's couched. In the *Times Literary Supplement* (U.K.), T. M. Luhrmann gives testimony to the compelling power of Geertz' writing: "Rarely has there been a social scientist who has also been so acute a writer; perhaps there has never been one so quotable."[25] Indeed, Geertz' interpretation of a Balinese cockfight reads like an engrossing novel that the reader can't put down. Though Pacanowsky writes well, it may not be until a perceptive ethnographer with Geertz' compelling way with words focuses on organizational life that the cultural approach will spark renewed interest.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Based on the concept of organizational culture as a system of *shared meaning*, how would you describe the culture at your school to a prospective student?

2. Consider Pacanowsky's "Slouching Towards Chicago" as an *ethnographer's thick description.* What can you deduce about Jack and Radner's subculture from the fragment of narrative in Figure 20–1?

3. Think of your extended family as an *organizational culture.* What family *ritual* might you analyze to *interpret* the webs of significance you share for someone visiting your home?

4. What favorite *story* do you tell others about your most recent place of employment? Is it a *corporate, personal,* or *collegial* narrative?

SELF-QUIZ *www.mhhe.com/griffin8*

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* Basic Books, New York, 1973. (See especially "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," pp. 3–30; and "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," pp. 412–453.)

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Interpretive research: Bryan Taylor and Nick Trujillo, "Qualitative Research Methods," in *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication,* Fredric Jablin and Linda L. Putnam (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2001, pp. 161–194.

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CHAPTER 21

Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations

of Stanley Deetz

Based on a true story, the 1999 film *Erin Brockovich* dramatizes the four-year quest of a novice legal researcher to win compensation and damages for victims of corporate irresponsibility.[1] Played by Julia Roberts, who received the year's Best Actress Academy Award for her performance, Brockovich becomes an advocate for more than 600 people poisoned by water contaminated by Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E). As the story unfolds, Brockovich uncovers a series of managerial decisions that eventually cost the company $333 million—the largest judgment awarded in a direct-action lawsuit in U.S. history. Aimed at cutting corporate costs, these managerial moves also resulted in catastrophic health problems for the residents of Hinkley, California, and cost some of them their lives.

Like most producers of electricity, PG&E used water to cool the turbine blades of its generators. But it added a rust inhibitor containing hexavalent chromium to prolong the life of the blades. Unlike other chromium compounds that are benign or even beneficial, scientists have long known that chrome 6 is harmful to humans and animals. Highly toxic water was piped into unlined outdoor ponds, where it seeped into the ground and contaminated the well water in the nearby town. Long-term residents experienced chronic headaches and nosebleeds, bone deterioration, liver failure, lung failure, reproductive failure, heart failure, and many forms of lethal cancer.

Using the chrome 6 additive was a bad decision from the start. Internal company documents reveal that decades before the danger became public, managers in the San Francisco headquarters knew about the well water contamination. Deciding not to fix the problem was the second tragic decision. Directing Hinkley branch officials to say nothing about the contaminated water was the third. Company-paid doctors treated those who became ill but told patients that there was no connection between the generating plant and their illnesses. And when a regulatory board mandated an environmental cleanup, plant managers assured a

meeting of 200 concerned citizens that the chromium additive was harmless and even sent out a pamphlet saying that it was good for them. Actually, the water contained 10 times the allowable level of hexavalent chromium.

PG&E managers showed continual bad judgment when Ed Masry, the lawyer who employed Erin, tried to negotiate for a family in which the father had Hodgkin's disease and the mother faced a hysterectomy and a double mastectomy. They sent a low-level flunky who offered to buy their home for $250,000 but had no authority to negotiate or discuss health claims. Yet he apparently had been instructed to warn Ed and Erin that they were dealing with a $28 billion company. Big mistake. PG&E later had to pay that family $5 million.

Erin Brockovich is just one of many feature films about corporate managers who make decisions without regard for the negative consequences to their employees, consumers, or the general public—others include *The Informant, The Insider, Roger and Me, Silkwood,* and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room.* These movies tap a growing concern among Americans that something is wrong with the way decisions are reached at the highest levels of business. The modern corporation is protected from direct public control, yet it's the place where the crucial decisions that affect the everyday lives of citizens are made.

University of Colorado communication professor Stanley Deetz has developed a critical communication theory to explore ways to ensure the financial health of corporations while taking into account diverse—and often noneconomic—human interests. Deetz does this by first demonstrating how corporations have become political as well as economic institutions. He then employs advances in communication theory to point out how communication practices within corporations can distort decision making. Finally, he outlines how workplaces can become more productive and democratic through communication reforms.

CORPORATE COLONIZATION AND CONTROL OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Deetz views multinational corporations such as GM, AT&T, IBM, Time Warner, Disney, and Microsoft as the dominant force in society—more powerful than the church, state, or family in their ability to influence the lives of individuals. For example, more than 90 percent of the mass media outlets—newspaper, broadcast, cable, telephone, and satellite—are owned by just a handful of corporations.[2] Deetz notes that hourly reports of the Dow-Jones Industrial Average underscore the absence of an equivalent index of quality in the arts, health care, or the environment. Media preoccupation with corporate well-being makes President George W. Bush's post–9/11 equation of consumer spending with patriotism seem almost logical.

The corporate executive suite is the place where most decisions are made regarding the use of natural resources, development of new technologies, product availability, and working relations among people. Deetz says that corporations "control and colonize" modern life in ways that no government or public body since the feudal era ever thought possible.[3] Yet the fallout of corporate control is a sharp decrease in quality of life for the vast majority of citizens.

Corporate colonization Encroachment of modern corporations into every area of life outside the workplace.

Within the lifetime of most of today's college students, the average American workweek has increased from 40 to 50 hours, and leisure time has declined by a corresponding 10 hours. Despite the fact that 85 percent of families with children now have mothers working outside the home, their real standard of living

has *decreased* over the last two decades. The number of full-time workers whose income has fallen below the poverty line has doubled, yet compensation for chief executive officers (CEOs) has risen from 24 times to 290 times that of the average worker.[4] Deetz suggests that "we need to consider in depth what type of 'business' this is, who the moral claimants are, how privilege is organized, and what the possible democratic responses are."[5]

Deetz' theory of communication is *critical* in that he wants to critique the easy assumption that "what's good for General Motors is good for the country." More specifically, he wants to examine communication practices in organizations that undermine fully representative decision making and thus reduce the quality, innovation, and fairness of company policy.

INFORMATION OR COMMUNICATION: TRANSMISSION OR THE CREATION OF MEANING

Information model
A view that communication is merely a conduit for the transmission of information about the real world.

Deetz begins his analysis by challenging the view that communication is the transmission of information. Even though a majority of human communication scholars now dismiss the familiar source → message → channel → receiver conception of communication, the conduit model is still taken for granted in organizations and in everyday life. There's an intuitive appeal in the idea that words refer to real things—that by using the right words we can express state-of-the-art knowledge. As Deetz notes, "Clearly, the public really wants to believe in an independent reality."[6] He warns, however, that as long as we accept the notion that communication is merely the transmission of information, we will continue to perpetuate corporate dominance over every aspect of our lives.

Consider PG&E's annual report. The sanitized numbers present themselves as facts compiled and categorized according to "standard accounting procedures." But Deetz contends that each line item is *constitutive*—created by corporate decision makers who have the power to make their decisions stick. What seems to be value-free information is really meaning *in formation*. The end-of-the-year audit is not fact—it's artifact. All corporate information is an outcome of political processes that are usually undemocratic and have consequences that usually hurt democracy.

Communication model
A view that language is the principal medium through which social reality is created and sustained.

In place of the *information model* of messages, Deetz presents a *communication model* that regards language as the principal medium through which social reality is created and sustained. He states that "language does not represent things that already exist. In fact, language is a part of the production of the thing that we treat as being self-evident and natural within the society."[7] Humanists like I. A. Richards have long pointed out that meanings are in people, not in words (see Chapter 4). But Deetz moves even further away from a representational view of language when he raises the question, *Whose meanings are in people?* Once we accept that organizational forms are continually produced and reproduced through language, we'll understand that corporations like PG&E produce not only electricity, but also meaning.

People who adopt the lingo of big business may not be aware that they are putting corporate values into play. For example, the bottom line on a profit-and-loss statement is only that—the last line on the financial report. But a CEO's continual use of the term *bottom line* to justify all managerial decisions produces a perceived reality that shuts out nonfinancial considerations. When ordinary citizens begin to use this economic idiom to characterize the deciding or crucial factor in their own family decisions, they reinforce and

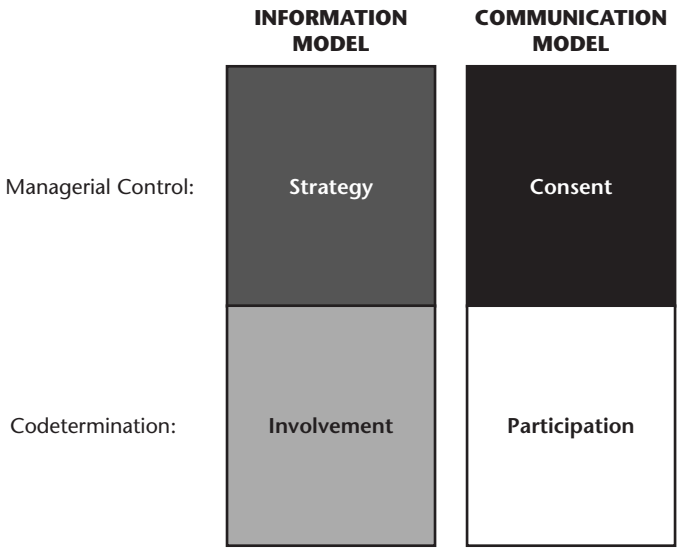


FIGURE 21–1 Two Approaches to Organizational Practice
Based on Deetz, *Transforming Communication, Transforming Business,* Chapter 7

expand the influence of corporate thinking in life without even realizing they are doing so.

Figure 21–1 contrasts Deetz' communication approach to organizational practices with an information approach that regards language as neutral and neutered. Like Pearce and Cronen (see Chapter 6), Deetz considers communication to be the ongoing social construction of meaning. But his critical theory differs from CMM in that he thinks the issue of power runs through all language and communication. Deetz would not be surprised that PG&E workers or residents of Hinkley had no say in the plant's environmental policies. He believes that managerial control often takes precedence over representation of conflicting interests and long-term company and community health.

> The fundamental issue in my analysis is control and how different groups are represented in decision making. . . . Since industrialization, managers in American corporations have primarily operated from a philosophy of control.[8]

The upper level of Figure 21–1 represents corporate decision processes that systematically exclude the voices of people who are directly affected by the decisions. Deetz labels this practice *managerial control*. The bottom half of the figure pictures decision processes that invite open dialogue among all stakeholders. Deetz calls this practice *codetermination*. When coupled with the constitutive view of communication, codetermination represents the "collaborative collective constructions of self, other, and the world"[9] that Deetz believes are the product of participatory democracy.

Codetermination
Collaborative decision making; participatory democracy in the workplace.

The 2 × 2 nature of Figure 21–1 yields four different ways in which public decisions—including corporate ones—can be made: *strategy, consent, involvement,* and *participation.* Deetz' analysis of these four corporate practices provides the core of his critique of managerialism.

STRATEGY: OVERT MANAGERIAL MOVES TO EXTEND CONTROL

Managerialism
A systematic logic, set of routine practices, and ideology that values control over all other concerns.

Consistent with Deetz' view of corporate control, *Erin Brockovich* never portrays a PG&E manager whom the viewer can despise. Deetz makes it clear that individual managers are not the problem. The real culprit is *managerialism*. Deetz describes managerialism as discourse based on "a kind of systematic logic, a set of routine practices, and ideology" that values control above all else.[10] Stockholders want profits and workers desire freedom, but management craves control.

Whenever there's a corporate disaster or scandal, the public and media look for a scapegoat or "bad apple" who's responsible. Deetz thinks that's shortsighted because it diverts attention away from a failed managerial system based on control. He cites social psychologist Philip Zimbardo's book The *Lucifer Effect*, which suggests we'd do well to stop talking about a few bad apples and look at the consequences of what happens when you put good people in bad barrels.[11]

Erin Brockovich offers a glimpse of managerial control when lawyer Ed teams up with a large corporate firm to pursue the legal actions against the power company. Although Erin is the one who did extensive research at the county water board and later spent months garnering signed complaints from all 634 adult residents of Hinkley, the "suits" at the large firm regard her as unprofessional and try to shut her out from their deliberations. Many workers experience that same dictatorial style in the expressed and implied messages that come down from the top:

> "Because I'm the boss."
> "Because I say so."
> "If you don't like it, quit."
> "It's my way or the highway."

Some employees do object by saying, in effect, "Take this job and shove it," but this doesn't increase representation. Choice is often limited to loyalty or exit—"love it or leave it." Without a voice, workers have no say in the decisions that affect them during the majority of their waking hours. Deetz argues that while control of this sort is disappearing in most enlightened corporations, new forms of control based in communication systems impede any real worker voice in structuring their work.

Stockholders face the same either/or dilemma. They can choose to hold their shares or sell them, but neither option offers a way to influence corporate policy. Although management presents itself as making decisions on behalf of stockholders (the owners), Deetz says that the interests of the two groups are often not the same. Because of stock options and "golden parachutes," top management has benefited more than any other group from the merger mania of the last two decades. Whereas long-term growth would help the average investor, quick profits and tight control of costs are the manager's ticket up the corporate ladder. Regardless of a company's product line or service, "control is the management product and is most clearly the one on which individual advancement rests."[12]

Initially, managers may regard efficiency as a means to the end of higher profits. Deetz is convinced, however, that the desire for control soon becomes a valued end in itself. The desire for control can even exceed the desire for corporate performance. Talking in terms of money is often more for control than respect for efficiency or profits.

> The control drive of managerialism seeks the medium of its extension, and money is it. . . . Everything that cannot be adequately translated into money is implicitly

> suppressed, and all competing rights of decisions regarding one's life are made marginal.[13]

Nowhere is this quest for control more apparent than in the corporate aversion to public conflict. The managerial rule of thumb seems to be that conflict is to be "dealt with" rather than openly discussed. Managers are rewarded for "putting out fires," "running a tight ship," or "making things run smoothly." The impersonal nature of these metaphors suggests that executives should place responsibility to the company ahead of personal feelings or ethical concerns. In the corporate context, claims of "company policy" and "just doing my job" provide sufficient moral justification for suppressing almost any act of employee resistance or dissent.

Other than accelerating advancement on the managerial career path, there is little evidence that strategic control has beneficial effects. Deetz claims that most corporate successes (or failures) are the result of factors beyond managerial control.[14] Control does have distinct disadvantages, however. The cost is high, and workers resent the constant surveillance. Frequent references to "clearing out the deadwood" or "trimming the fat" create an understandable jumpiness among employees, and sometimes their fear is acted out in covert rebellion, as illustrated in *Erin Brockovich*.

When the suit against PG&E appears to be dead in the water because there is no proof that the parent company knew what was going on, a man approaches Erin in a bar. He asks her what she would do if he told her he'd been ordered to shred documents about the toxic water when he worked at the local plant. The papers included a letter from corporate headquarters that says, in effect, *The water is poisonous, but it would be better for all involved if this weren't discussed with the community.* Erin asks him if he destroyed the papers as he was told to do. With a conspiratorial smile, he admits that he wasn't a very good employee. Because dominance creates this kind of resistance, most modern managers prefer to maintain control through the voluntary consent of the worker rather than by relying on the strategic use of raw power.

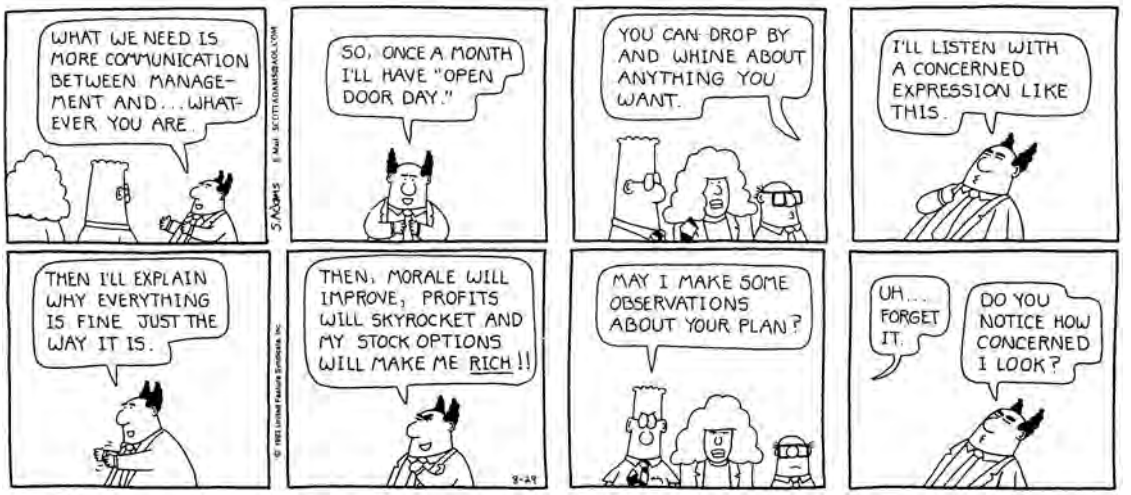
CONSENT: UNWITTING ALLEGIANCE TO COVERT CONTROL

Deetz is for capitalism, but he's convinced that corporations are unreasonable. "They expect more than a fair day's work for a fair day's pay; they want love, respect, and above all loyalty."[15] Even though the company gets the workers' most rested, alert, and chemical-free portion of the day, apparently that's not enough. Management insists that allegiance to the company should come before family, friends, church, and community. Through the process Deetz calls *consent*, most employees willingly give that loyalty without getting much in return. "Consent is the term I use to designate the variety of situations and processes in which someone actively, though unknowingly, accomplishes the interests of others in the faulty attempt to fulfill his or her own interests. The person is complicit in her or his own victimization."[16]

Consent
The process by which employees actively, though unknowingly, accomplish managerial interests in a faulty attempt to fulfill their own.

Lynn, a former student of mine, wrote an application log entry for Deetz' critical theory that poignantly captures the human cost of consent:

> My father was very loyal to his company in the interest of moving up the ladder for pay increases. When my brother and I were babies and toddlers, my family



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lived in four different places in three years because the company required that we move. Later on, my father spent much of his time traveling and lived in New York for over six months while the rest of us lived in Baltimore. During my high school years, he worked until about eight or nine o'clock in the evening even though it wasn't demanded of him. His entire department was often there because it was common practice to spend that much time getting the job done.

I would love to see the ideal world where employees have a lot more power in their communication within a large company. I think that it would possibly save families like mine from growing up without a full-time father.

I can see further implications. If employees, especially men, feel like they have more power in the workplace, they will be less likely to come home and feel the need to prove their power at home by demeaning their wives in many different ways. I think that if Deetz' proposals ever worked on a wide scale, our country would see a decrease in domestic violence.

How do companies manage to strike such an unfair bargain with their employees? It's tempting to point to the workaholism of Lynn's father as the core of the problem, but Deetz lays more of the blame on managerial control of workplace language, information, forms, symbols, rituals, and stories. Although these are the practices that Pacanowsky and other interpretive scholars treat as indicators of a given organizational culture (see Chapter 20), Deetz views them as attempts to produce and reproduce a culture that is sympathetic to managerial interests. All corporations have their own sets of constitutive practices. The question he asks is not *What do these mean?* Rather, it is *Whose meanings are these?*

Systematically distorted communication
Operating outside of employees' awareness, a form of discourse that restricts what can be said or even considered.

Managerialism promotes worker consent through a process of *systematically distorted communication.* Unlike strategic control, which is open and deliberate, systematically distorted communication operates under the radar. When this happens, expectations and norms within a group setting restrict what can be openly expressed or even thought. Deetz emphasizes that the workers deceive themselves because they believe they are interacting freely, while in reality only certain options are available. As an example, Deetz notes that arbitrary authority relations within an organization may be disguised as legitimate divisions

of labor. That way any talk about power relations must assume the validity of the status quo, thus reproducing the organizational hierarchy rather than challenging it. Real interactive decisions can't be made in such a context.

Discursive closure
Suppression of conflict without employees realizing that they are complicit in their own censorship.

Systematically distorted communication requires suppression of potential conflict. This process, which Deetz calls *discursive closure,* occurs in a variety of ways. For example, certain groups of people within an organization may be classified as "disqualified" to speak on important issues. Arbitrary definitions can be labeled "natural" to avoid further discussion. The values that guided a manager's judgment call may be kept hidden so that it appears to be an objective decision. A group may discourage members from talking about certain subjects. Or the organization may allow the discussion of a topic such as gender-linked job classification or pay differences but discount its importance or quickly divert attention to other issues.

Deetz suggests that the force of an organizational practice is strongest when no one even thinks about it. If someone were to question such a routine, employees would be hard-pressed to explain why it is standard operating procedure. The best response they could muster would be a nonanswer: "That's the way it's done around here." Practices that have this taken-for-granted quality are often equated with common sense. Without a clear understanding that communication produces rather than reflects reality (the right side of Figure 21–1), employees will unknowingly consent to the managerial mentality that wants to expand corporate control.

INVOLVEMENT: FREE EXPRESSION OF IDEAS, BUT NO VOICE

For anyone who has a stake in corporate decisions (all of us?), shifting from managerial control at the top of Figure 21–1 to involvement at the bottom is a crucial move. In political terms, it represents a switch from autocracy to liberal democracy—from managerial decisions made behind closed doors to open discussions where all have the opportunity to express their opinions.

Involvement
Stakeholders' free expression of ideas that may, or may not, affect managerial decisions.

Employee *involvement* in corporate choices began with a suggestion box mounted on a wall. In some companies, this invitation for expression evolved over decades into open forums that look like early-American town meetings. At their best, these attempts at corporate democracy are based on a commitment to free speech and the value of an open marketplace of ideas (see Nilsen's ethic of significant choice, pp. 214–215).

Deetz claims that liberal eighteenth-century Jeffersonian democracy was based on three notions about communication: (1) freedom of speech guaranteed equitable participation in decision making; (2) persuasion and advocacy were the best ways to reach a good decision; and (3) autonomous individuals could then make up their own minds. Taken together, this meant truth would emerge from the free flow of information in an open marketplace of ideas. As long as people shared the same values, an information-transfer model of communication worked well.[17] But in a heterogeneous, postmodern society that's seldom the case.

Organizations in the twenty-first century must operate in a pluralistic and interconnected world. People have always been different, but it used to be that mountains and oceans made it possible to stick with your own kind. Today in business and government, that's almost impossible. You can't expect much empathy from a person raised in a different culture, who has had radically different experiences, and who holds a worldview that you might find disturbing. And isolation is no longer an option. As the worldwide economic meltdown in 2008 and the 2010 BP Gulf oil

spill illustrate, whatever happens up the road or overseas will surely affect us all. Deetz is convinced that if Thomas Jefferson lived downwind of a factory hog farm, the Declaration of Independence he wrote would be a different document.[18] An information-transfer view of communication doesn't work well today.

As Deetz surveys present-day corporate communication practices, he concludes that "the right of expression appears more central than the right to be informed or to have an effect."[19] Through involvement in discussions of company policy, employees have a chance to air their grievances, state their desires, and recommend alternative ways of working. Many managers use these sessions as a way to give employees a chance to let off steam. But advocacy is not negotiation. When workers find out that their ideas aren't represented in the final decision, they quickly become cynical about the process.

Both in national politics and in corporate governance, meaningful democracy requires not only that people have a chance to discuss the issues, they also need to have a voice in the final outcome. Forums provide the opportunity for involvement, but *voice* is not just having a say. It means expressing interests that are freely and openly formed, and then having those interests reflected in joint decisions. That's real participation. Deetz says it's only possible when all stakeholders realize that their communication creates reality rather than merely describing it.

PARTICIPATION: STAKEHOLDER DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Deetz' theory of communication is critical, but not just negative. While he strongly criticizes the managerial strategy of increasing control over workers, engineering their consent, and granting them free expression without giving them a voice in decisions, he also believes that joint, open decisions in the workplace are possible. Deetz is convinced that "meaningful democratic participation creates better citizens and better social choices, and provides important economic benefits."[20] One of the goals of his theory is to reclaim the possibility of open negotiations of power. He calls it *stakeholder democracy*.

The first move Deetz makes is to expand the list of people who should have a say in how a corporation is run. Besides managers, he sees at least six groups of stakeholders with multiple needs and desires.[21]

Participation
Stakeholder democracy; the process by which all stakeholders in an organization negotiate power and openly reach collaborative decisions.

Investors seek security of principal and a decent return on their investment.

Workers seek a reasonable wage, safe working conditions, a chance to take pride in their labor, security of employment, and time for their families.

Consumers seek quality goods and services at a fair price.

Suppliers seek a stable demand for their resource with timely payment upon delivery.

Host communities seek payment for services provided, stable employment, environmental care, and the quality of family and public life enhanced rather than diminished.

Greater society and the world community seek environmental care, economic stability, overall civility, and fair treatment of all constituent groups (racial, ethnic, gender).

Deetz notes that some stakeholders have taken greater risks and made longer-term investments in a company than typical owners of stock or top-level managers.[22] He believes it's imperative that those who are affected by corporate decisions have a say in how such decisions are made. Of course, this stance runs counter to traditional notions of exclusive stockholder rights or managerial prerogatives, but

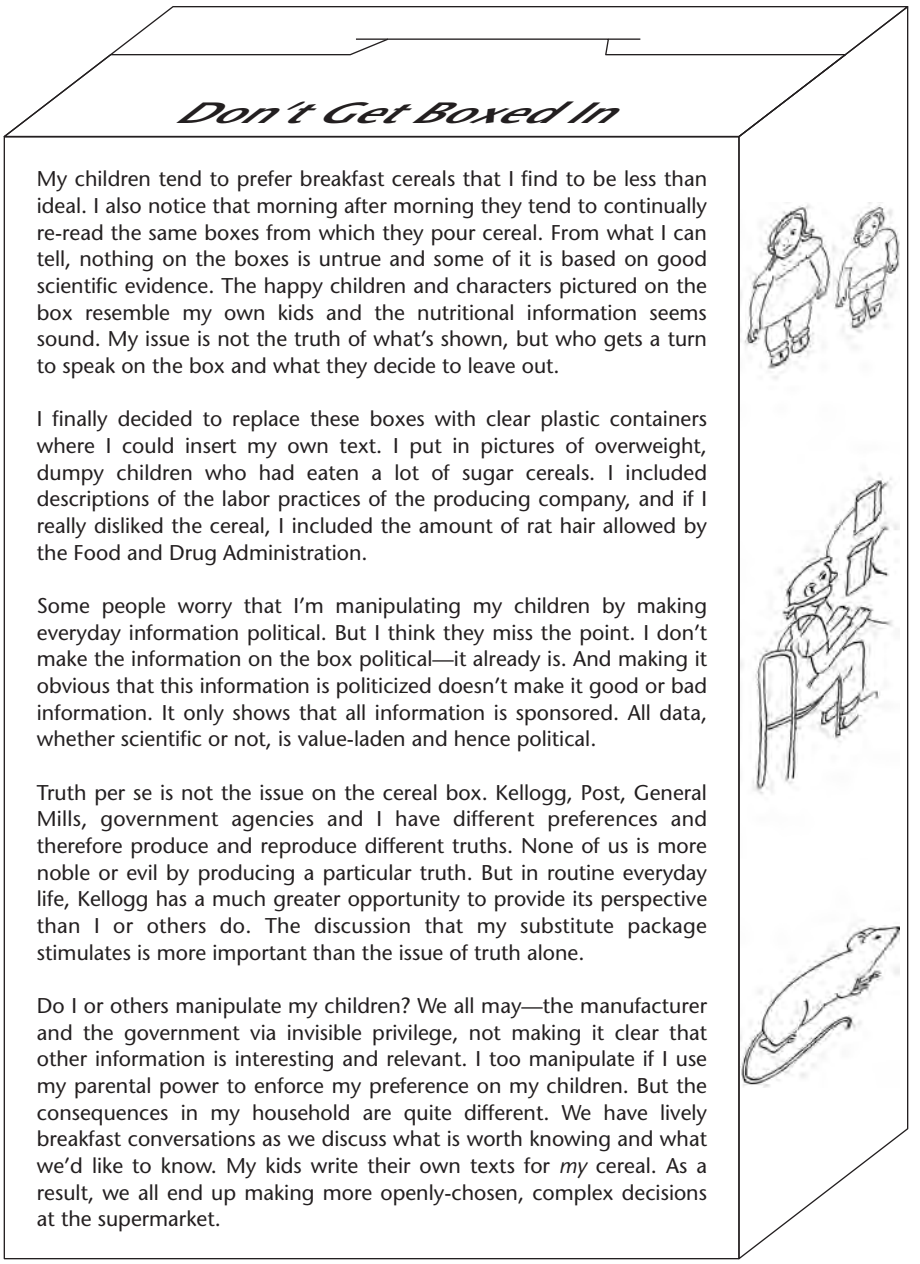

FIGURE 21–2 A Morning Exercise Created by Stan Deetz

Deetz says there's no legitimate basis for privileging one group of stakeholders over another. He reminds us that nature did not make corporations—we did.

> The rights and responsibilities of people are not given in advance by nature or by a privileged, universal value structure, but are negotiated through interaction.[23]

As you scan the class of stakeholders and their interests, listed on the opposite page, it's obvious that current corporate governance is not set up to address their social, financial, and ecological goals. In this age of Enron and Halliburton, relying

on managerial goodwill would seem a joke. Some would expect government to insert social values into the marketplace, but, except for brief periods of time following a crisis, government policy is largely influenced by business leaders and lobbyists. Free-enterprise advocates suggest that the unseen hand of the market will sort things out, but that reduces all values to a matter of dollars and cents—and those not equitably. Deetz offers his appraisal and previews his solution:

> Collectively, stewardship, government regulation and markets offer weak mechanisms for value inclusion and virtually no support for communication processes that create win/win situations where multiple stakeholders can successfully pursue their mutual interests. . . . Ultimately, the best hope rests in getting wider social values into the decisional premises, processes and routines in business rather than trying to direct them from the outside. This draws our attention to new forms of governance and communication.[24]

POLITICALLY ATTENTIVE RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTIONISM (PARC)

Deetz proposes a politically attentive relational constructionism model (PARC) as an enriched form of many critical theories of communication, including four other media and feminist theories presented in later chapters.[25] He refers to PARC as "a collaborative constitutive view of communication based in conflict rather than in person-centered and consensus oriented models of communication."[26]

PARC model
Politically attentive relational constructionism; a collaborative view of communication based in conflict.

The *politically attentive* feature of PARC refers to honestly exploring the power-in-play behind so-called neutral facts and taken-for-granted positions. For example, a PARC approach would examine specific "standard accounting practices" to uncover how they came to be—who benefited and who suffered loss by their adoption. Since he regards all information as political, Deetz believes an organization's stakeholders need to recover conflict that was repressed in order to get all interests on the table. Only in this way can beneficial and fair negotiations take place.

The *relational constructionism* feature of PARC refers to the social construction of communication—the constitutive nature of language. Deetz shares this core commitment with a growing number of theorists in the discipline. He uses the term *relational* rather than *social* because he wants to be clear that it not only covers social relationships created by persons-in-conversation, but also refers to the meaning we give everything we label in the world—money, profit, work, bankruptcy, pollution, love, quality time, and anything else.

Perhaps the best way to picture an application of PARC within an organization is to look at the list of requirements for negotiation among stakeholders that Deetz lays down.[27]

1. Stakeholders who have divergent interests, not set positions.
2. Stakeholders who possess roughly the same level of communication skill.
3. Authority relationships and power positions are set aside.
4. All stakeholders have an equal opportunity to express themselves.
5. Stakeholders' wants are openly investigated in order to determine their interests.
6. Participants transparently share information and how decisions are made.
7. Facts and knowledge claims are revisited to see how they were created.

8. Focusing on outcomes and interests rather than bargaining on rival solutions.
9. Stakeholders jointly make decisions rather than just having "their say."

This may strike you as a daunting set of conditions, but those trained in the art of conflict mediation and negotiation are quite familiar with most of these principles and with using them for the benefit of all parties. It's not surprising that Deetz, the director of peace and conflict studies at his university, finds them useful in the PARC model.

Deetz would have managers take the role of mediators rather than persuaders. They would coordinate the conflicting interests of all parties affected by corporate decisions. He understands that even those who are committed to open dialogue would feel insecure as they relinquished control. He suggests that a good way for them to start is to "complicate" their perceptions of subordinates and other stakeholders by being around them, talking with them, and learning their hopes, dreams, fears, values, and needs. Managers could take notes on how to do this from Erin Brockovich. That's how she communicated with people in Hinkley.

Once PG&E discovered that contaminated wastewater was leaching into the underground aquifer, Deetz would envision a negotiation that would include more than corporate executives and stockholders. Consumers, employees who came in contact with the water, Hinkley residents developing tumors, and perhaps Erin Brockovich herself would also be at the table. Certainly the discussions would be heated. From Deetz' perspective, that would be OK. The final decision on how to handle the problem would have to incorporate all of their interests.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: WEST'S PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM

Cornel West is a pragmatist philosopher who is now a professor of religion at Princeton University. Along with the best-known American pragmatist, John Dewey (see Chapter 18), West regards pragmatism as "a mode of cultural critical action that focuses on the ways and means by which human beings have, do, and can overcome obstacles, dispose predicaments, and settle problematic situations."[28] The moral obstacle West wants to overcome is the institutional oppression of "the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected" people who struggle on the margins of society.[29] They face racism, sexual discrimination, and economic injustice. West agrees with the analysis of Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr, who deplored the inhuman treatment of workers in Henry Ford's auto factory.[30] Both men said that these evils exist not just because of ignorance or apathy—they are the result of pervasive human sin.

West is also sympathetic to a Marxist critique of capitalism,[31] but his own brand of pragmatism is deeply rooted in the narratives of the Scriptures:

> I have dubbed it "prophetic" in that it harks back to the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day. The mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage—come what may.[32]

For example, Hebrew prophets like Amos demanded social justice for the powerless; Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan reminds believers that they are responsible to help those who are hurting, whoever and wherever they are.[33]

As a prophetic pragmatist, Cornel West applauds an action-oriented approach to empower rather than exploit the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected who are excluded from decision-making processes. Deetz' call for all stakeholders to have an effective say in corporate decisions that affect their lives aligns well with West's commitments. Yet the specific ethical implications of West's prophetic pragmatism aren't always clear-cut. In 1995 he took flak from most whites and many blacks for supporting Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March on Washington.

West acknowledged that he faced a tragic moral choice: "After all, I am a radical democrat devoted to a downward redistribution of wealth and a Christian freedom-fighter in the King legacy—which condemns any xenophobia, including patriarchy, homophobia, and anti-semitism."[34] These commitments put him at odds with Farrakhan's rhetoric. But West said that he and Farrakhan agreed on the importance of highlighting black suffering, and he was galvanized by Dr. Martin Luther King's example of forming alliances and coalitions across racial, gender, class, and religious lines. And so he marched.

CRITIQUE: IS WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY JUST A DREAM?

Deetz' approach to corporate decision making is inherently attractive because it is built on values that many of us in the field of communication share. By reserving a seat at the decision-making table for every class of stakeholders, Deetz affirms the importance of democratic participation, fairness, equality, diversity, and cooperation.

Without question, Deetz' insistence on the constitutive nature of all communication can help us understand consent practices in the workplace. Yet his advocacy of stakeholder rights and participatory democracy isn't necessarily furthered by his constructionist view of communication. In fact, his reform agenda could be hindered. If, contrary to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, there are no self-evident truths on which to stand, everything is in play and it doesn't make much sense to assume that we have a right to participate in decisions that affect us.

Political realism may be another problem. As applied to corporate life, Deetz' theory is a critique of managerialism. Arizona State University communication professor Robert McPhee offers a somewhat tongue-in-cheek summary: "If we just didn't find it natural and right and unavoidable to hand power over to managers, everything would be very different and our problems would be solved."[35] Although a caricature, this capsule statement underscores the problematic nature of the stakeholder negotiations that Deetz pictures and the incredible difficulty of getting all parties to sit at the table as equals.

Deetz admits that a positive alternative to managerialism is difficult to work out in conception and in practice.[36] Moving from the dark quadrant of consent to the clear quadrant of participation in Figure 21–1 is a quantum leap. The PARC model moves critical theory to a higher level of conceptual sophistication. As for stakeholder participation in practice, Deetz finds that businesses increasingly recognize they must work with others. He cites cases where resources are scarce—river basin governance, mineral extraction, environmental choices, as well as social and economic development. Stakeholders at the table often include governmental agencies, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, special-interest groups, and community members. Deetz reports that "critical theories work to increase equality by surfacing unnecessary and harmful control mechanisms, showing the

importance of different forms of knowledge and values, and building interaction processes that make this greater equality meaningful and productive."[37]

Moving from the theory to the theorist, Deetz insists that critical scholars should be "filled with care, thought, and good humor."[38] That third quality may surprise you, for like prophets, critical theorists have the reputation of being a rather grim bunch. But Deetz suggests that with good humor we can smile at our inconsistencies, contradictions, and bruised pride. We are to take the plight of the oppressed—not ourselves—seriously. "The righteousness and pretense is gone, we must act without knowing for sure. The grand narratives are dead, but there is meaning and pleasure in the little ones. The pleasure embarrasses us but also gives us energy and a smile at ourselves."[39] To sample a mix of Deetz' care, thought, and humor, read through his morning exercise printed on the cereal box in Figure 21–2. I find the contents a compelling reason not to dismiss his theory.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Deetz contrasts *information* models that assume language *reflects* reality with *communication* models that assume reality emerges out of a relationship among self, others, language, and the world. What other theories already covered fit the communication model?

2. Managers use *strategy* and *consent* to maintain *control* over subordinates. According to Deetz, which practice is more effective? Why?

3. The *stakeholder model* requires *participation*, not just *involvement*. What is the difference between the two practices?

4. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Autocracy at work is the price we pay for *democracy* after hours"? Does it apply equally to work in the classroom?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at *www.mhhe.com.griffin8* or *www.afirstlook.com.*

In this eight-minute segment, critical theorist Stan Deetz offers a host of pithy opinions. Here's a sample. *On communication:* "The field for a long time argued that meanings were in people. I raise the opposite kind of question: Whose meanings are in people?" *On management:* "A lot of managers talk about thinking out of the box, but they don't understand . . . that you do not think out of the box by commanding the box." *On corporate assets:* "Their primary assets are not what investors gave them, but what employees gave them. . . . Their primary assets go down the elevator every night." And there are lots more. Watch and discover your favorites.

A SECOND LOOK

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Ethical foundations of stakeholder theory: Tanni Hass and Stanley Deetz, "Between the Generalized and the Concrete Other," in *Rethinking Organizational & Managerial Communication from Feminist Perspectives,* Patrice M. Buzzanell (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2000, pp. 24–46.

International Communication Association 1997 presidential address: Stanley Deetz, "Communication in the Age of Negotiation," *Journal of Communication,* Vol. 47, No. 4, 1997, pp. 118–135.

PARC model overview: Stanley Deetz, "The Rise of Stakeholder Governance Models and the Redesign of Communication Necessary for Them," in *Revista Organicom 7: A Comunicação na Gestão para Sustentabilidade das Organizações,* M. Kunsch (ed.), Difusão, São Paulo, Brazil, 2009, p. 2.

Extensive treatment of PARC model: Stanley Deetz and G. Radford, *Communication Theory at the Crossroads: Theorizing for Globalization, Pluralism and Collaborative Needs,* Wiley-Blackford, Oxford, in press.

PARC model vis-à-vis Habermas' theory of communicative action: Stanley Deetz, "Politically Attentive Relational Constructionism (PARC) and Making a Difference in a Pluralistic, Independent World," in *Distinctive Qualities in Communication Research,* Donal Carbaugh and Patrice M. Buzzanell (eds.), Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 32–51.

Review and critique: Branislav Kovačić, "The Democracy and Organizational Communication Theories of Deetz, Mumby, and Associates," in *Watershed Research Traditions in Communication Theory,* Donald Cushman and Branislav Kovačić (eds.), State University of New York, Albany, NY, 1995, pp. 211–238.

To access titles and cue points of scenes from other feature films that illustrate managerial control, click on Suggested Movie Clips under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com.*

Public Rhetoric

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion."[1] That designation centers attention on the intentional act of using words to have an effect. I use the term *public rhetoric* in this section to refer to a speaking context in which the speaker has an opportunity to monitor and adjust to the response of his or her immediate audience.

For citizens in ancient Greece, knowing how to speak in public was part of their democratic responsibility. Later on, when Rome ruled the world, rhetorical ability was a survival skill in the rough-and-tumble politics of the forum. Rhetoricians have always had a special interest in judicial argument, legislative debate, political rallies, religious sermons, and speeches given at special celebrations.

In each setting, teachers and practitioners championed the art of rhetoric as a means of ensuring that speakers of truth would not be at a disadvantage when trying to win the hearts and minds of an audience.

The Greeks and Romans distinguished five parts, or divisions, of the study of rhetoric:

1. *Invention*—discovery of convincing arguments
2. *Arrangement*—organization of material for best impact
3. *Style*—selection of compelling and appropriate language
4. *Delivery*—coordination of voice and gestures
5. *Memory*—mastery and rehearsal of content

With the possible exception of memory, these concerns of rhetoric require that a speaker first analyze and then adapt to a specific group of listeners. We can, of course, react to the idea of audience adaptation in two different ways. If we view speakers who adjust their message to fit a specific audience in a positive light, we'll praise their rhetorical sensitivity and flexibility. If we view them negatively, we'll condemn them for their pandering and lack of commitment to the truth. Rhetorical thought across history swings back and forth between these two conflicting poles. The words of most rhetoricians reflect the tension they feel between "telling it like it is" and telling it in such a way that the audience will listen.

Greek philosopher Plato regarded rhetoric as mostly flattery. Far from seeing it as an art, he described rhetoric as a *knack*—similar to the clever use of cosmetics. Both are attempts to make things seem better than they really are.[2] In spite of his scorn, Plato imagined an ideal rhetoric based on a speaker's understanding of listeners with different natures and dispositions.

Plato's ideal discourse was an elite form of dialogue meant for private, rather than public, consumption. This philosophic, one-on-one mode of communication is known as *dialectic* (a different meaning for the term than its use in Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics). Unlike typical oratory in Athens, where speakers addressed large audiences on civic issues, Plato's dialectic focused on exploring eternal Truths in an intimate setting.

Although Plato hoped that philosophic dialectic would supplant public rhetoric, his best student, Aristotle, rejuvenated public rhetoric as a serious academic subject. More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* systematically explored the topics

"I found the old format much more exciting."

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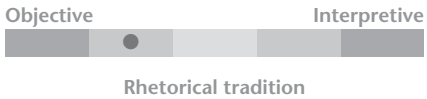
of speaker, message, and audience. His ideas have stood the test of time and form a large portion of the advice presented in contemporary public speaking texts. But even though Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of discovering all available means of persuasion, this conception doesn't solve the problem of how to get audiences to listen to hard truths.

Religious rhetors face the same paradox. In many ways the apostle Paul seemed to personify the lover of diverse souls that Plato had earlier described. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the people of Corinth that he made a conscious decision to let his message speak for itself: "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom."[3] Yet further on in the same letter he outlines a conscious rhetorical strategy: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."[4] Four centuries later, Augustine continued to justify the conscious use of rhetoric by the church. Why, he asked, should defenders of truth be long-winded, confusing, and boring, when the speech of liars was brief, clear, and persuasive?

The tension between the logic of a message and the appeal it has for an audience isn't easily resolved. British philosopher Francis Bacon sought to integrate the two concerns when he wrote that "the duty of rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will."[5]

The three rhetoricians I introduce in this section continue to face the dilemma that rhetoricians have struggled with since Plato: "How do you move an audience without changing your message or losing your integrity?" As you read, see which theorist comes up with an answer that is most satisfying for you.

CHAPTER 22



The Rhetoric

of Aristotle

Aristotle was a student of Plato in the golden age of Greek civilization, four centuries before the birth of Christ. He became a respected instructor at Plato's Academy but disagreed with his mentor over the place of public speaking in Athenian life.

Ancient Greece was known for its traveling speech teachers called Sophists. Particularly in Athens, those teachers trained aspiring lawyers and politicians to participate effectively in the courts and deliberative councils. In hindsight, they appear to have been innovative educators who offered a needed and wanted service.[1] But since their advice was underdeveloped theoretically, Plato scoffed at the Sophists' oratorical devices. His skepticism is mirrored today in the negative way people use the term *mere rhetoric* to label the speech of *tricky* lawyers, *mealy-mouthed* politicians, *spellbinding* preachers, and *fast-talking* salespeople.

Aristotle, like Plato, deplored the demagoguery of speakers using their skill to move an audience while showing a casual indifference to the truth. But unlike Plato, he saw the tools of rhetoric as a neutral means by which the orator could either accomplish noble ends or further fraud: ". . . by using these justly one would do the greatest good, and unjustly, the greatest harm."[2] Aristotle believed that truth has a moral superiority that makes it more acceptable than falsehood. But unscrupulous opponents of the truth may fool a dull audience unless an ethical speaker uses all possible means of persuasion to counter the error. Speakers who neglect the art of rhetoric have only themselves to blame when their hearers choose falsehood. Success requires wisdom *and* eloquence.

Both the *Politics* and the *Ethics* of Aristotle are polished and well-organized books compared with the rough prose and arrangement of his text on rhetoric. The *Rhetoric* apparently consists of Aristotle's reworked lecture notes for his course at the academy. Despite the uneven nature of the writing, the *Rhetoric* is a searching study of audience psychology. Aristotle raised rhetoric to a science by systematically exploring the effects of the speaker, the speech, and the audience. He regarded the speaker's use of this knowledge as an art. Quite likely, the text your communication department uses for its public speaking classes is basically a contemporary recasting of the audience analysis provided by Aristotle more than two thousand years ago.

RHETORIC: MAKING PERSUASION PROBABLE

Rhetoric
Discovering all possible means of persuasion.

Aristotle saw the function of *rhetoric* as the discovery in each case of "the available means of persuasion." He never spelled out what he meant by persuasion, but his concern with noncoercive methods makes it clear that he ruled out force of law, torture, and war. His threefold classification of speech situations according to the nature of the audience shows that he had affairs of state in mind.

The first in Aristotle's classification is courtroom (forensic) speaking, which addresses judges who are trying to render a just decision about actions alleged to have taken place in the *past.* The closing arguments presented by the prosecution and defense in the corruption trial of former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich are examples of judicial rhetoric centered on guilt or innocence. The second, ceremonial (epideictic) speaking, heaps praise or blame on another for the benefit of *present-day* audiences. For example, Lincoln gave his famous Gettysburg Address in order to honor "the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here." But his ultimate purpose was to inspire listeners to persevere in their fight to preserve the Union. The third, political (deliberative) speaking, attempts to influence legislators or voters who decide *future* policy. The 2008 presidential debates gave Barack Obama and John McCain a chance to sway undecided voters. These different temporal orientations could call for diverse rhetorical appeals.

Because his students were familiar with the question-and-answer style of Socratic dialogue, Aristotle classified rhetoric as a counterpart or an offshoot of dialectic. Dialectic is one-on-one discussion; rhetoric is one person addressing many. Dialectic is a search for truth; rhetoric tries to demonstrate truth that's already been found. Dialectic answers general philosophical questions; rhetoric addresses specific, practical ones. Dialectic deals with certainty; rhetoric deals with probability. Aristotle saw this last distinction as particularly important: Rhetoric is the art of discovering ways to make truth seem more probable to an audience that isn't completely convinced.

RHETORICAL PROOF: *LOGOS, ETHOS, PATHOS*

Inartistic proofs
External evidence the speaker doesn't create.

Artistic proofs
Internal proofs that contain logical, ethical, or emotional appeals.

According to Aristotle, the available means of persuasion can be artistic or inartistic. *Inartistic* or external proofs are those that the speaker doesn't create. These would include testimonies of witnesses or documents such as letters and contracts. *Artistic* or internal proofs are those that the speaker creates. There are three kinds of artistic proofs: logical (*logos*), ethical (*ethos*), and emotional (*pathos*). Logical proof comes from the line of argument in the speech, ethical proof is the way the speaker's character is revealed through the message, and emotional proof is the feeling the speech draws out of the hearers. Some form of *logos, ethos,* and *pathos* is present in every public presentation, but perhaps no other modern-day speech has brought all three appeals together as effectively as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream," delivered in 1963 to civil rights marchers in Washington, D.C. In the year 2000, American public address scholars selected King's "I Have a Dream" as the greatest speech of the twentieth century. We'll look at this artistic speech throughout the rest of the chapter to illustrate Aristotle's rhetorical theory.

Case Study: "I Have a Dream"

At the end of August 1963, a quarter of a million people assembled at the Lincoln Memorial in a united march on Washington. The rally capped a long, hot

summer of sit-ins protesting racial discrimination in the South. (The film *Mississippi Burning* portrays one of the tragic racial conflicts of that year.) Two months before the march, President John F. Kennedy submitted a civil rights bill to Congress that would begin to rectify the racial injustices, but its passage was seriously in doubt. The organizers of the march hoped that it would put pressure on Congress to outlaw segregation in the South, but they also wanted the demonstration to raise the national consciousness about economic exploitation of blacks around the country.

Martin Luther King shared the platform with a dozen other civil rights leaders, each limited to a five-minute presentation. King's successful Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, freedom rides across the South, and solitary confinement in a Birmingham jail set him apart in the eyes of demonstrators and TV viewers. The last of the group to speak, King had a dual purpose. In the face of a Black Muslim call for violence, he urged blacks to continue their nonviolent struggle without hatred. He also implored white people to get involved in the quest for freedom and equality, to be part of a dream fulfilled rather than contribute to an unjust nightmare.

A few years after King's assassination, I experienced the impact his speech continued to have upon the African-American community. Teaching public address in a volunteer street academy, I read the speech out loud to illustrate matters of style. The students needed no written text. As I came to the last third of the speech, they recited the eloquent "I have a dream" portion word for word with great passion. When we finished, all of us were teary-eyed.

David Garrow, author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of King, called the speech the "rhetorical achievement of a lifetime, the clarion call that conveyed the moral power of the movement's cause to the millions who watched the live national network coverage."[3] King shifted the burden of proof onto those who opposed racial equality. Aristotle's three rhetorical proofs can help us understand how he made the status quo of segregation an ugly option for the moral listener.

Logical Proof: Lines of Argument That Make Sense

Logos
Logical proof, which comes from the line of argument in a speech.

Aristotle focused on two forms of *logos*—the *enthymeme* and the *example.* He regarded the enthymeme as "the strongest of the proofs."[4] An enthymeme is merely an incomplete version of a formal deductive syllogism. To illustrate, logicians might create the following syllogism out of one of King's lines of reasoning:

Major or general premise: *All people are created equal.*
Minor or specific premise: *I am a person.*
Conclusion: *I am equal to other people.*

Typical enthymemes, however, leave out a premise that is already accepted by the audience: *All people are created equal. . . . I am equal to other people.* In terms of style, the enthymeme is more artistic than a stilted syllogistic argument. But as emeritus University of Wisconsin rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer notes, Aristotle had a greater reason for advising the speaker to suppress the statement of a premise that the listeners already believe.

> Because they are jointly produced by the audience, enthymemes intuitively unite speaker and audience and provide the strongest possible proof. . . . The audience itself helps construct the proof by which it is persuaded.[5]

Enthymeme
An incomplete version of a formal deductive syllogism that is created by leaving out a premise already accepted by the audience or by leaving an obvious conclusion unstated.

Most rhetorical analysis looks for enthymemes embedded in one or two lines of text. In the case of "I Have a Dream," the whole speech is one giant enthymeme. If the logic of the speech were to be expressed as a syllogism, the reasoning would be as follows:

Major premise: *God will reward nonviolence.*
Minor premise: *We are pursuing our dream nonviolently.*
Conclusion: *God will grant us our dream.*

King used the first two-thirds of the speech to establish the validity of the minor premise. White listeners are reminded that blacks have been "battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by winds of police brutality." They have "come fresh from narrow jail cells" and are "veterans of creative suffering." Blacks are urged to meet "physical force with soul force," not to allow "creative protest to degenerate into physical violence," and never to "satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." The movement is to continue to be nonviolent.

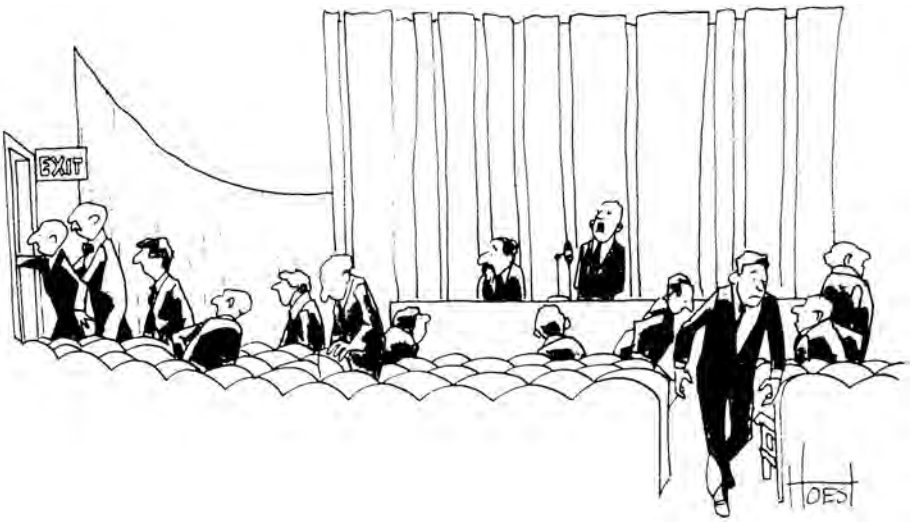
King used the last third of the speech to establish his conclusion; he painted the dream in vivid color. It included King's hope that his four children would not be "judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." He pictured an Alabama where "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." And in a swirling climax, he shared a vision of all God's children singing, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty we are free at last." But he never articulated the major premise. He didn't need to.

King and his audience were already committed to the truth of the major premise—that God would reward their commitment to nonviolence. Aristotle stressed that audience analysis is crucial to the effective use of the enthymeme. The centrality of the church in American black history, the religious roots of the civil rights protest, and the crowd's frequent response of "My Lord" suggest that King knew his audience well. He never stated what to them was obvious, and this strengthened rather than weakened his logical appeal.

The enthymeme uses deductive logic—moving from global principle to specific truth. Arguing by example uses inductive reasoning—drawing a final conclusion from specific cases. Since King mentioned few examples of discrimination, it might appear that he failed to use all possible means of logical persuasion. But pictures of snarling police dogs, electric cattle prods used on peaceful demonstrators, and signs over drinking fountains stating "Whites only" appeared nightly on TV news. As with the missing major premise of the enthymeme, King's audience supplied its own vivid images.

Ethical Proof: Perceived Source Credibility

According to Aristotle, it's not enough for a speech to contain plausible argument. The speaker must *seem* credible as well. Many audience impressions are formed before the speaker even begins. As poet Ralph Waldo Emerson cautioned more than a century ago, "Use what language you will, you can never say anything but what you are."[6] Some who watched Martin Luther King on television undoubtedly tuned him out because he was black. But surprisingly, Aristotle said little about a speaker's background or reputation. He was more interested in audience perceptions that are shaped by what the speaker does or doesn't say.



"I see our next speaker needs no introduction. . . ."

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In the *Rhetoric* he identified three qualities that build high source credibility—*intelligence*, *character*, and *goodwill*.

1. Perceived Intelligence. The quality of intelligence has more to do with practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and shared values than it does with training at Plato's Academy. Audiences judge intelligence by the overlap between their beliefs and the speaker's ideas. ("My idea of an agreeable speaker is one who agrees with me.") King quoted the Bible, the United States Constitution, the patriotic hymn "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and the Negro spiritual "We Shall Overcome." With the exception of violent terrorists and racial bigots, it's hard to imagine anyone with whom he didn't establish strong value identification.

2. Virtuous Character. Character has to do with the speaker's image as a good and honest person. Even though he and other blacks were victims of "unspeakable horrors of police brutality," King warned against a "distrust of all white people" and against "drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." It would be difficult to maintain an image of the speaker as an evil racist while he was being charitable toward his enemies and optimistic about the future.

3. Goodwill. Goodwill is a positive judgment of the speaker's intention toward the audience. Aristotle thought it possible for an orator to possess extraordinary intelligence and sterling character yet still not have the listeners' best interest at heart. King was obviously not trying to reach "the vicious racists" of Alabama, but no one was given reason to think he bore them ill will. His dream included "black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics."

Ethos
Perceived credibility, which comes from the speaker's intelligence, character, and goodwill toward the audience, as these personal characteristics are revealed through the message.

Although Aristotle's comments on *ethos* were stated in a few brief sentences, no other portion of his *Rhetoric* has received such close scientific scrutiny. The results of sophisticated testing of audience attitudes show that his three-factor theory of source credibility stands up remarkably well.[7] Listeners definitely think

in terms of competence (intelligence), trustworthiness (character), and care (goodwill). As Martin Luther King spoke in front of the Lincoln Memorial, most listeners perceived him as strong in all three.

Emotional Proof: Striking a Responsive Chord

Recent scholarship suggests that Aristotle was quite skeptical about the emotion-laden public oratory typical of his era.[8] He preferred the reason-based discussion characteristic of relatively small councils and executive deliberative bodies. Yet he understood that public rhetoric, if practiced ethically, benefits society. Thus, Aristotle set forth a theory of *pathos*. He offered it not to take advantage of an audience's destructive emotions, but as a corrective measure that could help a speaker craft emotional appeals that inspire reasoned civic decision making. To this end, he cataloged a series of opposite feelings, then explained the conditions under which each mood is experienced, and finally described how the speaker can get an audience to feel that way. Aristotle scholar and translator George Kennedy claims that this analysis of pathos is "the earliest systematic discussion of human psychology."[9] If Aristotle's advice sounds familiar, it may be a sign that human nature hasn't changed much in the last 2,300 years.

Pathos
Emotional proof, which comes from the feelings the speech draws out of those who hear it.

Anger versus Mildness. Aristotle's discussion of anger was an early version of Freud's frustration–aggression hypothesis. People feel angry when they are thwarted in their attempt to fulfill a need. Remind them of interpersonal slights, and they'll become irate. Show them that the offender is sorry, deserves praise, or has great power, and the audience will calm down.

Love or Friendship versus Hatred. Consistent with present-day research on attraction, Aristotle considered similarity the key to mutual warmth. The speaker should point out common goals, experiences, attitudes, and desires. In the absence of these positive forces, a common enemy can be used to create solidarity.

Fear versus Confidence. Fear comes from a mental image of potential disaster. The speaker should paint a vivid word picture of the tragedy, showing that its occurrence is probable. Confidence can be built up by describing the danger as remote.

Indignation versus Pity. We all have a built-in sense of fairness. As the producers of *60 Minutes* prove weekly, it's easy to arouse a sense of injustice by describing an arbitrary use of power upon those who are helpless.

Admiration versus Envy. People admire moral virtue, power, wealth, and beauty. By demonstrating that an individual has acquired life's goods through hard work rather than mere luck, admiration will increase.

THE FIVE CANONS OF RHETORIC

Canons of rhetoric
The principle divisions of the art of persuasion established by ancient rhetoricians—invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory.

Although the organization of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is somewhat puzzling, scholars and practitioners synthesize his words into four distinct standards for measuring the quality of a speaker: the construction of an argument (invention), ordering of material (arrangement), selection of language (style), and techniques of delivery. Later writers add memory to the list of skills the accomplished speaker must master. As previewed in the introduction to this section on public rhetoric, the

five canons of rhetoric have set the agenda of public address instruction for more than 2,000 years. Aristotle's advice strikes most students of public speaking as surprisingly up-to-date.

Invention. To generate effective enthymemes and examples, the speaker draws on both specialized knowledge about the subject and general lines of reasoning common to all kinds of speeches. Imagining the mind as a storehouse of wisdom or an informational landscape, Aristotle called these stock arguments *topoi*, a Greek term that can be translated as "topics" or "places." As Cornell University literature professor Lane Cooper explains, "In these special regions the orator hunts for arguments as a hunter hunts for game."[10] When King argues, "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation," he marshals the specific American topic or premise that the United States is a land of opportunity. When he contends that "many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny," he establishes a causal connection that draws from Aristotle's general topics of cause/effect and motive.

Invention
A speaker's "hunt" for arguments that will be effective in a particular speech.

Arrangement. According to Aristotle, you should avoid complicated schemes of organization. "There are two parts to a speech; for it is necessary first to state the subject and then to demonstrate it."[11] The introduction should capture attention, establish your credibility, and make clear the purpose of the speech. The conclusion should remind your listeners what you've said and leave them feeling good about you and your ideas. Like speech teachers today, Aristotle decried starting with jokes that have nothing to do with the topic, insisting on three-point outlines, and waiting until the end of the speech to reveal the main point.

Style. Aristotle's treatment of style in the *Rhetoric* focuses on metaphor. He believed that "to learn easily is naturally pleasant to all people" and that "metaphor most brings about learning."[12] Furthermore, he taught that "metaphor especially has clarity and sweetness and strangeness."[13] But for Aristotle, metaphors were more than aids for comprehension or aesthetic appreciation. Metaphors help an audience visualize—a "bringing-before-the-eyes" process that energizes listeners and moves them to action.[14] King was a master of metaphor:

> The Negro lives on a *lonely island* of poverty in the midst of a *vast ocean* of material prosperity.
> To rise from the *dark and desolate valleys* of segregation to the *sunlit path* of racial justice.

King's use of metaphor was not restricted to images drawn from nature. Perhaps his most convincing imagery was an extended analogy picturing the march on Washington as people of color going to the federal bank to cash a check written by the Founding Fathers. America had defaulted on the promissory note and had sent back the check marked "insufficient funds." But the marchers refused to believe that the bank of justice was bankrupt, that the vaults of opportunity were empty. These persuasive images gathered listeners' knowledge of racial discrimination into a powerful flood of reason:

> Let justice roll down like waters
> and righteousness like a mighty stream.[15]

Delivery. Audiences reject delivery that seems planned or staged. Naturalness is persuasive; artifice just the opposite. Any form of presentation that calls attention to itself takes away from the speaker's proofs.

Memory. Aristotle's students needed no reminder that good speakers are able to draw upon a collection of ideas and phrases stored in the mind. Still, Roman teachers of rhetoric found it necessary to stress the importance of memory. In our present age of word processing and teleprompters, memory seems to be a lost art. Yet the stirring I-have-a-dream litany at the end of King's speech departed from his prepared text and effectively pulled together lines he had used before. Unlike King and many Athenian orators, most of us aren't speaking in public every day. For us, the modern equivalent of memory is rehearsal.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: ARISTOTLE'S GOLDEN MEAN

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is the first known systematic treatise on audience analysis and adaptation. His work therefore begs the same question discussed in the introduction to this section on public rhetoric: *Is it ethical to alter a message to make it more acceptable for a particular audience?*

The way I've phrased the question reflects a Western bias for linking morality with behavior. Does an act produce benefit or harm? Is it right or wrong to do a certain deed? Aristotle, however, spoke of ethics in terms of character rather than conduct, inward disposition instead of outward behavior. He took the Greek admiration for moderation and elevated it to a theory of virtue.

When Barry Goldwater was selected as the Republican party's nominee for president in 1964, he boldly stated: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice . . . moderation in the pursuit of justice is not virtue."[16] Aristotle would have strongly disagreed. He assumed virtue stands between the two vices.[17] Aristotle saw wisdom in the person who avoids excess on either side. Moderation is best; virtue develops habits that seek to walk an intermediate path. This middle way is known as the *golden mean*. That's because out of the four cardinal virtues—courage, justice, temperance, and practical wisdom—temperance is the one that explains the three others.

Golden mean
The virtue of moderation; the virtuous person develops habits that avoid extremes.

As for audience adaptation, Aristotle would have counseled against the practice of telling people only what they want to hear, pandering to the crowd, or "wimping out" by not stating what we really think. He would be equally against a disregard of audience sensitivities, riding roughshod over listeners' beliefs, or adopting a take-no-prisoners, lay-waste-the-town rhetorical belligerence. The golden mean would lie in winsome straight talk, gentle assertiveness, and appropriate adaptation.

Whether the issue is truth-telling, self-disclosure, or risk-taking when making decisions, Aristotle's golden mean suggests other middle-way communication practices:

Extreme	Golden Mean	Extreme
Lies	Truthful statements	Brutal honesty
Secrecy	Transparency	Soul-baring
Cowardice	Courage	Recklessness

The golden mean will often prove to be the best way to persuade others. But for Aristotle, that was not the ethical issue. Aristotle advocated the middle way because it is the well-worn path taken by virtuous people.

CRITIQUE: STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

For many teachers of public speaking, criticizing Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is like doubting Einstein's theory of relativity or belittling Shakespeare's *King Lear.* Yet the Greek philosopher often seems less clear than he urged his students to be. Scholars are puzzled by Aristotle's failure to define the exact meaning of *enthymeme*, his confusing system of classifying metaphor according to type, and the blurred distinctions he made between deliberative (political) and epideictic (ceremonial) speaking. At the beginning of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle promised a systematic study of *logos, ethos,* and *pathos*, but he failed to follow that three-part plan. Instead, it appears that he grouped the material in a speech-audience-speaker order. Even those who claim that there's a conceptual unity to Aristotle's theory admit that the book is "an editorial jumble."[18] We must remember, however, that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* consists of lecture notes rather than a treatise prepared for the public. To reconstruct Aristotle's meaning, scholars must consult his other writings on philosophy, politics, ethics, drama, and biology. Such detective work is inherently imprecise.

Some present-day critics are bothered by the *Rhetoric's* view of the audience as passive. Speakers in Aristotle's world seem to be able to accomplish any goal as long as they prepare their speeches with careful thought and accurate audience analysis. Other critics wish Aristotle had considered a fourth component of rhetoric—the situation. Any analysis of King's address apart from the context of the march on Washington would certainly be incomplete.

Referring to Aristotle's manuscript in a rare moment of sincere appreciation, French skeptic Voltaire declared what many communication teachers would echo today: "I do not believe there is a single refinement of the art that escapes him."[19] Despite the shortcomings and perplexities of this work, it remains a foundational text of our discipline—a starting point for social scientists and rhetoricians alike.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. For most people today, the term *rhetoric* has unfavorable associations. What synonym or phrase captures what Aristotle meant yet doesn't carry a negative connotation?

2. What *enthymemes* have advocates on each side of the abortion issue employed in their public *deliberative rhetoric?*

3. Aristotle divided *ethos* into issues of *intelligence, character,* and *goodwill*. Which quality is most important to you when you hear a campaign address, sermon, or other public speech?

4. Most scholars who define themselves as rhetoricians identify with the humanities rather than the sciences. Can you support the claim that Aristotle took a *scientific approach to rhetoric*?

SELF-QUIZ

www.mhhe.com/griffin8

A SECOND LOOK

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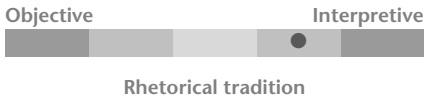
CHAPTER 23



Dramatism

of Kenneth Burke

American audiences want straightforward advice from their film critics. Roger Ebert and the late Gene Siskel created the successful television show *Sneak Previews* by describing a movie's plot, showing a brief clip, commenting on the quality of acting, and recommending whether people should see the film or skip it. The thumbs-up–thumbs-down nature of their judgment left little room for trying to discern the writer's purpose or the director's motivation. In this sense, Siskel and Ebert were *reviewers* of cinema rather than *critics*.

Kenneth Burke, on the other hand, was a critic. Along with the symbolic theorists we've already discussed (Mead, Pearce and Cronen, Bormann, Geertz and Pacanowsky), Burke believed that language is a strategic human response to a specific situation: "Verbal symbols are meaningful acts from which motives can be derived." He considered clusters of words as dances of attitudes. According to Burke, the critic's job is to figure out why a writer or speaker selected the words that were choreographed into the message. The task is ultimately one of assessing motives.

Until his death in 1993 at the age of 96, Burke picked his way through the human "motivational jungle" by using the tools of philosophy, literature, psychology, economics, linguistics, sociology, and communication. He spent his young adult years in Greenwich Village, a New York bohemian community that included E.E. Cummings and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Like many intellectuals during the depression of the 1930s, Burke flirted with communism but was disillusioned by Stalin's intolerance and brutality. Although he never earned a college degree, he taught for 15 years at Bennington College in Vermont and filled visiting lectureships at Harvard, Princeton, Northwestern, and the University of Chicago.

Burke's writing shows an intellectual breadth and depth that leads admirers to refer to him as a Renaissance man. He called himself a "gypsy scholar" and responded to questions about his field of interest by asking, "What am I but a word man?" *Dramatism* was Burke's favorite word to describe what he saw going on when people open their mouths to communicate.

As Burke viewed it, life is not *like* a drama; life *is* drama. The late Harry Chapin (who happened to be Burke's grandson) captured some of the tragedy and comedy of everyday life by putting words to music in *story songs*. My personal favorite is "Cat's in the Cradle," the timeless tale of a father too busy to

spend time with his son. Any male who hears the song realizes that he has a part in the drama rather than the role of a passive listener.

The latest somebody-done-somebody-wrong country-and-western song makes it clear that a critic's skills could be helpful in understanding human motivation. But it wasn't until 1952 that University of Illinois rhetorician Marie Hochmuth Nichols alerted the field of communication to the promises of Burke's dramatistic methodology.[1] Since that time, thousands of communication scholars have used his perspectives of *identification*, *dramatistic pentad*, and *guilt–redemption cycle* as ways to analyze public address and other forms of symbolic action.

IDENTIFICATION: WITHOUT IT, THERE IS NO PERSUASION

Although he was a great admirer of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Burke was less concerned with enthymeme and example than he was with a speaker's overall ability to identify with an audience.

> The key term for the "old rhetoric" was *persuasion* and its stress upon deliberative design. The key term for the "new rhetoric" is *identification* and this may include partially unconscious factors in its appeal.[2]

Identification
Ther ecognized common ground between speaker and audience, such as physical characteristics, talents, occupation, experiences, personality, beliefs, and attitudes; consubstantiation.

Identification is the common ground that exists between speaker and audience. Burke used the word *substance* as an umbrella term to describe a person's physical characteristics, talents, occupation, experiences, personality, beliefs, and attitudes. The more overlap between the substance of the speaker and the substance of the listener, the greater the identification. Behavioral scientists have used the term *homophily* to describe perceived similarity between speaker and listener,[3] but Burke preferred religious language to scientific jargon. Borrowing from Martin Luther's description of what takes place at the communion table, Burke said identification is *consubstantiation*. The theological reference calls to mind the oft-quoted Old Testament passage where Ruth pledges solidarity with her mother-in-law, Naomi: "For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I

"My fellow victims. . ."

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will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."[4] That's identification. It's also part of Ruth and Naomi's story. We'll revisit Ruth's pledge of loyalty in Chapter 24, Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm.

Audiences sense a joining of interests through style as much as through content. Burke said that the effective communicator can show consubstantiality by giving signs in language and delivery that his or her properties are the same as theirs. The style of a typical tent evangelist probably turns off cosmopolitan New Yorkers more than does the content of the message. The mood and manner of revival-style preaching signal a deep division between the evangelist and urbane listeners. To the extent that the speaker could alter the linguistic strategy to match the hearers' sophisticated style, they'd think the speaker was "talking sense."

Burke said that identification works both ways. Audience adaptation not only gives the evangelist a chance to sway the audience, it also helps the preacher fit into the cultural mainstream. But identification in either direction will never be complete. If nothing else, our tennis elbow or clogged sinuses constantly remind us that each of us is separate from the rest of the human race. But without some kind of division in the first place, there would be no need for identification. And without identification, there is no persuasion.

THE DRAMATISTIC PENTAD

Dramatistic pentad
Atool to analyze how a speaker attempts to get an audience to accept his or her view of reality by using five key elements of the human drama—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose.

Burke regarded persuasion as the communicator's attempt to get the audience to accept his or her view of reality as true. The *dramatistic pentad* is a tool to analyze how the speaker tries to do it. The five-pronged method is a shorthand way to "talk about their talk about." Burke's pentad directs the critic's attention to five crucial elements of the human drama—*act, scene, agent, agency,* and *purpose*.

> In a well-rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the act (names what took place in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose.[5]

Although Burke was an advocate of creativity, he believed the critic's choice of labels should be constrained by the language that the speaker actually selects. Burke recommended a content analysis that identifies key terms on the basis of the intensity of their evaluation. The speaker's *god term* is the word to which all other positive words are subservient. When critics discover the god term, they should avoid dictionary definitions as a way of determining its exact meaning. A speaker's god term is best understood by the other words that cluster around it, known by the company it keeps. In like fashion, a *devil term* sums up all that a speaker regards as bad, wrong, or evil. Consistent with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis described in the socio-cultural tradition (see Chapter 4), Burke's analysis sees words as *terministic screens* that dictate interpretations of life's drama.[6]

God term
The word a speaker uses to which all other positive words are subservient.

Devil term
Thew ord a speaker uses that sums up all that is regarded as bad, wrong, orevil.

Burke illustrated the importance of taking language seriously by having the reader imagine a parallel pentad with substitute terms:

act	scene	agent	agency	purpose
response	situation	subject	stimulus	target

He said that the dramatistic pentad on the top assumes a world of intentional action, whereas the scientific terms on the bottom describe motion without intention or purpose.

The dramatistic pentad is deceptively similar to the standard journalistic practice of answering *who, what, where, when, why,* and *how* in the opening paragraph of a story. Because Burke regarded himself as an interpreter rather than a reporter, he was not content merely to label the five categories. By evaluating the ratio of importance between individual pairs (scene–agency, agent–act), the critic can determine which element provides the best clue to the speaker's motivation.

The pentad offers a way to determine why the speaker selected a given rhetorical strategy to identify with the audience. When a message stresses one element over the other four, it reveals the speaker's philosophy or worldview.

Act. A critic's label for the act illustrates what was done. A speech that features dramatic verbs demonstrates a commitment to realism.

Scene. The description of the scene gives a context for where and when the act was performed. Public speaking that emphasizes setting and circumstance, downplays free will, and reflects an attitude of situational determinism. ("I had no choice.")

Agent. The agent is the person or people who performed the act. Some messages are filled with references to self, mind, spirit, and personal responsibility. This focus on character and the agent as instigator is consistent with philosophical idealism.

Agency. Agency is the means the agent used to do the deed. A long description of methods or technique reflects a "get-the-job-done" approach that springs from the speaker's mindset of pragmatism.

Purpose. The speaker's purpose is the stated or implied goal of the address. An extended discussion of purpose within the message shows a strong desire on the part of the speaker for unity or ultimate meaning in life, which are common concerns of mysticism.

Burke was somewhat confusing in his use of the terms *purpose* and *motivation*. Is the concern for purpose (as one of the five terms of the pentad) separate from the quest for underlying motivation, which the entire dramatistic metaphor is designed to uncover? Perhaps the distinction lies between an immediate localized goal and the ultimate direction of all human activity. According to this view, the pentad can be seen as offering a static photograph of a single scene in the human drama. The guilt–redemption cycle, the third perspective, would be the plot of the whole play.

GUILT–REDEMPTION CYCLE: THE ROOT OF ALL RHETORIC

The immediate purpose of a speech may vary according to the scene or agent, but Burke was convinced that the ultimate motivation of all rhetoric is to purge ourselves of an ever-present, all-inclusive sense of guilt. Guilt is his catchall term to cover every form of tension, anxiety, embarrassment, shame, disgust, and other noxious feelings he believed intrinsic to the human condition. His *Definition of Man* is a discouraging counterpoint to the optimism of Carl Rogers. (Like most

Guilt
Burke's catchall term for tension, anxiety, embarrassment, shame, disgust, and other noxious feelings intrinsic to the human condition.

writers of an earlier generation, Burke used the word *man* to designate men and women. Given his record of using words to startle and stretch his readers, if he were writing today, one wonders if he might suddenly recast his definition in exclusively feminine symbols. But in order to remain faithful to what he wrote, I won't alter his gender-loaded references.)

> Man is
> the symbol-using inventor of the negative
> separated from his natural condition by instruments
> of his own making
> goaded by the spirit of hierarchy
> and rotten with perfection.[7]

Burke started out by acknowledging our animal nature, but like Mead (see Chapter 5) he emphasized the uniquely human ability to create, use, and abuse language. The rest of his definition makes it clear that the capacity to manipulate symbols is not an unmixed blessing. The remaining lines suggest three linguistic causes for the sense of inner *pollution*.

By writing "inventor of the negative," Burke claimed that it's only through man-made language that the possibility of choice comes into being. In a world without human beings, there are no negative commands, no prohibitions. It's only when humans come into the world and begin to act symbolically that the possibility of *No! Thou shalt not! Don't do it!* arrives.

The phrase "separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making" bounces off the traditional description of a human as a *tool-using animal.* Here again, Burke suggested that our technological inventions get us into trouble. Murphy's Law states that anything that can go wrong will.[8] When it comes to interpersonal relations, Burke would say Murphy was an optimist.

Burke wrote extensively about hierarchies, bureaucracies, and other ordered systems that rank how well people observe society's negative rules. He was convinced that no matter how high you climb on the performance ladder, you'll always feel a strong sense of embarrassment for not having done better. The guilt-inducing high priests of the hierarchy are the professional symbol users of society—teachers, lawyers, journalists, artists, and advertising copy writers.

The final phrase, "rotten with perfection," is an example of what Burke called *perspective by incongruity.*[9] The device calls attention to a truth by linking two incongruous words. Burke uses this technique to suggest that our seemingly admirable drive to do things perfectly can hurt us and others in the process. Our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness. Both our successes and our failures heighten our desire to find someone on whom we can dump our load of guilt. Burke believed that getting rid of guilt is the basic plot of the human drama. At its root, rhetoric is the public search for a perfect scapegoat.

Redemption Through Victimage

Those who have rejected or never had a religious commitment may be impatient with Burke's continual use of theological terms. Surprisingly, he made no claim to be a man of faith, nor did he ask his readers to believe in God. Regardless of whether you accept the Christian doctrine of human sin and divine redemption, Burke claimed that the "purely social terminology of human relations can not do better than to hover about that accurate and succinct theological formula."[10]

He regarded theology as a field that has fine-tuned its use of language, and he urged the social critic to look for secular equivalents of the major religious themes of guilt and purification. This quest brought him to view rhetoric as a continual pattern of redemption through victimage.

Burke said that the speaker has two choices. The first option is to purge guilt through self-blame. Described theologically as *mortification*, this route requires confession of sin and a request for forgiveness. But even obvious candidates (Richard Nixon, O. J. Simpson, Bill Clinton, Rod Blagojevich) find it excruciatingly difficult to admit publicly that they are the cause of their own grief. Since it's much easier for people to blame their problems on someone else—the second option—Burke suggested we look for signs of *victimage* in every rhetorical act. He was sure that we would find them.

Mortification
Confession of guilt and request for forgiveness.

Victimage is the process of designating an external enemy as the source of all ills. The list of candidates is limited only by our imagination—Eastern liberals, Al Qaeda, the Colombian drug cartel, the military-industrial complex, blacks, Communists, Jews, chauvinistic males, homosexuals, religious fundamentalists, the police, rich capitalists, illegal aliens. Since the terrorism of 9/11, Americans would probably nominate Osama bin Laden, whose massively callous acts make him seem the personification of evil. Perfect guilt requires a perfect victim. God terms are only as powerful as the devil terms they oppose.

Victimage
Scapegoating; the process of naming an external enemy as the source of all personal or public ills.

Burke was not an advocate of redemption through victimization, but he said he couldn't ignore the historical pattern of people uniting against a common enemy ("congregation through segregation"). We've already discussed his claim that identification is the central strategy of the new rhetoric. The easiest way for an orator to identify with an audience is to lash out at whatever or whomever the people fear. ("My friend is one who hates what I hate.")

A RHETORICAL CRITIQUE USING DRAMATISTIC INSIGHT

Many rhetorical critics in communication have adopted Burke's techniques of literary criticism to inform their understanding of specific public address events. I asked Ken Chase, a colleague at Wheaton, and Glen McClish at San Diego State University to perform a Burkean analysis of Malcolm X's famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet."[11] The critique that follows is the result of their combined insight.

Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet"

Often paired with Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X was one of the most influential civil rights speakers of the 1960s. Malcolm's rhetoric, though, was more militant, angry, and for many African Americans, more realistic than the idealism of King's "I Have a Dream." Malcolm delivered his famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" in April 1964, only 11 months before his assassination.

By viewing public rhetoric as an attempt to build a particular social order, Kenneth Burke helped reveal the power of "The Ballot or the Bullet." Malcolm's address portrays America as a nation that promises full equality, dignity, and freedom for all its citizens, yet African Americans have never received their birthright. Epitomizing his commitment to Black Nationalism, Malcolm urged his brothers and sisters to start their own businesses and elect their own leaders. At the same time he attacked white politicians who impede civil rights. The audience

at the Corey Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, interrupted Malcolm X with applause and laughter more than 150 times during the lengthy oration.

Malcolm asserted that the struggle for civil rights is not only the work of his fellow Black Muslims, but is shared by all concerned African Americans. By strategically aligning himself with Christian ministers like King and Adam Clayton Powell, he minimized the alienation his Islamic faith could potentially create. He emphasized the shared heritage of all African Americans: "Our mothers and fathers invested sweat and blood. Three hundred and ten years we worked in this country without a dime in return. . . ." In this way, Malcolm created a strong sense of *identification* as he coaxed his audience to share his social purpose and his means of achieving it.

The title of the speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," refers to the means, or *agency*, by which the *agents*—African Americans—can *act* as citizens to accomplish the *purpose* of equality, dignity, and freedom. Malcolm strategically placed his audience within the larger context of American history and the international struggle for human rights. It is this *scene* that motivates the militant message that African Americans will proclaim—"We've got to fight until we overcome."

Malcolm's emphasis on the means to achieve his purpose ("by whatever means necessary") results in a high agency–purpose ratio—an indicator of his pragmatic motivation. The ballot enforces civil rights legislation; the bullet defends blacks from white violence. The bullet also warns white society that equality must not be delayed: "Give it to us now. Don't wait for next year. Give it to us yesterday, and that's not fast enough."

Malcolm criticized his brothers and sisters for failing to show the courage, knowledge, and maturity necessary to reap the full benefits of citizenship. It is the white man, however, who has enslaved, lynched, and oppressed the Africans living on American soil, and it is he who must bear the brunt of collective *guilt.* Through *victimage*, the white man and his society become the *scapegoat* that must be sacrificed for the *redemption* of blacks. Within the drama of African-American life, "Black Nationalism" serves as the *god term* that embodies the spirit of the movement. Conversely, "white man" is the *devil term* that epitomizes all who oppose equality, dignity, and freedom for all.

CRITIQUE: EVALUATING THE CRITIC'S ANALYSIS

Kenneth Burke was perhaps the foremost rhetorician of the twentieth century. Burke wrote about rhetoric; other rhetoricians write about Burke. Universities offer entire courses on Burkean analysis. On two occasions the National Communication Association featured the man and his ideas at its national convention. The Kenneth Burke Society holds conferences and competitions that give his followers the opportunity to discuss and delight over his wide-ranging thoughts. *KB Journal* exists solely to explain, clarify, and critique Burke's ideas. He obviously had something to say.

The problem for the beginning student is that he said it in such a roundabout way. Burke was closely tied to symbolic interactionism (see Chapter 5), and complexity seems to be characteristic of much of the writing within that tradition. Even advocates like Nichols feel compelled to explain why Burke was frequently confusing and sometimes obscure: "In part the difficulty arises from the numerous vocabularies he employs. His words in isolation are usually simple enough, but he often uses them in new contexts."[12] Clarity is

compromised further by Burke's tendency to flood his text with literary allusions. Unless a student is prepared to grapple with Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Augustine's *Confessions*, and Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*—all on the same page—Burke's mental leaps and breadth of scholarship will prove more frustrating than informative.

Yet Burke enthusiasts insist that the process of discovery is half the fun. Like a choice enthymeme, Burke's writing invites active reader participation as he surrounds an idea. And no matter what aspect of rhetoric that idea addresses, the reader will never again be able to dismiss words as "mere rhetoric." Burke has done us all a favor by celebrating the life-giving quality of language.

Without question, the dramatistic pentad is the feature of Burke's writing that has gained the most approval. The integrated procedure offers five artistic tools for the critic to use in analyzing human interaction. Many have found it helpful for pinpointing a speaker's motivation and the way the speech serves that need or desire.

Burke's concept of rhetoric as identification was a major advance in a field of knowledge that many scholars had thought complete. Rather than opposing Aristotle's definition, he gave it a contemporary luster by showing that common ground is the foundation of emotional appeal. Communication scientists can't test Burke's claim that unconscious identification produces behavior and attitude change, but they can confirm that perceived similarity facilitates persuasion.

Of all Burke's motivational principles, his strategies of redemption are the most controversial. Perhaps that's because his "secular religion" takes God too seriously for those who don't believe, yet not seriously enough for those who do. Both camps have trouble with Burke's unsubstantiated assumption that guilt is the primary human emotion that underlies all symbolic action. There's no doubt that Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" exploited a guilt–scapegoat linkage, but whether the same religious drama is played out in every important public event is another matter.

I appreciate Burke's commitment to an ethical stance that refuses to let desirable ends justify unfair means. He urged speakers not to make a victim out of someone else in order to become unified with the audience. True believers in the dramatistic gospel maintain that it's unwise to talk about communication without some understanding of Burke. The inclusion of this chapter is my response to their claim.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Burke says that without *identification*, there is no persuasion. A number of the theories already covered deal with ideas or principles akin to identification. Can you name five?

2. Burke encourages the *rhetorical critic* to discover communicators' *motives* by analyzing the *god terms* and *devil terms* they use. As presented in this chapter, what are Burke's god terms and devil terms?

3. Apply the *dramatistic pentad* to the nonverbal rhetoric of a Friday night party on campus. Which of the five elements of the pentad would you stress to capture the meaning of that human drama?

4. Burke claims that all rhetoric ultimately *expiates guilt through victimage*. If he's right, is it the guilt of the speaker, the listener, or the victim that is being purged?

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To access links to numerous websites on Kenneth Burke,
click on Links under Theory Resources at
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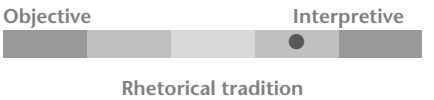
CHAPTER 24



Narrative Paradigm

of Walter Fisher

People are storytelling animals. This simple assertion is Walter Fisher's answer to the philosophical question *What is the essence of human nature?*

Many of the theorists discussed in preceding chapters offer different answers to this key question of human existence. For example, Thibaut and Kelley's social exchange theory operates on the premise that humans are rational creatures. Berger's uncertainty reduction theory assumes that people are basically curious. More pertinent for students of communication, Mead's symbolic interactionism insists that our ability to use symbols is what makes us uniquely human. (See Chapters 9, 10, and 5.)

Fisher doesn't argue against any of these ideas, but he thinks that human communication reveals something more basic than rationality, curiosity, or even symbol-using capacity. He is convinced that we are narrative beings who "experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends."[1] If this is true, then all forms of human communication that appeal to our reason need to be seen fundamentally as stories.[2]

Walter Fisher is a professor emeritus at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication. Throughout his professional life he has been uncomfortable with the prevailing view that rhetoric is only a matter of evidence, facts, arguments, reason, and logic that has its highest expression in courts of law, legislatures, and other deliberative bodies. In 1978, he introduced the concept of *good reasons,* which led to his proposal of the narrative paradigm in 1984.[3] He proposed that offering good reasons has more to do with telling a compelling story than it does with piling up evidence or constructing a tight argument.

Fisher soon became convinced that all forms of communication that appeal to our reason are best viewed as stories shaped by history, culture, and character. When we hear the word *story*, most of us tend to think of novels, plays, movies, TV sitcoms, and yarns told sitting around a campfire. Some of us also call to mind accounts of our past—tales we tell to others in which we are the central character. But with the exception of jokes, *Hi, How are you?* greetings, and other forms of *phatic communication*, Fisher regards almost *all* types of communication as story. Obviously, he sees differences in form between a Robert Frost poem, an Anne Tyler novel, or a performance of *As You Like It* on the one hand, and a philosophical essay, historical report, political debate, theological discussion, or

Phatic communication
Communication aimed at maintaining relationships rather than passing along information or saying something new.

scientific treatise on the other. But if we want to know whether we should believe the "truth" each of these genres proclaims, Fisher maintains that all of them could and should be viewed as narrative. He uses the term *narrative paradigm* to highlight his belief that there is no communication of ideas that is purely descriptive or didactic.

TELLING A COMPELLING STORY

Most religious traditions are passed on from generation to generation through the retelling of stories. The faithful are urged to "tell the old, old story" to encourage believers and convince those in doubt. American writer Frederick Buechner takes a fresh approach to passing on religious story. His book *Peculiar Treasures* retells the twelfth-century B.C. biblical story of Ruth's devotion to Naomi, her mother-in-law, in a twenty-first-century style.[4] Buechner's account of true friendship provides a vehicle for examining Fisher's narrative paradigm in the rest of this chapter. The story begins after the death of Naomi's husband and two sons:

> Ruth was a Moabite girl who married into a family of Israelite transplants living in Moab because there was a famine going on at home. When her young husband died, her mother-in-law, Naomi, decided to pull up stakes and head back for Israel where she belonged. The famine was over by then, and there was no longer anything to hold her where she was, her own husband having died about the same time that Ruth's had. She advised Ruth to stay put right there in Moab and to try to snag herself another man from among her own people.
>
> She was a strong-willed old party, and when Ruth said she wanted to go to Israel with her, she tried to talk her out of it. Even if by some gynecological fluke she managed to produce another son for Ruth to marry, she said, by the time he was old enough, Ruth would be ready for the geriatric ward. But Ruth had a mind of her own too, besides which they'd been through a lot together what with one thing and another, and home to her was wherever Naomi was. "Where you go, I go, and where you live, I live," Ruth told her, "and if your God is Yahweh, then my God is Yahweh too" (*Ruth 2:10–17*). So Naomi gave in, and when the two of them pulled in to Bethlehem, Naomi's home town, there was a brass band to meet them at the station.
>
> Ruth had a spring in her step and a fascinating Moabite accent, and it wasn't long before she caught the eye of a well-heeled farmer named Boaz. He was a little long in the tooth, but he still knew a pretty girl when he saw one, and before long, in a fatherly kind of way, he took her under his wing. He told the hired hands not to give her any trouble. He helped her in the fields. He had her over for a meal. And when she asked him one day in her disarming Moabite way why he was being so nice to her, he said he'd heard how good she'd been to Naomi, who happened to be a distant cousin of his, and as far as he was concerned, she deserved nothing but the best.
>
> Naomi was nobody's fool and saw which way the wind was blowing long before Ruth did. She was dead-set on Ruth's making a good catch for herself, and since it was obvious she'd already hooked old Boaz whether she realized it or not, all she had to do was find the right way to reel him in. Naomi gave her instructions. As soon as Boaz had a good supper under his belt and had polished off a nightcap or two, he'd go to the barn and hit the sack. Around midnight, she said, Ruth should slip out to the barn and hit the sack too. If Boaz's feet just happened to be uncovered somehow, and if she just happened to be close enough to keep

them warm, that probably wouldn't be the worst thing in the world either (*Ruth 3:1–5*). But she wasn't to go too far. Back in Jericho, Boaz's mother, Rahab, had had a rather seamy reputation for going too far professionally, and anything that reminded him of that might scare him off permanently.

Ruth followed her mother-in-law's advice to the letter, and it worked like a charm. Boaz was so overwhelmed that she'd pay attention to an old crock like him when there were so many young bucks running around in tight-fitting jeans that he fell for her hook, line and sinker, and after a few legal matters were taken care of, made her his lawful wedded wife.

They had a son named Obed after a while, and Naomi came to take care of him and stayed on for the rest of her life. Then in time Obed had a son of his own named Jesse, and Jesse in turn had seven sons, the seventh of whom was named David and ended up as the greatest king Israel ever had. With Ruth for his great-grandmother and Naomi for his grandfather's nurse, it was hardly a wonder.[5]

NARRATION AND PARADIGM: DEFINING THE TERMS

Narration
Symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.

Fisher defines *narration* as "symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them."[6] Ruth's life and Buechner's account of it clearly qualify as narrative. But Fisher's definition is broad and is especially notable for what it doesn't exclude. On the basis of his further elaboration,[7] I offer this expanded paraphrase of his definition:

> Narration is communication rooted in time and space. It covers every aspect of our lives and the lives of others in regard to character, motive, and action. The term also refers to every verbal or nonverbal bid for a person to believe or act in a certain way. Even when a message seems abstract—is devoid of imagery—it is narration because it is embedded in the speaker's ongoing story that has a beginning, middle, and end, and it invites listeners to interpret its meaning and assess its value for their own lives.

Under this expanded definition, Ruth's *my god is Yahweh* statement is as much a story of love and trust as it is a declaration of belief. Framed in the context of King David's genealogy, it is also an early episode in the *Greatest Story Ever Told*. Those who identify with the human love, trust, loyalty, and commitment described in the narrative can't help but feel the solidarity of an extended family of faith.

Paradigm
A conceptual framework; a universal model that calls for people to view events through a common interpretive lens.

Fisher uses the term *paradigm* to refer to a *conceptual framework*. You'll remember from Delia's constructivism that perception is not so much a matter of the physics of sight and sound as it is one of interpretation (see Chapter 8). Meaning isn't inherent in events; it's attached at the workbench of the mind. A paradigm is a universal model that calls for people to view events through a common interpretive lens.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn argues that an accepted paradigm is the mark of a mature science.[8] Responding to this challenge, communication scientists in the 1970s sought to discover a universal model that would explain communication behavior. Fisher's narrative paradigm is an interpretive counterpart to their efforts. Fisher offers a way to understand all communication and to direct rhetorical inquiry. He doesn't regard the narrative paradigm as a specific rhetoric. Rather, he sees it as "the foundation on which a

complete rhetoric needs to be built. This structure would provide a comprehensive explanation of the creation, composition, adaptation, presentation, and reception of symbolic messages."[9]

PARADIGM SHIFT: FROM A RATIONAL-WORLD PARADIGM TO A NARRATIVE ONE

Fisher begins his book *Human Communication as Narration* with a reference to the opening line of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the word (*logos*)." He notes that the Greek word *logos* originally included story, reason, rationale, conception, discourse, thought—all forms of human communication. Imagination and thought were not yet distinct. So the story of Naomi and Ruth was *logos*.

According to Fisher, the writings of Plato and Aristotle reflect the early evolution from a generic to a specific use of *logos*—from story to statement. *Logos* had already begun to refer only to philosophical discourse, a lofty enterprise that relegated imagination, poetry, and other aesthetic concerns to a second-class status. Rhetoric fell somewhere between *logos* and *mythos*. As opposed to the abstract discourse of philosophy, it was practical speech—the secular combination of pure logic on the one hand and emotional stories that stir up passions on the other. The Greek citizen concerned with truth alone should steer clear of rhetoric and consult an expert on wisdom—the philosopher.

Fisher says that 2,000 years later the scientific revolution dethroned the philosopher–king. In the last few centuries, the only knowledge that seems to be worth knowing in academia is that which can be spotted in the physical world. The person who wants to understand the way things are needs to check with a doctor, a scientist, an engineer, or another technical expert. Despite the elevation of technology and the demotion of philosophy, both modes of decision making are similar in their elitist tendencies to "place that which is not *formally* logical or which is not characterized by *expertise* within a somehow subhuman framework of behavior."[10] Fisher sees philosophical and technical discussion as scholars' standard approach to knowledge. He calls this mindset the *rational-world paradigm*. Hirokawa and Gouran's functional perspective on group decision making is a perfect example (see Chapter 18).

Fisher lists five assumptions of the prevailing rational-world paradigm. See if they match what you've been taught all along in school.[11]

Rational-world paradigm A scientific or philosophical approach to knowledge that assumes people are logical, making decisions on the basis of evidence and lines of argument.

1. People are essentially rational.
2. We make decisions on the basis of arguments.
3. The type of speaking situation (legal, scientific, legislative) determines the course of our argument.
4. Rationality is determined by how much we know and how well we argue.
5. The world is a set of logical puzzles that we can solve through rational analysis.

Viewed through the rational-world paradigm, the story of Ruth is suspect. Ruth ignores Naomi's argument, which is based on uncontestable biological facts of life. Nor does Ruth offer any compelling rationale for leaving Moab or for worshiping Yahweh. Once they are back in Israel, Naomi's scheme for Ruth to "reel in" Boaz has nothing to do with logic and everything to do with emotional bonds. Other than the Old Testament passage, the author offers no evidence that Naomi and Ruth are historical characters, that any kind of god exists, or that a book about

friendship, kinship, and romance deserves a place in the Old Testament canon. Thus, from a rational-world perspective, the story makes little sense.

Fisher is convinced that the assumptions of the rational-world paradigm are too limited. He calls for a new conceptual framework (a paradigm shift) in order to better understand human communication. His *narrative paradigm* is built on five assumptions similar in form to the rational-world paradigm, but quite different in content.[12]

Narrative paradigm
A theoretical framework that views narrative as the basis of all human communication.

1. People are essentially storytellers.
2. We make decisions on the basis of good reasons, which vary depending on the communication situation, media, and genre (philosophical, technical, rhetorical, or artistic).
3. History, biography, culture, and character determine what we consider good reasons.
4. Narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories.
5. The world is a set of stories from which we choose, and thus constantly re-create, our lives.

Viewing human beings as storytellers who reason in various ways is a major conceptual shift. For example, in a logical system, values are emotional nonsense. From the narrative perspective, however, values are the "stuff" of stories. Working from a strictly logical standpoint, aesthetic proof is irrelevant, but within a narrative framework, style and beauty play a pivotal role in determining whether we get into a story. Perhaps the biggest shift in thinking has to do with who is qualified to assess the quality of communication. Whereas the rational-world model holds that only experts are capable of presenting or discerning sound arguments, the narrative paradigm maintains that, armed with a bit of common sense, almost any of us can see the point of a good story and judge its merits as the basis for belief and action. Fisher would say that each of us will make his or her judgment about Buechner's account of Ruth (or any story) based upon *narrative rationality*.

NARRATIVE RATIONALITY: COHERENCE AND FIDELITY

According to Fisher, not all stories are equally good. Even though there's no guarantee that people won't adopt a bad story, he thinks that everybody applies the same standards of *narrative rationality* to whatever stories he or she hears: "The operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation."[13] Will we accept a cross-cultural tale of a young widow's total commitment to her mother-in-law and of Naomi's enthusiastic efforts to help Ruth remarry and have children by another man? Fisher believes that our answer depends on whether Buechner's account meets the twin tests of *narrative coherence* and *narrative fidelity.* Together they are measures of a story's truthfulness and humanity.

Narrative rationality
A way to evaluate the worth of stories based on the twin standards of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity.

Narrative Coherence: Does the Story Hang Together?

Narrative coherence has to do with how probable the story sounds to the hearer. Does the narrative *hang together*? Do the people and events it portrays seem to be of

"I know what you're thinking, but let me offer a competing narrative."

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one piece? Are they part of an organic whole or are there obvious contradictions among them? Do the characters act consistently?

Narrative coherence
Internal consistency with characters acting in a reliable fashion; the story hangs together.

Buechner's version of Ruth and Naomi's relationship translates this ancient tale of interpersonal commitment into a contemporary setting. To the extent that his modern-day references to a brass band at the station, polishing off a nightcap, and young bucks running around in tight-fitting jeans consistently portray the present, the story has structural integrity. Fisher regards the internal consistency of a narrative as similar to lines of argument in a rational-world paradigm. In that sense, his *narrative paradigm doesn't discount or replace logic.* Instead, Fisher lists the test of reason as one, but only one, of the factors that affect narrative coherence.

Stories hang together when we're convinced that the narrator hasn't left out important details, fudged the facts, or ignored other plausible interpretations. We often judge the coherence of a narrative by comparing it with other stories we've heard that deal with the same theme. How does Buechner's account of feminine wiles used to move an older man toward marriage without going "too far" stack up against the seduction scenes in the film *Heartbreakers?* To the extent that Ruth's ploy seems more believable than the blatant tactics of Jennifer Love Hewitt's and Sigourney Weaver's characters, we'll credit Buechner's biblical update with coherence.

For Fisher, the ultimate test of narrative coherence is whether we can count on the characters to act in a reliable manner. We are suspicious of accounts where characters behave "uncharacteristically." We tend to trust stories of people who show continuity of thought, motive, and action. Whether you regard Buechner's Naomi as a wise matchmaker or an overcontrolling mother-in-law, her consistent concern that Ruth find a man to marry is a thread that gives the fabric of the story a tight weave.

Narrative Fidelity: Does the Story Ring True and Humane?

Narrative fidelity is the quality of a story that causes the words to strike a responsive chord in the life of the listener. A story has fidelity when it rings true with the hearers' experiences; it squares with the stories they might tell about themselves.[14]

Narrative fidelity
Congruence between values embedded in a message and what listeners regard as truthful and humane; the story strikes a responsive chord.

Have we, like Boaz, done special favors for a person we found especially attractive? Like Naomi, have we stretched the rules of decorum to help make a match? Or, like Ruth, have we ever experienced a bond with a relative that goes beyond obligation to family? To the extent that the details of this 3,000-year-old story portray the world we live in, the narrative has fidelity.

Fisher's book *Human Communication as Narration* has the subtitle *Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action.* He believes a story has fidelity when it provides good reasons to guide our future actions. When we buy into a story, we buy into the type of character we should be. Thus, values are what set the narrative paradigm's logic of good reasons apart from the rational-world paradigm's mere logic of reasons.

The *logic of good reasons* centers on five value-related issues. Fisher says we are concerned with (1) the values embedded in the message, (2) the relevance of those values to decisions made, (3) the consequence of adhering to those values, (4) the overlap with the worldview of the audience, and (5) conformity with what the audience members believe is "an ideal basis for conduct."[15] The last two concerns—congruity with the listeners' values and the actions they think best—form the basis of Fisher's contention that people tend to prefer accounts that fit with what they view as truthful and humane. But what specific values guide audiences as they gauge a story's truth or fidelity? Fisher suggests that there is an *ideal audience* or permanent public that identifies the humane values that a good story embodies:

Ideal audience
An actual community existing over time that believes in the values of truth, the good, beauty, health, wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, harmony, order, communion, friendship, and oneness with the cosmos.

> It appears that there is a permanent public, an actual community existing over time, that believes in the values of truth, the good, beauty, health, wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, harmony, order, communion, friendship, and oneness with the Cosmos—as variously as those values may be defined or practiced in "real" life.[16]

Fisher admits that other communities are possible—ones based on greed or power, for example. But he maintains that when people are confronted by "the better part of themselves," these less-idealistic value systems won't be "entirely coherent or true to their whole lives, or to the life that they would most like to live."[17] Fisher believes, then, that the humane virtues of the ideal audience shape our logic of good reasons. If we are convinced that this audience of good people would scoff at Boaz' protection of Ruth or squirm in discomfort at her midnight visit to the barn, Buechner's version of the biblical narrative will lack fidelity. But inasmuch as we think that these ideal auditors would applaud Ruth's rarified devotion to Naomi—while appreciating the older woman's down-to-earth approach to courtship—Buechner's words will have the ring of truthfulness and humanity.

According to Fisher, when we judge a story to have fidelity, we are not merely affirming shared values. We are ultimately opening ourselves to the possibility that those values will influence our beliefs and actions. For example, many engaged couples for whom the love of Ruth rings true have adopted her words to Naomi as a model for their wedding vows:

> I will go wherever you go and live wherever you live.
> Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.[18]

I employed the age-old story of Ruth to illustrate features of the narrative paradigm. In like manner, most of my students—like Chris below—pick a book or a film to demonstrate their application of Fisher's theory.

> Beginning with *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* in *The Chronicles of Narnia,* C.S. Lewis presents a coherent set of stories. While the characters, places, and events may not be "of this world"—the rational world we live in—Lewis has constructed a set of relationships and rules so consistent that it makes the fictional world seem plausible. The stories also have fidelity because Lewis skillfully creates parallels to our common human reality. The characters relate directly to people in my life (including me). For instance, I can identify with "doubting" Susan as she grows out of her child-like faith. Yet I long for the innocent passion of Lucy and the nobleness of Peter.

A good story is a powerful means of persuasion. Fisher would remind us, however, that almost *all* communication is narrative, and that we evaluate it on that basis. This chapter and all the others in this book are story. According to his narrative paradigm, you can (and will) judge whether they hang together and ring true to the values held by the people who make up your ideal audience.

CRITIQUE: DOES FISHER'S STORY HAVE COHERENCE AND FIDELITY?

Fisher's narrative paradigm offers a fresh reworking of Aristotelian analysis, which has dominated rhetorical thinking in the field of communication. His approach is strongly democratic. When communication is viewed as narrative, people usually don't need specialized training or expertise to figure out if a story holds together or offers good reasons for believing it to be true. There's still a place for experts to provide information and explanation in specialized fields, but when it comes to evaluating coherence and fidelity, people with ordinary common sense are competent rhetorical critics.

In *Human Communication as Narration*, Fisher applies the principles of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity to analyze various types of communication. He explains why a sometimes illogical President Ronald Reagan was aptly known as "The Great Communicator." He examines the false values of Willy Loman that lead to his downfall in *Death of a Salesman*. And he explores the consequences of adopting the rival philosophies embedded in the stories of two Greek thinkers—Socrates and Callicles. According to Fisher, the very fact that the narrative paradigm can be applied to this wide range of communication genres provides strong evidence of its validity.

Of course, Fisher's theory is itself a story, and, as you might expect, not everyone accepts his tale. For example, many critics charge that he is overly optimistic when, similar to Aristotle, Fisher argues that people have a natural tendency to prefer the true and the just. Challenging Fisher's upbeat view of human nature, rhetorical critic Barbara Warnick at the University of Washington calls attention to the great communicative power of evil or wrongheaded stories such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Fisher declares that Hitler's opus "must be judged a bad story,"[19] but as Warnick notes, it "struck a chord in an alienated, disunited, and despairing people."[20] Hitler's success in scapegoating the Jews ranks as one of history's most notorious acts of rhetoric, yet in its time and place it achieved both coherence and fidelity. Fisher thinks Warnick is confusing Hitler's *effective* discourse

with the *good* discourse that people tend to prefer. But he grants that evil can overwhelm that tendency and thinks that's all the more reason to identify and promote the humane values described by the narrative paradigm.

William Kirkwood at East Tennessee State University claims there is another problem with the logic of good reasons. Kirkwood says that a standard of narrative rationality implies that good stories cannot and perhaps should not go beyond what people already believe and value. He charges that the logic of good reasons encourages writers and speakers to adjust their ideas to people rather than people to their ideas, and thus denies the "rhetoric of possibility," the chance to be swayed by that which is unfamiliar or radically different.[21]

University of Rhode Island communication professor Kevin McClure agrees with Kirkwood, and argues that Fisher's understanding of probability and fidelity are too tightly linked with normative concepts of rationality. He reminds us that Fisher wrote that "the operative principle of narrative rationality is identification."[22] If Fisher would concentrate on Kenneth Burke's understanding of identification as "an aesthetic and poetic experience, and thus a relational experience or encounter with the symbolic rather than an encounter with rational argument," McClure thinks the narrative paradigm could easily explain how improbable stories that "lack a sense of fidelity are accepted and acted on."[23]

Fisher thinks these critiques are ridiculous. He explicitly states that people have the capacity to "formulate and adopt new stories that better account for their lives or the mystery of life itself."[24] In a somewhat wry fashion, Fisher credits his detractors for bolstering the validity of the narrative paradigm:

> I want to thank my critics, for they cannot but substantiate the soundness of my position. They do this in two ways: whatever line of attack they may take, they end up criticizing either the coherence or fidelity of my position, or both. And whatever objections they may make, the foundation for their objections will be a rival story, which, of course, they assume to be coherent and which has fidelity.[25]

Is most communication story, and do we judge every message we hear on the basis of whether it hangs together and rings true with our values? If you take Fisher's ideas seriously, you won't need me or a trained rhetorician to give you the final word. Like everyone else, you can spot the difference between a good story and a bad one.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Using Fisher's definition of *narration*, can you think of any types of communication other than jokes or phatic communication that don't fit within the *narrative paradigm?*

2. Fisher claims that the *rational-world paradigm* dominates Western education. Can you list college courses you've taken that adopt the assumptions of this conceptual framework?

3. What is the difference between *narrative coherence* and *narrative fidelity?*

4. You apply a *logic of good reasons* to the stories you hear. What are the *values* undergirding Buechner's story of Ruth? Which one do you most admire? What *values* do you hold that cause you to ultimately accept or reject his narrative?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action,* University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, 1987.

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Critique: Barbara Warnick, "The Narrative Paradigm: Another Story," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vol. 73, 1987, pp. 172–182.

Critique and revision: Kevin McClure, "Resurrecting the Narrative Paradigm: Identification and the Case of Young Earth Creationism," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* Vol. 39, 2009, pp. 189–211.

Do you think you can detect when a story is false?
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DIVISION FOUR

Mass Communication

MEDIA AND CULTURE

CHAPTER 25. Media Ecology (McLuhan)
CHAPTER 26. Semiotics (Barthes)
CHAPTER 27. Cultural Studies (Hall)

MEDIA EFFECTS

CHAPTER 28. Uses and Gratifications (Katz)
CHAPTER 29. Cultivation Theory (Gerbner)
CHAPTER 30. Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw)

Media and Culture

Students who begin to study the relationship between media and culture quickly run across multiple references to *postmodernism*. While most of us understand that this term refers to many elements of contemporary Western society, we may be hard-pressed to explain the specific values or practices that distinguish a postmodern culture from others. Since media expression is at the heart of postmodernism, I'll illustrate six of its defining features.[1]

1. Postmodern *describes a period of time when the promise of modernism no longer seems justified.* The modernistic ideologies that postmodernism rejects include the industrial revolution, nationalistic imperialism, the rationality of the Enlightenment, faith in science, and any sense that the world is on an upward trajectory. In his essay "On Nihilism," Jean Baudrillard, a leading French postmodernist, claims that he and his colleagues are neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Yet the absence of meaning he describes strikes most readers as devoid of hope.

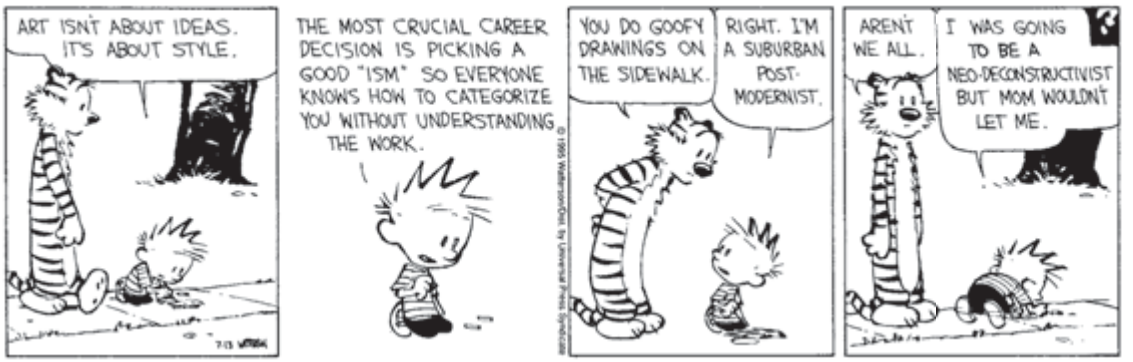
> I have the impression with postmodernism that there is an attempt to rediscover a certain pleasure in the irony of things. Right now one can tumble into total hopelessness—all the definitions, everything, it's all been done. What can one do? What can one become? And postmodernity is the attempt . . . to reach a point where one can live with what is left. It is more a survival amongst the remnants than anything else.[2]

2. *We have become tools of our tools.* Canadian Marshall McLuhan surveyed the history of media technology and observed that *we shape our tools and they in turn shape us.* According to McLuhan, when we continually use a communication technology it alters our symbolic environment—the socially constructed, sensory world of meanings that shapes our perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behavior. If we concentrate on analyzing or resisting the content of media messages, we miss the fact that the medium itself is the message.

3. *In a postmodern world, any claim of truth or moral certainty is suspect.* In his book *The Postmodern Condition*, Baudrillard's countryman Jean-François Lyotard was the first to popularize the use of the term *postmodern* to describe our culture. "Simplifying to the extreme," wrote Lyotard, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives."[3] He was referring specifically to any systems of thought that claimed to be true for all people, such as Marxism, Freudianism, or Christianity. But the relativity of knowledge applies to any assertion of truth. In postmodern thinking, we can't know anything for certain. There are no facts, only interpretations.

Under postmodern skepticism, anything that appears solid melts into thin air. This is a major reason film critics label *The Matrix, Memento,* and *Inception* postmodern art. The success of the television show *Seinfeld* suggests that even lighthearted comedy can have the same ephemeral quality. As its creator often claimed, "It's a show about nothing."

4. *Images become more important than what they represent.* Postmodernists are convinced that recurrent media images take on a *hyperreality*—they are more real than reality. Our mental pictures of the perfect body, house, meal, vacation, and sexual relationship have been created through exposure to constantly recycled



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media depictions that have no basis in fact—but it is these images that create our expectations. As Baudrillard suggests, "It's not TV as a mirror of society but just the reverse: *it's society as the mirror of television.*"[4] For postmodernists, the issue is not whether media distort reality. In today's world the media have become reality—the only one we have.

5. *With a media assist, we can mix and match diverse styles and tastes to create a unique identity.* Lyotard regards this kind of eclecticism as the norm for postmodern culture. "One listens to reggae, watches a Western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games."[5] The possibilities of identity construction are endless in an urban setting with thousands of cable channels and high-speed Internet to provide infinite variety. Postmodernism is an age of individualism rather than one of community.

6. *Postmodernism can also be seen as a new kind of economic order—a consumer society based on multinational capitalism.* In a postmodern society, information rather than production is the key to profits. Money is especially important in a consumer society because *people are what they consume.*

Operating from a neo-Marxist perspective, Duke University literature professor Frederic Jameson is a high-profile postmodernist who takes this economic view. He sees in our current era "the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order,"[6] specifically a late stage of capitalism. He is not surprised to see the erosion of the old distinction between high culture and so-called popular culture. In the absence of aesthetic standards, profits become the measure of whether art is good or bad. Thus, media conglomerates such as Disney and Time Warner cannot help but work in the interest of those who already have financial control.

The theorists featured in this section do not specifically refer to themselves as postmodernists, but the insights they offer have contributed to the postmodern analysis of the relationship between media and culture. And, as with avowed postmodernist scholars, their methodological approach is highly interpretive rather than empirical. Media theorists who take a scientific approach that focuses on measurable effects will be featured in the section following this one.

CHAPTER 25

Socio-cultural tradition

Media Ecology

of Marshall McLuhan

The critical and popular success of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* caught nearly everyone by surprise. Not even dedicated environmentalists expected former Vice President Al Gore's slide-show lecture on global warming to create the buzz it did, nor did they anticipate that Gore would be honored with the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for his effort. Yet *An Inconvenient Truth* became one of the highest-grossing documentaries of all time, won the 2006 Academy Award for best picture in that category, and appears to have been the tipping point in Americans' concern about the effects of global warming.

Of course, not everyone liked the film. Some people stayed away, because they knew what they'd see and hear (see Chapter 17). Others argued strongly against Gore's claims. Science may prove that the climate is heating up for now, but climates are dynamic, critics suggested, and the current rise in temperature may just be an uptick in a cycle that will later go down. These skeptics also asked how it's possible to know if human beings are directly responsible for the ongoing climate changes.[1]

The debate on global warming turns on our attitude toward the relationship between modern civilization and the environment. Do human inventions and actions really matter when it comes to the stability of global temperatures? Are we affecting our atmosphere and, if so, does it affect us in return?

In the 1960s, University of Toronto English professor Marshall McLuhan burst onto the public scene by asking similar questions about the relationship between *media* and culture. Like *An Inconvenient Truth*, McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was a surprise hit that generated both admiration and dissension. His theory suggests that media should be understood ecologically. Changes in technology alter the *symbolic environment*—the socially constructed, sensory world of meanings that in turn shapes our perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behavior.

Symbolic environment
The socially constructed, sensory world of meanings.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

McLuhan's theory of media ecology is best captured in his famous aphorism: "The medium is the message." This pithy statement is meant to upset our expectations. We're accustomed to thinking of the message as separate from the medium itself. The *medium* delivers the message. McLuhan, however, collapsed

Media
Generic term for all human-invented technology that extends the range, speed, or channels of communication.

Medium
A specific type of media; for example, a book, newspaper, radio, television, telephone, film, website, or email.

the distinction between the message and the medium. He saw them as one and the same.

When considering the cultural influence of *media*, however, we are usually misled by the illusion of *content*. McLuhan wrote, "For the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."[2] We focus on the content and overlook the *medium*—even though content doesn't exist outside of the way it's mediated. *Moby Dick* is a book. *Moby Dick* is a movie. *Moby Dick* is an oral tale. These are different stories. For this reason, we shouldn't complain that a movie is not like the book, because a movie can never be like a book. A movie can only be a movie.

Whether a TV show is about killer whales, current events, crime scene investigations, or discovering the next American pop star, the message is always television. It is the distinct experience of TV that alters the symbolic environment. From the perspective of media ecology, the Diehard Peyton MasterCard ad discussed in Chapter 2 is important not for its content but for its televisual characteristics, such as its reliance on humor and 10 cuts in a 30-second commercial. Media ecologists might point out that neither Glenn nor Marty even mentioned these features in their analysis.

After reading about McLuhan's theory, John had no problem recognizing the message of a medium. In his application log he wrote:

> Instant messaging is a recent fad as society moves deeper into the digital age. I don't regard IM as necessary for exchanging information. Emails and phone calls can take care of that. For me, instant messages are a sign of affection; they are "flirtatious." I've got a crush on Ashley, and when I see that I have an instant message from her, I can't help but smile—this even before I read the message. Overshadowed by a media form that signifies intimacy and fondness, the content seems irrelevant. The medium is the message.

THE CHALLENGE OF MEDIA ECOLOGY

Media ecology
The study of different personal and social environments created by the use of different communication technologies.

Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.[3] But evaluating the *ecology of media* is a difficult enterprise because all environments are inherently intangible and interrelated. An environment is not a thing to identify; rather, it is the intricate association of many things. By definition, these things are part of the background. They are everything and no thing. McLuhan noted that "their ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception."[4]

Invisibility of Environments

McLuhan was fond of quoting the mantra of anthropologists: "We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the fish." In the same way, we have trouble recognizing "the way media work as environments" because we are so immersed in them.

McLuhan's theory of media differs from the traditional warnings against technological advances. The tales of *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner, Jurassic Park*, and *The Matrix* posit technology gone awry and turning on its maker. These fantastical threats prove terribly obvious. As long as our technologies are not chasing after us, we are supposedly safe from the consequences of our creations.

Technology
According to McLuhan, human inventions that enhance communication.

According to McLuhan, it's not technological abnormality that demands our attention, since it's hard *not* to notice the new and different. Instead, we need to focus on our everyday experience of *technology*. A medium shapes us because we partake of it over and over until it becomes an extension of ourselves. Because every medium emphasizes different senses and encourages different habits, engaging a medium day after day conditions the senses to take in some stimuli and not register others. A medium that emphasizes the ear over the eye alters the ratios of sense perception. Like a blind man who begins to develop a heightened sense of hearing, society is shaped in accordance with the dominant medium of the day.

It's the ordinariness of media that makes them invisible. When a new medium enters society, there's a period of time in which we're aware of its novelty. It's only when it fades into the background of our lives that we're truly subjected to its patterns—that is, its environmental influence. In the same way that a girl growing up in California may unconsciously absorb a West Coast attitude, a boy growing up in our electronic age may unconsciously absorb a digital attitude.

Complexity of Environments

In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore offers scientific evidence that the planet is experiencing a critical change in climate. Even when global warming skeptics grudgingly admit a rise in average temperature, they suggest that there's no direct relationship between this change in climate and the emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from human activities. Because environments are incredibly intricate, there are always a number of other factors and conditions that opponents can claim are contributing to the climate. Systems theorists call this *overdetermination,* or *equifinality (*see Chapter 14). When it comes to the environment, there is no easy formula for a cause-and-effect relationship such as *global warming increases 0.0001 degrees for every million gallons of gasoline burned.*

Overdetermination
Equifinality; a systems theory assumption that a given outcome could be effectively caused by any or many interconnected factors.

This lack of a one-to-one relationship is also why it's so easy to ignore our contributions to global warming. If the sun got brighter and hotter every time we filled our tank with gas, we'd probably look for an alternative energy source. In like manner, if our ears grew and our eyes dimmed every time we used our cell phone, we'd surely take notice. Understanding the influential relationship between the media environment and society is a subtle yet crucial endeavor that demands a complex sense of both incremental and sudden change. For this reason, McLuhan traced the major ecological shifts in media throughout human history.

A MEDIA ANALYSIS OF HUMAN HISTORY

McLuhan was critical of social observers who analyzed the Western world but bypassed the effects of symbolic environments—be they oral, print, or electronic. He specifically accused modern scholars of being "ostrichlike" in refusing to acknowledge the revolutionary impact of electronic media on the sensory experience of contemporary society.

As Figure 25–1 shows, McLuhan divided all human history into four periods, or epochs—a tribal age, a literate age, a print age, and an electronic age. According to McLuhan, the crucial inventions that changed life on this planet were the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph. In each case the world was wrenched from one era into the next because of new developments in media

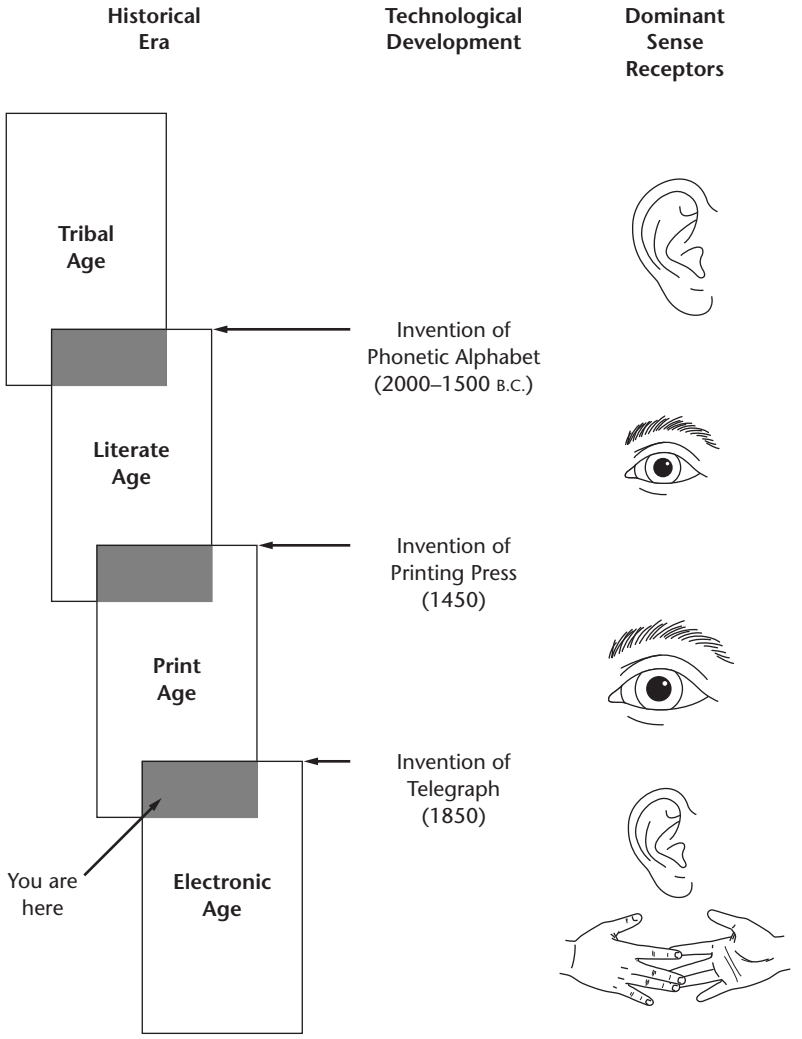

FIGURE 25–1 Marshall McLuhan's Media Map of History

technology. Those of us born in the twentieth century are living through one of those turbulent transitions—from the tail end of the *print* age to the very beginning of the *electronic* age.

1. The Tribal Age: An Acoustic Place in History

Tribal age
An acoustic era; a time of community because the ear is the dominant sense organ.

According to McLuhan, the tribal village was an acoustic place where the senses of hearing, touch, taste, and smell were developed far beyond the ability to visualize. In untamed settings, hearing is more valuable than seeing because it allows you to be more immediately aware of your surroundings. With sight, we are limited to direction and distance. We can only sense what is clearly in front of us. If a preying animal is behind us or hidden behind a tree, we are hopelessly unaware without a sensitivity to sound or smell. Hearing and smelling provide a sense of that which we cannot see, a crucial ability in the tribal age.

The omnidirectional quality of sound also enhances community. The spoken word is primarily a communal experience. To tell a secret, we must whisper or speak directly in someone's ear or make sure that no one else is listening. The sense of sound works against privatization. Listening to someone speak in a group is a unifying act. Everyone hears at the same time.

The spoken word is also immediate and alive. It exists only at the moment it is heard. There is no sense of the word as something that is fixed or objectified. Spoken words lack materiality. In order to keep an idea or an event alive, it must constantly be shared and reiterated and passed down. The ethereal quality of speech doesn't allow for detached analysis. In a tribal age, hearing is believing.

McLuhan claimed that "primitive" people led richer and more complex lives than their literate descendants because the ear, unlike the eye, encourages a more holistic sense of the world. There is a deeper feeling of community and greater awareness of the surrounding existence. The acoustic environment also fosters more passion and spontaneity. In that world of surround sound, everything is more immediate, more present, and more actual.

Then someone invented the alphabet.

2. The Age of Literacy: A Visual Point of View

Turning sounds into visible objects radically altered the symbolic environment. Suddenly, the eye became the heir apparent. Hearing diminished in value and quality. To disagree with this assessment merely illustrates McLuhan's belief that a private, left-brain "point of view" becomes possible in a world that encourages the visual practice of reading texts.

Words fixed on a page detach meaning from the immediacy of context. In an acoustic environment, taking something out of context is nearly impossible. In the age of literacy, it's a reality. Both writer and reader are always separate from the text. Words are no longer alive and immediate. They can be read and reread. They can be thoroughly analyzed. Hearing no longer becomes trustworthy. "Seeing it in writing" becomes proof that it's true.

Literary age
A visual era; a time of private detachment because the eye is the dominant sense organ.

Literacy also jarred people out of collective tribal involvement into "civilized" private detachment. Reading words, instead of hearing them, transforms group members into individuals. Even though the words may be the same, the act of reading a text is an individual one. It requires singular focus. A tribe no longer needs to come together to get information. Proximity becomes less important.

McLuhan also claimed that the phonetic alphabet established the line as the organizing principle in life. In writing, letter follows letter in a connected, orderly line. Logic is modeled on that step-by-step linear progression. According to McLuhan, when literate people say, "I don't follow you," they mean, "I don't think you are logical." He alleged that the invention of the alphabet fostered the sudden emergence of mathematics, science, and philosophy in ancient Greece. He cited the political upheaval in colonial Africa as twentieth-century evidence that literacy triggers an ear-to-eye switch that isolates the reader. When oppressed people learned to read, they became independent thinkers.

3. The Print Age: Prototype of the Industrial Revolution

If the phonetic alphabet made visual dependence possible, the printing press made it widespread. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan argued that the most

Print age
A visual era; mass-produced books usher in the industrial revolution and nationalism, yet individuals are isolated.

important aspect of movable type was its ability to reproduce the same text over and over again, and a press run of 100,000 copies of *Understanding Media* suggests that he was right. Because the print revolution demonstrated mass production of identical products, McLuhan called it the forerunner of the industrial revolution.

He saw other unintended side effects of Gutenberg's invention. The homogenization of fluid regional tongues into a fixed national language was followed closely by the rise of nationalism. Concurring with this new sense of unification was a countering sense of separation and aloneness.

> Printing, a ditto device, confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It created the portable book, which men could read in privacy and in isolation from others.[5]

Many libraries have the words "The truth will set you free" carved in stone above the main entrance.[6] From McLuhan's perspective, libraries provide readers with the freedom to be alienated from others and from the immediacy of their surroundings.

4. The Electronic Age: The Rise of the Global Village

Electronic age
An era of instant communication; a return to the global village with all-at-once sound and touch.

With the tap-tap-tap of the telegraph, the power of the printed word lost its bearings. Of course, Samuel Morse's invention was only the first of the new electronic media devices that would make the corner Radio Shack seem, to previous generations, like a magic shop.

Telegraph Radio Telephone
Film projector Phonograph TV
Photocopier Tape recorder Answering machine
VCR Computer CD
Cell phone Fax Video game
Internet DVD MP3 Smart phone

McLuhan insisted that electronic media are retribalizing the human race. Instant communication has returned us to a pre-alphabetic oral tradition where sound and touch are more important than sight. We've gone "back to the future" to become a village unlike any other previous village. We're now a *global village*.

Global village
A worldwide electronic community where everyone knows everyone's business and all are somewhat testy.

Electronic media bring us in touch with everyone, everywhere, instantaneously. Whereas the book extended the eye, electronic circuitry extends the central nervous system.[7] Constant contact with the world becomes a daily reality. All-at-once-ness is our state of being. Closed human systems no longer exist. The rumble of empty stomachs in Bombay and of roadside bombs in Baghdad vibrate in the living rooms of Boston. For us, the first postliterate generation, privacy is either a luxury or a curse of the past. The planet is like a general store where nosy people keep track of everyone else's business—a 12-way party line or a "Dear Abby" column writ large. "The new tribalism is one where everyone's buiness is everyone else's and where we all are somewhat testy."[8] Citizens of the world are back in acoustic space.

Linear logic is useless in the electronic society that McLuhan described. Acoustic people no longer inquire, "Do you see my point?" Instead we ask, "How does that grab you?" What we feel is more important than what we think.

5. The Digital Age? Rewiring the Global Village

Digital age
A possible fifth era of specialized electronic tribes contentious over diverse beliefs and values.

When *Wired*, a magazine on digital culture, was launched in 1992, the editors declared Marshall McLuhan the magazine's "patron saint." There was a sense that another revolution was looming, and many returned to the words of McLuhan for guidance. However, digital technology doesn't pull the plug on the electronic age, because, quite frankly, it still needs its power source. The *digital age* is wholly electronic.

With that said, there's no doubt that the introduction of digital technology is altering the electronic environment. The mass age of electronic media is becoming increasingly personalized. Instead of one unified electronic tribe, we have a growing number of digital tribes forming around the most specialized ideas, beliefs, values, interests, and fetishes. Instead of mass consciousness, which McLuhan viewed rather favorably, we have the emergence of a tribal warfare

"You see, Dad, Professor McLuhan says the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it. The invention of type created linear, or sequential, thought, separating thought from action. Now, with TV and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a village. Get it?"

© Alan Dunn/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

mentality. Despite the contentious nature of this tribalization of differences, many see benefit in the resulting decentralization of power and control.

Were he alive today, McLuhan undoubtedly would have spotted other ways that digital media are altering our present environment. And he would probably speculate on whether the electronic environment is the destiny of humankind, or if there's another media force waiting to upset the ecology of the previous century.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: POSTMAN'S FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

McLuhan's probes stimulated others to ponder whether specific media environments were beneficial or destructive for those immersed in them. Neil Postman founded the media ecology program at New York University and was regarded by many as McLuhan's heir apparent. Like McLuhan, Postman believed that the forms of media regulate and even dictate what kind of content the form of a given medium can carry.[9] For example, smoke signals implicitly discourage philosophical argument.

> Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content.[10]

But unlike McLuhan, Postman believed that the primary task of media ecology is to make moral judgments. "To be quite honest about it," he once proclaimed, "I don't see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context."[11]

According to Postman, a new technology always presents us with a *Faustian bargain*—a potential deal with the devil. As Postman was fond of saying, "Technology giveth and technology taketh away. . . . A new technology sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it destroys more than it creates. But it is never one-sided."[12] His media ecology approach asks, *What are the moral implications of this bargain? Are the consequences more humanistic or antihumanistic? Do we, as a society, gain more than we lose, or do we lose more than we gain?*

Faustian bargain
A deal with the devil; selling your soul for temporary earthly gain.

Postman argued that television is detrimental to society because it has led to the loss of serious public discourse. Television changes the form of information "from discursive to nondiscursive, from propositional to presentational, from rationalistic to emotive."[13] *Sesame Street*, *60 Minutes*, and *Survivor* all share the same ethos—amusement. The environment of television turns everything into entertainment and everyone into juvenile adults. Triviality trumps seriousness.

Shortly before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, *Daily Show* comedian Jon Stewart shocked TV audiences by confronting the hosts of *Crossfire* for hurting public discourse in America. He suggested that their program turned debate into theater and "partisan hackery." Some compared Stewart's criticism to Neil Postman's sentiments in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Stewart's criticism seemed warranted, but it was significantly different than Postman's critique of television news shows. Whereas Stewart argued that shows like *Crossfire* should be more responsible, Postman believed that, on television, panelists are unable to respond in a serious manner. *Crossfire*, which is no longer on the air, was bad at public discourse because, for a while, it was good at being television—silly and shallow.

Like McLuhan, Postman preferred questions to answers, so it is fitting that his legacy be defined by three questions he urged us to ask about any new technology:

1. What is the problem to which this technology is a solution?
2. Whose problem is it, actually?
3. If there is a legitimate problem to be solved, what other problems will be created by my using this technology?

To this end, Postman expressed concerns about the coming age of computer technology. He questioned if we were yielding too easily to the "authority" of computation and the values of efficiency and quantification. He pondered whether the quest for technological progress was becoming increasingly more important than being humane. He wondered if information was an acceptable substitute for wisdom. While Postman was primarily concerned with the ecology of television, his work set a precedent for considering the moral consequences of all symbolic environments.

CRITIQUE: HOW COULD HE BE RIGHT? BUT WHAT IF HE WAS?

McLuhan likened himself to "Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy is quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them."[14] Of course, the major difference is that Pasteur was a scientist, who ultimately gave tangible evidence for his germ theory. The problem with McLuhan's theory is that it suggests objectivity without scientific evidence. In other words, he used the subjective approach to make objective claims.

McLuhan faced harsh criticism from the scholarly community. He was one of the first academic superstars of the TV era, so perhaps his enormous popularity gave added impetus to critics' scorn for his methods and message. The pages of *McLuhan: Hot & Cool* and *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, collections of essays that critique his ideas, are filled with denunciation:

> [McLuhan] prefers to rape our attention rather than seduce our understanding.[15]

> He has looted all culture from cave painting to *Mad* magazine for fragments to shore up his system against ruin.[16]

> The style . . . is a viscous fog through which loom stumbling metaphors.[17]

George Gordon, then chairman of the department of communication at Fordham University, labeled McLuhan's work "McLuhanacy" and dismissed it as worthless. Gordon stated, "Not one bit of sustained and replicated scientific evidence, inductive or deductive, has to date justified any one of McLuhan's most famous slogans, metaphors, or dicta."[18] Indeed, it is hard to know how one could prove that the phonetic alphabet created Greek philosophy, that the printing press fostered nationalism, or that television is a tactile medium.

It is also hard to say that he was wrong, because it's difficult to be certain what he said. As a writer, McLuhan often abandoned the linearity and order that he claimed were the legacy of print technology. As a speaker, he was superb at crafting memorable phrases and 10-second sound bites, but his truths were enigmatic and seldom woven into a comprehensive system. He preferred to offer theoretical punch lines for people to accept or reject at face value.

A different attack on McLuhan comes from those who lament that he merely *explored* rather than publicly *deplored* the effects that electronic media have had on public morals. His biographers agree that he held a deep faith in God as represented by the Roman Catholic Church; he was well-read in theology and attended Mass almost every day. Yet he believed that as a professor, he should keep his personal beliefs private.[19] In a letter to anthropologist Edward Hall he wrote, "I deliberately keep Christianity out of these discussions lest perception be diverted from structural processes by doctrinal sectarian passions."[20] But as a comment he made during a radio interview reveals, his scholarship informed his faith and his faith informed his scholarship. "In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same."[21]

For those who regard falsifiability as a mark of a good theory, McLuhan's leaps of faith make it difficult to take his ideas seriously. However, history is littered with theories that were ahead of their time and couldn't immediately be tested. Tom Wolfe reverses the question: "What if he's right? Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov?"[22]

McLuhan's historical analysis has heightened awareness of the possible cultural effects of new media technologies. Other scholars have been more tempered in their statements and more rigorous in their documentation, but none has raised media consciousness to the level achieved by McLuhan with his catchy statements and dramatic metaphors.

The late economist Kenneth Boulding, who headed the Institute of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Colorado, captured both the pro and con reactions to McLuhan by using a metaphor of his own: "It is perhaps typical of very creative minds that they hit very large nails not quite on the head."[23]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What would McLuhan say about the impact of the Internet on the *global village?* Consider the fact that civic, political, and religious participation are declining in America.[24] Has *electronic technology* increased social connectedness?

2. How are portable media devices such as smart phones, iPods, and handheld video games altering the *media environment?* How are these devices shaping sensibilities?

3. Beyond changes in content, what are the differences in experiencing a book and its translations into film or television?

4. Can you conceive of any way that McLuhan's idea of *media ecology* could be proved false?

SELF-QUIZ *www.mhhe.com/griffin8*

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Marshall McLuhan, "*Playboy* Interview: A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," March 1969, p. 53ff. Reprinted in *Essential McLuhan,* Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (eds.), BasicBooks, New York, 1995, pp. 233–269.

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CHAPTER 26

Semiotic tradition

Semiotics

of Roland Barthes

French literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes (rhymes with "smart") wrote that for him, semiotics was not a cause, a science, a discipline, a school, a movement, nor presumably even a theory. "It is," he claimed, "an adventure."[1] The goal of semiotics is interpreting both verbal and nonverbal *signs.* The verbal side of the field is called *linguistics.* Barthes, however, was mainly interested in the nonverbal side—multifaceted visual signs just waiting to be read. Barthes held the chair of literary semiology at the College of France when he was struck and killed by a laundry truck in 1980. In his highly regarded book *Mythologies*, Barthes sought to decipher the cultural meaning of a wide variety of visual signs—from sweat on the faces of actors in the film *Julius Caesar* to a magazine photograph of a young African soldier saluting the French flag.

Unlike most intellectuals, Barthes frequently wrote for the popular press and occasionally appeared on television to comment on the foibles of the French middle class. His academic colleagues found his statements witty, disturbing, flashy, overstated, or profound—but never dull. He obviously made them think. With the exception of Aristotle, the four-volume *International Encyclopedia of Communication* refers to Barthes more than to any other theorist in this book.[2]

Semiotics (semiology) The study of the social production of meaning from sign systems; the analysis of anything that can stand for something else.

Semiology (or semiotics, as it is better known in America) is concerned with *anything that can stand for something else.* Italian semiologist and novelist Umberto Eco has a clever way of expressing that focus. Semiotics, he says, is "the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie, because if something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to tell at all."[3] Barthes was interested in signs that are seemingly straightforward but that subtly communicate ideological or connotative meaning and perpetuate the dominant values of society. As such, they are deceptive.

Barthes was a mercurial thinker who changed his mind about the way signs work more than once over the course of his career. Yet most current practitioners of semiotics follow the basic analytical concepts of his original theory. His approach provides great insight into the use of signs, particularly those channeled through the mass media.

WRESTLING WITH SIGNS

Myth
The connotative meaning that signs carry wherever they go; myth makes what is cultural seem natural.

Barthes initially described his semiotic theory as an explanation of *myth*. He later substituted the term *connotation* to label the ideological baggage that signs carry wherever they go, and most students of Barthes' work regard connotation as a better word choice to convey his true concern.

Barthes' theory of connotative meaning won't make sense to us, however, unless we first understand the way he viewed the structure of signs. His thinking was strongly influenced by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who coined the term *semiology* and advocated its study.[4] To illustrate Barthes' core principles I'll feature portions of his essay on professional wrestling entertainment.

1. A Sign Is the Combination of Its Signifier and Signified

The distinction between signifier and signified can be seen in Barthes' graphic description of the body of a French wrestler who was selected by the promoter because he typified the repulsive slob:

> As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant. Thauvin, a fifty-year-old with an obese and sagging body . . . displays in his flesh the characters of baseness. . . . The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight.[5]

According to Barthes, the image of the wrestler's physique is the *signifier*. The concept of baseness is the *signified*. The combination of the two—the villainous body—is the *sign*.

Sign
Thei nseparable combination of the signifier and the signified.

This way of defining a sign differs from our customary use of the word. We would probably say the wrestler's body *is a sign* of his baseness—or whatever else comes to mind. But Barthes considered the wrestler's body just *part* of the overall sign; it's the signifier. The other part is the concept of hideous baseness. The signifier isn't a sign of the signified. Rather, they work together in an inseparable bond to form a unified sign.

Signifier
The physical form of the sign as we perceive it through our senses; an image.

Barthes' description of a sign as the correlation between the signifier and the signified came directly from Saussure. The Swiss linguist visualized a sign as a piece of paper with writing on both sides—the signifier on one side, the signified on the other. If you cut off part of one side, an equal amount of the other side automatically goes with it.

Using a similar metaphor, I see signs as coins. For example, the image of President John F. Kennedy—the signifier—is stamped on the "heads" side of a large silver coin. It's only on the flip side of the coin that we learn its value is a half-dollar—the signified. The signifier and the signified can't be separated. They are combined in our common reference to that monetary sign—a Kennedy half-dollar.

Signified
The meaning we associate with the sign.

Is there any logical connection between the image of the signifier and the content of the signified? Saussure insisted the relationship is arbitrary—one of correlation rather than cause and effect. Barthes wasn't so sure. He was willing to grant the claim of Saussure that words have no inherent meaning. For example, there is nothing about the word *referee* that makes it stand for the third party

in the ring who is inept at making Thauvin follow the rules. But nonverbal signifiers seem to have a natural affinity with their signifieds. Barthes noted that Thauvin's body was so repugnant that it provoked nausea. He classified the relationship between signifiers and signifieds as "quasi-arbitrary." After all, Thauvin really did strike the crowd as vileness personified.

2. A Sign Does Not Stand on Its Own: It Is Part of a System

Barthes entitled his essay "The World of Wrestling," because, like all other semiotic systems, wrestling creates its own separate world of interrelated signs:

> Each moment in wrestling is therefore like an algebra which instantaneously unveils the relationship between a cause and its represented effect. Wrestling fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in *seeing* the moral mechanism function so perfectly. . . . A wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him.[6]

Barthes noted that the grapplers' roles are tightly drawn. There is little room for innovation; the men in the ring work within a closed system of signs. By responding to the unwavering expectation of the crowd, the wrestlers are as much spectators as the fans who cheer or jeer on cue.

Wrestling is just one of many semiotic systems. Barthes also explored the cultural meaning of designer clothes, French cooking, automobiles, Japanese gift giving, household furniture, urban layout, and public displays of sexuality. He attempted to define and classify the features common to all semiotic systems. This kind of structural analysis is called *taxonomy*, and Barthes' book *Elements of Semiology* is a "veritable frenzy of classifications."[7] Barthes later admitted that his taxonomy "risked being tedious," but the project strengthened his conviction that all semiotic systems function the same way, despite their apparent diversity.

Barthes believed that the significant semiotic systems of a culture lock in the status quo. The mythology that surrounds a society's crucial signs displays the world as it is today—however chaotic and unjust—as *natural, inevitable,* and *eternal*. The function of myth is to bless the mess. We now turn to Barthes' theory of connotation, or myth, which suggests how a seemingly neutral or inanimate sign can accomplish so much.

THE YELLOW RIBBON TRANSFORMATION: FROM FORGIVENESS TO PRIDE

According to Barthes, not all semiological systems are mythic. Not every sign carries ideological baggage. How is it that one sign can remain emotionally neutral while other signs acquire powerful inflections or connotations that suck people into a specific worldview? Barthes contended that a mythic or connotative system is a *second-order semiological system*—built off a preexisting sign system. The sign of the first system becomes the signifier of the second. A concrete example will help us understand Barthes' explanation.

In an *American Journal of Semiotics* article, Donald and Virginia Fry of Emerson College examined the widespread American practice of displaying

yellow ribbons during the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis.[8] They traced the transformation of this straightforward yellow symbol into an ideological sign. Americans' lavish display of yellow ribbons during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and the occupation of Iraq that began in 2003 adds a new twist to the Frys' analysis. I'll update their yellow ribbon example to illustrate Barthes' semiotic theory.

"Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree" was the best-selling pop song of 1972 in the United States.[9] Sung by Tony Orlando and Dawn, the lyrics express the thoughts of a convict in prison who is writing to the woman he loves. After three years in jail, the man is about to be released and will travel home by bus. Fearing her possible rejection, he devises a plan that will give her a way to signal her intentions without the potential embarrassment of a face-to-face confrontation.

Since he'll be able to see the huge oak planted in front of her house when the bus passes through town, he asks her to use the tree as a message board. If she still loves him, wants him back, and can overlook the past, she should tie a yellow ribbon around the trunk of the tree. He will know that all is forgiven and join her in rebuilding a life together. But if this bright sign of reconciliation isn't there, he'll stay on the bus, accept the blame for a failed relationship, and try to get on with his life without her.

The yellow ribbon is obviously a sign of acceptance, but one not casually offered. There's a taint on the relationship, hurts to be healed. Donald and Virginia Fry labeled the original meaning of the yellow ribbon in the song as "forgiveness of a stigma."

Yellow ribbons in 1991 continued to carry a "we want you back" message when U.S. armed forces fought in Operation Desert Storm. Whether tied to trees, worn in hair, or pinned to lapels, yellow ribbons still proclaimed, "Welcome home." But there was no longer any sense of shameful acts to be forgiven or disgrace to be overcome. Vietnam was ancient history and America was the leader of the "new world order." Hail the conquering heroes.

The mood surrounding the yellow ribbon had become one of triumph, pride, and even arrogance. After all, hadn't we intercepted Scud missiles in the air, guided "smart bombs" into air-conditioning shafts, and "kicked Saddam Hussein's butt across the desert"? People were swept up in a tide of "yellow fever." More than 90 percent of U.S. citizens approved of America's actions in the Persian Gulf. The simple yellow ribbon of personal reconciliation now served as a blatant sign of nationalism.

The yellow-ribbon sign functioned the same way for about three years after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which was the centerpiece of America's "War on Terror." Millions of citizens displayed yellow-ribbon decals and magnets on their cars and trucks that urged all to "Support Our Troops." The ribbon called up feelings of national pride and memories of the shock-and-awe attack on Baghdad that had squashed immediate resistance; Saddam Hussein had been driven from office, his statue toppled; democracy was being established; and President George W. Bush had dramatically landed a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier proclaiming "Mission Accomplished." The yellow ribbon continued to signify that the soldiers' return would be joyous, but its message held no sense of shame. What had originally signified forgiveness of a stigma now symbolized pride in victory.

THE MAKING OF MYTH: STRIPPING THE SIGN OF ITS HISTORY

According to Barthes' theory, the shift from "forgiveness of stigma" to "pride in victory" followed a typical semiotic pattern. Figure 26–1 shows how it's done.

Barthes claimed that every ideological sign is the result of two interconnected sign systems. The first system represented by the smaller coin is strictly descriptive—the signifier image and the signified concept combining to produce a denotative sign. The three elements of the sign system based on the "Tie a Yellow Ribbon . . ." lyrics are marked with Arabic numerals on the three images of the smaller coin. The three segments of the connotative system are marked with Roman numerals on the images of the larger coin. Note that the sign of the first system does double duty as the signifier of the Iraqi War connotative system. According to Barthes, this lateral shift, or connotative sidestep, is the key to transforming a neutral sign into an ideological tool. Follow his thinking step-by-step through the diagram.

Denotative sign system
A descriptive sign without ideological content.

The signifier (1) of the *denotative sign system* is the image of a yellow ribbon that forms in the mind of the person who hears the 1972 song. The content of the signified (2) includes the stigma that comes from the conviction of a crime, a term in jail, the prisoner's willingness to take responsibility for the three-year separation, and the explosive release of tension when the Greyhound passengers cheer at the sight of the oak tree awash in yellow ribbons. The corresponding

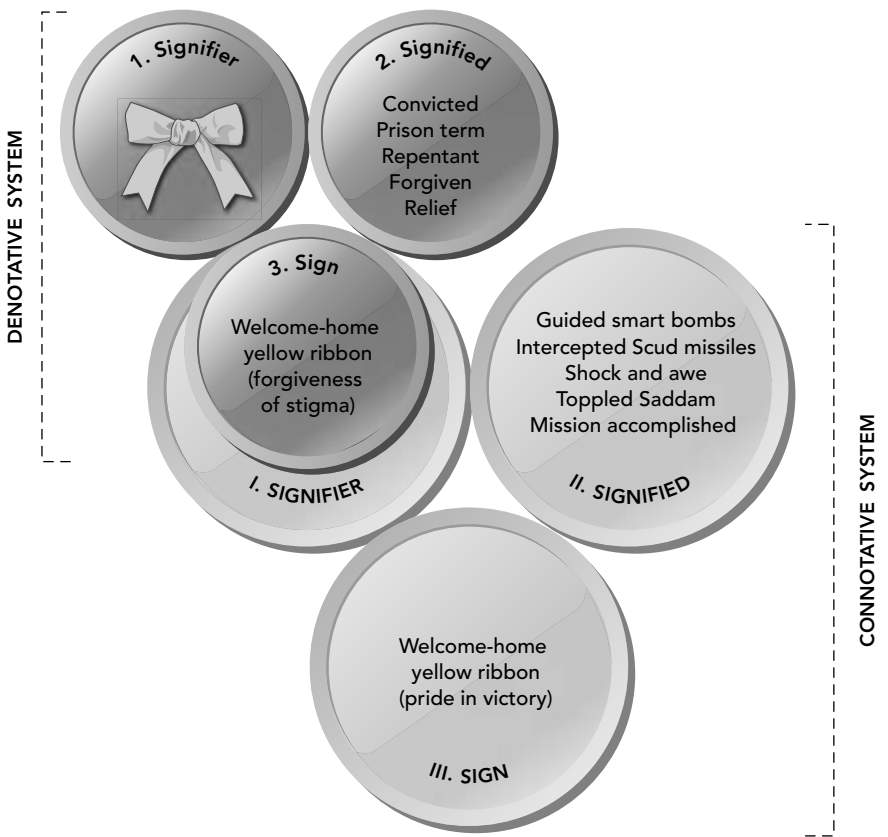

FIGURE 26–1 Connotation as a Second-Order Semiotic System
Based on Barthes, "Myth Today"

denotative sign (3) is "forgiveness of a stigma." For those who heard the song on the radio, the yellow-ribbon sign spoke for itself. It was a sign rich in regret and relief.

Current usage takes over the sign of the denotative system and makes it the signifier (I) of a secondary (connotative) system. The "welcome-home" yellow ribbon is paired with the mythic content of a signified (II) that shouts to the world, "Our technology can beat up your technology." But as the symbol of the yellow ribbon is expropriated to support the myth of American nationalism, the sign loses its historical grounding.

As a mere signifier of the *connotative sign system*, the yellow ribbon is no longer rooted in the details of the song. It ceases to stand for three years of hard time in prison, repentance, wrongdoing, or forgiveness that gains meaning because there is so much to be forgiven. Now in the service of the mythic semiotic system, the yellow ribbon becomes empty and timeless, a form without substance. According to Barthes, that doesn't mean that the meaning of the original denotative sign is completely lost:

> The essential point in all this is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance. . . . One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which . . . the myth will draw its nourishment.[10]

Connotative sign system
A mythic sign that has lost its historical referent; form without substance.

In the connotative system, the generalized image of a yellow ribbon is now paired with the signified content of victory in the Iraqi wars as seen on television. But since the signifier can't call up a historical or cultural past, the mythic sign (III) of which it is a part carries the "crust of falsity."[11] For example, there was no sense of American culpability in supplying arms to Saddam Hussein until he invaded Kuwait, no confession that a post-war plan for peace hadn't been prepared, and no shame for allowing the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. And since mythic communication is unable to imagine anything alien, novel, or other, the sign sweeps away second thoughts about civilian deaths in Baghdad. The transformed yellow ribbon is now a lofty sign that allows no room for nagging doubts that love of oil may have been our country's prime motivation for championing the United Nations' "humanitarian" intervention.

As a semiologist who relished uncovering the ideological subtext in apparently straightforward signs, Barthes might also note that the support-our-troops yellow ribbon is not merely an appeal to write encouraging letters, pray for their safety, and praise them for their service when they come home. In effect, the exhortation makes it unpatriotic to openly criticize George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. (Remember what happened to the Dixie Chicks?) The juxtaposition of yellow ribbons with Bush-Cheney bumper stickers prior to the 2004 election, as well as the conservative stance of websites selling the magnets, makes it clear that these are not neutral denotative signs.

UNMASKING THE MYTH OF A HOMOGENEOUS SOCIETY

Barthes was convinced that only those with semiotic savvy can spot the hollowness of connotative signs. For most Americans, the yellow ribbon will continue to elicit an unreflective "we're number one" feeling of national pride. Of course, it goes without saying that people will love their country. But that's precisely the problem with mythic signs. They *go without saying*. They don't explain, they

Deconstruction
The process of unmasking contradictions within a text; debunking.

don't defend, and they certainly don't raise questions. So it's up to the semiologist to expose or deconstruct the mythic system.

Throughout his life, Roland Barthes deciphered and labeled the *ideologies* foisted upon naïve consumers of images. Although the starting-point signifiers varied, Barthes concluded that society's connotative spin always ends up the same. *Mythic signs reinforce the dominant values of their culture.* For example, the wrestling match we examined earlier seems at first glance to be no more than a harmless Saturday night diversion. Under Barthes' watchful eye, however, it was the site of dangerous mythmaking. He explained that the honorable wrestler's eventual triumph over the rule-breaking villain signifies a make-believe ideology of pure "justice." The "good guys win" simplicity of the spectacle provides false comfort for an audience that lives in a world of dubious morality and inherent inequality.

Ideology
Knowledge presented as common sense or natural, especially when its social construction is ignored or suppressed.

According to Barthes, ideological signs enlist support for the status quo by transforming history into nature—pretending that current conditions are the natural order of things. As with the ribbons and the wrestling match, everything that is personal, conditional, cultural, and temporal disappears. We are left with a sign that makes the world seem inevitable and eternal. Barthes' analysis calls to mind

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the final words of the "Gloria Patri," a choral response that many Christians sing in worship:

> As it was in the beginning,
> Is now and ever shall be,
> World without end. Amen. Amen.

For believers, singing these words about anything or anyone but God would be unthinkable. Barthes wouldn't grant even that exception. All his semiotic efforts were directed at unmasking what he considered the heresy of those who controlled the images of society—the naturalizing of history.

THE SEMIOTICS OF MASS COMMUNICATION: "I'D LIKE TO BE LIKE MIKE"

Like wrestlers and ribbons, most semiotic signs gain cultural prominence when broadcast through the electronic and print media. Because signs—as well as issues of power and dominance—are integral to mass communication, Barthes' semiotic analysis has become a seminal media theory. As Kyong Kim, author of a book on semiotics, concludes:

> Information delivered by mass media is no longer information. It is a commodity saturated by fantasized themes. Mass audiences are nothing more than consumers of such commodities. One should not forget that, unlike nature, the media's reality is always political. The mass signification arising in response to signs pouring from the mass media is not a natural process. Rather it is an artificial effect calculated and induced by the mass media to achieve something else.[12]

The advertisements that make commercial television so profitable also create layers of connotation that reaffirm the status quo. During the 1998 NBA playoffs, one of the most frequently aired spots featured Chicago Bulls' superstar Michael Jordan slam-dunking the basketball over a variety of helpless defenders. He then gulps down Gatorade while a host of celebrity and everyday admirers croon his praises. The most memorable of these adoring fans is a preschool African-American boy, who stares up in awe at the towering Jordan. "Sometimes I dream," we hear him sing, "that he is me." He *really* wants to be like Mike.

Obviously, the commercial is designed to sell Gatorade by linking it to the virtually unlimited achievement of basketball's greatest player. To partake of this liquid is to reach for the stars. In that sense, the little boy, rather than MJ himself, becomes the spot's crucial sign. Within this denotative system, the youngster's rapt gaze is the signifier, and his dream of becoming a famous athlete is the signified. The resultant denotative sign—a look of yearning—has the potential to move cartons of Gatorade off the shelf. But as the signifier of a secondary connotative system, it has greater cultural impact.

At the connotative level, the original "look of yearning" suggests a new second-order signified—a more general kind of dreaming about one's future in which the ad's audience is invited to participate. Viewers are encouraged to wish for careers and goals that are virtually unobtainable, even in the best of circumstances. The CEO of Microsoft, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Hollywood's most glamorous talent, the president of the United States, and the world's leading AIDS researcher constitute the lofty heights surveyed by the gaze that the connotative shift implies.

With its attractive visuals, uplifting soundtrack, and good-natured humor, the commercial functions as a glorification of *unfulfilled desire*, the very essence of its second-order sign. This is America, after all, so think big, aim high, and don't be satisfied with anything but the top. Do what it takes—and purchase what is required—to be the very best. Ideologically speaking, it is this kind of naturalized longing that enslaves the average citizen and fuels the capitalist system. Although the commercial evokes a warm, fuzzy reaction from the viewer, it surreptitiously enforces our fundamental cultural myths about unlimited possibilities for success, myths that—according to Barthes—maintain the dominance of those who hold the reins of commerce and power.

Furthermore, Barthes would no doubt seek to expose the semiotic sleight of hand that subtly drains the second-order connotative system of the historical reality implicit in the original sign. At this denotative level, the African-American boy's fixation with MJ is necessarily embedded in a long history of racial injustice and economic hardship. Michael Jordan's accomplishments, as well as the dream of his pint-sized fan, exist in a world in which African Americans must strive particularly hard to succeed. As the documentary *Hoop Dreams* brilliantly portrays, the desire-filled faces of the kids who populate the rough basketball courts of urban America also reflect the poverty, substance abuse, shattered families, and harsh, big-city surroundings that constantly threaten to engulf them. Nonetheless, the yearning connoted by the second-order system generated by the commercial is utterly stripped of this rather grim social reality. The boy, his life, and his dream are deftly co-opted by the system. Or so Barthes would argue.

Katherine, a student who read the semiotic analysis above, was inspired to look for other connotative sign systems involving Michael Jordan and his admirers.

> Michael Jordan played most of his games (especially his slam dunks) with his mouth hanging wide and his tongue wagging. This came to signify talent, expectation of greatness, and pride. Jordan wannabes across the country have picked up this little quirk. For them, keeping their mouth open signifies Michael Jordan and, therefore, being cool, talented, and better than everyone else. The image of superiority, however, is not derived from any comparable history of success or talent of their own; it's based on myth.

CHARLES PEIRCE: A TRIADIC ALTERNATIVE TO SAUSSURE AND BARTHES

More than one hundred years ago, while Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was describing a *sign* as the combination of the *signifier* and *signified*, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce was independently developing his *triadic model* of the sign. Peirce (pronounced "purse") suggested that a sign has three components—the *object*, the *representamen*, and the *interpretant*.[13]

Triadic model
Peirce's view of the relationships among the object, representamen, and interpretant.

Object: Something beyond the sign to which the sign refers. This referent is often a physical object (gun), but may be an action (shooting) or an idea (self-defense).

Representamen: The *sign vehicle* or the form that the sign takes. Similar to what Saussure called the *signifier*. Peirce often referred to the representamen as the *sign*.

Interpretant: The sense of the sign made in the mind of the interpreter. Similar to what Saussure called the *signified*.

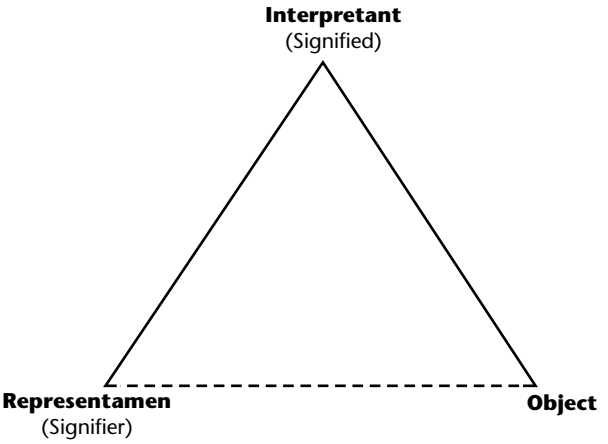

FIGURE 26–2 Peirce's Triadic Model of the Sign
Adapted from Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics,* 2nd ed.

Figure 26–2 portrays the relationship among the three elements in Peirce's sign system. Because the *representamen* and the *interpretant* are akin to the *signifier* and the *signified,* I've bracketed Saussure's terms from his dyadic model for easy comparison with Peirce's triadic conception of signs. What stands out, of course, is Peirce's addition of the object. Peirce was a philosophical realist. Unlike hard-core social constructionists and most postmodernists today, he thought many referents actually existed apart from their linguistic descriptions. Saussure wasn't so sure. And although the solid line connecting the representamen [signifier] with the interpretant [signified] is consistent with what Saussure saw as their inseparable bond, the dotted line between the representamen and the object is an added factor that has been affirmed by later semiologists. It portrays that there is no direct relationship between the word and the thing to which it refers.

Even though Saussure coined the term semiology (semantics), his concern was with spoken and written words as signs—the province of linguistics. That's probably why he thought all signifiers are arbitrary, with no logical connection between the signifier and the signified. It was Barthes who took Saussure's dyadic conception of the sign and extended it to visual images. Barthes thought nonverbal signifiers had a natural affinity with their signifieds. (Recall his description of the wrestler's body as vileness personified.)

Peirce included nonverbal signs in his system right from the start. Unlike Saussure, who didn't classify signs by type, Peirce described three different kinds of signs based on their relationship between their sign vehicle and the other two components.

Symbolic signs bear no resemblance to the objects to which they refer. The association is arbitrary and must be learned within the culture as a matter of convention. Examples: almost all words; mathematical symbols; the meaning of a red light on a traffic signal; a yellow ribbon.

Iconic signs have a perceived resemblance with the objects they portray. They look, sound, taste, smell, or feel similar to their referents. Examples: cartoon art; metaphors; onomatopoeic words like *slush* or *ring;* shadows; a wrestler's ignoble body.

Indexical signs are directly connected with their referents spatially, temporally, or by cause and effect. Like an index finger, they point to the object, action, or

idea to which they refer. Examples: smoke as a sign of fire; fever as a sign of illness; a wind sock as a sign of the direction and speed of the wind; a wrinkled brow as a sign of confusion.

Cinesemiotics, a branch of semiotics that informs filmmaking, draws upon Peirce's distinctions among signs.[14] Symbolic signs are usually quite obvious—religious films that use the sign of the cross; courtroom dramas that show the scales of justice; adventure thrillers that quickly train audiences to associate a particular musical score with impending disaster. (*Jaws*, anyone?)

Directors known for realism draw upon signs that index, but film them sparingly. They foreground natural scenes and actions rather than scripted images. Their aim is for the film to reveal the world as it is rather than for what it signifies. They believe that indexical connections should be captured rather than created or contrived. That way the movie evokes reality instead of an imaginary world. The film *Bicycle Thieves* is a classic example of the use of indexical signs.

Expressionistic directors use iconic signs to create a fantasy world of their own choosing. When artfully done, the choices they make present an interpretation of life that's difficult for viewers to resist. The film *Avatar* did this well. Not many viewers left the theater convinced that the need for minerals justified displacing or dispatching human beings.

CRITIQUE: DO MYTHIC SIGNS ALWAYS REAFFIRM THE STATUS QUO?

Roland Barthes' semiotics fulfills five of the criteria of a good interpretive theory (see Chapter 3) exceedingly well. His qualitative analyses of middle-class values and practices are fascinating and well-written. As readers of his essays, we chuckle with new understanding at how consumers of mediated images are taken in, and only belatedly realize that Barthes was describing us. More than most interpretive scholars, Barthes intended that this new realization would inoculate us against being sucked into thinking that life should not, and could not, be altered. He wanted to change the world.

When it comes to the good-theory standard of a community of agreement, however, semiotics doesn't quite deliver. Barthes spoke and wrote for wide audiences, so he can't be accused of presenting his ideas only to true believers. But are connotative systems always ideological, and do they inevitably uphold the values of the dominant class? Many who study the theory are dubious. Perhaps there are significant semiotic systems that suggest divergent perspectives or support alternative voices. To some students of signification, Barthes' monolithic Marxist approach to mythmaking borders on conspiracy theory. These interpreters are unwilling to accept the idea that all representation is a capitalistic plot, or that visual signs can't be used to promote resistance to dominant cultural values.

University of Pennsylvania political scientist Anne Norton expands Barthes' semiotic approach to account for other possibilities. For example, she argues that Madonna's MTV persona signifies an autonomous, independent sexuality that inspires young girls to control—rather than be controlled by—their environment. In effect, Madonna's "construction of herself as a 'material girl' subverts the hierarchies and practices evolved by its dense tissue of references."[15]

In the same vein, UCLA media scholar Douglas Kellner writes that through Madonna's deliberate manipulation of stereotypes and imagery, female "wannabes" are "empowered in their struggles for *individual* identity." Although her provocative outfits and unabashed eroticism may seem at first glance to reinforce traditionally

patriarchal views of women, her onstage character refigures her body as "the means to her wealth" and recasts her sexuality as "a form of feminine power."[16]

Whether or not we accept Barthes' claim that all connotative signs reinforce dominant values, his semiotic approach to imagery remains a core theoretical perspective for a wide variety of communication scholars, particularly those who emphasize media and culture. For example, cultural studies guru Stuart Hall builds directly on Barthes' analysis of myth to establish his critique of the "hegemonic" effects of mass communication.[17] Hall's innovative analysis, though, deserves a chapter all its own.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What are the *signifier* and *signified* of a favorite item of clothing or jewelry? Can you think of a way that this sign has already *been stripped of history?*

2. Why did Barthes think it was crucial to *unmask* or *deconstruct* the original *denotation* of a sign?

3. Identify two or more distinct *nonverbal signifiers* from different television reality shows that have basically the same *signified*—"You're out of here."

4. "It's not over 'til the fat lady sings": what are the *denotative signifier, signified,* and *sign* to which this statement originally refers? When spoken about a baseball game, what *connotative shift* has altered the meaning of the original sign?

A SECOND LOOK

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CHAPTER 27

Cultural Studies

of Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall is a Jamaican-born emeritus professor of sociology at the Open University in the U.K. In previous pages you read about the ideas of the Frankfurt School sociologists, Stanley Deetz, and Roland Barthes (see Chapters 4, 21, and 26). Hall joins this group of critical scholars who attack "mainstream" communication research that is empirical, quantitative, and narrowly focused on discovering cause-and-effect relationships. In particular, Hall doubts social scientists' ability to find useful answers to important questions about media influence. He rejects the "body counts" of survey research, which are "consistently translating matters that have to do with signification, meaning, language, and symbolization into crude behavioral indicators." For Hall, the question is not what percentage of Americans supported the post 9/11 U.S. War on Terror. Rather, the crucial issue is how the media created unified support for the invasion of Iraq among a public that had previously been split on the issue.

CULTURAL STUDIES VERSUS MEDIA STUDIES: AN IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

Hall believes the mass media maintain the dominance of those already in positions of power. Broadcast and print outlets serve the Warren Buffetts, Michael Bloombergs, and Bill Gateses of this world. Conversely, the media exploit the poor and powerless. Hall charges that the field of communication continues to be "stubbornly sociologically innocent." He is "deeply suspicious of and hostile to empirical work that has no ideas because that simply means that it does not know the ideas it has."[1] Noncritical researchers represent their work as pure science with no presuppositions, but every media theory by its very nature has ideological content. Hall defines *ideologies* as "the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works."[2] Most of us are unaware of our ideologies and the tremendous impact they can have on our lives.

Ideology
The mental frameworks different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of the way society works.

As for mainstream mass communication research in the United States, Hall believes that it serves the myth of *democratic pluralism*—the pretense that society is held together by common norms, including equal opportunity, respect for

diversity, one person–one vote, individual rights, and rule of law. The usual finding that media messages have little effect celebrates the political claim that democracy works. Such research claims that the American dream has been empirically verified, and science beckons developing countries to become "fully paid-up members of the consensus club."

Democratic pluralism
The myth that society is held together by common norms such as equal opportunity, respect for diversity, one person–one vote, individual rights, and rule of law.

Hall believes that typical research on individual voting behavior, brand loyalty, or response to dramatic violence fails to uncover the struggle for power that the media mask. He thinks it's a mistake to treat communication as a separate academic discipline (a view that may or may not endear him to your instructor). Academic isolation tends to separate messages from the culture they inhabit:

> All the repetition and incantation of the sanitized term *information*, with its cleansing cybernetic properties, cannot wash away or obliterate the fundamentally dirty, semiotic, semantic, discursive character of the media in their cultural dimensions.[3]

Therefore, Hall refers to his work as *cultural studies* rather than *media studies,* and in the 1970s he directed the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the U.K. Under Hall, the staff and graduate students at CCCS sought to articulate their perceptions of the cultural struggle between the haves and the have-nots. Hall uses the term *articulate* in the dual sense of *speaking out* on oppression and *linking* that subjugation with the communication media because they provide the terrain where meaning is shaped. He says he doesn't seek to be a "ventriloquist" for the masses, but he does desire to "win some space" where their voices can be heard.[4] The effort to jar people loose from their entrenched power positions often requires harsh words, but a "cozy chat among consenting scholars" won't dissolve the ideology that is the glue binding together most communication study.

Articulate
The process of speaking out on oppression and linking that subjugation with media representations; the work of cultural studies.

Since one of Hall's stated aims is to unmask the power imbalances within society, he says the cultural studies approach is valid if it "deconstructs" the current structure of a media research establishment that fails to deal with ideology. Just as Deetz wants to give a meaningful voice to stakeholders affected by corporate decisions (see Chapter 21), Hall wants to liberate people from an unknowing acquiescence to the dominant ideology of the culture. Obviously, *critical theory* and *cultural studies* are close relatives. However, Hall places less emphasis on rationality and more emphasis on resistance. As far as he's concerned, the truth of cultural studies is established by its ability to raise our consciousness of the media's role in preserving the status quo.

Cultural studies
A neo-Marxist critique that sets forth the position that mass media manufacture consent for dominant ideologies.

Hall is suspicious of any cultural analysis that ignores power relationships. That's because he believes the purpose of theory and research is to empower people who live on the margins of society, people who have little say in the direction of their lives and who are scrambling to survive. He takes the epitaph on Karl Marx' tombstone as a mission statement for cultural studies: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however is to *change* it."

HEGEMONY: MARXISM WITHOUT GUARANTEES

Stuart Hall owes an intellectual debt to Karl Marx. Of course, for many students in the West, the word *Marxist* conjures up images of failed Communist states, repressive dictators, and the Tiananmen Square massacre. Marxism, however,

is at root a theory of economics and power. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Marxist golden rule suggests that *he who has the gold, rules*. Because workers lack capital or the means of production, they must sell their labor to live. Therefore, in a capitalistic society, people who own the means of production gain more wealth by extracting labor from workers, who get no extra benefit from the wealth created by their work. So the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Great wealth comes to the privileged few who did little to create it. According to Marx, as the gap between the managerial class and the working class grows ever larger, desperate workers will overthrow the owners and create a classless society.

Economic determinism
The belief that human behavior and relationships are ultimately caused by differences in financial resources and the disparity in power that those gaps create.

Although Hall is strongly influenced by Marxist thought, he doesn't subscribe to the hard-line brand of *economic determinism* that sees all economic, political, and social relationships as ultimately based on money. He thinks that's an oversimplification. As a Jamaican person of color who immigrated to England as a young adult, Hall found that his physical appearance was often as important as his economic class in the way people reacted to him. Nor is he convinced that the masses will inevitably revolt against those who control the means of production in a capitalistic society. Instead, he adopts a Marxism without guarantees. He realizes that his theory is not pure, but he'd rather be "right but not rigorous" than "rigorous but wrong."[5]

Hegemony
The subtle sway of society's haves over its have-nots.

Hall draws upon Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* to explain why the revolution Marx predicted hasn't occurred in any industrial society.[6] On the international scene, *hegemony* usually refers to the preponderant influence or domination of one nation over another. The word is little used by Americans, perhaps because it describes how many countries see the United States. In a specific cultural context, Hall employs the term to describe the subtle sway of society's *haves* over its *have-nots*. He emphasizes that media hegemony is not a conscious plot, it's not overtly coercive, and its effects are not total. The broadcast and print media present a variety of ideas, but then they tend to prop up the status quo by privileging the already-accepted interpretation of reality. The result is that the role of mass media turns out to be *production of consent* rather than a *reflection of consensus* that already exists.

Recall that Stan Deetz uses the term *consent* to describe how workers unwittingly accomplish the desires of management in the faulty attempt to fulfill their own interests. They are complicit in their own victimization (see Chapter 21). In the same way, Hall believes that the consent-making function of the mass media is to convince readers and viewers that they share the same interests as those who hold the reins of power. Because the media's hegemonic influence has been relatively successful, it's played an important role in maintaining worker unrest at the level of moaning and groaning rather than escalating into revolutionary fervor.

MAKING MEANING THROUGH DISCOURSE

In his book *Representation*, Hall states that the primary function of discourse is to *make meaning*. Many students of communication would agree that words and other signs contain no intrinsic meaning. A catchy way of stating this reality is "Words don't mean; people mean." But Hall asks us to push further and ask, *Where do people get their meanings?* After all, humans don't come equipped with

ready-made meanings, either. Hall's answer is that they learn what signs mean through discourse—through communication and culture:

> Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings—"the giving and taking of meaning"—between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world in ways that will be understood by each other.[7]

To illustrate that meaning comes through discourse, Hall asks his readers how they know that a red light means *stop* and a green light means *go*. The answer is that someone, many years ago, told them so. The process is the same when we consider signs such as a picture of Osama bin Laden, the golden arches, or the word *terrorist*. But it is not enough that we simply recognize that meaning is created in discourse. We must also examine the *sources* of that discourse, especially the originators or "speakers" of it.

Discourse
Frameworks of interpretation.

Hall was struck by French philosopher Michel Foucault's extensive study of mental illness, sexuality, and criminality in different historical eras. Foucault concentrated on what people were saying, what people were *not* saying, and *who* got to say it. As you might suspect, he discovered that throughout history, not everyone in society had an equal voice or power. That's certainly true in America today. Undoubtedly, CNN founder Ted Turner has more discursive power than I have. But, due to the fact that I've authored a college textbook, I'm aware that I have more power to frame meaning than do many of the students who read it.

In terms of mental illness, Foucault found that the definition of what constitutes insanity and what to do about it have changed dramatically over time.[8] People with power drew arbitrary lines between the normal and the abnormal, and these distinctions became *discursive formations* that had real, physical effects on those deemed to belong to each group.[9] Over time, these unquestioned and seemingly natural ways of interpreting the world became ideologies, which then perpetuated themselves through further discourse. The right to make meaning can literally be the power to make others crazy.

Discursive formation
The process by which unquestioned and seemingly natural ways of interpreting the world become ideologies.

CORPORATE CONTROL OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Hall has worked to move the study of communication away from the compartmentalized areas reflected in the organization of this text: relationship development, influence, media effects, and so on. He believes we should be studying the unifying *atmosphere* in which they all occur and from which they emanate—human culture. Consistent with Marxist theory, he also insists that communication scholarship should examine power relations and social structures. For Hall, stripping the study of communication away from the cultural context in which it is found and ignoring the realities of unequal power distribution in society have weakened our field and made it less theoretically relevant.

Hall and scholars who follow his lead wish to place the academic spotlight directly on the ways media representations of culture reproduce social inequalities and keep the average person more or less powerless to do anything but operate within a corporatized, commodified world. At least within the United States, the vast majority of information we receive is produced and distributed by corporations. If your family-room television is tuned to CNN, and the table

beneath it holds a copy of *Sports Illustrated* (*SI*), your home is a virtual advertisement for a media conglomerate. Time Warner owns *SI*, CNN, and most likely the cable company that brings the signal to your house. And if you switch channels to HBO to watch a flick produced by the largest Hollywood studio, you'll get a double dose of meanings produced and sponsored by Time Warner.

As long as subscription rates don't go up, what difference does monopoly ownership make? Hall would answer that corporate control of such influential information sources prevents many stories from being told. Consider the plight of the vast majority of the people in Africa. Except for your knowledge of the scourge of HIV/AIDS across the continent and news of pirates hijacking ships off the coast of Somalia, that may be hard for you to do. For example, there's almost no reporting of decades of genocide in Sudan. It's not the subject of a television drama and it rarely makes the evening news. On the few occasions when the atrocities are mentioned, they are paired with the issue of who will control the country's oil reserves. That linkage squares with Hall's belief that news comes with a spin reflecting the interests of Western multinational corporations. The ultimate issue for cultural studies is not *what* information is presented but *whose* information it is.

POST–9/11 MEDIA COVERAGE: THE CHILL OF CONSTRAINT

Sometimes the dominant ideology is upheld by constraint. On the night of September 11, ABC broadcasters Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel discussed the question that was on many Americans' minds: *Why do some people hate America so much that they respond with glee at the carnage caused by terrorists?* Both commentators spoke of extended assignments in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East among people in abject poverty who had only seen images of America's wealth, power, and arrogance—much of it exported in U.S. culture industries of television, movies, fashion, and popular music. For 15 minutes, two of the country's top news analysts spoke in a personal and soul-searching way about seething frustrations among the poor in two-thirds of the world. They avoided the good-guy/bad-guy stereotyping that I had heard on other channels. This was surely not Hall's ideological discourse of constraint.

Culture industries
The producers of culture; television, radio, music, film, fashion, magazines, newspapers, etc.

It turned out to be a one-night stand. That was the only time these broadcasters suggested that American political and corporate policy might be a contributing cause of enmity. A week later CBS anchor Dan Rather appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* and declared something like unconditional fealty to President George W. Bush and the "War on Terror."

> But I couldn't feel stronger, David, that this is a time for us—and I'm not preaching about it—George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and—you know as just one American—wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where.[10]

Two lesser-known journalists criticized Bush shortly after the attack for matters of style. One said he appeared "stiff and boyish," while the other took issue with the president's characterization of America's response to terrorism as a "crusade." But both commentators quickly apologized for their outspokenness. For the next month, *never was heard a discouraging word.*

Perhaps the most unusual patriotic appeal after the 9/11 terrorism was President Bush's equation of love of country with spending money. He suggested that this was an especially good time to buy a new car, a statement that he permitted to be used in numerous car commercials.[11] Whether it was patriotism

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or zero percent financing, new car sales increased 31 percent in the first two months after the tragedy. Here again, no network news show questioned the administration's linkage of consumer purchasing and patriotism. But comedian George Carlin drew a laugh of derision from a *Tonight Show* audience when he deadpanned: "Go out and buy some jewelry and a new car. Otherwise the terrorists win."

Hall believes the mass media provide the guiding myths that shape our perception of the world and serve as important instruments of social control.[12] This seems to describe U.S. media treatment of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as justification for invading Iraq in 2003. Although the broadcast and print media faithfully reported chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix' failure to discover WMD prior to the invasion, like the Bush administration, they never questioned the existence of a chemical or nuclear threat. News stories instead dwelled on when and where WMD would be found. The media's creation of a popular consensus was so thorough that even after the 9/11 Commission concluded that Saddam Hussein had no such weapons, large segments of the population continued to believe in their existence. Only in late 2004 did media outlets begin to examine why they never questioned the government's position.

How do multiple media outlets end up speaking on a major issue with what seems to be a single voice? Given the country's shared images of airliners impaling the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the buildings' subsequent collapse, and the 95 percent approval rating of the president's response, each news editor's decision may seem an easy one. But Hall suggests that hegemonic

encoding occurs all the time, though it's not a conscious plot. A story in an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times,* written by Alexander Cockburn, reflects that idea.

> When he was joining the London Times in the 1920s, my father asked his uncle, who was on the Times' board, who really formulated Times' policy. "My boy," his uncle said, "the policy of the London Times is set by a committee that never meets."[13]

EXTREME MAKEOVER: THE IDEOLOGICAL WORK OF REALITY TV

Not all of the media's ideological work is accomplished through the presentation of news. Luke Winslow, a business communication lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, claims that the representation of ordinary people on reality TV "offers its viewer more explicit 'guidelines for living' than other television genres."[14] Specifically, he analyzes *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* to show how it reinforces the myth of the American Dream.

Since 2003, the Sunday-night show has featured the fairytale story of a down-and-out family living in a decrepit house and then having it transformed into a dream home in seven days, at no cost to them. But as Winslow notes, the weekly feel-good program hasn't "become ABC's top-rated series and the winner of back-to-back Emmy awards because it is concerned with concrete and drywall."[15] The real focus is on a deserving family that has suffered misfortune and on their restoration to a perfect life.

Although the show spotlights a different family each week, they have much in common. The producers intentionally seek out all-American families whose moral character, love for each other, and demonstrated care for others make it clear that they are worthy recipients. In the first segment of the show we meet the family and hear their story. Through his questions and comments, host Ty Pennington assures his team that these are good folks who play by the rules. In the second segment we learn that, through no fault of their own, the family has fallen on hard times made much worse by the dump they live in. Whether victims of heinous crime, survivors of a natural disaster, or those who suffer from medical problems that insurance companies refuse to cover, they've all hit rock bottom. The combination of their moral goodness and tragic circumstances convinces Ty and his viewers that these are *deserving people*—truly worthy of being chosen to get an extreme makeover or a brand new home.

The rest of the show chronicles the ingenuity and commitment of the designers, contractors, and volunteers as they frantically race against time. We learn to appreciate ABC and other major corporations that donate materials and services to make this extreme makeover possible. Meanwhile, the family has been sent away for an all-expenses-paid week of vacation. At the end of the show they are brought back in a stretch limousine to see their new home, but their view is intentionally blocked by a bus. Then Ty and the whole crew yell to the driver, "Move that bus!" When they can see their new home, family members are blown away by the total transformation. Amid tears of joy they tell Ty that it's unbelievable, miraculous, an answer to prayer. As for television viewers, they "can rest assured knowing that the moral are rightly rewarded and all is right in the world."[16]

Perhaps you've already anticipated Winslow's cultural critique of the show. He believes the real work done in *Extreme Makeover* is on the audience rather than the house. Each episode is a mini morality play that suggests wealth goes only to those who deserve it. These good people deserved a decent house and

they got it. The system works. Winslow cites Stuart Hall when he summarizes the message that's enacted every week:

> The result is a reduced and simplified ideology regarding the connection between morality and economics: who should be poor and who should not, and, more importantly, frameworks of thinking about how the social world works, what the viewers' place is in it, and what they ought to do. We not only learn who deserves to be rich, and who deserves to be poor, but also how each should be treated.[17]

Winslow's critique is typical of scholarship done under the banner of Hall's cultural studies. It takes popular culture seriously and seeks to reveal the way it typically supports the status quo. In Winslow's words, "Ultimately, a primary goal of ideological scholarship is to bring comfort to the afflicted and [to] afflict the comfortable by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, giving voice to the voiceless, and bringing in those on the margins of society."[18]

AN OBSTINATE AUDIENCE

The fact that the media present a preferred interpretation of human events is no reason to assume that the audience will correctly "take in" the offered ideology. I once heard Robert Frost recite his famous poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." After completing the last stanza—

> These woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.[19]

—the New England poet said in a crusty voice, "Some people think I'm talking about death here, but I'm not." Yet poems, like media depictions, have a life of their own. Despite his words, I have continued to interpret the verse as referring to obligations to be met before we die.

Hall holds out the possibility that the powerless may be equally obstinate by resisting the dominant ideology and translating the message in a way that's more congenial to their own interests. He outlines three decoding options:

1. *Operating inside the dominant code.* The media produce the message; the masses consume it. The *audience reading* coincides with the *preferred reading.*
2. *Applying a negotiable code.* The audience assimilates the leading ideology in general but opposes its application in specific cases.
3. *Substituting an oppositional code.* The audience sees through the establishment bias in the media presentation and mounts an organized effort to demythologize the news.

With all the channels of mass communication in the unwitting service of the dominant ideology, Hall has trouble believing that the powerless can change the system. He calls this his "pessimism of the intellect."[20] Yet he is determined to do everything he can to expose and alter the media's structuring of reality. He refers to this as his "optimism of the will." Hall has genuine respect for the ability of people to resist the dominant code. He doesn't regard the masses as cultural dupes who are easily manipulated by those who control the media, but he is unable to predict when and where resistance will spring up.

Hall cites one small victory by activists in the organized struggle to establish that black is beautiful. By insisting on the term *black* rather than *Negro* or *colored*, people of African heritage began to give dignity in the 1970s to what was once a racial slur. Jesse Jackson's call for an African American identity is a continuing effort to control the use of symbols. This is not a matter of "mere" semantics, as some would charge. Although there is nothing inherently positive or negative in any of these racial designations, the connotative difference is important because the effects are real. The ideological fight is a struggle to capture language. Hall sees those on the margins of society doing semantic battle on a media playing field that will never be quite level. In her cultural studies application log, Sharon depicts a clear winner in the linguistic struggle within the abortion debate:

> The media seems to favor those with "pro-choice" beliefs. I wish copywriters would even the debate by referring to the other side as "pro-life" rather than "anti-abortion." This would be a sign that pro-life groups are seen as reasonable, positive people. Up to this point, they haven't been able to make that label stick in the public arena. The media gives an ideological spin by the use of connotative language.

CRITIQUE: YOUR JUDGMENT WILL DEPEND ON YOUR IDEOLOGY

In his early work, Marshall McLuhan was highly critical of television. Hall accuses McLuhan of being co-opted by the media establishment in his later years. He characterizes McLuhan's final position as one of "lying back and letting the media roll over him; he celebrated the very things he had most bitterly attacked."[21] No one has ever accused Stuart Hall of selling out to the dominant ideology of Western society. Many communication scholars, however, question the wisdom of performing scholarship under an ideological banner.

Do such explicit value commitments inevitably compromise the integrity of research? Former surgeon general C. Everett Koop lamented that pro-choice researchers always conclude that abortion does no psychological harm to the mother, whereas pro-life psychologists invariably discover that abortion leaves long-term emotional scars. In like manner, the findings of the economically conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, differ greatly from the conclusions reached at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the direction of Hall. Ever since Copernicus thought the unthinkable, that the earth is not the center of the universe, truth has prospered by investigating what *is,* separately from what we think it *ought* to be. Hall seems to blur that distinction.

Although Hall is recognized as a founding figure of cultural studies, there are those who work within this fast-growing field who are critical of his leadership. While appreciating his advocacy for ethnic minorities and the poor, many women decried his relative silence on their plight as equal victims of the hegemony he railed against. Hall belatedly became an advocate for women and acquiesced to their demand for shared power at the Birmingham Center. But his now-famous description of the feminist entry into British cultural studies shows that for him the necessary change was painful and messy: "As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies."[22]

The most often heard criticism of Hall's work is that he doesn't offer specific remedies for the problems he identifies. While it's true that he has no grand

action agenda for defusing the media's influence on behalf of the powerful elite, he has worked hard to expose racism that's reinforced by press reporting. For example, Hall served as a key member of a commission that issued an influential report in 2000 on the future of a multiethnic Britain. The following excerpt is a sample of Hall's impact on the commission's call for a change in the way ethnic groups are represented in the media.

> A study by the *Guardian* of its own coverage of Islam in a particular period in 1999 found that the adjective "Islamic" was joined with "militants" 16 times, "extremists" 15 times, "fundamentalism" eight times and "terrorism" six times; in the same period the adjective "Christian" was joined, in so far as it appeared at all, to positive words and notions or to neutral ones such as tradition or belief.[23]

Hall's most positive contribution to mass communication study is his constant reminder that it's futile to talk about meaning without considering power at the same time. Cliff Christians, former director of the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois and a leading writer in the field of media ethics, agrees with Hall that the existence of an idealistic communication situation where no power circulates is a myth. Christians is lavish in his praise of Hall's essay "Ideology and Communication Theory," which I've listed as a Second Look resource: "His essay, like the Taj Mahal, is an artistic masterpiece inviting a pilgrimage."[24]

Stuart Hall has attracted tremendous interest and a large following. Samuel Becker, former chair of the communication studies department at the University of Iowa, describes himself as a besieged empiricist and notes the irony of Hall's attack. Hall knocks the dominant ideology of communication studies, yet he "may himself be the most dominant or influential figure in communication studies today."[25]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. *Hegemony* is not a household word in the United States. How would you explain what the term means to your roommate? Can you think of a metaphor or an analogy that would clarify this critical concept?

2. What is the nature of Hall's complaint about *American media scholarship*?

3. Hall says that the *media encode the dominant ideology of our culture*. If you don't agree with his thesis, what *evidence* could he muster that would convince you that he's right? What evidence would you provide to counter his argument?

4. In what way is Roland Barthes' *semiotic* perspective (see Chapter 26) similar to Hall's cultural studies? How do they differ?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Stuart Hall, "Introduction" and "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* Stuart Hall (ed.), Sage, London, 1997, pp. 1–64.

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Grossberg, Barbara O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1989, pp. 40–52. (See also multiple reactions following.)

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Media coverage of the war in Iraq: Deepa Kumar, "Media, War, and Propaganda: Strategies of Information Management During the 2003 Iraq War," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies,* Vol. 3, 2006, pp. 48–69.

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Appreciative retrospective: Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (eds.), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall,* Verso, London, 2000.

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Critique from quantitative perspective: Justin Lewis, "What Counts in Cultural Studies?" *Media, Culture & Society,* Vol. 19, 1997, pp. 83–97.

Critique from qualitative perspective: Patrick Murphy, "Media Cultural Studies' Uncomfortable Embrace of Ethnography," *Journal of Communication Inquiry,* Vol. 23, 1999, pp. 205–221.

For self-scoring quizzes that will help you gauge your understanding of cultural studies, or any other theory covered in the book, click on Self-Help Quizzes under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com.*

Media Effects

In 1940, before the era of television, a team of researchers from Columbia University, headed by Paul Lazarsfeld, descended on Erie County, Ohio, an area that had reflected national voting patterns in every twentieth-century presidential election. By surveying people once a month from June to November, the interviewers sought to determine how the press and radio affected the people's choice for the upcoming presidential election.[1]

Contrary to the then-accepted *magic bullet* model of direct media influence, the researchers found little evidence that voters were swayed by what they read or heard. Political conversions were rare. The media seemed merely to reinforce the decisions of those who had already made up their minds.

Lazarsfeld attributed the lack of media effect to *selective exposure* (see Chapter 17). Republicans avoided articles and programs that were favorable to President Franklin Roosevelt; Democrats bypassed news stories and features sympathetic to Republican Wendell Willkie. The principle of selective exposure didn't always test out in the laboratory, where people's attention was virtually guaranteed, but in a free marketplace of ideas it accounted for the limited, short-term effects of mass communication.

The Erie County results forced media analysts to recognize that friends and family affect the impact of media messages. They concluded that print and electronic media influence masses of people only through an indirect *two-step flow of communication.* The first stage is the direct transmission of information to a small group of people who stay well-informed. In the second stage, those opinion leaders pass on and interpret the messages to others in face-to-face discussion.

The two-step flow theory surfaced at a time of rapid scientific advancement in the fields of medicine and agriculture. The model accurately described the diffusion of innovation among American doctors and farmers in the 1950s, but the present era of saturation television and Internet news has made alterations necessary. The first step of the *revised two-step theory* of media influence is the transmission of information to a mass audience. The second step is validation of the message by people the viewer respects.[2]

By the 1970s, empirical studies on viewer response to television had reestablished belief in a *powerful effects* model of media influence, and the explanatory links between the two were becoming clear. The possible connection between violence on the screen and subsequent viewer aggression was of particular interest to media theorists.

University of Alabama media researcher Dolf Zillmann's *excitation transfer theory* recognizes that TV has the power to stir up strong feelings.[3] Although we use labels like *fear, anger, humor, love,* and *lust* to describe these emotional states, the heightened physiological arousal is similar, no matter what kind of TV program elicited the response. It's easy to get our emotional wires crossed when the show is over. Zillmann says that the heightened state of arousal takes a while to dissipate, and the leftover excitation can amplify any mood we happen to be feeling. If a man is mad at his wife, the emotional stimulation he gets from televised aggression can escalate into domestic violence. But Zillmann says that the arousal that comes from an erotic bedroom scene or a hilarious comedy often has the same effect.

Excitation transfer can account for violent acts performed immediately after TV viewing. But Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura's *social learning theory* takes the findings a step further and predicts that the use of force modeled on television today may erupt in antisocial behavior years later.[4] Although Bandura's theory can explain imitation in many contexts, most students of his work apply it specifically to the vicarious learning of aggression through television.

Social learning theory postulates three necessary stages in the causal link between television and the actual physical harm that we might inflict on another some time in the future. The three-step process is attention, retention, and motivation. Video violence grabs our *attention* because it's simple, distinctive, prevalent, useful, and depicted positively. If you doubt that last quality, remember that television draws in viewers by placing attractive people in front of the camera. There are very few overweight bodies or pimply faces on TV. When the winsome star roughs up a few hoods to rescue the lovely young woman, aggression is given a positive cast.

Without any risk to ourselves, watching media violence can expand our repertoire of behavioral options far beyond what we'd discover on our own through trial-and-error learning. For example, we see a knife fighter holding a switchblade at an inclined angle of 45 degrees and that he jabs up rather than lunging down. This kind of street smarts is mentally filed away as a visual image. But Bandura says that *retention* is strongest when we also encode vicarious learning into words: *Hold the pistol with both hands. Don't jerk the trigger; squeeze it. Aim six inches low to compensate for recoil.*

Without sufficient *motivation,* we may never imitate the violence that we saw and remember. But years later we may be convinced that we won't go to jail for shooting a prowler lurking in our backyard or that we might gain status by punching out a jerk who is hassling a friend. If so, what we learned earlier and stored in our memory bank is now at our disposal.

Communication scholars have shown surprisingly little interest in studying the dynamics of television advertising. However, advertising guru Tony Schwartz theorized that commercials are effective when they strike a *responsive chord* within the viewer.[5] Schwartz claimed that media persuasion is not so much a matter of trying to put an idea into consumers' heads as it is seeking to draw an emotional response out of them. The best commercials use sight and sound to resonate with an audience's past experience.

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CHAPTER 28

Socio-psychological tradition

Uses and Gratifications

of Elihu Katz

Written by Glenn Sparks*

Paul and Alex are college sophomores who have roomed together since freshman year. At the end of their first year, Paul notices that Alex is spending more and more time playing *World of Warcraft,* an online role-playing game in which many players join together in a common mission. During their second year, the gaming gets even more intense. Paul becomes concerned that Alex' game playing is draining time from his studies and ruining his social life.

Thinking about Alex, Paul remembers what he heard in his media class about the case of Lien Wen-cheng. The 27-year-old Taiwanese man died of exhaustion in 2002 after playing a video game for 32 straight hours.[1] And in 2005 in South Korea, a man died after playing a game for 50 consecutive hours. Authorities said the man had hardly eaten during his game playing and hadn't slept.[2] While Paul knows that these deaths happened in Asian countries where addiction to video games has been a greater problem than in the United States,[3] he wonders if he should try to have a serious talk with Alex about his game playing.

Whether or not you spend time playing video games like Alex does, you do make daily choices to consume different types of media. In 1959, communication scholar Elihu Katz said that by studying those *media choices,* the entire field of communication could be saved.[4] When Katz introduced uses and gratifications theory (commonly referred to as *uses & grats*), no one was playing video games on campus. But newspapers, magazines, radio, and movies were well-established, and 90 percent of American households had a TV. There were plenty of media to choose from.

Katz made his argument about saving the field of communication in response to another communication scholar, Bernard Berelson, who had just published an influential essay arguing that the future of communication research was bleak.[5] Berelson based his case on the study of the persuasive power of radio during the 1940 presidential campaign[6]—research described in the introduction to this section. The study showed that media didn't do anything to change people's attitudes. Berelson reasoned that if media weren't persuasive, the field of communication research would simply wither away.

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Katz, who is now a professor emeritus of both sociology and communication at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, introduced a different logic. In order to prevent the disintegration of the field, he suggested that scholars change the question used to generate their research. Instead of asking, "What do media do to people?" Katz flipped the question around to ask, "What do people do with media?"[7] In retrospect, the field of communication was hardly on its deathbed. Berelson's perspective was overly pessimistic and, by focusing only on media effects, it was overly narrow as well. Though Katz' theory didn't "save" the discipline, it was still valuable because it encouraged scholars to think about mass communication in a different way. As it turns out, uses & grats has endured for more than 50 years and still inspires cutting-edge research.

The theory attempts to make sense of the fact that people consume a dazzling array of media messages for all sorts of reasons, and that the effect of a given message is unlikely to be the same for everyone. The driving mechanism of the theory is need gratification. By understanding the particular needs of media consumers, the reasons for media consumption become clear. Particular media effects, or lack of effects, can also be clarified. For example, radio listeners in 1940 may have been so loyal to their political party that they had little need to listen to the opposing party's campaign ads. If they didn't attend to the ads, the ads couldn't have any effect. Let's look more closely at the key assumptions that underlie uses & grats.

PEOPLE USE MEDIA FOR THEIR OWN PARTICULAR PURPOSES

The theory's fundamental assumption was revolutionary at the time Katz proposed it: *The study of how media affect people must take account of the fact that people deliberately use media for particular purposes*. Prior to this proposal, scholars thought that audiences were passive targets waiting to be hit by a magic bullet (the media message) that would affect everyone in the same way. In uses & grats, audiences are seen as anything but passive. They decide which media they want to use and what effects they want the media to have.

Consider an example: When Game 6 of the 2010 NHL Stanley Cup Finals was on TV, I wanted to watch it in hopes of seeing the Chicago Blackhawks become hockey champions. I'm not a big fan of the sport, but after talking with Em Griffin, a hockey aficionado, I got sucked into the series. When I sat down to watch I was already prepared to celebrate. My wife, Cheri, who would ordinarily choose to watch *anything* instead of hockey, decided that the clacking of hockey sticks was exactly what she needed to prevent her from stumbling upon the depressing CNN videos of oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico from the exploded BP oil well. So we decided to watch the game together—each for very different reasons and with very different effects. For me, watching the game resulted in happiness as I basked in the Blackhawks' victory. For her, the game provided a boring, but safe, distraction from unpleasant news she wanted to avoid. According to uses & grats, audiences are strong; they play a pivotal role in determining how any influence of media will play out. When Cheri and I each decided to watch that hockey game for different reasons, we behaved in a way that was consistent with the theory.

In the history of media theory, uses & grats is known for its deliberate shift away from the notion that powerful media messages have uniform effects on large audiences (passive receivers). Instead, the theory emphasizes the personal

media choices consumers make to fulfill different purposes at different times. The *uniform-effects model* does not easily account for Paul's and Alex' very different behavior surrounding video games. But uses & grats assumes that the two roommates make deliberate choices that result in different patterns of media use and different effects. The uniform-effects view of media evokes the image of a parent who force-feeds the kids with a prepared formula that's guaranteed to have the same effect on each child. Uses & grats rejects that image and replaces it with one of adults in a cafeteria deciding what to eat based on individual yearnings at particular times. You might compare Alex' obsession with playing video games to someone craving the same food for every meal.

Uniform-effects model
The view that exposure to a media message affects everyone in the audience in the same way; often referred to as the "magic-bullet" or "hypodermic-needle" model of mass communication.

PEOPLE SEEK TO GRATIFY NEEDS

Just as people eat in order to satisfy certain cravings, uses & grats assumes that people have needs that they seek to gratify through media use.[8] Note the close connection between the concepts of *media use* and *gratification from media*. The deliberate choices people make in using media are presumably based on the gratifications they seek from those media. Thus, *uses* and *gratifications* are inextricably linked. By taking this position, Katz was swimming against the tide of media theory at the time. In 1974, he wrote an essay with Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, two scholars often considered co-creators of the theory. The essay states:

> In the mass communication process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member. This places a strong limitation on theorizing about any form of straight-line effect of media content on attitudes and behavior.[9]

A *straight-line effect of media* is a specific effect on behavior that is predicted from media content alone, with little consideration of the differences in people who consume that content. A theory predicting this sort of effect might guess that *both* Cheri and I would have become excited watching the Blackhawks win the Stanley Cup. But Katz thought the key to understanding media depended upon which need(s) a person was trying to satisfy when selecting a media message. One reason the hockey game affected Cheri and I differently is that we were watching the game to satisfy different needs.

Straight-line effect of media
A specific effect on behavior that is predicted from media content alone, with little consideration of the differences in people who consume thatco ntent.

MEDIA COMPETE FOR YOUR ATTENTION AND TIME

One of Paul's concerns as he watches Alex spend so much time playing video games is that gaming is ruining Alex' social life. From Paul's perspective, the technology that permits Alex to interact with other gamers online is competing with opportunities to interact with peers on campus. The uses & grats approach directly acknowledges the competition. Not only do media compete with each other for your time, they compete with other activities that don't involve media exposure.

While Paul evaluates Alex' situation as unhealthy, uses & grats first attempts to understand exactly what needs motivate Alex' use of video games. Why does he choose to spend his time gaming instead of socializing with Paul and the

other guys who live in the dorm? Some of the more recent attempts to understand these sorts of choices might provide an answer. Uses & grats researchers have discovered that some people experience high levels of anxiety when they think about talking face-to-face; they don't enjoy these sorts of interactions or find them rewarding.[10] Meeting face-to-face just doesn't gratify their needs. In contrast, extroverts express a clear preference for one-on-one conversations over spending time with media.[11]

The notion that media compete for attention and time is only an initial step in understanding the choices people eventually make. The more interesting question is *why* some people choose to watch TV while others decide to play a video game or read a book, and still others decide to have coffee with a friend. On any given day, the number of ways we can choose to spend our time is nearly limitless. According to uses & grats, we won't understand the media choices we make unless we first recognize the underlying needs that motivate our behavior. Paul's well-intentioned concern might cause him to overlook the needs Alex has that are gratified by playing video games. Helping Alex get a good grasp of the reasons he plays may be the key to helping him alter his behavior.

MEDIA AFFECT DIFFERENT PEOPLE DIFFERENTLY

One of the core concepts of uses & grats is that the same media message doesn't necessarily affect everyone the same way. That's because media audiences are made up of people who are not identical to each other. In terms of media effects, the differences matter.

My own studies on the effects of frightening media have confirmed this central tenet of uses & grats. Assuming that Hollywood makes so many scary movies because of the popularity of the genre, journalists often ask me, "Why do people enjoy watching scary movies?" My first response to this question is always the same and echoes the fundamental point of uses & grats: Not everyone *does* enjoy scary movies. Some people systematically avoid them and can suffer for days if they become emotionally upset from what they see in a film.

As it turns out, few people voluntarily expose themselves to scary movies in order to experience fear. Fear is a negative emotion and, in general, people want to avoid it. However, some people are willing to tolerate fear in order to ooh and aah at high-tech special effects they can't see anywhere else. Others are willing to endure fear to experience a sense of mastery over something threatening—much like the effect of riding a roller coaster. Still others might actually enjoy the adrenaline rush that accompanies a scary movie and the intense relief that comes when the film is over.[12] Current research seeks to understand the factors that lead some individuals to shun frightening entertainment and others to seek it out. Media effects scholarship lends strong support to the uses & grats claim that media affect different people differently.

PEOPLE CAN ACCURATELY REPORT THEIR MEDIA USE AND MOTIVATION

If uses & grats was to have any future as a theory, researchers had to find a way to uncover the media that people consumed and the reasons they consumed it. For these purposes, the most obvious way to collect data involved asking people

directly and recording their answers. There is now a long tradition in mass communication research that asks people to report the amount of time they devote to different kinds of media. The early research on uses & grats can take a good deal of the credit for starting that tradition.[13]

The controversial aspect of this measurement strategy is whether or not people are truly capable of discerning the reasons for their media consumption. It may be easy for us to report the reason why we watch a local weather forecast, but it might be more difficult to know exactly why we're so willing to kill a few hours each day playing a game like *geoDefense* on our smart phones.

If Paul were to ask Alex why he spends so much time playing video games, Alex might simply say, "Because I like it." Scholars attempting to arrive at the best scientific explanation for Alex' behavior might question that response. Is it possible, for example, that Alex might be playing the games to avoid having to talk with others face-to-face? If so, would he necessarily be aware of that motivation? While some scholars have attempted to show that we can trust people's reports of the reasons for their media consumption,[14] this tenet of the theory continues to be debated.

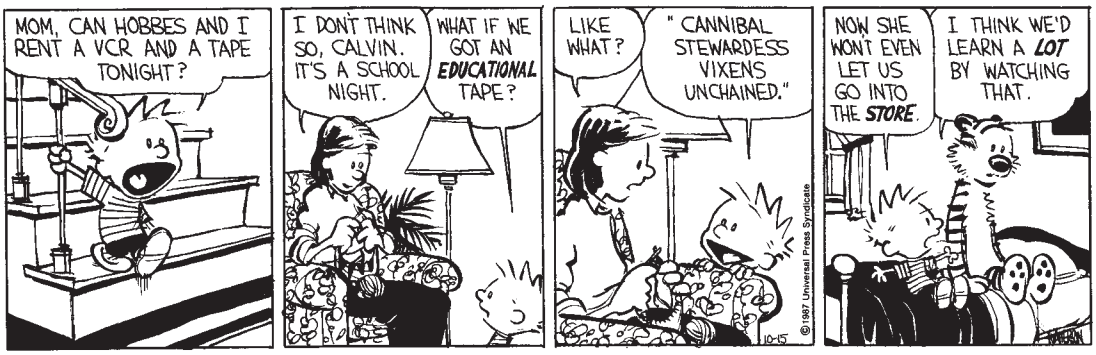
A TYPOLOGY OF USES AND GRATIFICATIONS

What are the reasons people give for their media consumption? For the last 50 years, uses & grats researchers have compiled various lists of the motives people report. These studies are designed to construct a *typology* of the major reasons why people voluntarily expose themselves to different media. A typology is simply a classification scheme that attempts to sort a large number of specific instances into a more manageable set of categories.

Typology
A classification scheme that attempts to sort a large number of specific instances into a more manageable set of categories.

One of the most comprehensive typologies of media uses and gratifications was proposed by communication scholar Alan Rubin in 1981.[15] Rubin claims that his typology of eight motivations can account for most explanations people give for why they watch television. Notice that each category describes both a reason for TV *use* as well as a potential *gratification* experienced from that use.

1. **Passing time.** Consider the waiting room at the doctor's office. The primary reason for watching TV is to simply pass the time until you're called in for your appointment.
2. **Companionship.** When sports fans get together to watch the big game on the small screen, some fans are there primarily for the chance to get together with friends. Watching the game is secondary.
3. **Escape.** Instead of focusing on that anxiety-causing term paper due in two weeks, a college student might just turn on the tube to escape the pressure.
4. **Enjoyment.** Many report that the main reason they watch a TV show is that they find the whole experience enjoyable. This might be the most basic motivation to consume any media.
5. **Social interaction.** TV viewing provides a basis for connecting to others. If I make sure to watch the last episode of a show like *Lost,* I may find that I have more opportunities to start a conversation with someone else who saw the show.



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6. **Relaxation.** After working all day, many people report that they find watching TV to be relaxing. Today, many households have at least one bedroom with a TV set. People sometimes report that watching TV relaxes them so much that they have difficulty falling asleep any other way.
7. **Information.** News junkies report that watching TV is all about keeping up with the latest information of the day. If they don't get to watch TV for several days, they report feeling uncomfortable about the information they know they've missed.
8. **Excitement.** Sometimes media consumers are after an intense sense of excitement. This could be one reason why media violence is a staple of TV entertainment. Conflict and violence generate a sense of excitement that few other dramatic devices can match.

When you look at Rubin's eight categories, it's easy to see that the examples filed under any one label don't have to be identical. While some people look for violence to gratify their need for excitement, others, like Alex, look for a competitive online game. Still others might seek out a movie with erotic content in order to provide a sense of sexual excitement. Excitement can be subdivided into sexual excitement, competitive excitement, and excitement that arises from a suspenseful story line. But if each of Rubin's eight categories were subdivided into three more, the resulting typology of 24 categories would seem unwieldy and inelegant. Remember that relative simplicity is a valuable asset for objective theories.

Rubin claims that his typology captures *most* of the explanations people give for their media consumption. There may well be others. When Bradley Greenberg studied uses and gratifications among British children back in 1974, he discovered that many kids reported they watched TV simply because they had developed a *habit* of doing so that was difficult to break.[16] Children aren't the only ones who cite habit as the main reason they use media. In "Television Addiction Is No Mere Metaphor," a 2002 *Scientific American* cover story, communication researchers Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi present hard evidence of TV's habit-forming nature.[17] Maintaining that habit feels good. Breaking it is agony. Paul may realize that if he asks Alex to simply stop playing video games, his roommate will balk at the request. Alex may have developed a habitual behavior that is no longer volitional.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: USING MEDIA TO HAVE A FANTASY FRIEND

Using media to gratify a habitual urge may not be the only motivation to add to Rubin's typology. Years ago, actor Robert Young played the lead role in the hit TV series *Marcus Welby, M.D*. As the ideal physician who combined kindness with authority and expertise, he attracted millions of weekly viewers who were curious about how Dr. Welby would solve the next medical mystery. As the popularity of the series grew, something strange started to happen—the actor began receiving personal letters from viewers asking him for medical advice. In fact, according to one researcher who wrote a book on the "psychology of fame and celebrity," Robert Young received more than 250,000 such letters during the first five years of the program.[18] Why did so many viewers come to believe that a Hollywood actor with no medical credentials was a good source of medical advice?

The answer to that intriguing question is now best understood in terms of what researchers refer to as the *parasocial relationship*. According to Rubin, a parasocial relationship is basically a sense of friendship or emotional attachment that develops between TV viewers and media personalities. This relationship can be measured by asking viewers some basic questions about their involvement with popular characters. Rubin says these relationships are experienced in different ways, including ". . . seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program's social world, and desiring to meet media performers."[19] While Rubin doesn't suggest that desire for a parasocial relationship might count as another category in his typology, it certainly seems to be a candidate.

Parasocial relationship
A sense of friendship or emotional attachment that develops between TV viewers and media personalities.

Knowing which media consumers will form parasocial relationships can help researchers predict how media will affect different viewers in different ways. An illustration can be found in the surprising aftermath of an episode of the old TV series *Happy Days*.[20] Shortly after the episode where "The Fonz" applied for a library card was broadcast, library card applications around the country increased 500 percent. By applying uses & grats, a researcher might hypothesize that viewers who were more deeply involved in a parasocial relationship with The Fonz would be the ones most likely to apply for a card.

In his review of some of the current directions of research on uses & grats, Rubin notes several studies that utilize the existence of parasocial relationships to predict differential effects of media content on viewers.[21] For example, after basketball star Magic Johnson announced in 1991 that he had tested positive for HIV, one study compared college students who may have had a parasocial relationship with Johnson to those who said they had only heard of him. News reports of Johnson's disease affected the two groups differently. Those who may have had a parasocial relationship said they were more concerned about HIV among heterosexuals and expressed an intention to reduce risky sexual behavior. Students who had only heard of Magic Johnson weren't affected by the news reports in the same way.[22]

CRITIQUE: HEAVY ON DESCRIPTION AND LIGHT ON PREDICTION?

In Chapter 3 you read that a good objective theory explains the past and present and predicts the future. These two criteria are called the "twin objectives of scientific knowledge." One criticism of uses & grats is that its major contribution

is a *descriptive* typology of media uses and gratifications. For some, the emphasis on description rather than *explanation* and *prediction* is a serious weakness of the theory. This criticism might be countered by pointing out that studies such as the one on reactions to reports of Magic Johnson's contracting HIV offer more than just description; they enable researchers to predict which media will affect consumers in particular ways, and they offer an explanation for the data observed. So how well does uses & grats measure up against the other criteria mentioned in Chapter 3: *relative simplicity, testability, practical utility*, and *quantitative research?*

There's nothing overly complex about the theory. The propositions that people use the media to gratify particular needs and that those needs can be succinctly described using eight categories have the ring of *relative simplicity*. On the other hand, scholars continue to question the extent to which people can accurately report the reasons for their media use.[23] If they can't, the theory's *testability* is jeopardized. While people are able to report with reasonable accuracy *what* media they consume, who is to say *why* they consume it? Depth psychologists from Freud to present-day therapists would suggest that the average media user is probably in one of the *worst* positions to explain his or her choices. There may also be a logical contradiction between the habit motive for consuming media and the theory's notion that media choices are conscious and deliberate. To the extent that Alex plays video games out of a deeply ingrained habit, he may not reflect on how he spends his time before he sits down to play. If so, his failure to reflect creates a problem for testing a theory that takes such reflection for granted.

If users are not active participants in the media choices they make, it creates a safety concern because we may be lulled into thinking people of any age can take good care of themselves.[24] If they are active participants, as the theory suggests, concern about negative media effects that are often expressed by government agencies, medical and scholarly associations, and parent organizations is misplaced. The latter possibility makes many people feel uneasy. Those looking for a theory that offers some *practical utility* to reinforce their concern about negative media effects may find that uses & grats has little to offer.

As a student of communication theory, what practical implications does the theory have for you? At the very least, you might think of uses & grats as raising your own personal consciousness about the media you consume and the reasons you consume it. By reflecting on your media use, you could come to a new realization of your needs and how you choose to gratify them. And this self-awareness can lead to more satisfying choices in the long run. If Alex realizes that his game playing is based on a habitual urge that's threatening his health, he might be more inclined to take the advice of a concerned friend like Paul and seek help to curtail his habit.

Uses & grats has generated a large body of *quantitative research* over the last 50 years. The fact that researchers continue to be inspired to conduct new studies under its banner gives testimony to its contributions to the field of communication. Ultimately, the litmus test for how scholars will think about uses & grats over the next 50 years will depend on how much of the future research only *reports* the reasons people give for their media choices. If that proves to be the dominant focus, it will be difficult to refute the criticism that uses & grats is heavy on description and light on prediction. But if future studies focus on making *testable predictions* about media effects based on how media are used, this criticism will become moot.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. To what extent can we give an *accurate report* of the media content we consume? Are we always aware of the reasons we choose the media we do? Why or why not?

2. Consider Facebook and other *social networking sites.* Have you heard others express reasons for using Facebook that aren't reflected in the typology proposed by Alan Rubin?

3. Do you think many people have *parasocial relationships* with media characters? Were the people who wrote letters to Robert Young seeking medical advice genuinely confused about whether he was an actor or a doctor?

4. Think of a specific example of how two individuals might use *media content* to gratify different needs. How will those individuals experience very different *media effects?*

A SECOND LOOK

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CHAPTER 29

Socio-psychological tradition
Socio-cultural tradition

Cultivation Theory

of George Gerbner

What are the odds that you'll be involved in some kind of violent act within the next seven days? 1 out of 10? 1 out of 100? 1 out of 1,000? 1 out of 10,000?

According to Hungarian-born George Gerbner, the answer you give may have more to do with how much TV you watch than with the actual risk you face in the week to come. Gerbner, who died in 2005, was dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of the Cultural Environment Movement. He claimed that because TV contains so much violence, people who spend the most time in front of the tube develop an exaggerated belief in a *mean and scary world.* The violence they see on the screen can cultivate a social paranoia that counters notions of trustworthy people or safe surroundings.

Like Marshall McLuhan, Gerbner regarded television as the dominant force in shaping modern society. But unlike McLuhan, who viewed the medium as the message, Gerbner was convinced that TV's power comes from the symbolic content of the real-life drama shown hour after hour, week after week. At its root, television is society's institutional storyteller, and a society's stories give "a coherent picture of what exists, what is important, what is related to what, and what is right."[1]

Until the advent of broadcast media, the two acceptable storytellers outside the home were schools and faith communities. Today, the TV set is a key member of the household, with virtually unlimited access to every person in the family. Television dominates the environment of symbols, telling most of the stories, most of the time. Gerbner claimed that people now watch television as they might attend church, "except that most people watch television more religiously."[2]

What do they see in their daily devotions? According to Gerbner, violence is one of the major staples of the TV world. He wrote that violence "is the simplest and cheapest dramatic means to demonstrate who wins in the game of life and the rules by which the game is played."[3] Those who are immersed in the world of TV drama learn these "facts of life" better than occasional viewers do.

Most people who decry violence on television are worried that it affects receptive young viewers by encouraging aggressive *behavior.* Gerbner was more concerned that it affects viewers' *beliefs* about the world around them and the *feelings* connected to those beliefs. If viewers come to believe that the world

around them is filled with crime, they're also likely to feel scared about the prospect of engaging in that crime-filled world. Gerbner thought that watching television violence might result in viewers wanting to own guard dogs, double-bolt locks, and home security systems. He was concerned that television violence convinces viewers that it is indeed "a jungle out there."

Gerbner's general expertise in the field of communication was widely acknowledged. He served as editor of the *Journal of Communication,* and for almost two decades he spearheaded an extensive research program that monitored the level of violence on television, classified people according to how much TV they watch, and compiled measures of how viewers perceive the world around them. He was especially interested in how viewers' consumption of TV violence increased their perceptions of risk for crime, and most of his research sought to gather support for that idea.

But cultivation theory isn't limited to TV violence. Other scholars have used it to theorize about how TV affects perceptions about the health risks of smoking, the popularity of various political positions, and appropriate gender roles. The ways that TV might affect views of social reality are probably too many to count. Partly because of Gerbner's credentials and partly because of the intuitive appeal of the theory itself, his cultivation explanation of his research findings remains one of the most popular and controversial theories of mass communication.

Gerbner introduced the theory of cultivation as part of his "cultural indicators" paradigm. As you'll recall from Fisher's *narrative paradigm* (see Chapter 24), a paradigm is a conceptual framework that calls for people to view events through a common interpretive lens. You might think of Gerbner's framework as a three-pronged plug leading to a TV set, with each of the prongs uniquely equipped to tell us something different about the world of TV.[4] Each of the three prongs is associated with a particular type of analysis that Gerbner considers a critical component in understanding the effects of television on its viewers.

INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS ANALYSIS—THE FIRST PRONG

The first prong of the plug represents scholars' concern for the reasons why media produce the messages they do. Gerbner labeled the research addressing this concern *institutional process analysis*. Scholars who do this type of research penetrate behind the scenes of media organizations in an effort to understand what policies or practices might be lurking there. For example, Gerbner believed that one reason there is so much violence on TV is that Hollywood is mainly concerned with how to export its product globally for maximum profit at minimum cost. Since violence is cheap to produce and speaks in a language that is universally understood, studios adopt policies that call for their shows to include lots of violent content.

Institutional process analysis
Scholarship that penetrates behind the scenes of media organizations in an effort to understand what policies or practices might be lurking there.

It would be difficult for a scholar to discover institutional policy without conducting in-depth interviews with media producers, accountants, and studio executives. When scholars conduct these sorts of interviews, they are engaging in institutional process analysis. Gerbner was fond of promoting his own views about the inner workings of Hollywood, but it isn't always clear whether those views were based on systematic scholarship. Cultivation theory is far better known for the concerns represented by the second and third prongs of the plug.

MESSAGE SYSTEM ANALYSIS—THE SECOND PRONG

If TV cultivates perceptions of social reality among viewers, it becomes essential to know exactly what messages TV transmits. The only way to know for sure is to undertake careful, systematic study of TV content—*message system analysis*. For Gerbner, that involved employing the method of quantitative *content analysis,* which resulted in numerical reports of exactly what the world of television contained.

Message system analysis Scholarship that involves careful, systematic study of TV content, usually employing content analysis as a research method.

While Gerbner designed most of his content analyses to reveal how much violence was on TV and how that violence was depicted, this method can be used to focus on any type of TV content. For example, scholars who thought that TV cultivated perceptions about smoking behavior and appropriate gender roles used content analysis to document the prevalence of smoking and the different roles played by males and females in prime time. Other researchers have examined depictions of marriage and work, attitudes about science, depictions of the paranormal, treatment of various political views, and ways environmental issues are handled. Before one can examine how certain messages might affect perceptions of social reality, however, it's important to know exactly what those messages contain.

An Index of Violence

As the opening paragraphs of the chapter reveal, Gerbner devoted most of his research to studying the cultivating impact of media violence, and this is still the theory's main focus. His content analysis was designed to uncover exactly how violence was depicted on TV. Of course, that required Gerbner to clearly specify what he meant by violence. He defined *dramatic violence* as "the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or others) compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt and/or killed or threatened to be so victimized as part of the plot."[5]

Dramatic violence The overt expression or serious threat of physical force as part of the plot.

The definition rules out verbal abuse, idle threats, and pie-in-the-face slapstick. But it includes the physical abuse presented in a cartoon format. When the coyote pursuing the roadrunner is flattened by a steamroller or the monsters in *Pokémon* crush their enemies, Gerbner would label the scene violent. He also counted auto crashes and natural disasters. From an artistic point of view, these events are no accident. The screenwriter inserted the trauma for dramatic effect. Characters die or are maimed just as effectively as if they'd taken a bullet in the chest.

For more than two decades, Gerbner's team of researchers randomly selected a week during the fall season and videotaped every prime-time (8 to 11 p.m.) network show. They also recorded programming for children on Saturday and Sunday (8 a.m. to 2 p.m.). After counting up the incidents that fit their description, they gauged the overall level of violence with a formula that included the ratio of programs that scripted violence, the rate of violence in those programs, and the percentage of characters involved in physical harm and killing. They found that the annual index was both remarkably stable and alarmingly high.

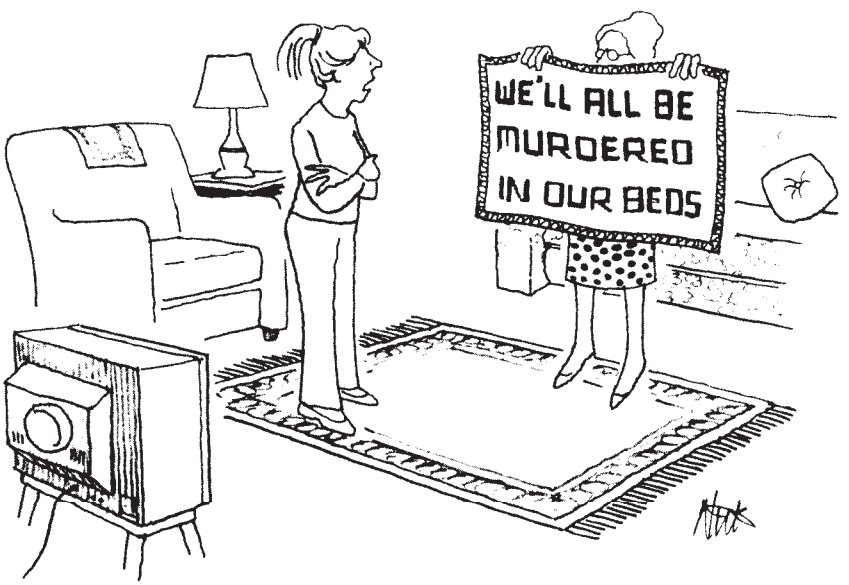
Equal Violence, Unequal Risk

One indisputable fact to emerge from Gerbner's analysis is that the cumulative portrayal of violence varies little from year to year. More than half of prime-time programs contain actual bodily harm or threatened violence. *The Office* and *Two*

and a Half Men are not typical. Dramas that include violence average five traumatic incidents per viewing hour. Almost all the weekend children's shows major in mayhem. They average 20 cases an hour. By the time the typical TV viewer graduates from high school, he or she has observed 13,000 violent deaths.

On any given week, two-thirds of the major characters are caught up in some kind of violence. Heroes are just as involved as villains, yet there is great inequality as to the age, race, and gender of those on the receiving end of physical force. Old people and children are harmed at a much greater rate than are young or middle-aged adults. In the pecking order of "victimage," African Americans and Hispanics are killed or beaten more than their Caucasian counterparts. Gerbner noted that it's risky to be "other than clearly white." It's also dangerous to be female. The opening lady-in-distress scene is a favorite dramatic device to galvanize the hero into action. And finally, blue-collar workers "get it in the neck" more often than do white-collar executives.

The symbolic vulnerability of minority-group members is striking, given their gross underrepresentation in TV drama. Gerbner's analysis of the world of television recorded that 50 percent of the characters are white, middle-class males, and women are outnumbered by men 3 to 1. Although one-third of our society is made up of children and teenagers, they appear as only 10 percent of the characters on prime-time shows. Two-thirds of the United States labor force have blue-collar or service jobs, yet that group constitutes a mere 10 percent of the players on television. African Americans and Hispanics are only occasional figures, but the elderly are by far the most excluded minority. Less than 3 percent of the dramatic roles are filled by actors over the age of 65. If insurance companies kept actuarial tables on the life expectancy of television characters, they'd discover that the chance of a poor, elderly black woman's avoiding harm for the entire hour is almost nil.



"You do lovely needlepoint, grandma, but . . ."

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In sum, Gerbner's content analyses reveal that people on the margins of American society are put in symbolic double jeopardy. Their existence is understated, but at the same time their vulnerability to violence is overplayed. When written into the script, they are often made visible in order to be victims. Not surprisingly, these are the very people who exhibit the most fear of violence when the TV set is turned off.

CULTIVATION ANALYSIS—THE THIRD PRONG

Most devotees of cultivation theory subscribe to the notion that *message system analysis* is a prerequisite to the third prong of the plug: *cultivation analysis*. It's important to recognize the difference between the two. Message system analysis deals with the content of TV; cultivation analysis deals with how TV's content might affect viewers—particularly the viewers who spend lots of time glued to the tube.

It might be helpful to think of cultivation analysis as the prong that carries the most electrical current in the theory. This is the part of the paradigm where most of the action takes place. Gerbner's research associates, Michael Morgan, James Shanahan, and Nancy Signorielli, offer a clear definition of *cultivation:*

> The concept of "cultivation" thus refers to the independent contribution television viewing makes to audience members' conceptions of social reality. Television viewing cultivates ways of seeing the world—those who spend more time "living" in the world of television are more likely to see the "real world" in terms of the images, values, portrayals and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television.[6]

Cultivation analysis Research designed to find support for the notion that those who spend more time watching TV are more likely to see the "real world" through TV's lens.

After watching an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, my student Jeremy found the idea of cultivation perfectly plausible when it comes to watching media violence and developing a fear of real-world crime. His description of the episode and his conclusion about cultivation are worth noting:

> In the episode, a child found the dead bodies of both his nanny and his mom. His nanny was killed by someone she met online and his mom was killed by his dad a few days later because she was having an affair and wanted to leave him. At the end of the episode, a detective and the wife of another detective were in a car accident. Of the nine central characters in the episode, three were victims of violent crime and two were perpetrators of violent crime. Two of the four remaining characters were involved in the car crash, so only two people made it out of the episode unscathed. I can see how heavy viewers of such shows would get the idea that the world is mean and scary.[7]

CULTIVATION WORKS LIKE A MAGNETIC OR GRAVITATIONAL FIELD

If Gerbner is right that heavy TV watching influences viewers' beliefs about the world, how can we understand exactly how this happens? It's tempting to think of cultivation as a linear *push* process where TV content influences viewers much like the cue ball on a billiard table pushes the other balls to new locations upon impact. But cultivation researchers aren't fond of that metaphor. Michael Morgan and his co-authors point out that the cultivation process is much more like the *pull* of a gravitational field.[8]

Glenn Sparks, another media effects scholar who has published several cultivation studies, extends the metaphor of gravity to magnetism. He asks us to imagine a table of billiard balls that are made of metal, with the cue ball (representing TV) possessing powerful magnetic properties. Regardless of where the other balls (representing individual viewers) are positioned on the table, they will be affected by the magnetic pull of the cue ball and tend to move closer to it. Depending on the initial position of the balls on the table, they won't all move toward the magnetic cue ball at the same angle and at the same speed—but they will all be susceptible to the pull of the magnet to some degree. In the same way, although the magnitude of TV's influence is not the same for every viewer, all are affected by it.

While metaphors like the magnetic cue ball can shed light on a theoretical process like cultivation, some scholars see them as limited in terms of explaining what's really going on. L. J. Shrum, a professor of marketing at the University of Texas at San Antonio, offers insight into the "black box" of the mind so we can better understand how watching TV affects judgments of the world around us. Shrum relies on the *accessibility principle* in explaining TV's cultivating impact.[9] This principle states that when people make judgments about the world around them, they rely on the smallest bits of information that come to mind most quickly—the information that is most accessible.

Accessibility principle
When people make judgments about the world around them, they rely on the smallest bits of information that come to mindm ost quickly.

For those who consume lots of TV, the most accessible information for making judgments is more likely to come from TV shows than anywhere else. Heavy TV viewing keeps messages from the small screen at the top of the mind's vast bin of information. If you're a heavy TV viewer and someone asks you about your odds of being involved in a violent act, the most accessible information about crime that you will use to construct your answer could come from your steady diet of *CSI*.

Gerbner seemed content to leave scholars like Shrum with the task of explaining exactly how the cultivation process works. In the meantime, he was busy spinning out more specific propositions to test. The two main propositions that guided his thinking about cultivation were *mainstreaming* and *resonance*.

MAINSTREAMING: BLURRING, BLENDING, AND BENDING OF ATTITUDES

Mainstreaming is Gerbner's term to describe the process of "blurring, blending, and bending" that those with heavy viewing habits undergo. He thought that through constant exposure to the same images and labels, heavy viewers develop a commonality of outlook that doesn't happen with radio. Radio stations segment the audience to the point where programming for left-handed truck drivers who bowl on Friday nights is a distinct possibility. But instead of *narrowcasting* their programs, TV producers *broadcast* in that they seek to "attract the largest possible audience by celebrating the moderation of the mainstream."[10] Television homogenizes its audience so that those with heavy viewing habits share the same orientations, perspectives, and meanings with each other.

Mainstreaming
The blurring, blending, and bending process by which heavy TV viewers from disparate groups develop a common outlook through constant exposure to the same imagesan d labels.

Think of the metaphor of the metal billiard balls scattered on the pool table and visualize the magnetic cue ball in the center. Despite the fact that the individual metal balls are located in many different positions on the table, each one is drawn closer to the magnetic cue ball and, in the process, all of the balls become closer to each other—assuming positions on the table that are more alike than before the magnet had its effect. In a similar way, as TV mainstreams

people, it pulls those who might initially be different from each other into a common perception of reality that resembles the TV world. We needn't ask how close this common perception of the way the world works is to the mainstream of culture. According to Gerbner, the "television answer" *is* the mainstream.

Gerbner illustrated the mainstreaming effect by showing how heavy TV viewers blur economic and political distinctions. TV glorifies the middle class, and those with heavy viewing habits assume that label, no matter what their income. But those with light viewing habits who have blue-collar jobs accurately describe themselves as working-class people.

In like fashion, those with heavy viewing habits label themselves political *moderates*. Most characters in TV dramas frown on political extremism—right or left. This nonextremist ethic is apparently picked up by the constant viewer. It's only from the ranks of sporadic TV users that Gerbner found people who actually label themselves *liberal* or *conservative*.

Social scientists have come to expect political differences between rich and poor, blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants, city dwellers and farmers. Those distinctions still emerge when sporadic television viewers respond to the survey. But Gerbner reported that traditional differences diminish among those with heavy viewing habits. It's as if the light from the TV set washes out any sharp features that would set them apart.

Even though those with heavy viewing habits call themselves moderates, Gerbner and his associates studying cultural indicators noted that their positions on social issues are decidedly conservative. Heavy viewers consistently voice opinions in favor of lower taxes, more police protection, and stronger national defense. They are against big government, free speech, homosexual marriage or gays in the military, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, interracial marriage, open-housing legislation, and affirmative action. The *mainstream* is not *middle of the road*. The magnetic cue ball isn't sitting in the middle of the table—it's distinctly skewed to the right.

RESONANCE: THE TV WORLD LOOKS LIKE MY WORLD, SO IT MUST BE TRUE

To understand the resonance process, consider the billiard metaphor. The balls closest to the magnetic cue ball are like TV viewers whose real-world environment is very much like the world of TV. They might be viewers who live in the inner city and are accustomed to violent attacks, police chases, and losing friends to violent crime. The balls farthest away from the cue ball are like viewers who live in a world that doesn't resemble TV at all. Which of the balls on the table are most affected by the magnetic cue ball? If you remember how magnets behave and you have a clear image of the billiard table, the answer is clear: the closest balls are the ones that will be most affected. In fact, if they are extremely close to the cue ball, they will be pulled in quickly and end up firmly attached. Although Gerbner didn't use this metaphor, I think he would have seen it as illustrative of the *resonance* process. He thought the cultivating power of TV's messages would be especially strong over viewers who perceived that the world depicted on TV was a world very much like their own. He thought of these viewers as ones who get a "double dose" of the same message.[11]

Resonance
The condition that exists when viewers' real-life environment is like the world of TV; these viewers are especially susceptible to TV's cultivating power.

For three years I was a volunteer advocate in a low-income housing project. Although I felt relatively safe walking through the project, police and social workers told stories of shootings and stabbings. Even peace-loving residents

were no strangers to violence. I can't recall ever entering an apartment where the TV was turned off. Gerbner would expect that the daily diet of symbolic savagery would reinforce people's experience of doorstep violence, making life even more frightening. The hesitation of most tenants to venture outside their apartments is consistent with his resonance assumption.

RESEARCH ON CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

Cultivation takes time. Gerbner viewed the process as one that unfolds gradually through the steady accumulation of TV's messages. Consequently, he shunned the experimental method many researchers used to study the effects of TV violence on aggressive behavior. According to Gerbner, these experiments couldn't possibly detect the sort of changes he sought to document. Change due to cultivation takes place over months and years; experiments measure change that takes place over 30 or 60 minutes. That's why the strategy for performing *cultivation analysis* relies on surveys instead of experiments.

Gerbner's basic prediction was that heavy TV viewers would be more likely than light viewers to see the social world as resembling the world depicted on TV. The strategy for testing this notion was simple. Survey respondents were asked two types of questions: one type focused on reports of TV exposure so that Gerbner could distinguish between heavy and light viewers; the second focused on perceptions of social reality that he thought media might cultivate. Once measured, the responses could be correlated to find out if heavy viewers perceive the world as a scarier place than light viewers do.

Heavy viewers
TV viewers who report that they watch at least four hours per day; televisiont ypes.

Based on the data from survey questionnaires on TV viewing, most of Gerbner's work established a self-report of two hours a day as the upper limit of light viewing. He labeled *heavy viewers* as those who watch four hours or more. He also referred to the heavy viewer as the *television type,* a more benign term than *couch potato* with its allusion to either a steady diet of television and potato chips or a vegetable with many eyes. There are more heavy viewers than light viewers, but each group makes up about one-fourth of the general population. People whose viewing habits are in the two- to four-hour midrange make up the other half, but Gerbner wanted to compare people with distinctly different patterns of television exposure.

THE MAJOR FINDINGS OF CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

Believing that violence is the backbone of TV drama and knowing that people differ in how much TV they watch, Gerbner sought to discover the *cultivation differential.* That's his term for "the difference in the percent giving the 'television answer' within comparable groups of light and heavy viewers."[12] He referred to *cultivation differential* rather than *media effects* because the latter term implies a comparison between *before*-TV exposure and *after*-TV exposure. But Gerbner believed there is no before-television condition. Television enters people's lives in infancy. His surveys have revealed some provocative findings:

Cultivation differential
The difference in the percentage giving the "television answer" within comparable groups of light and heavy TV viewers.

1. *Positive correlation between TV viewing and fear of criminal victimization***.** In most of the surveys Gerbner conducted, the results reveal a small but statistically significant relationship between TV consumption and fear about becoming the victim of a crime. The question at the start of the chapter is illustrative: Those

with light viewing habits predict their weekly odds of being a victim are 1 out of 100; those with heavy viewing habits fear the risk to be 1 out of 10. Actual crime statistics indicate that 1 out of 10,000 is more realistic. Not surprisingly, more women than men are afraid of dark streets. But for both sexes, the fear of victimization correlates with time spent in front of the tube. People with heavy viewing habits tend to overestimate criminal activity, believing it to be 10 times worse than it really is. In actuality, muggers on the street pose less bodily threat to pedestrians than does injury from cars.

Meta-analysis
A statistical procedure that blends the results of multiple empirical and independent research studies exploring the same relationship between two variables (e.g., TV viewing and fearofviole nce).

Because so many cultivation studies have been published, it is possible to compute an overall average effect based on the correlations from all of the individual surveys. Such a study is called a *meta-analysis*. One meta-analysis estimated the average correlation over 82 different studies to be consistently small, but positive ($r = +0.09$)—indicating that as TV viewing increases, there is a tendency for fear of victimization to increase as well.[13] Since correlations can range from 0.0 to 1.0, a value of 0.09 is certainly on the small side. But in most of the studies, the correlation was large enough to conclude that the relationship was not just a chance finding. TV viewing is definitely related to fear of criminal victimization.

2. *Perceived activity of police.* People with heavy viewing habits believe that 5 percent of society is involved in law enforcement. Their video world is peopled with police officers, judges, and government agents. People with light viewing habits estimate a more realistic 1 percent. Gerbner's television type assumes that cops draw their guns almost every day, which isn't true.

3. *General mistrust of people.* Those with heavy viewing habits are suspicious of other people's motives. They subscribe to statements that warn people to expect the worst:

"Most people are just looking out for themselves."

"In dealing with others, you can't be too careful."

"Do unto others before they do unto you."

Mean world syndrome
The cynical mindset of general mistrust of others subscribed to by heavy TVviewers .

Gerbner called this cynical mindset the *mean world syndrome.* The evidence suggests that the minds of heavy TV viewers are fertile ground for sowing thoughts of danger.

CRITIQUE: HOW STRONG IS THE EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF THE THEORY?

For most observers, Gerbner's claim that the dramatic content of television creates a fearful climate makes sense. How could the habitual viewer watch so much violence without it having a lasting effect? Yet over the last 30 years, communication journals have been filled with the sometimes bitter charges and countercharges of critics and supporters. Opponents have challenged Gerbner's definition of violence, the programs he selected for content analysis, his decision to lump together all types of dramatic programs (action, soap operas, sitcoms, and so on), his assumption that there is always a consistent television answer, his nonrandom methods of selecting respondents, his simple hours-per-day standard of categorizing viewers as *light* or *heavy*, his multiple-choice technique of measuring their perceived risk of being mugged, his statistical method of analyzing the data, and his interpretation of correlational data.

Perhaps the most daunting issue to haunt cultivation research is how to clearly establish the causal claim that heavy TV viewing leads a person to perceive the world as mean and scary. Because cultivation researchers shun the experimental method in favor of the survey, they are stuck with a method that is incapable of establishing clear evidence of causality. Critics are quick to point out that the correlation between TV viewing and fear of criminal victimization can be interpreted plausibly in more than one way. The correlation could indicate, as Gerbner contended, that TV viewing cultivates or causes fear of crime. But it could make just as much sense to interpret the relationship the other way—fear of crime causes people to watch more TV. After all, most TV shows depict a just world in which the bad guys get caught in the end. Perhaps those most afraid of crime are the ones most motivated to tune in to TV to become assured that justice will ultimately triumph.

With correlational data, the only way to distinguish what causes what is to collect data from the same people on more than one occasion over a longer period of time. *Longitudinal studies* like these can help determine which of the two variables comes before the other. Unfortunately, longitudinal research typically takes many months or years to complete. Scholars who live by the adage "publish or perish" are not usually attracted to projects that require them to wait around that long to collect data. As a result, cultivation studies of this type are virtually nonexistent. This state of affairs causes some critics to give cultivation theory low marks on the criterion of *testability* that you read about in Chapter 3.

Another possibility is that the relationship between TV viewing and fear of crime is like the relationship between a runny nose and a sore throat. Neither one causes the other—they are both caused by something else. Just as the cold virus is a common cause of runny noses *and* sore throats, some critics suggest that the neighborhoods people live in could be the common cause of TV viewing *and* fear of crime.[14] People who live in high-crime areas may fear crime for good reason. They also tend to stay inside to avoid victimization. While indoors, they pass the time by watching TV. In contrast, people who live in low-crime areas don't fear crime as much and so they tend to go outside more frequently, which leads to less TV consumption. If researchers ignore where people live, and most cultivation researchers do, they might miss the role played by this variable or others that weren't included on their questionnaires.

Scholars have another reservation about the evidence: cultivation effects tend to be statistically small. Imagine an entire pie that represents all the fear of crime that is measured in a cultivation questionnaire. The amount of the pie that researchers can attribute to watching TV might be just a single bite. On the other hand, champions of the theory point out that tiny statistical effects can be crucial. Consider the fact that a 1 percent swing in voting patterns in 3 of the last 13 presidential elections would have resulted in a different person being elected (Kennedy–Nixon in 1960; Nixon–Humphrey in 1968; Bush–Gore in 2000). Or reflect on the fact that a change in the average temperature of just a single degree could have catastrophic consequences for our planet.

Issues of statistical size aside, Gerbner's defenders would emphasize the *importance* of the issue at hand. Fear of violence is a paralyzing emotion. As Gerbner repeatedly pointed out, worry can make people prisoners in their own homes, change the way they vote, affect how they feel about themselves, and dramatically lower their quality of life. Even if the effect of TV viewing on these

factors is relatively small, the consequences at stake make TV's message one that we should be concerned about.

But what is TV's message? When Gerbner formulated his theory decades ago, there were only three major networks. The vast offerings of today's cable and satellite menu were unimaginable. Critics contend that Gerbner's original assumption that TV viewers are constantly exposed to the same images and labels is no longer true. While there may not yet be a channel for left-handed truck drivers who bowl on Friday nights, the TV environment seems to be moving in that direction. The choices between such channels as the Food Network, the Golf Channel, and C-SPAN permit a level of viewing selectivity that cultivation theory doesn't acknowledge. If the theory is to continue to exert influence, many critics maintain that it will have to adapt to the new media environment.

Compared to most of the other theories in this text, the "critique" section of cultivation theory is much longer. Does this mean it's a bad theory? Not necessarily. Consider the fact that cultivation theory has generated research for almost a half-century. Theories that have been around that long sustain more attacks than ones recently hatched. It's also important to keep in mind that amid all the criticism, few theories in the area of mass communication have generated so many studies. In addition to its tremendous contribution to research, the theory has influenced at least three generations of scholars to think about media in a particular way. Most theorists would love to have even a small fraction of the recognition that cultivation theory has managed to garner.

As for Gerbner, in 1996 he founded the Cultural Environment Movement, a coalition of organizations and social activists who believe it's vitally important who gets to tell the stories within a culture, and whose stories don't get told. They are committed to changing the stories that American television tells and are convinced this will happen only when the public wrests control of the airwaves from media conglomerates. Gerbner underscored the movement's agenda with repeated references to a line from Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher:

> "If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation."[15]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How would you change Gerbner's definition of *dramatic violence* so that his index of TV violence would measure what you think is important?

2. What types of people are underrepresented in television drama? What types of people are overrepresented? Who are the victims of symbolic violence on the screen?

3. How do your *political* and *social values* differ from, or coincide with, the *mainstream* attitudes of Gerbner's *television type?*

4. The *meta-analysis* finding of a +0.09 relationship between TV exposure and worldview can be seen as *significant, small,* and/or *important.* How do these interpretations differ? Which do you regard as most important?

A SECOND LOOK

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To access a chapter on Albert Bandura's social learning theory that predicts when it's likely that viewers will imitate violence they see on TV, click on Theory List at *www.afirstlook.com.*

CHAPTER 30

Objective — Interpretive

Socio-psychological tradition

Agenda-Setting Theory

of Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw

For some unexplained reason, in June 1972, five unknown men broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters looking for undetermined information. It was the sort of local crime story that rated two paragraphs on page 17 of the *Washington Post.* Yet editor Ben Bradlee and reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein gave the story repeatedly high visibility even though the public initially seemed to regard the incident as trivial.

President Nixon dismissed the break-in as a "third-rate burglary," but over the following year Americans showed an increasing public awareness of Watergate's significance. Half the country became familiar with the word *Watergate* over the summer of 1972. By April 1973, that figure had risen to 90 percent. When television began gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Senate hearings on the matter a year after the break-in, virtually every adult in the United States knew what Watergate was about. Six months after the hearings President Nixon still protested, "I am not a crook." But by the spring of 1974, he was forced from office because the majority of citizens and their representatives had decided that he was.

THE ORIGINAL AGENDA: NOT WHAT TO *THINK,* BUT WHAT TO THINK *ABOUT*

Journalism professors Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw regard Watergate as a perfect example of the agenda-setting function of the mass media. They were not surprised that the Watergate issue caught fire after months on the front page of the *Washington Post.* McCombs and Shaw believe that the "mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda."[1] They aren't suggesting that broadcast and print personnel make a deliberate attempt to influence listener, viewer, or reader opinion on the issues. Most reporters in the free world have a deserved reputation for independence and fairness. But McCombs and Shaw say that we look to news professionals for cues on where to focus our attention. "*We* judge as important what the *media* judge as important."[2]

Agenda-setting hypothesis
The mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda.

Although McCombs and Shaw first referred to the agenda-setting function of the media in 1972, the idea that people desire media assistance in determining political reality had already been voiced by a number of current events analysts. In an attempt to explain how the United States had been drawn into World War I, Pulitzer Prize–winning author Walter Lippmann claimed that the media act as a mediator between "the world outside and the pictures in our heads."[3] McCombs

and Shaw also quote University of Wisconsin political scientist Bernard Cohen's observation concerning the specific function the media serve: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."[4]

Starting with the Kennedy–Nixon contest in 1960, political analyst Theodore White wrote the definitive account of four presidential elections. Independent of McCombs and Shaw, and in opposition to then-current wisdom that mass communication had limited effects upon its audience, White came to the conclusion that the media shaped those election campaigns:

> The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins.[5]

A THEORY WHOSE TIME HAD COME

McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory found an appreciative audience among mass communication researchers. The prevailing selective-exposure hypothesis claimed that people would attend only to news and views that didn't threaten their established beliefs. The media were seen as merely stroking pre-existent attitudes. After two decades of downplaying the influence of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, the field was disenchanted with this limited-effects approach. Agenda-setting theory boasted two attractive features: it reaffirmed the power of the press while still maintaining that individuals were free to choose.

McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory represents a back-to-the-basics approach to mass communication research. Like the initial Erie County voting studies,[6] the focus is on election campaigns. The hypothesis predicts a cause-and-effect relationship between media content and voter perception. Although later work explores the conditions under which the media priorities are most influential, the theory rises or falls on its ability to show a match between the media's agenda and the public's agenda later on. McCombs and Shaw supported their main hypothesis with results from surveys they took while working together at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[7] (McCombs is now at the University of Texas.) Their analysis of the 1968 race for president between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey set the pattern for later agenda-setting research. The study provides an opportunity to examine in detail the type of quantitative survey research that Stuart Hall and other critical theorists so strongly oppose.

MEDIA AGENDA AND PUBLIC AGENDA: A CLOSE MATCH

Media agenda
The pattern of news coverage across major print and broadcast media as measured by the prominence and length of stories.

McCombs and Shaw's first task was to measure the *media agenda*. They determined that Chapel Hill residents relied on a mix of nine print and broadcast sources for political news—two Raleigh papers, two Durham papers, *Time, Newsweek,* the out-of-state edition of the *New York Times,* and the CBS and NBC evening news.

They established *position* and *length* of story as the two main criteria of prominence. For newspapers, the front-page headline story, a three-column story on an inside page, and the lead editorial were all counted as evidence of significant focus on an issue. For news magazines, the requirement was an opening story in the news section or any political issue to which the editors devoted a full

column. Prominence in the television news format was defined by placement as one of the first three news items or any discussion that lasted more than 45 seconds.

Because the agenda-setting hypothesis refers to substantive issues, the researchers discarded news items about campaign strategy, position in the polls, and the personalities of the candidates. The remaining stories were then sorted into 15 subject categories, which were later boiled down into 5 major issues. A composite index of media prominence revealed the following order of importance: foreign policy, law and order, fiscal policy, public welfare, and civil rights.

Public agenda
The most important public issues as measured by public opinion surveys.

In order to measure the *public's agenda*, McCombs and Shaw asked Chapel Hill voters to outline what each one considered the key issue of the campaign, regardless of what the candidates might be saying. People who were already committed to a candidate were dropped from the pool of respondents. The researchers assigned the specific answers to the same broad categories used for media analysis. They then compared the aggregate data from undecided voters with the composite description of media content. The rank of the five issues on both lists was nearly identical.

WHAT CAUSES WHAT?

McCombs and Shaw believe that the hypothesized agenda-setting function of the media is responsible for the almost perfect correlation they found between the media and public ordering of priorities:

Media Agenda → Voters' Agenda

But as critics of cultivation theory remind us, correlation is not causation. It's possible that newspaper and television coverage simply reflects public concerns that already exist:

Voters' Agenda → Media Agenda

The results of the Chapel Hill study could be interpreted as providing support for the notion that the media are just as market-driven in their news coverage as they are in programming entertainment. By themselves, McCombs and Shaw's findings were impressive, but equivocal. A true test of the agenda-setting hypothesis must be able to show that public priorities lag behind the media agenda. I'll briefly describe two research studies that provide evidence that the media agenda is, in fact, the *cause,* while the public agenda is its somewhat delayed *effect.*

Critics have suggested that *both* the media agenda and the public agenda merely reflect current events as they unfold, but that news professionals become aware of what's happening sooner than most of us do. To examine that possibility, communication researcher Ray Funkhouser, now retired from Pennsylvania State University, undertook an extensive *historical* review of stories in news magazines from 1960 to 1970.[8] He charted the rise and fall of media attention on issues and compared these trends with annual Gallup poll responses to a question about "the most important problem facing America." Funkhouser's results make it clear that the twin agendas aren't mere reflections of reality. For example, the number of American troops in Vietnam increased until 1968, but news coverage peaked two years before that. The same was true of urban violence and campus unrest. Press interest cooled down while cities and colleges were still heating up. It appears that Walter Lippmann was right—the actual environment and the pictures in our mind are two different worlds.

This historical study provides strong support for McCombs and Shaw's basic agenda-setting hypothesis. But it took a tightly controlled *experiment* run by Yale researchers to establish a cause-and-effect chain of influence from the media agenda to the public agenda.[9] Political scientists Shanto Iyengar, Mark Peters, and Donald Kinder spliced previously aired news features into tapes of current network newscasts. For four days straight, three groups of New Haven residents came together to watch the evening news and fill out a questionnaire about their own concerns. Each group saw a different version—one version contained a daily story on environmental pollution, another had a daily feature on national defense, and a third offered a daily dose of news about economic inflation. Viewers who saw the media agendas that focused on pollution and defense elevated those issues on their own lists of concerns—definite confirmation of a cause-and-effect relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. (As it turned out, inflation was already an important topic for most participants, so there wasn't any room for that issue to move up on the third group's agenda.)

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED BY THE MEDIA AGENDA?

Even in their original Chapel Hill study, McCombs and Shaw understood that "people are not automatons waiting to be programmed by the news media."[10] They suspected that some viewers might be more resistant to the media's political priorities than others—that's why they filtered out the responses of voters who were already committed to a candidate. In follow-up studies, McCombs and Shaw turned to the *uses and gratifications* approach, which suggests that viewers are selective in the kinds of TV programs they watch (see Chapter 28). The theorists sought to discover exactly what kind of person is most susceptible to the media agenda. They concluded that people who have a willingness to let the media shape their thinking have a high *need for orientation.* Others refer to it as an *index of curiosity.*

Index of curiosity
A measure of the extent to which individuals' need for orientation motivates them to let the media shape their views.

Need for orientation arises from high *relevance* and *uncertainty.* For example, because I'm a dog and cat owner, any story about cruelty to animals always catches my attention (high relevance). However, I don't really know the extent to which medical advances require experimentation on live animals (high uncertainty). According to McCombs and Shaw, this combination would make me a likely candidate to be influenced by media stories about vivisection. If the news editors of *Time* and ABC think it's important, I probably will too.

FRAMING: TRANSFERRING THE SALIENCE OF ATTRIBUTES

Until the 1990s, almost every article about the theory included a reiteration of the agenda-setting mantra—*the media aren't very successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.* In other words, the media make some issues more *salient.* We pay greater attention to those issues and regard them as more important. By the mid-1990s, however, McCombs was saying that the media do more than that. They do, in fact, influence the way we think. The specific process he cites is one that many media scholars discuss—*framing.*

Framing
The selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object or issue is discussed.

James Tankard, one of the leading writers on mass communication theory, defines a media frame as "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of *selection, emphasis, exclusion,* and *elaboration.*"[11] The final four nouns in that sentence suggest that the media not only set the agenda for what issues, events, or candidates are most important,

they also transfer the salience of specific attributes belonging to those potential objects of interest. My own "final four" experience may help explain the distinction.

I'm writing this section while visiting relatives in St. Petersburg, Florida. The *St. Petersburg Times* is filled with stories about the finals of the NCAA men's basketball tournament that starts here tomorrow. The field of 64 teams has now been narrowed to 4, and it's hard to imagine anything the newspaper or television stations could do to make this Final Four event more prominent for local residents. No one seems to talk about anything else.

What is it about the Final Four extravaganza that captures people's attention? For some it's the high quality of basketball play they expect to see. For others it's a rooting interest for a particular team. But beyond these inherent characteristics of a basketball tournament, there are many other potential features of the event that might come to mind:

Gambling—there's more money bet on this game than on the Super Bowl.

Party scene—a guy leans out the window and yells, "This is where it's at."

Local economy—this is the weekend that could keep Florida green.

Exploitation of players—how many of these guys will ever graduate?

Beach forecast—it will be sunny and warm both today and tomorrow.

"Your royal command has been obeyed, Highness. Every town crier in the land is crying: 'Old King Cole is a merry ole soul.' Before nightfall we'll have them all believing it."

Cartoon by Ed Frascino. Reprinted by permission.

The morning paper carried separate stories on each of these features, but coverage on benefits to the local economy and the gambling angle were front-page features that ran five times as long as the brief article on player exploitation buried inside.

We see, therefore, that there are two levels of agenda setting. The first level, according to McCombs, is the transfer of salience of an *attitude object* in the mass media's pictures of the world to a prominent place among the pictures in our head. The Final Four becomes important to us. This is the agenda-setting function that survey researchers have traditionally studied.

The second level of agenda setting is the transfer of salience of a dominant set of *attributes* that the media associate with an attitude object to the specific features of the image projected on the walls of our minds.[12] Now when I think of the Final Four, I imagine money changing hands for a variety of reasons. I don't think about GPAs or diplomas. According to McCombs, the agenda setting of attributes mirrors the process of framing that Robert Entman describes in his article clarifying the concept:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.[13]

NOT JUST WHAT TO THINK ABOUT, BUT HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT

Is there evidence that the process of framing as defined by agenda-setting theorists actually alters the pictures in the minds of people when they read the newspaper or tune in to broadcast news? Does the media's construction of an agenda with a cluster of related attributes create a coherent image in the minds of subscribers, listeners, and viewers? McCombs cites national election studies in Spain, Japan, and Mexico that show this is how framing works.[14] I also find compelling evidence in another framing study conducted by Salma Ghanem for her doctoral dissertation under McCombs' supervision at the University of Texas.[15]

Ghanem analyzed the changing percentage of Texans who ranked crime as the most important problem facing the country between 1992 and 1995. The figure rose steadily from 2 percent of respondents in 1992 to 37 percent in 1994, and then dipped down to a still high 21 percent a year later. Ironically, even as public concern about crime was on the rise the first two years, the actual frequency and severity of unlawful acts were going down. On the basis of many first-level agenda-setting studies like the Chapel Hill research, Ghanem assumed that the increased salience of crime was driven by media that featured crime stories prominently and often. She found a high correlation (+0.70) between the amount of media coverage and the depth of public concern.

Ghanem was more interested in tracking the transfer of salience of specific crime attributes—the second level of agenda setting. Of the dozen or so media frames for stories about crime, two bundles of attributes were strongly linked to the public's increasing alarm. The most powerful frame was one that cast crime as something that could happen to anyone. The stories noted that the robbery took place in broad daylight, or the shooting was random and without provocation.

The second frame was where the crime took place. Out-of-state problems were of casual interest, but when a reported felony occurred locally or in the

state of Texas, concern rose quickly. Note that both frames were features of news stories that shrank the psychological distance between the crimes they described and the average citizens who read or heard about them. Many concluded, "I could be next." The high correlations (+0.78, +0.73) between these media frames and the subsequent public concern suggest that attribute frames make compelling arguments for the choices people make after exposure to the news.

Framing is not an option. Reporters inevitably frame a story with the personal attributes of public figures they select to describe. For example, the media continually reported on the "youthful vigor" of John F. Kennedy while he was alive but made no mention of his extramarital affairs, which were well-known to the White House press corps. The 1988 presidential race was all but over after *Time* framed the contest between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis as "the Nice Man vs. the Ice Man." In 1996 Republican spin doctors fought an uphill battle positioning their candidate once media stories focused on Bob Dole's lack of passion—"Dead Man Walking" was the quip of commentator Mark Shields. And the press picked up on George W. Bush's claim to be a "compassionate conservative" in the 2000 presidential election, whereas Senator John Kerry, his opponent in 2004, was repeatedly described as "flip-flopping" on the issues. In all of these cases it's easy to spot the affective tone of the attribute.

For the last decade, researchers seeking to determine the public's agenda during an election campaign have asked potential voters, "Suppose one of your friends has been away a long time and knows nothing about the candidates. . . . What would you tell your friend about _____?" They take note of each attribute mentioned and later sort them into content categories such as experience, competence, personality, and morality. They then code each attribute as positive, neutral, or negative. Summing all of these affective aspects of attributes gives researchers a reliable measure of voters' attitudes toward the candidate. In most studies, the voters' agenda mirrors the media's agenda in substance and in tone, and also predicts the outcome of the election.[16]

McCombs and Shaw no longer subscribe to Bernard Cohen's classic remark about the media's limited agenda-setting role. They now headline their work with a revised and expanded version that describes agenda setting as a much more powerful media function:

> The media may not only tell us what to think about,
> they also may tell us how and what to think about it,
> and perhaps even what to do about it.[17]

BEYOND OPINION: THE BEHAVIORAL EFFECT OF THE MEDIA'S AGENDA

Most of the research studies on agenda setting have measured the effect of media agendas on public *opinion.* But some intriguing findings suggest that media priorities also affect people's *behavior.* For example, Alexander Bloj, a graduate student of McCombs', had access to the sales records of a major airline in a large northeastern city.[18] He was also able to find out about the purchase pattern of flight insurance sold at the airport. Bloj predicted that prominent stories of airplane crashes and hijackings in the *New York Times* would both lower ticket sales and increase the purchases of trip insurance the following week. He defined media salience of flight safety as any story running for two days that reported a crash with double-digit fatalities or a skyjacker gaining control of a plane in the air.

Fortunately, disaster-salient weeks over a five-year period in the early 1970s were much less common than were weeks when air safety wasn't an issue. But when the stories appeared, fewer people bought tickets and more people bought flight insurance. Of course, 30 years later no one doubts that saturation media coverage affects travel behavior. Most of us have a televised image of an airliner crashing into the World Trade Center etched in our minds, with the result that the number of people flying plummeted and didn't recover for more than two years.

Nowhere is the behavioral effect of the media agenda more apparent than in the business of professional sports. In his book *The Ultimate Assist,* John Fortunato explores the commercial partnership between network television's agenda and the National Basketball Association's (NBA).[19] Television dramatically raised the salience of the sport (the first level of agenda setting) by scheduling games in prime-time viewing slots. It also put basketball's best attributes forward (the second level of agenda setting) by selecting the teams with the premier competitors to play in those games and focusing on those players. During the peak years of Michael Jordan's basketball career, it was "all Michael, all the time."

Television shaped an attractive picture of the NBA in viewers' minds through a series of off-court frames. Interviews with select players and coaches, color commentary, graphics, and instant replays of players' spectacular moves all created a positive image of the NBA. As for the rape accusation against L.A. Lakers superstar Kobe Bryant, and later his feud with teammate Shaquille O'Neal that split the team, the media cooperated in downplaying those attributes that tarnish the NBA's image. As McCombs and other researchers have discovered by analyzing multiple presidential elections, it's the cumulative effect of long-term attribute salience that can alter attitudes and behavior.[20]

This 30-year effort to shape the public agenda has not only had a spectacular effect on fan behavior, it has also altered the face of popular culture. From 1970 to 2000, the number of NBA teams and the number of games doubled. The number of fans going to games quadrupled. But the astronomical difference is in the money. In 1970, television provided $10 million in revenue to the NBA. In 2000, the payout was $20 billion—no small change. McCombs' comment: "Agenda setting the theory can also be agenda setting the business plan."[21]

WHO SETS THE AGENDA FOR THE AGENDA SETTERS?

News doesn't select itself. So who sets the agenda for the agenda setters? One view regards a handful of news editors as the guardians, or "gatekeepers," of political dialogue. Nothing gets put on the political agenda without the concurrence of a few select people—the operations chiefs of the Associated Press, the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post, Time, Newsweek,* ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. Although there is no evidence to support right-wing conservative charges that the editors are part of a liberal, eastern-establishment conspiracy, when one of them features an issue, the rest of the nation's media tend to pick up the story.

An alternative view regards candidates and office holders themselves as the ultimate source of issue salience. George H. W. Bush put the tax issue on the table with his famous statement "Read my lips—no new taxes!" But he was unable to get the issue off the table when he broke that pledge. He also tried to dismiss the

economic recession as a "mild technical adjustment." The press and the populace decided it was major.

Current thinking on news selection focuses on the crucial role of public relations professionals working for government agencies, corporations, and interest groups. Even prestigious newspapers with large investigative staffs such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* get more than half of what they print straight from press releases and press conferences.[22]

Interest aggregations Clusters of people who demand center stage for their one overriding concern; pressure groups.

Interest aggregations are becoming increasingly adept at creating news that must be reported. This term refers to clusters of people who demand center stage for their one overriding concern, whatever it might be—antiabortion, antiwar, anticommunism, antipollution, anti-immigration, anti-gay-marriage. As the examples indicate, these groups usually rally around a specific action that they oppose. They stage demonstrations, marches, and other media events so that television and the press will be forced to cover their issue. The prominence of the Tea Party's campaign against government spending and taxes is a striking example. The media seem to pay attention to those who grab it.

On rare occasions, news events are so compelling that editors have no choice but to feature them for extended periods of time. The monthlong Florida recount in 2000 to determine whether George W. Bush or Al Gore would be president was one such case. And, of course, the 9/11 terrorist attack totally dominated U.S. print and broadcast news, pushing almost every other story off the front page and television screen for the rest of the year.

WILL NEW MEDIA STILL SHAPE THE AGENDA, OPINIONS, AND BEHAVIOR?

Ironically, the power of agenda setting that McCombs and Shaw describe may be on the wane. In a creative experiment, University of Illinois researchers Scott Althaus and David Tewksbury predicted that traditional print media would be more effective than new electronic media in setting a reader's agenda.[23] They reasoned that people who are reading a newspaper know that editors consider a long, front-page article under a banner headline more important than a short story buried on an inside page. Not only are these comparative cues absent on the computer screen, but online readers can click on links to similar stories and never see accounts of events that paper readers see as they thumb through the pages.

Althaus and Tewksbury recruited students to spend 30–60 minutes a day for 5 days reading either a print version or an online version of the *New York Times* under controlled conditions. For both groups it was their only exposure to news that week. On the sixth day, the researchers tested recognition and recall of the week's stories and assessed which problems facing the country students personally regarded as most important. Not only did those who read the traditional paper remember more content, they also selected a higher percentage of international issues as more important to them, thus aligning them closer to the prioritized agenda of the *Times'* editors. The researchers concluded that "by providing users with more content choices and control over exposure, new technologies may allow people to create personalized information environments that shut them off from larger flows of public information in a society."[24] Abby's application log illustrates this point.

> I confess to being an online newsreader who only clicks on links that interest me. I easily bypass information and headlines on my computer that I couldn't avoid

> when reading a print version of the news. This caught up with me in my class in American politics. Our assignment was to stay informed about worldwide current events by reading the *New York Times.* I chose to read the paper online—to my detriment. I found myself clicking on stories of personal interest and didn't even notice headlines on other issues. My weekly quiz grades let me know that my study agenda didn't match the media agenda.

McCombs wouldn't be surprised that Abby chose to get news online rather than through newspapers or news broadcasts. In a study reported in 2007, he and Renita Coleman, a colleague at the University of Texas, found that most of the younger generation (18 to 34) relied on the Internet for news, middle-aged viewers (35 to 54) tended to favor TV, and older readers (55+) preferred newspapers. The correlation between the media agenda and the younger generation was somewhat lower than for boomers or the older generation, but at 0.70, it was still high. McCombs thinks that's because "most Internet news sources are subsidiaries of traditional news media, and there is a high degree of redundancy in the media agendas even on diverse media."[25] He does note, however, that young adults are also learning what's important from late-night comedians like Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show.* It's not yet clear if the news they parody parallels the agenda of other media outlets.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: CHRISTIANS' COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS

Clifford Christians is the former director of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign and the lead author of *Good News: Social Ethics and the Press.*[26] Although he values free speech, he doesn't share the near-absolute devotion to the First Amendment that seems to be the sole ethical commitment of many journalists. Christians rejects reporters' and editors' insistence on an absolute right of free expression that is based on the individualistic rationalism of John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers. In our age of ethical relativism where *continue the conversation* is the best that philosophy has to offer,[27] Christians believes that discovering the truth is still possible if we are willing to examine the nature of our humanity. The human nature he perceives is, at root, personhood in community.[28]

Christians agrees with Martin Buber that the relation is the cradle of life. ("In the beginning is the relation."[29]) He is convinced, therefore, that mutuality is the essence of humanness. People are most fully human as "persons-in-relation" who live simultaneously for others and for themselves.

Communitarian ethics
A moral responsibility to promote community, mutuality, and persons-in-relation who live simultaneously for others and for themselves.

> A moral community demonstrates more than mere interdependence; it is characterized by mutuality, a will-to-community, a genuine concern for the other apart from immediate self-interest. . . . An act is morally right when compelled by the intention to maintain the community of persons; it is wrong if driven by self-centeredness.[30]

Christians understands that a commitment to mutuality would significantly alter media culture and mission. His *communitarian ethics* establish civic transformation rather than objective information as the primary goal of the press. Reporters' aim would thus become a revitalized citizenship shaped by community norms—morally literate and active participants, not just readers and audiences provided with data.[31] Editors, publishers, and owners—the gatekeepers of the media agenda—would be held to the same standard. Christians insists that

media criticism must be willing to reestablish the idea of moral right and wrong. Selfish practices aimed at splintering community are not merely misguided; they are evil.[32]

Agape love
An unconditional love for others because they are created in the image of God.

Christians' communitarian ethics are based on the Christian tradition of *agape love*—an unconditional love for others because they are created in the image of God. He believes journalists have a social responsibility to promote the sacredness of life by respecting human dignity, truthtelling, and doing no harm to innocents.[33] With an emphasis on establishing communal bonds, alienated people on the margins of society receive special attention from communitarians. Christians ultimately judges journalists on the basis of how well they use the media's power to champion the goal of social justice. For example, Christians asks:

> Is the press a voice for the unemployed, food-stamp recipients, Appalachian miners, the urban poor, Hispanics in rural shacks, the elderly, women discriminated against in hiring and promotion, ethnic minorities with no future in North America's downsizing economy?[34]

If the media sets that kind of agenda and features attributes that promote community, he believes they are fulfilling their communitarian responsibility.

CRITIQUE: ARE THE EFFECTS TOO LIMITED, THE SCOPE TOO WIDE?

When McCombs and Shaw first proposed the agenda-setting hypothesis, they saw it as a sharp break from the limited-effects model that had held sway in media research since Paul Lazarsfeld introduced the concept of *selective exposure* (see the Introduction to Media Effects). Although not reverting to the old magic-bullet conception of media influence, McCombs and Shaw ascribed to broadcast and print journalism the significant power to set the public's political priorities. As years of careful research have shown, however, agenda setting doesn't always work. Perhaps the best that could be said until the mid-1990s was that the media agenda affects the salience of some issues for some people some of the time. So in 1994, McCombs suggested that "agenda setting is a theory of limited media effects."[35] That would be quite a comedown from its original promise.

The new dimension of framing reasserts a powerful media-effects model. As Ohio State University journalism professor Gerald Kosicki states,

> Media "gatekeepers" do not merely keep watch over information, shuffling it here and there. Instead, they engage in active construction of the messages, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue and not others.[36]

But Kosicki questions whether framing is even a legitimate topic of study under an agenda-setting banner. He sees nothing in McCombs and Shaw's original model that anticipates the importance of interpretive frames.

As McCombs is fond of pointing out, the evidence is there. In the lead article of a 1977 book that he and Shaw edited, they clearly previewed the current "New Frontiers" of agendas of attributes and framing:

> Agenda setting as a concept is not limited to the correspondence between salience of topics for the media and the audience. We can also consider the saliency of various attributes of these objects (topics, issues, persons or whatever) reported in the media. To what extent is our view of an object shaped or influenced by the picture sketched in the media, especially by those attributes which the media deem newsworthy?[37]

McCombs' definition of framing appears to be quite specific: "Framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed."[38] In contrast, the popularity of framing as an *interpretive* construct in media studies has resulted in diverse and ambiguous meanings. The way Stuart Hall and other critical theorists use the term is so elastic that the word seems to refer to anything they don't like. Thus, I regard a narrow view of framing as a distinct advantage for empirically based media-effects research.

As for the six criteria for evaluating a social science theory, agenda setting fares well. It *predicts* that the public's agenda for the salience of attitude objects and key attributes will follow the media's lead, and it *explains* why some people are more susceptible to media influence than others. Those predictions are *testable* by using content analysis to establish the media agenda, surveys to determine public opinion, and *quantitative* statistical tests to determine the overlap. More than 400 empirical studies have supported and refined the theory. Even with the theorists' added concern for the affective tone of attributes, their theory remains relatively simple. And as for *practical utility,* agenda setting tells journalists, advertisers, political operatives, and media scholars not only what to look for, but how they might alter the pictures in the heads of those who read, view, or listen to the news.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. If the media aren't telling you what to think, why is their ability to tell you *what to think about* so important?

2. What *type of person* under what *type of circumstances* is most susceptible to the media's *agenda-setting function?*

3. Sarah Palin is one of the most controversial public figures in America. What *dominant set of attributes* could you use to *frame* her visit to a children's hospital to make her look good? How could you make her look bad?

4. Is there a recent issue that *news reporters and commentators* are now talking about daily that you and the people you know don't care about? Do you think you'll still be unconcerned two months from now?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at *www.mhhe.com/griffin8* or *www.afirstlook.com.*

In our conversation, Max McCombs discusses the process of framing and how this concept has changed the scope of his theory. He also answers questions posed by my students: How many issues can a person focus on at one time? If he ran the classic Chapel Hill study today, would he use CNN as a media outlet that sets the public agenda? Do TV entertainment shows have an agenda-setting function? I wanted to know how he saw potential media bias. Are all news stories delivered with a spin? Does he see anything sinister about intentionally framing a story? Is there a liberal bias in the national media? I think you'll be surprised by his direct responses.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Maxwell McCombs and Amy Reynolds, "How the News Shapes our Civic Agenda," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research,* Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (eds.), Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 1–16.

Comprehensive summary of theory and research: Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda,* Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2004.

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DIVISION FIVE

Cultural Context

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER 31. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles)
CHAPTER 32. Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey)
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GENDER AND COMMUNICATION

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When we think of *culture,* most of us picture a place—the South American culture of Brazil, the Middle Eastern culture of Saudi Arabia, or the Far Eastern culture of Japan. But Gerry Philipsen, a professor of communication at the University of Washington who specializes in intercultural communication, says that culture is not basically geographical. Nor is it essentially political or a matter of race. Philipsen describes *culture* as "a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules."[1] At root, culture is a code.

Ethnographers study the speech and nonverbal communication of people in order to crack that code. We've already looked at Mead's reliance on participant observation (see Chapter 5) and Geertz' use of thick description (see Chapter 20) to unravel the complex web of meanings that people share within a society or culture. In like manner, Philipsen spent multiple years conducting two ethnographic studies. The first study revealed what it was like to "speak like a man" in a multiethnic, blue-collar Chicago neighborhood he called "Teamsterville." He discovered that men used talk primarily to show solidarity with friends who were part of the neighborhood.[2] The second study identified the communication patterns of a large group of people dispersed around the U.S. whom he dubbed the "Nacirema" (*American* spelled backward). He regarded the live audience for the television talk show *Donahue*—a forerunner of *Oprah*—as typical members of the Nacirema culture. He and Donal Carbaugh (University of Massachusetts) found that any appeal to a universal standard of ethical conduct was considered by members of that culture to be an infringement of their right to be an individual.[3]

Philipsen selected these two American subcultures for study in part because he saw their communication practices as so different from one another. Is there a way he could have measured the extent of their discrepancy—or for that matter, the cultural variability of any two countries across the globe? From a study of multinational corporations in more than 50 countries, Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede concluded that there are four crucial dimensions on which to compare cultures.[4]

1. *Power distance*—the extent to which the less powerful members of society accept that power is distributed unequally (Americans—low; Japanese—medium)
2. *Masculinity*—clearly defined gender roles, with male values of success, money, and possessions dominant in society (Americans—high; Japanese—extremely high)
3. *Uncertainty avoidance*—the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguity and create beliefs and institutions to try to avoid it (Americans—low; Japanese—extremely high)
4. *Individualism*—people look out for themselves and their immediate families as opposed to identifying with a larger group that is responsible for taking care of them in exchange for group loyalty (Americans—extremely high; Japanese—low)

Many researchers agree that Hofstede's distinction between individualism and collectivism is the crucial dimension of cultural variability. The *we-centered*

focus of Teamsterville sets it apart from individualistic American society in general, and from the extremely *I-centered* preoccupation of the Nacirema subculture in particular. Cultural anthropologist Edward Hall was the first to label the communication style of collectivistic cultures as *high-context* and the style of individualistic cultures as *low-context.* The designation divides groups of people on the basis of how they interpret messages.

> A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite, i.e., the mass of information is vested in the explicit code.[5]

Hall contrasted American and Japanese cultures to illustrate the differences between collectivistic societies that have a message-*context* orientation and individualistic societies that rely more on message *content.*[6]

Americans believe in straight talk. Assertiveness is saying what you mean; honesty is meaning what you say. Both are highly prized. Perhaps the highest art form of explicit communication is the legal contract. A U.S. lawyer's dream is to prepare a verbal document that allows no room for interpretation. Hall said that Japanese communication is more subtle. Bluntness is regarded as rude; patience and indirection are the marks of a civilized person. What is said is less important than how it is said and who did the saying. Meaning is embedded in the setting and the nonverbal code. In Japan, the highest form of communication competency is empathy—the ability to sense what others are thinking and feeling without their having to spell it out for you.

Glenn Sparks, a special consultant for this book, experienced what happens when he—a typically low-context American—worked with high-context Africans in Ethiopia.

> When I was in Ethiopia, I worked daily with various folks at the university. I came to learn that about half the time, a lunch appointment, a promise to have a key at a certain time, or a commitment to have copies of a reading made for the class just didn't pan out. But all of these commitments were made with kindness and politeness. Ethiopians were much more attuned to the overall tenor of an interaction than they were to the actual words that were said.[7]

Glenn is a quick study. By reminding himself of the crucial contextual issue that Hall identified, he was able to reduce his frustration. Hopefully, in turn, his Ethiopian hosts gave him a "visitor's pass" for misinterpreting what they had "promised."

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CHAPTER 31

Socio-psychological tradition

Communication Accommodation Theory

of Howard Giles

I was born, raised, and educated in the Great Lakes region of the United States. During my sophomore year of college, my folks moved from the south side of Chicago to the Deep South, a region where the style of speech was foreign to my ear. When speaking with other college students I met there over summer vacation, I noticed that I started to talk slower, pause longer, maintain less eye contact, and drop the final *g* off of words ending with *ing* ("Nice *talkin'* with you"). Although I didn't adopt a southern drawl, I definitely adjusted my style of speaking to better match that of those I met. As an outsider, I wanted to fit in.

Although I couldn't lose my Chicago twang, one of the guys I met commented on my go-along-to-get-along effort. "You're beginning to talk just like us," he said. His smile suggested appreciation rather than scorn. Not so my older sister when I drove her from San Antonio, Texas, to Anniston, Alabama, the following Christmas. "You sound ridiculous," was her disdainful reaction when she heard me talk to people in restaurants and motels along the way.

In 1973, Welsh social psychologist Howard Giles suggested that my experience was typical. Now a professor of communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Giles claimed that when two people from different ethnic or cultural groups interact, they tend to accommodate each other in the way they speak in order to gain the other's approval.[1] He specifically focused on the nonverbal adjustments of speech rate, accent, and pauses. Based on the principle that we tend to like others who strike us as similar, Giles claimed that speech accommodation is a frequently used strategy to gain the appreciation of people who are from different groups or cultures. This process of seeking approval by meshing with another's style of speaking is at the core of what he then labeled *speech accommodation theory.*

A SIMPLE NOTION BECOMES A COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATION THEORY

Giles and his colleagues launched an extensive program of lab and field research to answer the questions that the practice of speech accommodation raises. For example:

Are there times we don't adjust our speech style to match that of others?

If so, what is our motive for not accommodating?

How do groups with which we identify affect our accommodation choices?

Is accommodation always conscious?

Do others accurately perceive our intent when we shift our speech style?

To what extent do we adjust *what* we say as well as the *way* we say it?

What are the social consequences if we overaccommodate?

Because the answers to these questions led Giles to communication issues that go far beyond the narrow issue of accent mobility, pauses, and pronunciation, the scope of the theory expanded dramatically. In 1987 Giles changed the name of the theory to *communication accommodation theory (CAT)* and offered it as "a theory of intercultural communication that actually attends to communication."[2]

The early research of Giles and his colleagues centered on interethnic communication, often between two bilingual groups in the same country. In the last two decades, however, CAT researchers have also shown consistent interest in exploring *communication accommodation* in an intergenerational context. They broadly define *young* communicators as those who are teenagers up to adults in their 40s or even 50s. They define *old* or *elderly* communicators as those who are 65 and over.[3] To what extent do members of these two groups adjust their communication when talking to someone of the other generation?

Accommodation
The constant movement toward or away from others by changing your communicative behavior.

Since the vast majority of this book's readers fall within that younger classification, I'll use intergenerational communication to illustrate the main predictions of the theory. That way you'll have a personal stake in understanding the theory's claims. So will I. In the spirit of full disclosure, you should know that for the past eight years I've qualified as a member of the elder group. Of course this means that every time I walk into a college classroom it becomes a potential laboratory to explore intergenerational communication. I also have ongoing experience in the other direction. My wife's 102-year-old mother has lived with us for the past six years.

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION STRATEGIES

Throughout the theory's extensive development, Giles has consistently contrasted two strategic forms of communication that diverse people use when they interact—*convergence* and *divergence*. He sees both types of behavior as accommodation because they each involve constant movement toward or away from others through a change in communicative behavior.

Convergence

Convergence is a strategy by which you adapt your communication behavior in such a way as to become more similar to another person. As we've already seen, one way to do this is to adjust your speaking style to approximate that of your

Convergence
A strategy of adapting your communication behavior in such a way as to become more similar to another person.

conversational partner. If you're talking with an octogenarian man who speaks in short phrases delivered in a gravelly voice, you could abandon smoothly flowing sentences in favor of brief, raspy responses. You wouldn't try to mimic his voice, but you'd try to get closer to its sound and cadence. Note how similar this idea is to constructivism's ideal of person-centered messages (see Chapter 8). In this case, however, it would be audience adaptation to reduce nonverbal differences. If the elderly man desires to converge toward your speaking style, he might need to speak with more energy, display greater facial expression, and increase vocal variety.

Another way you could converge toward the elderly gentleman would be to talk in a way that would make it easier for him to grasp what you're saying. If you notice that he's hard of hearing, convergence would involve speaking one notch louder, while clearly enunciating consonants. Or if he seems to have trouble tracking with abstract ideas, you could aid his comprehension by using examples to illustrate what you're saying. For his part, he might help you interpret what he's saying by not assuming you know the political background of the Korean War or singer Pat Boone's biggest hits.

An additional way to bridge the generation gap can be through *discourse management*—the sensitive selection of topics to discuss. Giles and Angie Williams (Cardiff University, Wales) elicited college students' retrospective accounts of both satisfying and frustrating intergenerational conversations. They found that young people greatly appreciated the elderly when they discerned what stories the students wanted to hear. For example, one girl wrote, "She just talked about the history of the team and all that she knew. . . . I stayed and listened to her stories, which were fascinating."[4] They also appreciated elders who sensed when not to pry: "I'm glad she didn't ask anything about Bekki and my relationship. . . . I would have felt awkward."[5]

As Brittany's application log describes, some parties converge to facilitate communication. When they do, mutual appreciation is often a byproduct.

> Some family members on my father's side are deaf. Some of my family members who can hear know how to sign and some of those who can't hear are able to read lips. I've learned to sign a bit so I can communicate more effectively with those who can't hear. I also slow my speech down and try to enunciate my words more clearly so they can more easily understand what I'm saying. They've told me that they appreciate my willingness to reach out to them. In the same way, I appreciate their convergence when they sign slower and also lip words so that I can catch what they're saying.

Divergence

Divergence
A communication strategy of accentuating the differences between you and another person.

Divergence is a communication strategy of accentuating the differences between you and another person. In interethnic encounters, you might insist on using a language or dialect with which the other is uncomfortable. In terms of speech style, you could diverge by employing a thicker accent, adopting a rate of speaking distinct from that used by the other person, or speaking in either a monotone or with exaggerated animation. Linguistically, divergence could be signaled by a deliberate substitution of words. Giles offers an example where a young speaker flippantly says to an elderly man, "Okay, mate, let's get it together at my place around 3:30 tomorrow." The disdainful elder might reply, "Fine, young man, we'll meet again at 15:30, at your house tomorrow."[6] All of these communication moves

"Hey, Gramps, is 'deathbed' one word or two?"

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are examples of counter-accommodation—direct ways of maximizing the differences between two speakers.

During intergenerational encounters, CAT researchers have found that divergence is the norm and convergence the exception, especially when the two aren't members of the same family. Young people typically characterize the elderly as *closed-minded, out of touch, angry, complaining,* and *negatively stereotyping youth.*[7] The elderly often increase the social distance through the process of *self-handicapping*—a defensive, face-saving strategy that uses age as a reason for not performing well. For example, University of Arizona communication professor Jake Harwood and two colleagues discovered that many of the ways the elderly talk continually remind younger listeners that their grandparents are old.[8]

Self-handicapping
For the elderly, a face-saving strategy that invokes age as a reason for not performing well.

1. Talk about age: *You're so young. I turn 70 next December.*
2. Talk about health: *They warned of blood clots with my hip replacement surgery.*
3. Don't understand the world today: *Does IM mean intramural?*
4. Patronizing: *You kids today don't know the meaning of hard work.*
5. Painful self-disclosure: *I cried when she said that to me. It still hurts.*

6. Difficulty hearing: *Please speak up and try not to mumble.*
7. Mental confusion: *I can't think of the word. What were we talking about?*

These features consistently make the speakers' age salient for the listener, and all seven leave a negative impression. They might as well tattoo GZR on their forehead.

Maintenance
Persisting in your original communication style regardless of the communication behavior of the other; similar to divergence; underaccommodation.

Giles and his colleagues describe two other forms of divergence that are a bit more subtle. *Maintenance* (or *underaccommodation*) is the strategy of persisting in your original communication style regardless of the communication behavior of the other. Although the original speech accommodation theory defined maintenance as a strategy distinct from convergence or divergence, subsequent research has shown that it has roughly the same effect as divergence, so I'm listing it here. Giles offers a college student's recollections of a dissatisfying conversation with a senior citizen as a description of underaccommodation: "He did most of the talking and did not really seem to care about what I said. . . . He appeared to be so closed minded and unreceptive to new ideas."[9] Conversely, an older person is likely to feel woefully underaccommodated if she shares a fear or frustration and then only hears a quick, "I know exactly how you feel," before the younger person changes the topic.[10]

Overaccommodation
Demeaning or patronizing talk; excessive concern paid to vocal clarity or amplification, message simplification, or repetition.

The other form of divergence is *overaccommodation*, which may be well-intended, but has the effect of making the recipient feel worse. Giles describes overaccommodation as "demeaning or patronizing talk . . . when excessive concern is paid to vocal clarity or [amplification], message simplification, or repetition"[11] Often characterized as "baby talk," this way of speaking can frustrate the elderly, thus leading to a perception that they are irritable or grumpy. Alternatively, frequent overaccommodation from caregivers can not only make the recipient feel less competent, it can actually talk them into becoming less competent (see Chapter 5).

If overaccommodating communication is often counterproductive and sometimes harmful, why do younger folks talk that way? For that matter, other than sheer obstinacy, why would old or young people opt for any kind of divergent strategy rather than one that's convergent? The next section shows that the motivation for these contrasting behaviors is tied to people's concern for their identity.

DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS FOR CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

As the first page of this chapter indicates, CAT theorists have always regarded *desire for social approval* as the main motivation for convergence. You meet a person different from you and you'd like him or her to think well of you, respect you, or find you attractive. As one of the theorems of *uncertainty reduction theory* states, there's a positive relationship between similarity and attraction (see Chapter 10). So you identify with the other person by adjusting what you say and the way you say it in order to appear more similar. As long as you're both acting as unique individuals who are shaping their own personal identities and relationships, representing convergence as a two-step, cause-and-effect relationship seems justified:

Desire for approval (personal identity) → Convergence → Positive response

There are two problems, however. First, this motivational sequence can't explain why we frequently communicate in a divergent way, and second, the

causal chain doesn't take into account the fact that we often act as a representative of a group. Giles and other CAT theorists draw upon *social identity theory*, the work of Henri Tajfel (University of Bristol, UK) and John Turner (Australian National University) to solve that problem.[12]

Social Identity Theory

Social identity
Group memberships and social categories that we use to define who we are.

Tajfel and Turner suggested that we often communicate not as individual actors, but as representatives of groups that help define who we are. Our *social identity* is based upon our intergroup behavior. As Jake Harwood puts it, "We are not random individuals wandering the planet with no connections to others, and our connections to others cannot be understood purely as a function of individual phenomena."[13] Our group memberships—whether formal associations or allegiances only in our minds—can greatly affect our communication.

As a case in point, if you click on "Em Griffin" at the bottom of the home page of *www.afirstlook.com,* you'll find that I identify with groups of communication professors, conflict mediators, people of faith, pilots, an extended Griffin family, and those who work for economic justice in the developing world. By accident of birth, I also have at least four other group identifications: I'm an older, white, American male. According to Tajfel and Turner, whenever any of these associations comes to mind in talking with others, my motivation will be to reinforce and defend my ties to those groups. After all, they make up my social identity. And when these groups are salient at the start of an interaction with someone different, CAT claims that my communication will diverge away from my partner's speech rather than converge toward it.

Tajfel and Turner pictured a motivational continuum with *personal identity* on one end of the scale and *social identity* at the other pole. As long as both parties consider themselves and their conversational partner to be unencumbered, autonomous individuals acting for themselves, the theorists believed the *desire for approval* → *convergence* → *positive response* sequence is what takes place. But if one (or both) of the interactants regards self or other as a representative of a group of people, Tajfel and Turner said that their communication will likely become divergent because of their need to emphasize their distinctiveness. So when group identity is salient, the two-step, cause-and-effect sequence is quite different:

Need for distinctiveness (social identity) → Divergence → Negative response

Giles and his colleagues believe that this alternative sequence occurs quite frequently. They hold out the possibility that a person could seek approval and distinctiveness within the same conversation when their personal and social identities are both salient. For example, consider an interracial friendship where buddies never lose sight of their ethnicity. Or think of a loving marriage in which both husband and wife are keenly aware of their gender roles. Your first look at communication accommodation theory will come into focus more easily, however, if we stick with Tajfel and Turner's either/or conception of one of the two motivations holding sway in a given interaction. To the extent that their theory is accurate, how can we predict whether concerns for personal identity or social identity will kick in? According to Giles there's no hard-and-fast rule. But a person's *initial orientation* is a somewhat reliable predictor.

Initial Orientation

Initial orientation
Communicators' predisposition to focus on either their individual identity or group identity during a conversation.

Initial orientation is the predisposition a person has toward focusing on either individual identity or group identity. Predicting which route a person will take is difficult, but the additive presence of five factors increases the odds that a communicator will see the conversation as an intergroup encounter. I'll continue to illustrate these factors by referring to intergenerational communication.

1. **Collectivistic cultural context.** As noted in the introduction to the intercultural communication section, the distinction between collectivistic and individualistic cultures is probably the crucial dimension of cultural variability. The *we-centered* focus of collectivism emphasizes similarity and mutual concern within the culture—definitely oriented toward social identity. Their communication toward out-group members is often divergent. The *I-centered* focus of individualistic cultures valorizes the individual actor—definitely oriented toward individual identity. As for intergenerational relationships, despite the cultural value of respect for elders shared among East Asian cultures, there's strong evidence that Pacific Rim young people and their Western counterparts both regard the elderly as a group apart.[14] Age transcends ethnic culture.

2. **Distressing history of interaction.** If previous interactions were uncomfortable, competitive, or hostile, both interactants will tend to ascribe that outcome to the other person's social identity. *(Men are like that. The poor are lazy. Presbyterians are God's frozen people.)* If the previous time together was positive, the result is often ascribed to the individual rather than to a group or class to which he or she belongs. *(By the end I felt good knowing that not all older people hate the younger generation. . . . Every other elder I've talked to has made me fear or want to avoid getting old.)*[15]

3. **Stereotypes.** The more specific and negative the images that people have of an out-group, the more likely they are to think of the other in terms of social identity and then resort to divergent communication. This is a big factor in intergenerational communication. The young tend to stereotype the elderly as *irritable, nagging, grouchy, verbose,* and *addled.*[16] Conversely, the elderly stereotype "youth today" as *spoiled,* an accusation often introduced with the phrase, *Why, when I was your age. . . .* These rigid group-stereotypes make convergent communication across generations a rare and difficult achievement.

Norms
Expectations about behavior that members of a community feel should (or should not) occur in particular situations.

4. **Norms for treatment of groups.** Norms can be defined as "expectations about behavior that members of a community feel should (or should not) occur in particular situations."[17] These expectations can affect whether a member of one group regards a person from another group as an individual or as "one of them." The oft-stated rule to "respect your elders" suggests that the elderly are a group of people who deserve high regard because they've stayed alive, rather than because they have individual worth. The result of that group norm may be young adults showing deference to an elderly person, but *biting their tongue* and *not talking back,* a process that could build up resentment toward a group that they may join someday.

5. **High group-solidarity / high group-dependence.** Picture Lucile, a 70-year-old widow living in a small retirement village where residents rely on each other for social, emotional, and even physical well-being. As the organizer

of a successful food co-op, she's at the nexus of communication and has a higher status among her neighbors than she's ever had before. When a young county health department official questions the co-op's food handling practices, Lucile goes to talk with him in what she regards as an us-against-them encounter. Giles would predict that she would have an initial intergroup orientation because of her strong identification with the group and her high dependence on it for relational warmth and a sense of worth.[18]

No single factor determines a person's initial orientation, but if all five factors line up in the direction of public identity, it's almost certain that a communicator will approach a conversation with an intergroup mindset. That seems to be the case in most intergenerational interactions. Giles would note, however, that a person may change orientations during a conversation.

RECIPIENT EVALUATION OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

Let's start with the bottom line. After 35 years of multiple revisions, restatements, and research studies, Giles and his colleagues continue to believe what he wrote about accommodation in his first monograph—that listeners regard convergence as positive and divergence as negative. Specifically, converging speakers are viewed as more competent, attractive, warm, and cooperative.[19] On the other hand, "divergence is often seen by its recipients as insulting, impolite, or downright hostile."[20] But CAT researchers are quick to remind us that accommodation is in the eyes and ears of the beholder. What's ultimately important is not how the communicator converged or diverged, but how the other *perceived* the communicator's behavior.

Objective Versus Subjective Accommodation

Early in his research, Giles realized that there was a disconnect between the communication behavior that he and other neutral researchers observed and what participants heard and saw. He described the gap as the difference between *objective* and *subjective* accommodation. For example, a speaker's accent, rate, pitch, and length of pauses could actually be shifting toward a conversational partner's style of speaking, but the partner might regard it as divergent. In light of this discrepancy, Giles says it's recipients' subjective evaluation that really matters, because that's what will shape their response.

Speakers who desire to seek approval by converging with the other's way of speaking may also misperceive what that style really is. From an objective point of view, what strikes them as the other group's preferred style of communication may woefully miss the mark. For example, a granddad might try to identify with his grandkids by using phrases like *right on, really hep,* or *that's square*, not realizing that these phrases were more typical of teenagers in the late 1960s than of teens today. Giles notes that "one does not converge toward (or diverge from) the *actual* speech of the recipient, but toward (or from) one's *stereotype* about the recipient's speech."[21]

Attribution Theory

Our response to others' communication hinges not only on the behavior we perceive, but also on the intention or motive we ascribe to them for speaking

Attribution
The perceptual process by which we observe what people do and then try to figure out their intent or disposition.

that way. Giles draws from *attribution theory* to cast light on how we'll interpret our conversational partners' convergent or divergent behavior. In two different versions of attribution theory, social psychologists Fritz Heider (University of Kansas) and Harold Kelley (UCLA) suggested that we attribute an internal disposition to the behavior we see another enact.[22] As amateur psychologists, our default assumption is that *people who do things like that are like that*. Yet three mitigating factors may come into play: (1) the other's ability, (2) external constraints, and (3) the effort expended.

Suppose you're talking with an elderly man who continually asks you to repeat what you've said. If you know that his hearing is good (high ability) and the room is quiet (no external constraints), yet he's not paying much attention (low effort), you'll attribute his divergent behavior to his lack of respect for you. You'll be more understanding if you know he's hard of hearing (low ability). But as one research study shows, you'll still be irritated by his lack of consideration if he freely chooses not to wear a hearing aid (low effort).[23] What if you know he's almost deaf (low ability), the room is noisy (environmental constraint), and he's wearing a hearing aid and still struggling to catch your words (high effort)? You'll probably appreciate the fact that he cares about what you're saying and wants to understand, even if you find the conversation tiring or uncomfortable.

Overall, listeners who interpret convergence as a speaker's desire to break down cultural barriers react quite favorably.[24] That response is at the core of CAT. But because there's a societal constraint or norm that those with less power (workers, patients, students, immigrants) ought to accommodate to the communication practices of those with higher status (bosses, doctors, professors, citizens), upward convergers don't get as much credit as when status is relatively equal. Still, this moderate reaction is much more favorable than the response toward a low-power person who adopts a divergent strategy. As a case in point, consider the anger of many Anglo-Americans toward Latino immigrants who "refuse" to become bilingual.

There are benefits and costs to both convergent and divergent strategies. CAT research continues to document the positive interpersonal relationship development that can result from appropriate convergence. The practice also facilitates better comprehension and understanding. But these gains come at the potential risk of offending other in-group members, just as my sister was disgusted by my attempt to talk like a "down-home" southerner. They may feel that converging toward an out-group is diverging from them. And, of course, the one who accommodates may also feel a sense of inauthenticity.

The interpersonal tension that is created by divergence or maintenance can certainly block the formation of intergroup or intercultural relationships and understanding. But the upside for the communicator is the reaffirmed social identity and solidarity that comes from enacting a divergent strategy. In that sense, divergence is an accommodation strategy just as much as convergence is, but it's accommodation to the in-group rather than members of the out-group.

APPLYING CAT TO POLICE OFFICER–CITIZEN INTERACTION

My extensive discussion of intergenerational communication may have given you the idea that the scope of communication accommodation theory is limited to conversations between the young and the elderly. Not so. CAT can be applied to

any intercultural or intergroup situation where the differences between people are apparent and significant. Since Giles is a retired chaplain and reserve lieutenant in the Santa Barbara Police Department, he's found it helpful to apply CAT to the interaction between police officers and citizens during routine traffic stops.

At one time or another, most of us have been pulled over by a police officer for a possible driving infraction. Giles describes these encounters as "potentially negatively valenced, emotionally charged interactions" in which our group membership may be particularly salient and the uncertainty of the outcome can cause great anxiety.[25] If you've been stopped by a cop, you know the feeling. What you might not realize is that the event is also fraught with danger for the officer. For example, in 2004, more than 1,500 police officers were killed in the line of duty; more were murdered during traffic stops than in any other activity. Police officers are trained to stay on guard throughout the process, a mindset that could affect the quality of communication in the police–citizen interaction.

Tensions in this already stressful interaction may escalate when the issue of race comes into play. For example, civil rights advocates suggest that cops often treat blacks more harshly than whites. The goal of one CAT study was "to move beyond casual assumptions to systematically investigate the extent to which the race of interactants might influence the nature of police–civilian communication."[26]

Giles was part of a team of researchers that viewed 313 randomly selected video recordings from police cars during traffic stops in Cincinnati, Ohio. The research team analyzed the verbal and nonverbal interaction of officer and driver in each encounter to determine the extent of convergence or divergence. For officers, approachability, listening to the driver's explanation, and showing respect were the marks of accommodation. Indifference, dismissive behavior, and an air of superiority were scored as non-accommodative. Drivers who were courteous, apologetic, pleasant, and who showed respect were rated as accommodating. Drivers who were belligerent were regarded as non-accommodating.

Based on communication accommodation theory, the Cincinnati study predicted that interracial interactions would be less accommodating than those where the officer and driver were of the same race. Researchers anticipated this outcome because a mixed-race interaction in this high-pressure context would make each party's ethnic-group identity salient for them during the encounter. With that mindset, they would no longer act as independent agents; they would see themselves as representatives of their race and speak in a way that accentuates their differences.

The videotapes confirmed the accommodation prediction for the police. When the cop and driver were the same race, the officer's communication was viewed by objective judges as convergent. When the cop was white and the driver was black, or the cop was black and the driver was white, the officer's communication was judged as divergent. But the videotape evidence did not support the prediction of similar adjustments in the drivers' communication. Although Giles still suggests that "accommodating civilians may be less susceptible to harsh penalties and reprimands from officers,"[27] that's not a guaranteed prescription for avoiding a ticket if a cop pulls you over.

CRITIQUE: ENORMOUS SCOPE AT THE COST OF CLARITY

From a modest beginning as a narrowly conceived theory of social psychology, communication accommodation theory has morphed into a communication theory of enormous scope. Giles' adoption of *social identity theory of group behavior*

and *attribution theory,* which are essential to CAT's explanation of accommodation, demonstrates that Giles' theory has never abandoned its social psych roots. It's appropriate, therefore, to use the six criteria for good social science theories presented at the start of the book to evaluate CAT.

1. Explanation of data. CAT not only describes communication behavior, it explains why it happens. The dual theoretical engines of *desire for approval* and *need to maintain a distinctive social identity* are compelling reasons for two very different communication strategies. Further, Giles and his colleagues offer multiple factors to clarify which motivation will kick in at any given time.

2. Prediction of the future. Giles doesn't shy away from forecasting what will happen in specific situations. As the scope of the theory has expanded, he's found it necessary to alter or qualify many of these predictions, but CAT places its bets ahead of time. As a communication scholar who was first trained in experimental methodology, I find this put-up-or-shut-up approach appealing. I also appreciate Giles' movement toward qualitative methods as he attempts to predict how recipients will interpret accommodating behavior.

3. Relative simplicity. CAT is an extraordinarily complex theory presented in multiple versions that are sometimes offered simultaneously. As Cindy Gallois (University of Queensland, Australia), Tania Ogay (University of Geneva, Switzerland), and Giles admit in a summary chapter, CAT's "structure and the underlying terminology are not always represented consistently in texts and propositions."[28] Even the meaning of *accommodation* within the theory is slippery. Sometimes the term seems to be synonymous with convergence (as opposed to divergence), while other times it's used to refer to any adjustment of communication behavior. Gallois, Ogay, and Giles take on the challenge of "explaining the increased propositional complexity in terms of a parsimonious and unique set of integrative principles."[29] The end result of this attempt to simplify is not for the faint of heart. In fairness, the authors could respond, "Intercultural communication is devilishly complicated. Let's not pretend it isn't."

4. Testable hypotheses. The complexity problem also spills over into the possibility of being able to demonstrate that the theory is false. In 1998, Gallois and Giles wrote:

> CAT has become very complex, so that the theory as a whole probably cannot be tested at one time. This means that researchers using CAT must develop mini-theories to suit the contexts in which they work, while at the same time keeping the whole of the theory in mind.[30]

Looking back over four decades of theory development, Giles and his colleagues admit that it's not clear what "the whole of the theory" actually is.[31] If they aren't sure, it's hard for others to know. *Falsifiable* it isn't.

5. Quantitative research. Many alterations and additions to Giles' original theory have been made in response to field research that shows that communication accommodation is more complicated than originally was thought. Studies using surveys and interviews are the norm; experiments are rare. As illustrated by the Cincinnati traffic-stop study, the frequency of responses is tabulated, but figuring out what the behavior means depends on how the people themselves interpret their own actions. Many scholars appreciate this

mix of quantitative and qualitative methodology, but it's surprising to find it in a theory rooted in social psychology.

6. Practical utility. Giles' application of the theory to intergenerational communication and to police–citizen contacts demonstrates CAT's usefulness in important arenas of human life. The theory can be beneficially applied to any situation where people from different groups or cultures come into contact.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Can you think of a time when you found another's *divergence* in *speech style* delightful or another's *convergence* distressing?

2. To what extent is it possible to interact with another person and not have *age, gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, religious commitment,* or *political ideology* be *salient* when you know that one or more of these differs from your own?

3. In what way might you *overaccommodate* to the *stereotypical image* you hold of opposite-sex communication behavior?

4. As you read about the actions and reactions of young people cited from *intergenerational research*, with which strategies and responses do you identify? Which do you believe are uncharacteristic of you?

SELF-QUIZ

www.mhhe.com/griffin8

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Howard Giles and Tania Ogay, "Communication Accommodation Theory," in *Explaining Communication: Contemporary Theories and Exemplars,* Bryan Whaley and Wendy Samter (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2007, pp. 293–310.

Original statement of speech accommodation theory: Howard Giles, "Accent Mobility: A Model and Some Data," *Anthropological Linguistics,* Vol. 15, 1973, pp. 87–109.

SAT expanded and renamed CAT: Howard Giles, Anthony Mulac, James Bradac, and Patricia Johnson, "Speech Accommodation Theory: The First Decade and Beyond," in *Communication Yearbook 10*, Margaret L. McLaughlin (ed.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1987, pp. 13–48.

Propositional synthesis: Cindy Gallois, Tania Ogay, and Howard Giles, "Communication Accommodation Theory: A Look Back and a Look Ahead," in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*, William Gudykunst (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005, pp. 121–148.

Social identity theory: Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations,* L. Worchel and W. Austin (eds.), Nelson Hall, Chicago, IL, 1986, pp. 7–24.

Importance of social identity: Jake Harwood, "Communication as Social Identity," in *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory,* Gregory Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, pp. 84–90.

Intergenerational communication: Nikalos Coupland, Justine Coupland, Howard Giles, and Karen Henwood, "Accommodating the Elderly: Invoking and Extending a Theory," *Language and Society,* Vol. 17, 1988, pp. 1–41.

Intergenerational communication research: Angie Williams and Howard Giles, "Intergenerational Conversations: Young Adults' Retrospective Accounts," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 23, 1996, pp. 220–250.

Accommodation within families: Jake Harwood, Jordan Soliz, and Mei-Chen Lin, "Communication Accommodation Theory: An Intergroup Approach to Family Relationships," in *Engaging Theories in Family Communication*, Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie A. Baxter (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, pp. 19–34.

Police–citizen interactions and simplified propositions: Howard Giles, Michael Willemyns, Cindy Gallois, and M.C. Anderson, "Accommodating a New Frontier: The Context of Law Enforcement," in *Social Communication,* Klaus Fiedler (ed.), Psychology Press, New York, 2007, pp. 129–162.

Application to law enforcement: Howard Giles, Charles W. Choi, Travis L. Dixon, "Police–Civilian Encounters," in *The Dynamics of Intergroup Communication,* Howard Giles, Scott A. Reid, and Jake Harwood (eds.), Peter Lang, New York, 2010, pp. 65–75.

For a chapter on another empirically-based theory on intercultural communication,
select Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty management theory
after you click on Theory List at
www.afirstlook.com.

CHAPTER 32

Socio-psychological tradition

Face-Negotiation Theory

of Stella Ting-Toomey

For the past two decades I've served as a volunteer mediator at a metropolitan center for conflict resolution. My role as a mediator is to help people in conflict reach a voluntary agreement that satisfies both sides. I'm neither a judge nor a counselor, and I work hard not to make moral judgments about who's right and who's wrong. As a mediator, I'm a neutral third party whose sole job is to facilitate the process of negotiation. That doesn't mean it's easy.

Most disputants come to the center in a last-ditch effort to avoid the cost and intimidation of a day in court. The service is free, and we do everything possible to take the threat out of the proceedings. But after failing or refusing to work out their differences on their own, people walk in the door feeling various degrees of anger, hurt, fear, confusion, and shame. On the one hand, they hope that the mediation will help resolve their dispute. On the other hand, they doubt that talk around a table will soften hard feelings and change responses that seem to be set in stone.

The professional staff at the center instructs volunteers in a model of negotiation that maximizes the chance of people's reaching a mutually acceptable agreement. From the first day of training, the staff insists that "the mediator controls the process, not the outcome." Figure 32–1 lists some of the techniques that mediators use to ensure progress without suggesting the shape of the solution. Used artfully, the techniques work well. The majority of the negotiations end in freely signed and mutually kept agreements.

This model of negotiation doesn't work equally well for everyone, however. Although the center serves a multiethnic urban area, my colleagues and I have noticed that the number of people of Asian origin seeking conflict mediation is disproportionately small. On rare occasions when Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, or Koreans come to the office, they're more embarrassed than angry. If they do reach agreement, they seem more relieved that the conversation is over than pleased with the solution.

Stella Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory helps explain cultural differences in responses to conflict. A communication professor at California State University, Fullerton, Ting-Toomey assumes that people of every culture are always negotiating *face.* The term is a metaphor for our public self-image, the way we want others to see us and treat us. *Facework* refers to "specific verbal and nonverbal messages that help to maintain and restore face loss, and to uphold and

Face
The projected image of one's self in a relational situation.

Assure impartiality: "Since neither of you has met me before, I have no stake in what you decide."

Guarantee confidentiality: "What you say today is strictly between us. I'll rip up my notes before you go."

Display disputant equality: "Nate, thanks for not interrupting while Beth was telling her story. Now it's your turn. What do you want to tell me?"

Avoid "why" questions: Harmful—"Why did you do that?" Helpful—"What would you like to see happen?"

Acknowledge emotions while defusing their force: "I can understand that you were bothered when you found the bike was broken."

Summarize frequently: "I'd like to tell you what I've heard you say. If I don't get it right, fill me in."

Hold individual private conferences: "I wanted to meet privately with you to see if there's anything you want to tell me in confidence that you didn't feel you could say with Beth in the room."

Reframe issues of "right" and "wrong" into interests: "Beth, I'm not sure I understand. Tell me, how will Nate's going to jail give you what you need?"

Brainstorm: "Let's see how many different solutions you can think of that might solve the problem. Just throw out any ideas you have and we'll sort through them later."

Perform a reality check: "Have you checked to see if the bike can be put back in mint condition?"

Consider the alternative: "What are you going to do if you don't reach an agreement today?"

Move toward agreement: "You've already agreed on a number of important issues. I'm going to begin to write them down."

FIGURE 32–1 Selected Techniques of Third-Party Mediation

Facework
Specific verbal and nonverbal messages that help to maintain and restore face loss, and to uphold and honor face gain.

honor face gain."[1] Our identity can always be called into question, and the anxiety and uncertainty churned up by conflict make us especially vulnerable. Face-negotiation theory postulates that the facework of people from individualistic cultures like the United States or Germany will be strikingly different from the facework of people from collectivistic cultures like Japan or China. Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory suggests that face maintenance is the crucial intervening variable that ties culture to people's ways of handling conflict. In the following sections of this chapter, I'll unpack the meaning of the four concepts that are linked together in the causal chain:

Type of Culture → Type of Self-Construal → Type of Face Maintenance → Type of Conflict Management

COLLECTIVISTIC AND INDIVIDUALISTIC CULTURES

Ting-Toomey bases her face-negotiation theory on the distinction between *collectivism* and *individualism.* The most extensive differentiation between the two types of cultures has been made by University of Illinois emeritus psychology professor Harry Triandis. He says that the three important distinctions between collectivistic and individualistic cultures are the different ways members perceive *self, goals,* and *duty.*[2]

Consider a man named Em. Collectivistic Em might think of himself as a father, Christian, and teacher. Individualistic Em would probably define himself simply as Em, independent of any group affiliation. Collectivistic Em wouldn't go against group goals, but his individualistic counterpart would naturally

pursue personal interests. Collectivistic Em would have been socialized to enjoy duty that requires sacrifice in the service of others; individualistic Em would employ the minimax principle to determine a course of action that he would see as enjoyable and personally rewarding (see Chapter 9).

Collectivistic culture
Wherein people identify with a larger group that is responsible for providing care in exchange for group loyalty; *we*-identity; a high-context culture.

Individualistic culture
Wherein people look out for themselves and their immediate families; *I*-identity; a low-context culture.

More than two-thirds of the world's people are born into collectivistic cultures, while less than one-third of the population lives in individualistic cultures.[3] To help you draw a clearer mental picture of the distinctions, I'll follow the lead of cross-cultural researchers who cite Japan and the United States as classic examples of collectivistic and individualistic cultures, respectively. Note that it would be equally appropriate to use most countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, or Latin America to represent a collectivistic perspective. I could also insert Australia, Germany, Switzerland, or one of the Scandinavian societies as the model of an individualistic approach. It is Ting-Toomey's grouping of national cultures within the collectivistic and individualistic categories that separates her theory of conflict management from a mere listing of national characteristics.

Triandis says that the Japanese value collective needs and goals over individual needs and goals. They assume that in the long run, each individual decision affects everyone in the group. Therefore, a person's behavior is controlled by the norms of the group. This *we*-identity of the Japanese is quite foreign to the *I*-identity of the American who values individualistic needs and goals over group needs and goals. The American's behavior is governed by the personal rules of a freewheeling self that is concerned with individual rights rather than group responsibilities. Marching to a different drummer is the rule in the United States, not the exception.

Triandis claims that the strong in-group identity of the Japanese people leads them to perceive others in us–them categories. It is more important for the Japanese to identify an outsider's background and group affiliation than the person's attitudes or feelings—not because they don't care about their guest, but because unique individual differences seem less important than group-based information. People raised in the United States show a different curiosity. They are filled with questions about the interior life of visitors from other cultures. What do they think? What do they feel? What do they plan to do? Americans assume that every person is unique, and they reduce uncertainty by asking questions to the point of cross-examination.

With this understanding of the differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures in mind, read through the description of mediation techniques in Figure 32–1. Taken as a whole, the list provides a reliable window to the values that guide this type of conflict resolution. Participants who come to the conflict center are treated as responsible individuals who can make up their own minds about what they want. The mediator encourages antagonists to deal directly with their differences and keeps the conversation focused on the possibility of a final agreement. While the mediator is careful never to pressure clients to reach an accord, the climate of immediacy suggests this is their best chance to put the whole mess behind them in an acceptable way and get on with their lives. The mediator works hard to make sure that the individual rights of both parties are respected.

Whether or not disputants reach an agreement, the mediation approach outlined in Figure 32–1 offers a safe place where no one need feel embarrassed—at least no one from an individualistic American culture. As it turns out, the open

discussion of conflict, the encouragement to voice specific needs and interests, and the explicit language used to document any agreement all make the process quite uncomfortable for people raised in a high-context culture. No wonder potential clients from collectivistic cultures often stay away or leave dissatisfied.

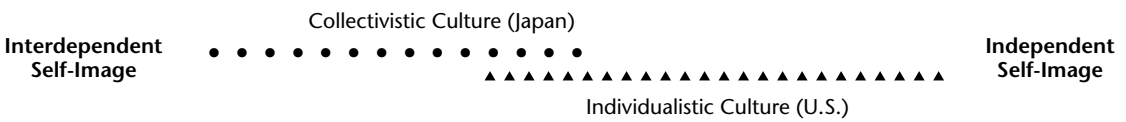
SELF-CONSTRUAL: VARIED SELF-IMAGES WITHIN A CULTURE

People aren't cultural clones, however. Just as cultures vary along a scale anchored by individualistic or collectivistic orientations, so, too, do their members. Ting-Toomey emphasizes that people *within* a culture differ on the relative emphasis they place on individual self-sufficiency or group solidarity. She uses the terms *independent* and *interdependent self* to refer to "the degree to which people conceive of themselves as relatively autonomous from, or connected to, others."[4] Psychologists Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama call this dimension *self-construal*, or the more familiar term *self-image*.[5]

Self-construal
Self-image; the degree to which people conceive of themselves as relatively autonomous from, or connected to, others.

The independent self values *I*-identity and is more self-face oriented, so this concept of self is prevalent within individualistic cultures like the United States. Yet due to the ethnic diversity of American society, there are people raised in the United States who are highly interdependent. The interdependent self values *we*-identity and emphasizes relational connectedness, and is therefore closely aligned with collectivism. But again, it would be dangerous to stereotype all members of a collectivist society as having the same self-construal. Culture is an overall framework for face concern, but individuals within a culture have different images of self as well as varied views on the degree to which they give others face or restore their own face in conflict situations.

The relational reality of self-image differences within two cultures is represented in the following diagram. Each circle (●) stands for the self-construal of a person raised in a collectivistic society that socializes its members to be interdependent and includes everyone in face concerns. Each triangle (▲) stands for the self-construal of a person raised in an individualistic culture that stresses independence and self-reliance. The cultures are obviously different. But the overlap shows that an American might have a self-image more interdependent than that of a person raised in Japan with a relatively high independent self-construal.



As you will see in the following sections, Ting-Toomey built her theory on the foundational idea that people from collectivistic/high-context cultures are noticeably different in the way they manage face and conflict situations than people from individualistic/low-context cultures. In dozens of scholarly articles she has defended that basic conviction. Yet more recently, Ting-Toomey and colleague John Oetzel from the University of New Mexico have discovered that "self-construal is a better predictor of conflict styles than ethnic/cultural background."[6] You can now see why face-negotiation theory is "in progress," and Ting-Toomey writes that "more theorizing effort is needed to 'decategorize' the colossal concepts of 'individualism' and 'collectivism' . . . into finer *culture-level,* explanatory-categories."[7]

Ting-Toomey and Oetzel identify people's self-construal by asking them to respond to surveys about real or imagined conflict situations. Strong agreement with the first two of the following four statements indicates an *independent* self-image. Endorsing the last two shows an *interdependent* self-image.[8]

"It was important for me to be able to act as a free and independent person."

"I tried not to depend on others."

"I sacrificed my self-interest for the benefit of our relationship."

"I was sensitive to the wishes of the other person."

The distinction between collectivistic and individualistic cultures is still important because culture has a strong effect on an individual's self-construal. But that sense of individual identity is one step closer to the person's preferred style of dealing with conflict, so it predicts dispute behavior better than generalized culture does.

THE MULTIPLE FACES OF FACE

Although popular Western wisdom regards *face* as an Asian preoccupation, Ting-Toomey and other relational researchers find it to be a universal concern. That's because face is an extension of self-concept: a vulnerable, identity-based resource. As Ting-Toomey notes, most of us blush. It's a telltale sign that we feel awkward, embarrassed, ashamed, or proud—all face-related issues.[9] In their well-developed theory of politeness, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, the Netherlands) define face as "the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself/herself."[10] Many Western writers regard face as an almost tangible good that can rise or fall like soybean futures on the commodity exchange at the Board of Trade. Taiwanese writer Lin Yutang called face "a psychological image that can be granted and lost and fought for and presented as a gift."[11] The term includes the patrician concern for dignity, honor, and status. It also covers the effect of trash talk after a slam dunk on the basketball court—"in your face!" Ting-Toomey simply refers to face as "the projected image of one's self in a relational situation."[12]

Although an overall view of face as public self-image is straightforward and consistent with Mead's concept of the *generalized other* (see Chapter 5), Ting-Toomey highlights several issues that turn face into a multifaceted object of study. Face means different things to different people, depending first on their culture, and second on how they construe their personal identities.

The question *Whose face are you trying to save?* may seem ridiculous to most Americans or members of other individualistic cultures. The answer is obvious: *mine.* Yet Ting-Toomey reminds us that in over two-thirds of the world, face concerns focus on the other person. Even in the midst of conflict, people in these collectivistic cultures pay more attention to maintaining the face of the other party than they do to preserving their own. Their answer to the *face-concern* question would honestly be an altruistic *yours.*

Face concern
Regard for self-face, other-face, or mutual-face.

But self-face and other-face concerns don't exhaust the possibilities. Ting-Toomey describes a third orientation in which there's equal concern for both parties' images, as well as the public image of their relationship. She calls this a

mutual-face concern, and people who have it would answer the *Whose face . . . ?* question with *ours.*

JoLynda applied the concept of mutual-face concern to what she learned about a desert nomadic culture:

> A Bedouin tradition that exemplifies concern for honor and mutual-face is one of raiding. In order to properly raid a village you had to raid it early in the morning in order to give the villagers all day to recover the animals. It gave the other tribe a chance to show their strength and save face by regaining what livestock they may have lost. Also, if an enemy asked for hospitality, you were required to treat him as the guest of honor for three days. If he had not left by that time you were allowed to do what you will to him. It would be his fault. The only reason an enemy would ask for hospitality is if he were injured or weak. You would then be in charge of healing him and giving him a fair chance in a fight.

Self-concerned *face-restoration* is the facework strategy used to stake out a unique place in life, preserve autonomy, and defend against loss of personal freedom. Not surprisingly, face-restoration is the typical face strategy across individualistic cultures. *Face-giving* out of concern for others is the facework strategy used to defend and support another person's need for inclusion. It means taking care not to embarrass or humiliate the other in public. Face-giving is the characteristic face strategy across collectivistic cultures.

Face-restoration
The self-concerned facework strategy used to preserve autonomy and defend against loss of personal freedom.

Face-giving
The other-concerned facework strategy used to defend and support another person's need for inclusion.

Of course, collectivism and individualism aren't all-or-nothing categories. The difference between other-face and self-face concerns is not absolute. Just as relational dialectics insists that everyone wants connection *and* autonomy in a close relationship (see Chapter 12), so, too, all people desire affiliation and autonomy within their particular society. People raised in Japan or other Asian countries do have personal wants and needs; Americans and northern Europeans still desire to be part of a larger group. The cultural difference is always a matter of degree.

Yet when push comes to shove, most people from a collectivistic culture tend to privilege other-face or mutual-face over self-face. In like manner, people raised in an individualistic culture are normally more concerned with self-face than they are with other-face.

PREDICTABLE STYLES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Based on the work of M. Afzalur Rahim, professor of management at Western Kentucky University, Ting-Toomey initially identified five distinct responses to situations where there is an incompatibility of needs, interests, or goals. The five styles are *avoiding (withdrawing), obliging (giving in), compromising (negotiating), dominating (competing),* and *integrating (problem solving).*[13] Most Western writers refer to the same five styles of conflict, although they often use the labels that are in parentheses.[14]

Avoiding
Responding to conflict by withdrawing from open discussion.

Obliging
Accommodating or giving in to the wishes of another in a conflict situation.

Compromising
Conflict management by negotiating or bargaining; seeking a middle way.

Suppose, for example, that you are the leader of a group of students working together on a class research project. Your instructor will assign the same grade to all of you based on the quality of the group's work, and that project evaluation will count for two-thirds of your final grade in the course. As often happens in such cases, one member of the group has just brought in a shoddy piece of work and you have only three days to go until the project is due. You don't know this group member well, but you do know that it will take 72 hours of

"My first choice, of course, is to solve things amicably."

© Mike Twohy/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

round-the-clock effort to fix this part of the project. What mode of conflict management will you adopt?

Avoiding: "I would avoid discussing my differences with the group member."

Obliging: "I would give in to the wishes of the group member."

Compromising: "I would use give-and-take so that a compromise could be made."

Dominating: "I would be firm in pursuing my side of the issue."

Integrating: "I would exchange accurate information with the group member to solve the problem together."

Dominating
Competing to win when people's interests conflict.

Integrating
Problem solving through open discussion; collaborating for a win–win resolution of conflict.

These five styles of conflict management have been discussed and researched so often that they almost seem to be chiseled in stone. Yet Ting-Toomey and Oetzel remind us that these styles have surfaced in work situations in Western countries. Using an ethnically diverse sample, they have identified three additional styles of conflict management that American, individualistic-based scholarship has missed. The styles are *emotional expression, passive aggressive,* and *third-party help.*[15] In the student-project example, these styles might be expressed in the following ways:

Emotional expression: "Whatever my 'gut' and my 'heart' tell me, I would let these feelings show."

Passive aggressive: "Without actually accusing anyone of being lazy, I'd try to make him or her feel guilty."

Third-party help: "I would enlist the professor to aid us in solving the conflict."

Emotional expression
Managing conflict by disclosure or venting of feelings.

Passive aggressive
Making indirect accusations, showing resentment, procrastination, and other behaviors aimed at thwarting another's resolution of conflict.

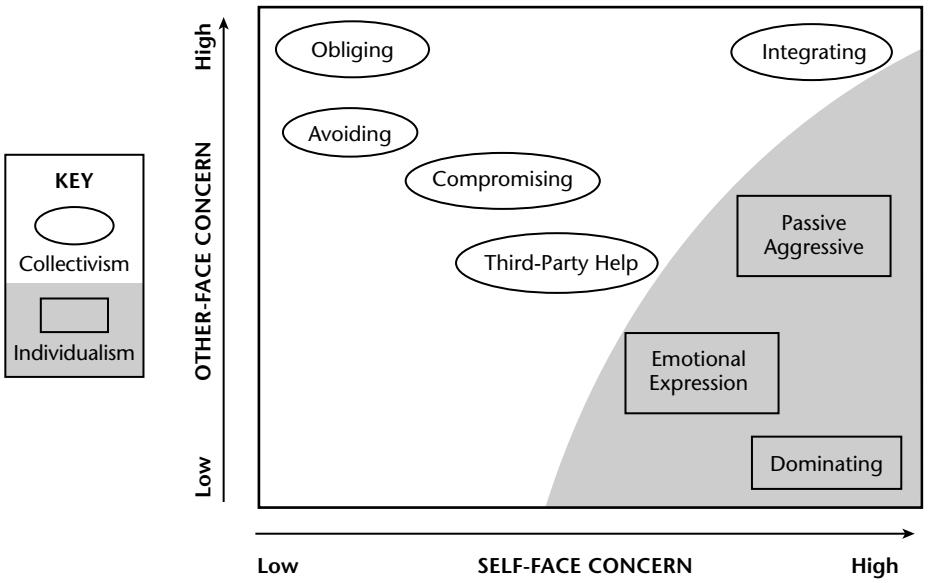


FIGURE 32–2 A Cultural Map of Eight Conflict-Management Styles
Adapted from Stella Ting-Toomey and John Oetzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively*

Figure 32–2 charts Ting-Toomey and Oetzel's map of conflict styles, arranged according to their culture-related face concern. The chart plots self-face concern on the horizontal axis and other-face concern on the vertical axis. For example, obliging is the behavior of choice for people who are concerned for another's public image, but not their own. Conversely, dominating is the act of someone who is concerned with his or her own face repair but doesn't care about promoting or honoring another's reputation. The smaller, shaded area on the right side depicts individualistic cultures that usually spawn conflict styles of emotional expression, passive aggression, and attempts to dominate. The larger, clear area on the left side reflects collectivistic cultures where obliging, avoiding, compromising, third-party help, and integrating are more the norm. Several explanations are in order.

You might be surprised to see *avoiding* rating almost as high as *obliging* on concern for the other person's face. Isn't withdrawing showing a casual disregard for the issue or your conversational partner? Ting-Toomey would disagree:

> It should be noted that in U.S. conflict management literature, obliging and avoiding conflict styles often take on a Western slant of being negatively disengaged (i.e., "placating" or "flight") from the conflict scene. However, collectivists do not perceive obliging and avoiding conflict styles as negative. These two styles are typically employed to maintain mutual-face interests and relational network interests.[16]

Third-party help
A method of conflict management in which disputing parties seek the aid of a mediator, arbitrator, or respected neutral party to help them resolve their differences.

Ting-Toomey would also point out that *third-party help* as practiced in a collectivistic culture is quite different from the interest-based mediation that I described at the start of the chapter. In these societies, parties in conflict voluntarily go to someone they greatly admire who has a good relationship with both of them. In order to "give face" to this wise elder or high-status person, they may be willing to follow his or her advice and in the process honor each other's image as well.[17] Perhaps that's why third-party help is sought out by conflicting parties in collectivistic

cultures, but the vast majority of Western-style mediations are court-ordered. Most people with an independent self-construal think first of getting a lawyer.

Of course, the entire figure assumes that people from a given culture construe their self-image consistent with the collectivistic or individualistic nature of their society. In one multiethnic study, Ting-Toomey and Oetzel identified some people whose self-image embraced both interdependence and independence. The researchers now believe that these "biconstrual" individuals possess a wider repertoire of behavioral options to use in different conflict situations.[18] Face-negotiation theory predicts that regardless of his or her culture of origin, "the biconstrual type is associated positively with compromising/integrating conflict style."[19]

Given that an integrating, or win–win, style of conflict resolution is extolled among theorists and practitioners in the West, why does the cultural map place it across the border in the land of collectivists?[20] Ting-Toomey suggests that collectivists who adopt this interpersonal style focus on relational-level collaboration, whereas individualists concentrate on solving the task in a way that brings closure.[21] "Problem solving," the alternative label, has a distinctly impersonal tone.

Figure 32–2 is a freeze-frame snapshot of what people in different cultures report they do, and, according to face-negotiation theory, why they do it. Yet as summarized near the start of the chapter, the theory lays out a multiple-stage *process* that captures the dynamics of response to conflict, and shows where the crucial matter of face concern fits in that flow. Using basically the same information that informed the map just discussed, Figure 32–3 depicts the comparative flow of the

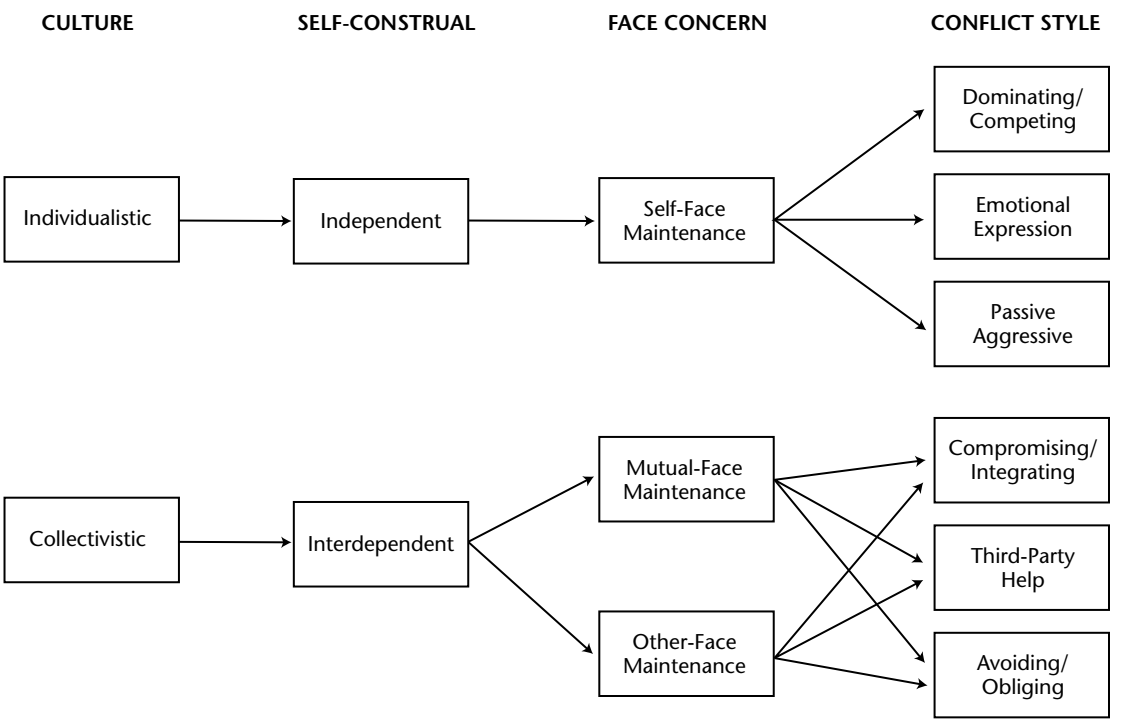


FIGURE 32–3 Face-Negotiation Model

Based on Ting-Toomey's hypotheses in "The Matrix of Face: An Updated Face-Negotiation Theory"

parallel processes for people with different face concerns. It incorporates most of the 24 propositions that form the backbone of Stella Ting-Toomey's theory.

COMPLICATING FACTORS: POWER DISTANCE AND PERCEIVED THREATS

Figure 32-3 and the discussion that led up to it seem to indicate that the individualism–collectivism variable is the sole factor that shapes cross-cultural differences in managing conflict. Ting-Toomey suggests, however, that power distance complicates the situation. *Power distance* refers to "the way a culture deals with status differences and social hierarchies."[22] Large power-distance cultures tend to accept unequal power as natural; small power-distance cultures value equality and regard most differences based on status as unjust.

Power distance
The way a culture deals with status differences and social hierarchies; the degree to which low-power members accept unequal power as natural.

Individualistic values and small power distance usually go together. That mix is exemplified in the Scandinavian countries, Ireland, and Israel, where concern for personal freedom and equality are paramount. The United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and Australia tend to share that concern, although their power distance isn't as small.

Collectivistic values and the acceptance of large power distance is common in Central and South America, Asia, and Africa. In these cultures, the sense of obligation to others and acceptance of inequality go hand-in-hand. Those who have little power hope that those who have much will act in a benevolent way.

But there are exceptions to these two clusters of cultural values. Ting-Toomey reports that Costa Rica is a country that combines small power distance with collectivistic values, as do feminist subcultures and the Kibbutz movement in Israel. Conversely, Italy and France are individualistic countries where great differences in power are accepted if they are earned. The United States and Great Britain share some of this status-through-achievement appreciation. If all of this seems somewhat confusing, that's because it's not simple in practice. The collectivism–individualism distinction becomes more complicated when power distance is taken into consideration. Ting-Toomey says that power-distance values affect responses to conflict, but she doesn't offer specific predictions in the latest version of the theory.[23]

Ting-Toomey also says that specific face *threats* can affect your face concern and the type of facework you do. She lists seven additive factors that increase the level of threat you perceive. The more . . .

a. central the violated-facework rule is in your culture
b. cultural difference causes mistrust between you
c. important the topic under dispute is to you
d. power the other has over you
e. harm that will be done when the threat is carried out
f. you view the other as responsible for initiating the conflict
g. you regard the other as an out-group member

. . . the more severe the threat to your face will seem. When a threat looms large, almost everyone uses a face-defending strategy. Those raised in individualistic cultures usually turn aggressive; collectivists typically opt for avoidance.[24]

APPLICATION: COMPETENT INTERCULTURAL FACEWORK

Ting-Toomey's ultimate goal for her theory goes beyond merely identifying the ways people in different cultures negotiate face or handle conflict. She believes that cultural *knowledge, mindfulness,* and facework *interaction skill* are the three requirements for effectively communicating across cultures. Imagine that you are a Japanese student in a U.S. college. As the appointed leader of the class research project, you feel it is your uncomfortable duty to talk with the unproductive American member of the group. How might you achieve competent intercultural facework?

Knowledge is the most important dimension of facework competence. It's hard to be culturally sensitive unless you have some idea of the ways you might differ from your classmate. Ting-Toomey's theory offers basic insights into collectivistic and individualistic cultures, self-construals, face concerns, and conflict styles, all of which could help you understand the American student's perspective, and vice versa. If you've read this chapter carefully, this knowledge will stand you in good stead.

Mindfulness
Recognizing that things are not always what they seem, and therefore seeking multiple perspectives in conflict situations.

Mindfulness shows a recognition that things are not always what they seem. It's a conscious choice to seek multiple perspectives on the same event. Perhaps the other's inferior work is not due to laziness but is the best he or she can do in this situation. The student might have a learning disability, an emotional problem, a lack of clarity about the assignment, or a desire to merely pass the course. Of course, your initiation of a conversation to discuss the project is also open to multiple interpretations. Ting-Toomey writes:

> Mindfulness means being particularly aware of our own assumptions, viewpoints, and ethnocentric tendencies in entering any unfamiliar situation. *Simultaneously,* mindfulness means paying attention to the perspectives and interpretive lenses of dissimilar others in viewing an intercultural episode.[25]

When you are mindful, you mentally switch off automatic pilot and process the situation and conversation through the central route of the mind, as ELM suggests (see Chapter 16). But you are also freed up to empathize with the other student and approach the discussion with a fresh or creative mindset. The result might be a novel solution that takes advantage of your different ways of thinking.

Interaction skill is your ability to communicate appropriately, effectively, and adaptively in a given situation. Perhaps you are studying communication to gain that type of competence. Hopefully your department offers a course in interpersonal or intercultural communication that includes structured exercises, role plays, or simulations. Without hands-on learning and feedback from others on how you're doing, it's hard to improve.

CRITIQUE: PASSING THE TEST WITH A GOOD GRADE

Most cross-cultural researchers analyze different cultures from a highly interpretive perspective. Ting-Toomey and her coresearcher, John Oetzel, are different because they are committed to an objective social science research agenda that looks for measurable commonalities across cultures. They then link these transcultural similarities (individualism or collectivism) to subsequent behavioral outcomes—in this case, response to others in conflict situations. In the course of this chapter you've seen that face-negotiation theory uses the concept of face

concern to explain, predict, and ultimately advise. The theory's value therefore rests on the extent to which it can be tested, and whether it can withstand that close scrutiny. Like all objective social science theories, it ultimately has to meet the "put-up-or-shut-up" test.

In 2003, Oetzel and Ting-Toomey conducted a four-nation survey to test the core of the theory.[26] More than 700 students from collectivistic cultures (China and Japan) and individualistic cultures (United States and Germany) responded to scales that reliably measure self-construal. The students then recounted a specific case of conflict with someone from their country and filled out scales that tapped into the face concern they felt and the way they acted in that situation. The test was simplified in that mutual-face wasn't factored in and the researchers measured only the three primary conflict styles—*dominating, integrating,* and *avoiding.*

Figure 32–4 shows the links that were examined. All of the solid lines represent significant relationships among variables that were validated by the data. The results were sufficiently strong that they couldn't be explained away as mere chance findings. The two dotted lines represent predicted relationships that didn't materialize. Despite these two failures, I regard the overwhelmingly positive results as clear support for the theory.

The findings regarding face concern were especially impressive. In earlier critiques of the theory I had questioned whether knowing a person's face concern would actually improve the model's prediction of conflict behavior. Note that the lines running directly from the individualistic-collectivistic (I-C) cultures at the beginning of the process to the three conflict styles at the end represent a way to find out if cutting out face concern would create a model that fits the data better. It did not. The results showed the *culture → self-construal → face concern → conflict style* paths provided a better prediction of what people reported than did the *culture → conflict style* direct route. In fact, when people scored high

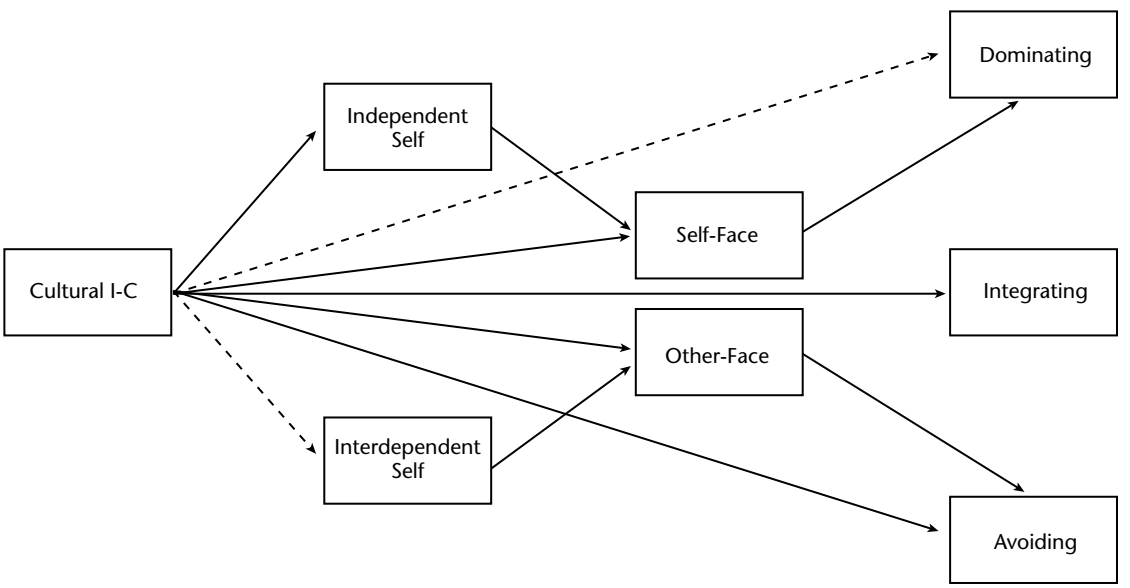


FIGURE 32–4 A Four-Culture Test of Face-Negotiation Theory
Based on Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, "Face Concerns in Interpersonal Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Empirical Test of Face-Negotiation Theory"

in *self-face* ("I was concerned with protecting my self-image"), they always took a *dominating* stance ("I insisted my position be accepted during the conflict").

Yet Oetzel and Ting-Toomey's procedures and findings still provide some cause for pause. First, we must remember that their analysis is based solely on self-report data. That's certainly an appropriate way to identify the internal attitudes of self-construal and face concern, but self-reports of behavior are often self-serving. Respondents might be trying to save face, give public face to a person they care about, or even try to give face to the researchers by giving them what they want. But even with this potential problem, asking what people did in a specific instance of conflict is a definite improvement on querying what they think they might do in a hypothetical situation.

As a mediator who highly values the goal of integrating, collaborating, and a win–win outcome, I'm bothered by the questions that supposedly assessed this conflict-resolution behavior. The survey items used referred to "meeting the other person halfway," proposing a "middle ground," and "'give and take' so that a compromise could be made." These items would seem to be a great way to assess *compromising,* but they don't measure what I and other mediators mean by *integrating.* Nor do I believe they do justice to what Ting-Toomey describes as behavior springing from high other-face *and* high self-face concerns. The following statements would more accurately assess integration: "We worked together to find a solution we could both be proud of" or "I sought to reach an agreement that met both of our needs and preserved our relationship."

Finally, the researchers report that "both individualistic and collectivistic samples had more independence and self-face tendencies than interdependence and other-face tendencies."[27] They suggest that college students in a collectivistic culture may be more competitive (or selfish?) than the rest of the population. But until this unexpected finding is explored further, we could be forgiven for wondering if citizens of collectivistic nations are quite as other-oriented as the theory suggests.

I'm impressed by the ambitious research program that Ting-Toomey has headed, and I also admire her willingness to adjust face-negotiation theory when confronted by unanticipated results. To create and test a theory that's later supported by empirical evidence obviously creates face within the research community. So does revising the theory when parts of it are disconfirmed. Stella Ting-Toomey has done both well. I look forward to the next edition of her theory.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Based upon what you've learned about Afghanistan, is the culture *individualistic* or *collectivistic?* Does the society have a large or small *power distance?* What clues do you have?

2. Do you see yourself as having more of an *independent* or an *interdependent self?* Does this go with the flow of your culture, or are you swimming against the tide?

3. What *face concern* (*self-face, other-face, mutual-face*) does your religious faith, political ideology, or personal set of values embrace? To what extent is the *facework* you do in your relationships with others consistent with that face concern?

4. What *style of conflict management* would you use with the group member who did poor work? Do you think that your response is based on your culture, self-construal, gender, or status? What other factors affect your decision?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.mhhe.com/griffin8 or www.afirstlook.com.

While talking with Stella Ting-Toomey, I raise the embarrassing possibility that our students may be bored while watching our discussion. If so, both she and I have some serious facework to do. Ting-Toomey shows how she, a child of a collectivistic culture, might give face to students. She then role-plays how I, the product of an individualistic culture, might save face. Later in the conversation I ask if she's bothered that self-construal has turned out to be a better predictor of conflict style than cultural origin—a potentially face-threatening question. You then get to see Ting-Toomey's real-life facework.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Stella Ting-Toomey, "The Matrix of Face: An Updated Face-Negotiation Theory," in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication,* William Gudykunst (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005, pp. 71–92.

Original theory: Stella Ting-Toomey, "Intercultural Conflict Styles: A Face-Negotiation Theory," in *Theories in Intercultural Communication,* Young Yun Kim and William Gudykunst (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1988, pp. 213–235.

Progression of the theory: Stella Ting-Toomey and Atsuko Kurogi, "Facework Competence in Intercultural Conflict: An Updated Face-Negotiation Theory," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* Vol. 22, 1998, pp. 187–225.

Literature review: Stella Ting-Toomey and John Oetzel, "Cross-Cultural Face Concerns and Conflict Styles," in *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication,* 2nd ed., William Gudykunst and Bella Mody (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, pp. 143–163.

Comprehensive treatment of face: Stella Ting-Toomey (ed.), *The Challenge of Facework,* State University of New York, Albany, NY, 1994.

Collectivistic/individualistic culture: Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism & Collectivism,* Westview, Boulder, CO, 1995.

Theory into practice: Stella Ting-Toomey, "Translating Conflict Face-Negotiation Theory into Practice," in *Handbook of Intercultural Training,* 3rd ed., Dan Landis, Jane Bennett, and Milton Bennett (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2004, pp. 217–248.

Conflict in intercultural communication: Stella Ting-Toomey and John Oetzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2001.

Face-negotiation in the context of other theories of conflict: Stella Ting-Toomey and Jiro Takai, "Explaining Intercultural Conflict: Promising Approaches and Directions," in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice,* John G. Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, pp. 691–723.

A personal account of face: Stella Ting-Toomey, "An Intercultural Journey: The Four Seasons," in *Working at the Interface of Cultures: Eighteen Lives in Social Science,* Michael Bond (ed.), Routledge, New York, 1997, pp. 202–215.

Test and critique of the theory: John Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey, "Face Concerns in Interpersonal Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Empirical Test of the Face-Negotiation Theory," *Communication Research,* Vol. 36, 2003, pp. 599–624.

CHAPTER 33

Socio-cultural tradition

Speech Codes Theory

of Gerry Philipsen

After three years on the staff of a youth organization, I resigned to pursue full-time graduate work in communication at Northwestern University. Gerry Philipsen was one of my classmates. When I finished my Ph.D. course work, the labor market was tight; I felt fortunate to receive an offer to teach at Wheaton College. A while later I heard Gerry was doing youth work on the south side of Chicago. I remember thinking that while my career was progressing, Gerry's was going backward. How wrong I was. As articles in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* soon made evident, Gerry Philipsen was doing ethnography.[1]

While at Northwestern, Philipsen read an article by University of Virginia anthropologist and linguist Dell Hymes, "The Ethnography of Speaking." Hymes called for a "close to the ground" study of the great variety of communication practices around the world.[2] Philipsen decided to start in the Chicago community where he worked, a place he dubbed "Teamsterville," since driving a truck was the typical job for men in the community. For three years Philipsen talked to kids on street corners, women on front porches, men in corner bars, and everyone at the settlement house where he worked so that he would be able to describe the speech code of Teamsterville residents. By *speech code,* Philipsen means "a historically enacted, socially constructed system of terms, meanings, premises, and rules pertaining to communicative conduct."[3]

Ethnography
Thew ork of a naturalist who watches, listens, and records communicative conduct in its natural setting in order to understand a culture's concept web of meanings.

Speech code
Ahis torically enacted, socially constructed system of terms, meanings, premises, and rules pertaining to communicativeconduct .

Even though the people of Teamsterville spoke English, Philipsen noted that their whole pattern of speaking was radically different from the speech code he knew and heard practiced within his own family of origin, by his friends at school, and across many talk shows on radio and TV. The stark contrast motivated him to conduct a second, multiyear ethnographic study, which began while he was teaching communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and continued when he moved on to the University of Washington. Although most of his "cultural informants" were from Santa Barbara or Seattle, the speech code community from which they were drawn was not confined to the West Coast of the United States. He labeled them the "Nacirema" (*American* spelled backward), because their way of using language was intelligible to, and practiced by, a majority of Americans. Typical Nacirema speech is a "generalized U.S. conversation that is carried out at the public level (on televised talk shows) and at the

interpersonal level in face-to-face interaction."[4] For Philipsen, me, and many reading this text, "Nacirema are us."

Philipsen defines the Nacirema culture by speech practices rather than geographical boundaries or ethnic background. It's a style of speaking about self, relationships, and communication itself that emerged for Philipsen as he spent hundreds of hours listening to tapes of dinner-table conversations, life stories, and ethnographic interviews. Just as cultural markers emerge gradually for the ethnographer, so the defining features of the Nacirema code will become more clear as you read the rest of the chapter. But for starters, one characteristic feature of that speech code is a preoccupation with metacommunication—their talk about talk.[5]

As Philipsen intended, the Teamsterville and Nacirema ethnographic studies provided rich comparative data on two distinct cultures. But he also wanted to go beyond mere description of interesting local practices. His ultimate goal was to develop a general theory that would capture the relationship between communication and culture. Such a theory would guide cultural researchers and practitioners in knowing what to look for and would offer clues on how to interpret the way people speak.

Based on the suggestion of Hymes, Philipsen first referred to his emerging theory as the *ethnography of communication.* He has found, however, that many people can't get past the idea of ethnography as simply a research method, so now that his theory has moved from description to explanation, Philipsen labels his work *speech codes theory.* Specifically, the theory seeks to answer questions about the existence of speech codes, their substance, the way they can be discovered, and their force upon people within a culture.

Philipsen outlines the core of speech codes theory in the following six general propositions. He is hopeful, however, that their presentation can be intertwined with the story of his fieldwork and the contributions of other scholars that stimulated the conceptual development of the theory. I've tried to capture that narrative mix within the limited space of this chapter.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF SPEECH CODES

> *Proposition 1:* Wherever there is a distinctive culture, there is to be found a distinctive speech code.

Philipsen describes an ethnographer of speaking as "a naturalist who watches, listens, and records communicative conduct in its natural setting."[6] When he entered the working-class, ethnic world of Teamsterville, Philipsen found patterns of speech that were strange to his ears. After many months in the community, he was less struck by the pronunciation and grammar that was characteristic of then Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley than he was by the practice of "infusing a concern with place into every conversation."[7] He realized that Teamsterville residents say little until they've confirmed the nationality, ethnicity, social status, and place of residence of the person with whom they're speaking. Most conversations start (and end) with the question *Where are you from and what's your nationality?*

Philipsen gradually found out that discussion of "place" is related to the issue of whether a person is from "the neighborhood." This concern isn't merely a matter of physical location. Whether or not a person turns out to be from "around here" is a matter of cultural solidarity. Unlike *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*,

Teamsterville does not welcome diversity. As Philipsen heard when he first entered a corner tavern, "We don't want no yahoos around here."

While Philipsen discovered that Teamsterville conversation is laced with assurances of common place among those in the neighborhood, he found that speech among the Nacirema is a way to express and celebrate psychological uniqueness. Dinnertime is a speech event where all family members are encouraged to have their say. Everyone has "something to contribute," and each person's ideas are treated as "uniquely valuable."

In Teamsterville, children are "to be seen, not heard." Among the Nacirema, however, it would be wrong to try to keep a child quiet at the dinner table. Communication is the route by which kids develop "a positive self-image," a way to "feel good about themselves." Through speech, family members "can manifest their equality and demonstrate that they pay little heed to differences in status—practices and beliefs that would puzzle and offend a proper Teamsterviller."[8]

Philipsen was raised in a largely Nacirema speech community, but until his research in Teamsterville, he hadn't thought of his family's communication as a particular cultural practice. Its taken-for-granted quality illustrates the saying that's common among ethnographers: "We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the fish."

THE MULTIPLICITY OF SPEECH CODES

Proposition 2: In any given speech community, multiple speech codes are deployed.

Philipsen later added this proposition to the other five that he first stated in 1997.[9] He did so because he and his students now observe times when people are affected by other codes or employ dual codes at the same time. In his Teamsterville ethnography, Philipsen stressed the unified nature of their neighborhood speech patterns. Yet he noticed that the men gauge their relative worth by comparing their style of talk with that of residents in other city neighborhoods. They respect, yet resent, middle-class northside residents who speak Standard English. On the other hand, they are reassured by their perceived ability to speak better than those whom they refer to as lower-class "Hillbillies, Mexicans, and Africans." Any attempt a man makes to "improve" his speech is regarded as an act of disloyalty that alienates him from his friends. Thus, the men define their way of speaking by contrasting it with other codes.

The awareness of another speech code is equally strong among the Nacirema. Their repeated references to the importance of "a good talk" or "meaningful dialogue" distinguish speech that they value from "mere talk," or what today is parodied as "blah, blah, blah." As Philipsen notes, the Nacirema characterized "their present way of speaking ('really communicating') by reference to another way of speaking and another communicative conduct that they had now discarded."[10]

Dell Hymes suggested that there may be more than one code operating within a speech community.[11] Philipsen's University of Washington colleague, Lisa Coutu, performed an in-depth analysis of language used in Robert McNamara's book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam.*[12] McNamara was the architect of U.S. policy in Vietnam, and his detractors referred to it as "McNamara's War." He wrote the book "to put before the American people why their government and its leaders behaved as they did and what we may learn from the experience."[13]

According to Coutu, McNamara's account reflects a *code of rationality.* He deeply regretted that he didn't force a knock-down, drag-out debate over the merits of fighting in Vietnam. In retrospect, he believed that had he insisted on a frank and probing discussion, America wouldn't have gone to war.

Coutu's analysis of press and public reaction to the book shows a competing code at work. Reviewers across the political spectrum wrote and spoke in a way that reflects a *code of spirituality.* Regardless of their evaluation, commentators used morally laden terms such as *evil, sin, shame, confession, contrition, forgiveness, atonement, absolution,* and *faith.* Therefore, Coutu concludes there are multiple codes within a speech community. Writing from his code of rationality, McNamara questioned whether the war could be won. Working from their ethical/spiritual code, the book's reviewers were concerned with whether the war was moral.

THE SUBSTANCE OF SPEECH CODES

Proposition 3: A speech code involves a culturally distinctive psychology, sociology, and rhetoric.

With this proposition, Philipsen takes a step back from the cultural relativism that characterizes most ethnographers. He continues to maintain that every culture has its own unique speech code; there's no danger we'll mistake a Nacirema discussion of personal worth with Teamsterville talk of neighborhood solidarity. But this third proposition asserts that whatever the culture, the speech code reveals structures of self, society, and strategic action.

Psychology. According to Philipsen, every speech code "thematizes" the nature of individuals in a particular way. The Teamsterville code defines people as a bundle of social roles. In the Nacirema code, however, the individual is conceptualized as unique—someone whose essence is defined from the inside out.

Sociology. Philipsen writes that "a speech code provides a system of answers about what linkages between self and others can properly be sought, and what symbolic resources can properly and efficaciously be employed in seeking those linkages."[14] According to the unwritten code of Teamsterville, speech is not a valued resource for dealing with people of lower status—wives, children, or persons from outside the neighborhood who are lower on the social hierarchy. Nor is speech a resource for encounters with bosses, city officials, or other higher-status outsiders. In cases where the latter kind of contact is necessary, a man draws on his personal connections with a highly placed intermediary who will state his case. Speech is reserved for symmetrical relationships with people matched in age, gender, ethnicity, occupational status, and neighborhood location. Words flow freely with friends.

Rhetoric. Philipsen uses the term *rhetoric* in the double sense of *discovery of truth* and *persuasive appeal.* Both concepts come together in the way Teamsterville men talk about women. To raise doubts about the personal hygiene or sexual purity of a man's wife, mother, or sister is to attack his honor. *Honor* is a code that grants worth to an individual on the basis of adherence to community values. The language of the streets in Teamsterville makes it clear that a man's social identity is strongly affected by the women he's related to by blood or

Rhetoric
Both the discovery of truth and a persuasive appeal.

Honor
Aco de that grants worth to an individual on the basis of adherence to community values.

Dignity
Thew orth an individual has by virtue of being a human being.

marriage. "If she is sexually permissive, talks too much, or lacks in personal appearance, any of these directly reflects on the man and thus, in turn, directly affects his honor."[15] In contrast, Philipsen discovered that a verbalized code of dignity holds sway among the Nacirema. *Dignity* refers to the worth that an individual has by virtue of being a human being. Within a code of dignity, personal experience is given a moral weight greater than logical argument or appeal to authority. Communication is a resource to establish an individual's uniqueness.[16]

THE INTERPRETATION OF SPEECH CODES

> *Proposition 4:* The significance of speaking depends on the speech codes used by speakers and listeners to create and interpret their communication.

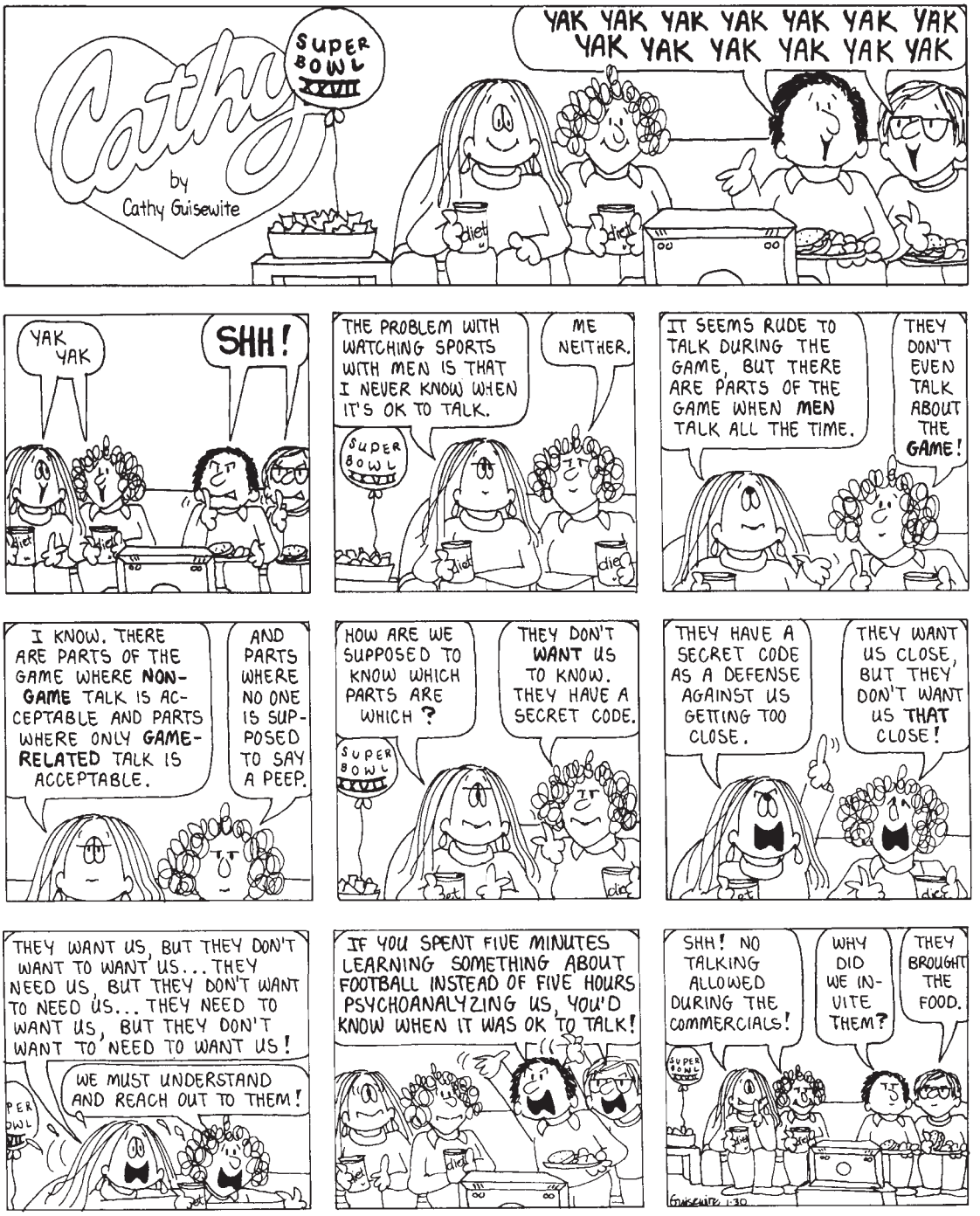
Proposition 4 can be seen as Philipsen's speech code extension of I. A. Richards' maxim that words don't mean; people mean (see Chapter 4). If we want to understand the significance of a prominent speech practice within a culture, we must listen to the way people talk about it and respond to it. It's their practice; they decide what it means.

No speech practice is more important among the Nacirema than the way they use the term *communication.* Philipsen and Tamar Katriel (University of Haifa, Israel) have shown that the Nacirema use this key word as a shorthand way of referring to *close, open, supportive speech.*[17] These three dimensions set communication apart from speech that the Nacirema dismiss as *mere communication, small talk,* or *normal chitchat.*

> *Close* relationships contrast with *distant* affiliations, where others are "kept at arm's length."
>
> *Open* relationships, in which parties listen and demonstrate a willingness to change, are distinct from routine associations, where people are stagnant.
>
> *Supportive* relationships, in which people are totally "for" the other person, stand in opposition to *neutral* interactions, where positive response is conditional.

You may have noticed my not-so-subtle switch from a description of *communication* to a discussion of *relationships.* Philipsen and Katriel say that Nacirema speakers use the two words almost interchangeably. In Burkean terms (see Chapter 23), when not qualified by the adjective *casual, communication* and *relationship* are "god terms" of the Nacirema. References to *self* have the same sacred status.

Although the people of Teamsterville know and occasionally use the word *communication,* it holds none of the potency that it has for the Nacirema. To the contrary, for a Teamsterville male involved in a relationship with someone of higher or lower status, communicating is considered an unmanly thing to do. Philipsen first discovered this part of the Teamsterville speech code through his work with youth at the community center. He ruefully recalls, "When I spoke to unruly Teamsterville boys in order to discipline them I was judged by them to be unmanly because, in such circumstances, I spoke."[18] The guys "naturally" expected this older male to use power or physical force to bring them in line. They were confused when Philipsen, consistent with his Nacirema speech code,



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sat down with them to "talk things out." The only explanation that made sense to them was that their youth leader was a homosexual. Not until much later did their conclusion get back to him.

THE SITE OF SPEECH CODES

Proposition 5: The terms, rules, and premises of a speech code are inextricably woven into speaking itself.

How can we spot the speech code of a given culture—our own or anyone else's? The answer is to analyze the speech of native speakers. Philipsen is convinced that speech codes are on public display as people speak; they are open to scrutiny by anyone who cares enough to take a long look. Proposition 5 suggests that it couldn't be otherwise.

Philipsen focuses on highly structured cultural forms that often display the cultural significance of symbols and meanings, premises, and rules that might not be accessible through normal conversation. For example, *social dramas* are public confrontations in which one party invokes a moral rule to challenge the conduct of another. The response from the person criticized offers a way of testing and validating the legitimacy of the "rules of life" that are embedded in a particular speech code.

Philipsen analyzed the late Mayor Daley's reply in the city council to charges of nepotism—in this case the appointment of his best friend's son to a political position.[19] By all accounts, Daley went ballistic. Most reporters regarded the speech as an irrational diatribe, yet his appeal to place, honor, and traditional gender roles resonated with the values of Teamsterville. When Philipsen asked people in the neighborhood if it was right for Daley to favor his friends, they responded, "Who should he appoint, his enemies?"

Totemizing rituals offer another window to a culture's speech code. They involve a careful performance of a structured sequence of actions that pays homage to a sacred object. Philipsen and Katriel spotted a *communication ritual* among the Nacirema that honors the sacred trinity of self, communication, and relationships.[20] Known as "a good talk," the topic is often a variation on the theme of how to be a unique, independent *self* yet still receive validation from close others. The purpose of the ritual is not problem solving per se. Instead, people come together to express their individuality, affirm each other's identity, and experience intimacy.

Totemizing ritual
Acaref ul performance of a structured sequence of actions that pays homage to a sacred object.

The communication ritual follows a typical sequence:

1. Initiation—a friend voices a need to work through an interpersonal problem.
2. Acknowledgment—the confidant validates the importance of the issue by a willingness to "sit down and talk."
3. Negotiation—the friend self-discloses, the confidant listens in an empathic and nonjudgmental way, the friend in turn shows openness to feedback and change.
4. Reaffirmation—both the friend and the confidant try to minimize different views, and they reiterate appreciation and commitment to each other.

By performing the communication ritual correctly, both parties celebrate the central tenet of the Nacirema code: "Whatever the problem, communication is the answer."

THE FORCE OF SPEECH CODES IN DISCUSSIONS

> *Proposition 6:* The artful use of a shared speech code is a sufficient condition for predicting, explaining, and controlling the form of discourse about the intelligibility, prudence, and morality of communication conduct.

Does the knowledge of people's speech codes in a given situation help an observer or a participant *predict* or *control* what others will say and how they'll interpret what is said? Philipsen thinks it does. It's important, however, to understand clearly what Philipsen is *not* saying.

Let's assume that Philipsen is again working with youth in Teamsterville and now knows the code of when a man should speak. Proposition 6 does not claim he should or could keep an unruly kid in line with a smack on the head. Speech codes theory deals with only one type of human behavior—speech acts. Nor does it claim that fathers in Nacirema homes will always encourage their kids to talk at the dinner table. Even when people give voice to a speech code, they still have the power, and sometimes the desire, to resist it. Perhaps the father had a bad day and wants some peace and quiet. Proposition 6 does suggest, however, that by a thoughtful use of shared speech codes, participants can guide metacommunication—the talk about talk. This is no small matter.

The dad-at-the-dinner-table example can help us see how prediction and control might work. Suppose a Nacirema father growls at his kids to finish their dinner without saying another word. Inasmuch as we understand the speech code of the family, we can confidently predict that his children will say that his demand is unfair, and his wife will object to his verbal behavior. As for artful control, she could choose to pursue the matter in private so that her husband wouldn't lose face in front of the children. She might also tie her objection to shared values: "If you don't communicate with our kids, they're going to grow up bitter and end up not liking you." In this way she would tap into issues that her husband would recognize as legitimate and would set the moral agenda for the rest of the discussion about the way he talks with the kids.

The dinner-table example I've sketched is based on an actual incident discussed by Philipsen.[21] He uses it to demonstrate the rhetorical force of appealing to shared speech codes. While the scope of Proposition 6 is limited to metacommunication, talk about the clarity, appropriateness, and ethics of a person's communication is an important feature of everyday life. In the vernacular of the Nacirema, "It's a big deal." For people who study communication, it's even bigger.

PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

In an extension and critique of the style of ethnography that Philipsen conducts, some researchers have stopped talking about *doing* ethnography in favor of *performing* ethnography. Much like Philipsen, the late Dwight Conquergood, a Northwestern University performance ethnographer, spent several years with teenagers in the "Little Beirut" district of Chicago. Conquergood was living in a multiethnic tenement and performing participant observation among local street gangs. *Performance ethnography* is more than a research tool; it is grounded in several theoretical principles.

The first principle is that performance is both the *subject* and the *method* of performance ethnography. All social interactions are performance because, as Philipsen notes, speech not only reflects but also alters the world. Thus,

Performance ethnography
Ares earch methodology committed to performance as both the subject and method of research, to researchers' work being performance, and to reports of fieldwork being actable.

Conquergood viewed the daily conversations of gang members who were hangin' on the street corner as performances. Of particular interest to Conquergood were rituals, festivals, spectacles, dramas, games, and other metaperformances. The ritualistic handshakes and elaborate graffiti enacted by the gangs are examples of metaperformance because the gang members themselves recognized the actions to be symbolic. Neither fiction nor farce, metaperformances are reminders that life consists of "performances about performances about performances."[22]

These researchers also consider their work performative. Fieldwork is performance because it involves suspension of disbelief on the part of both the participant observer and the host culture. In the act of embodied learning, researchers recognize that they are doing ethnography *with* rather than *of* a people group—they are co-performers. Conquergood didn't merely observe the greetings of gang members on the street; he greeted them.

In reporting their fieldwork, performance ethnographers are no less concerned about performance. They consider the thick descriptions traditionally produced to be a bit thin. By taking speech acts out of dialogues and dialogues out of context, published ethnographies smooth all the voices of the field "into the expository prose of more or less interchangeable 'informants.'"[23] Thus, the goal of performance ethnographies is to produce actable ethnographies. As Conquergood wrote, "What makes good theatre makes more sensitive and politically committed anthropological writing."[24]

Conquergood performed his ethnographies through public reading and even acting the part of a gang member. This kind of performance enables the ethnographer to recognize the limitations of, and uncover the cultural bias in, his or her written work. For those participating as audience members, performance presents complex characters and situations eliciting understanding that's responsive rather than passive.

Performance ethnography almost always takes place among marginalized groups. The theoretical rationale underlying this fact is that oppressed people are not passive but create and sustain their culture and dignity. In the face of daily humiliations, they create "subtle, complex, and amazingly nuanced performances that subversively key the events and critique the hierarchy of power."[25] Conquergood was committed to chronicling the performances of the oppressed in order to give them a voice in the larger society.

CRITIQUE: DIFFERENT SPEECH CODES IN COMMUNICATION THEORY

A favorite grad school professor of mine was fond of saying, "You know you're in the wrong place on an issue if you aren't getting well-roasted from all sides." By this "golden mean" standard, Gerry Philipsen is on the right academic path.

Most interpretive scholars applaud Philipsen's commitment to long-term participant observation and his perceptive interpretations, but they are critical of his efforts to generalize across cultures. Granted, he doesn't reduce cultural variation to a single issue such as an individualistic–collectivistic dichotomy. Philipsen's critics recoil, however, when he talks about explanation, prediction, and control—the traditional goals of science. Any theory that adopts these aims, no matter how limited its scope, strikes them as reductionist.

Theorists who operate from a feminist, critical, or cultural studies perspective (see Chapters 35–36, 21, and 27, respectively) charge that Philipsen is silent and perhaps naive about power relationships. His description of the Nacirema speech

code fails to unmask patterns of domination, and he doesn't speak out against male hegemony in Teamsterville. In response, Philipsen says the practice of ethnography that he recommends gives voice to the people who are observed. He offers this advice to critical scholars:

1. Look and listen for the variety and particularity in what people do; it is not all, or only, power that energizes human action.
2. Look at and listen to the concrete details of what people say before you interpret their conduct, even with those people whom you have been taught to think of as the usual suspects.
3. Try to learn what words and other symbols mean to those that use them, because sometimes such open inquiry will surprise you.[26]

If power is an issue—as it was in Mayor Daley's city council speech—Philipsen believes it will be evident in the way people speak. If it's not an issue, the ethnographer shouldn't make it one.

As one trained in the empirical tradition, I could wish for a bit more scientific rigor before generalizations are made. Philipsen's grounded research in Teamsterville is impressive, but his study of the Nacirema raises a number of questions. What are the boundaries of this speech community? Isn't it circular to first identify a dispersed speech community on the basis of common discursive practices and then do ethnographic research to determine their speech code? Has the language of this speech community so infused academic departments of communication that we as scholars are unable to analyze the code objectively?

Most of all, I could wish for a few more data sets than the two Philipsen presents. The Teamsterville and Nacirema codes are so diametrically opposed, it's tempting to divide the world into two cultural clusters:

Teamsterville	Nacirema
Collectivistic	Individualistic
Hierarchical	Egalitarian
Code of honor	Code of dignity
A man's world	A woman's world

This certainly isn't Philipsen's intention, but without an example of a culture that draws from both columns, there's no evidence to the contrary.

My concerns are minor compared with what I believe Philipsen has accomplished. He accepted Dell Hymes' challenge and became the first ethnographer of communication in our discipline. He has trained an increasing number of cultural scholars, who have all performed their own ethnographic studies. Of the most significance for this text, he has elevated ethnography from its former status as a rarely used research method in the field of communication to its present position as an intriguing theoretical perspective.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Most of *speech codes theory* is concerned with *cross-cultural* rather than *intercultural* communication. What is the difference? Which incidents described in the chapter are examples of intercultural encounters?

2. Which three *propositions* of the theory suggest a *scientific* approach to the study of speech codes?

3. Many scholars still think of Philipsen's work as the *ethnography of communication.* Why do you (or don't you) think *speech codes theory* is a better name?

4. Philipsen says that the *Nacirema* way of talking is the prevailing *speech code* in the United States. What *research* cited in this chapter supports his claim?

CONVERSATIONS

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My conversation with Gerry Philipsen is an exploration of contrasts. Philipsen highlights differences in cultures by listing topics that a Sioux interpersonal communication textbook would cover as opposed to the typical Nacirema text, which emphasizes self-disclosure. He then distinguishes between the ethnography of communication and his theory of speech codes. Philipsen goes on to suggest why the potential of using a culture's speech code to explain, predict, and even control people's behavior isn't at odds with the interpretive approach of ethnography. Finally, he discusses the fine line that he draws between learning to understand and appreciate how other people see the world and still embracing his own ethical standards.

A SECOND LOOK

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American Indian communicative silence: Patricia Covarrubias, "(Un)Biased in Western Theory: Generative Silence in American Indian Communication," *Communication Monographs,* Vol. 74, 2007, pp. 265–271.

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Critique: John Stewart, "Developing Communication Theories," in *Developing Communication Theories,* Gerry Philipsen and Terrance Albrecht (eds.), State University of New York, Albany, NY, 1997, pp. 183–186.

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Most of us believe that women and men interact differently. When we think about the differences (and most of us think about them a lot), we usually draw on the rich data of our lives to construct our own minitheories of masculine–feminine communication.

For example, I remember sitting from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. in a large room at the federal courthouse with a hundred other prospective jurors. We entered as strangers, but by midmorning the women were sitting in clusters of three to seven, engrossed in lively discussions. All the men sat by themselves. I thought about that stark difference as I went to my interpersonal communication class. Reviewing the class list, I realized that 70 percent of the students who took the course as an elective were female. Conversely, two-thirds of those who opted for my persuasion course were male. On the basis of this limited personal experience, I jumped to the conclusion that women talk more than men do and that their communication goal is connection rather than influence.

But stereotyping is a risky business. The distinction between women's focus on intimacy and men's concern for power has held up well under scrutiny by communication researchers. But most studies of gender differences show that women actually talk *less* than men do in mixed groups.

Linguist Robin Lakoff of the University of California, Berkeley, was one of the first scholars who attempted to classify regularities of women's speech that differentiate "women-talk" from "men-talk."[1] Lakoff claimed that women's conversation is marked by tentativeness and submission. Unfortunately, this conclusion and others were based mainly on her personal reflection and anecdotal evidence—much like my courthouse and classroom theorizing. Almost four decades of systematic research offers at least three cautions.

1. There are more similarities among men and women than there are differences. After conducting a meta-analysis of hundreds of research studies that reported gender differences on topics such as talk time, self-disclosure, and styles of conflict management, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee communication professor Kathryn Dindia found that the differences were actually quite small. She parodies the popular belief that men and women come from two different planets in the way she summarizes her findings: "Men are from North Dakota, Women are from South Dakota."[2] (Can you really see a difference?) If I tell you that Pat talks fast, uses big words, and holds eye contact, your chances of guessing whether Pat is male or female are just slightly better than 50/50.[3]

2. Greater variability of communication style exists among women and among men than between the two groups. Scores on the *Sex-Role Inventory,* developed by Cornell University psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem, illustrate this within-group diversity.[4] Bem asks people to rate themselves on a series of gender-related descriptions—many related to speech. A person who marks *soft-spoken, eager to soothe hurt feelings,* and *does not use harsh language* ranks high in femininity. A person who marks *assertive, defends own beliefs,* and *willing to take a stand* ranks high in masculinity. As you might expect, males tend to fit masculine sex roles and females tend to fit feminine sex roles, but the scores from a group of people of the same sex are typically all over the map. Sometimes individuals—male or

"How is it gendered?"

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female—score high on both scales. Bem regards this combination as the best of both worlds and refers to these people with blended identities as *androgynous.* Obviously, gender-related speech isn't an either/or proposition.

3. Sex is a fact; gender is an idea.[5] Within the literature of the field, the sex-related terms *male* and *female* are typically used to categorize people biologically, as they do at the Olympics—by chromosomes and genitalia. On the other hand, the terms *men* and *women* or *masculine* and *feminine* are usually employed to describe an idea that's been learned from and reinforced by others. When we forget that our concept of gender is a human construction, we fall into the trap of thinking that there is a real-in-nature category called *masculine*—an early Clint Eastwood archetype who smokes Marlboros, doesn't eat quiche, won't cry, and lives by the code that *a man's got to do what a man's got to do.* Sex is a given, but we negotiate, or work out, our concept of gender with others throughout our lives.

CHAPTER 34

Semiotic tradition
Socio-cultural tradition

Genderlect Styles

of Deborah Tannen

"Male–female conversation is cross-cultural communication."[1] This simple statement is the basic premise of Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand,* a book that seeks to explain why men and women often talk past each other.

Tannen is a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, and her research specialty is conversational style—not what people say but the way they say it. In her first book on conversational style she offers a microanalysis of six friends talking together during a two-and-a-half-hour Thanksgiving dinner.[2]

Tannen introduces this sociolinguistic study with a quote from E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India:* "A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry."[3] Forster's novel illustrates how people of goodwill from different cultures can grossly misunderstand each other's intentions. Tannen is convinced that similar miscommunication occurs all the time between women and men. The effect may be more insidious, however, because the parties usually don't realize that they are in a cross-cultural encounter. At least when we cross a geographical border we anticipate the need to bridge a communication gap. In conversing with members of the opposite sex, Tannen notes, our failure to acknowledge different conversational styles can get us in big trouble. Most men and women don't grasp that "talking through their problems" with each other will only make things worse if it's their divergent ways of talking that are causing the trouble in the first place.

Tannen's writing is filled with imagery that underscores the mutually alien nature of male and female conversation styles. When she compared the style of boys and girls who were in second grade, she felt she was looking at the discourse of "two different species." For example, two girls could sit comfortably face-to-face and carry on a serious conversation about people they knew. But when boys were asked to talk about "something serious," they were restless, never looked at each other, jumped from topic to topic, and talked about games and competition. These stylistic differences showed up in older kids as well. Tannen notes that "moving from the sixth-grade boys to the girls of the same age is like moving to another planet."[4] There is no evidence that we grow out of these differences as we grow up. She describes adult men and women as speaking "different words from different worlds," and even when they use the same terms, they are "tuned to different frequencies."

Tannen's cross-cultural approach to gender differences departs from much of feminist scholarship that claims conversations between men and women reflect men's efforts to dominate women. She assumes that male and female conversational styles are equally valid: "We try to talk to each other honestly, but it seems at times that we are speaking different languages—or at least different genderlects."[5] Although the word *genderlect* is not original with Tannen, the term nicely captures her belief that masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects rather than as inferior or superior ways of speaking.

Genderlect
A term suggesting that masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects.

Tannen realizes that categorizing people and their communication according to gender is offensive to many women and men. None of us like to be told, "Oh, you're talking just like a (wo)man." Each of us regards himself or herself as a unique individual. But at the risk of reinforcing a simplistic reductionism that claims biology is destiny, Tannen insists there *are* gender differences in the ways we speak.

> Despite these dangers, I am joining the growing dialogue on gender and language because the risk of ignoring differences is greater than the danger of naming them.[6]

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY: THE CLASH OF TWO CULTURES

Do men and women really live in different worlds? Tannen cites dialogue from Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist,* Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage,* Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar,* Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying,* and Jules Feiffer's *Grown Ups* to support her claim that the different ways women and men talk reflect their separate cultures.

Whenever I discuss Tannen's theory in class, students are quick to bring up conversations between Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan in the 1989 Rob Reiner film *When Harry Met Sally.* I'll use the words of Harry and Sally in the film written by Nora Ephron to illustrate the gender differences that Tannen proposes.

The movie begins as two University of Chicago students who have never met before share an 18-hour ride to New York City. Harry is dating Sally's good friend Amanda. Their different perspectives become obvious when Harry makes a verbal pass at his traveling companion just a few hours into the drive:

> SALLY: Amanda is my friend!
>
> HARRY: So?
>
> SALLY: So, you're going with her.
>
> HARRY: So?
>
> SALLY: So you're coming on to me.
>
> HARRY: No I wasn't. . . .
>
> SALLY: We are just going to be friends, OK?
>
> HARRY: Great, friends, best thing. [Pause] You realize of course we could never be friends.
>
> SALLY: Why not?
>
> HARRY: What I'm saying is . . . , and this is not a come-on in any way, shape or form . . . , is that men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.
>
> SALLY: That's not true, I have a number of men friends and there is no sex involved.

HARRY: No you don't. . . .

SALLY: Yes I do.

HARRY: No you don't.

SALLY: Yes I do.

HARRY: You only think you do.

SALLY: You're saying I've had sex with these men without my knowledge?

HARRY: No, what I'm saying is that they all want to have sex with you.

SALLY: They do not.

HARRY: Do too.

SALLY: They do not.

HARRY: Do too.

SALLY: How do you know?

HARRY: Because no man can be friends with a woman that he finds attractive. He always wants to have sex with her.

SALLY: So you're saying that a man can be friends with a woman he finds unattractive.

HARRY: No, you pretty much want to nail them too.

Harry next meets Sally five years later on an airplane. He surprises her when he announces that he's getting married. Sally obviously approves, but the ensuing conversation shows that they are still worlds apart in their thinking:

SALLY: Well it's wonderful. It's nice to see you embracing life in this manner.

HARRY: Yeah, plus, you know, you just get to a certain point where you get tired of the whole thing.

SALLY: What whole thing?

HARRY: The whole life of a single guy thing. You meet someone, you have the safe lunch, you decide you like each other enough to move on to dinner. You go dancing, . . . go back to her place, you have sex, and the minute you're finished you know what goes through your mind? How long do I have to lie here and hold her before I can get up and go home? Is thirty seconds enough?

SALLY: [Incredulous tone] That's what you're thinking? Is that true?

HARRY: Sure. All men think that. How long do you like to be held afterward? All night, right? See that's the problem. Somewhere between thirty seconds and all night is your problem.

SALLY: I don't have a problem.

HARRY: Yeah you do.

The casual viewer of these scenes will hear little more than two individuals quarreling about sex. Yet neither conversation is about the desirability of sex per se, but about what sex means to the parties involved. Tannen's theory of genderlect styles suggests that Harry's and Sally's words and the way they are said reflect the separate worlds of men and women. Harry would probably regard Sally as a resident of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,* while Sally might see Harry as coming from the *Planet of the Apes* or *Animal House.* But each person obviously finds the other's view alien and threatening. Sally, as a woman, wants intimacy. Harry, as a man, wants independence.

WOMEN'S DESIRE FOR CONNECTION VS. MEN'S DESIRE FOR STATUS

Tannen says that, more than anything else, women seek human *connection*. Harry's initial come-on irritates Sally because he is urging her to ignore her friendship with Amanda. She is further saddened at Harry's conviction that women and men can't be friends. But she is especially shocked at Harry's later revelation that for him the act of sex marks the end of intimacy rather than its beginning. Both times Harry insists that he is speaking for all men. If what Harry says is true, Sally does indeed have a problem. Harry's words imply that true solidarity with a man would be difficult to achieve, if not impossible.

According to Tannen, men are concerned mainly with *status.* They are working hard to preserve their independence as they jockey for position on a hierarchy of competitive accomplishment. In both conversations, Harry is the one who introduces the topic, starts to argue, talks the most, and enjoys the last word. In other words, he wins. For Harry, sexual intercourse represents achievement rather than communion. "Nailing" a woman is a way to score in a never-ending game of who's on top. A woman's desire for *intimacy* threatens his freedom and sidetracks him from his quest to be *one up* in all his relationships.

Harry's opinion that *all* men think like he does may strike you as extreme. Tannen agrees. She believes that some men are open to intimacy, just as some women have a concern for power. You'll recall that Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics assumes that all people feel a tension between connection and autonomy in their relationships (see Chapter 12). Tannen agrees that many men and women would like to have intimacy *and* independence in every situation if they could, but she doesn't think it's possible. As a result, these differences in priority tend to give men and women differing views of the same situation.

> Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connection. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status.[7]

RAPPORT TALK VS. REPORT TALK

Why is Tannen so certain that women focus on connection while men focus on status? Her answer is that she listens to men and women talk. Just as an ethnographer pores over the words of native informants to discover what has meaning within their society, so Tannen scrutinizes the conversation of representative speakers from the feminine culture and the masculine culture to determine their core values. She offers numerous examples of the divergent styles she observes in everyday communication. These linguistic differences give her confidence that the connection–status distinction structures every verbal contact between women and men.

Consider the following types of talk, most of which are evident in the film *When Harry Met Sally.* At root, each of these speech forms shows that women value *rapport* talk, while men value *report* talk.

1. Private Speaking Vs. Public Speaking

Folk wisdom suggests that women talk more than men. Tannen cites a version of an old joke that has a wife complaining to her husband, "For the past 10

years you've never told me what you're thinking." Her husband caustically replies, "I didn't want to interrupt you." Tannen grants the validity of the wordy-woman–mute-male stereotype as it applies to a couple alone. She finds that women talk more than men do in private conversations, and she endorses Alice Walker's notion that a woman falls in love with a man because she sees in him "a giant ear."[8] Sally continually tries to connect with Harry through words. She also shares the details of her life over coffee with her close friends Alice and Marie. But according to Tannen, Sally's rapport style of relating doesn't transfer well to the public arena, where men vie for ascendancy and speak much more than women do.

Rapport talk
The typical conversational style of women, which seeks to establish connection with others.

Report talk
The typical monologic style of men, which seeks to command attention, convey information, and win arguments.

Harry's lecture style is typical of the way men seek to establish a *one-up* position. Tannen finds that men use talk as a weapon. The function of the long explanations they use is to command attention, convey information, and insist on agreement. Even Harry's rare self-disclosure to his buddy Jess is delivered within the competitive contexts of jogging, hitting a baseball in a batting cage, and watching a football game. When men retreat from the battle to the safety of their own homes, they no longer feel compelled to talk to protect their status. They lay their weapons down and retreat into a peaceful silence.

Harry is unusual in that he's willing to talk about the nuances of his life with Sally. Most men avoid this kind of small talk. But in private conversation with Sally, Harry still speaks as though he were defending a case in court. He codifies rules for relationships, and when Sally raises a question, he announces an "amendment to the earlier rule." Men's monologic style of communication is appropriate for report, but not for rapport.

2. Telling a Story

Along with theorists Clifford Geertz, Michael Pacanowsky, and Walter Fisher (see Chapters 20 and 24), Tannen recognizes that the stories people tell reveal a great deal about their hopes, needs, and values. Consistent with men's focus on status and Billy Crystal's portrayal of Harry, Tannen notes that men tell more stories than women do—especially jokes. Telling jokes is a masculine way to negotiate status. Men's humorous stories have a *can-you-top-this?* flavor that holds attention and elevates the storyteller above his audience.

When men aren't trying to be funny, they tell stories in which they are heroes, often acting alone to overcome great obstacles. On the other hand, women tend to express their desire for community by telling stories about others. On rarer occasions when a woman is a character in her own narrative, she usually describes herself as doing something foolish rather than acting in a clever manner. This downplaying of self puts her on the same level with her hearers, thus strengthening her network of support.

3. Listening

A woman listening to a story or an explanation tends to hold eye contact, offer head nods, and react with *yeah, uh-huh, mmmn, right,* or other responses that indicate *I'm listening* or *I'm with you.* For a man concerned with status, that overt style of active listening means *I agree with you,* so he avoids putting himself in a submissive, or *one-down,* stance. Women, of course, conclude that men aren't listening, which is not necessarily true.

When a woman who is listening starts to speak before the other person is finished, she usually does so to add a word of agreement, to show support, or to finish a sentence with what she thinks the speaker will say. Tannen labels this *cooperative overlap.* She says that from a woman's perspective, cooperative overlap is a sign of rapport rather than a competitive ploy to control the conversation. She also recognizes that men don't see it that way. Men regard any interruption as a power move to take control of the conversation, because in their world that's how it's done. Those who win the conversational game can take a don't-talk-while-I'm-interrupting-you stance and make it stick. Tannen concludes that these different styles of conversation management are the source of continuing irritation in cross-gender talk. "Whereas women's cooperative overlaps frequently annoy men by seeming to co-opt their topic, men frequently annoy women by usurping or switching the topic."[9]

Cooperative overlap
A supportive interruption often meant to show agreement and solidarity with the speaker.

4. Asking Questions

When Sally and Harry started out on their trip to New York, Sally produced a map and a detailed set of directions. It's safe to assume that Harry never used them. According to Tannen, men don't ask for that kind of help. Every admission of ignorance whittles away at the image of self-sufficiency that is so important to a man. "If self-respect is bought at the cost of a few extra minutes of travel time, it is well worth the price," she explains.[10]

Women ask questions to establish a connection with others. Even a five-minute stop at a gas station to check the best route to New York can create a sense of community, however brief. Tannen notes that when women state their opinions, they often tag them with a question at the end of the sentence: "That was a good movie, *don't you think?" Tag questions* soften the sting of potential disagreement that might drive people apart. They are also invitations to participate in open, friendly dialogue. But to men, they make the speaker seem wishy-washy.

Tag question
A short question at the end of a declarative statement, often used by women to soften the sting of potential disagreement or invite open, friendly dialogue.

Ever since *You Just Don't Understand* was published, Tannen has entertained questions during television interviews, radio call-in shows, and discussions following lectures. Women almost always seek more information or offer their own experiences that validate her insights. That's now true for men as well. But when the book was riding high on best-seller lists, men would often pose questions that seemed designed to bring her down from her high horse or to establish their own expertise. Even though she understands that public face is crucially important to men, she identifies with the words of a wife in a short story: "I'd have been upset about making the mistake—but not about people *knowing.* That part's not a big deal to me." Her husband replied, "Oh, is it ever a big deal to me."[11]

5. Conflict

In the second half of *When Harry Met Sally,* Harry blows up at their friends Jess and Marie and then storms out of the room. After making an excuse for his behavior, Sally goes to him to try to calm him down.

> HARRY: I know, I know, I shouldn't have done it.
>
> SALLY: Harry, you're going to have to try and find a way of not expressing every feeling that you have every moment that you have them.

HARRY: Oh, really?

SALLY: Yes, there are times and places for things.

HARRY: Well the next time you're giving a lecture series on social graces, would you let me know, 'cause I'll sign up.

SALLY: Hey. You don't have to take your anger out on me.

HARRY: Oh, I think I'm entitled to throw a little anger your way. Especially when I'm being told how to live my life by Miss Hospital Corners.

SALLY: What's that supposed to mean?

HARRY: I mean, nothing bothers you. You never get upset about anything.

This scene illustrates Tannen's description of much male–female strife. Since they see life as a contest, many men are more comfortable with conflict and are therefore less likely to hold themselves in check. By trying to placate Harry and excuse his anger toward their friends, Sally responds in what Tannen believes is an equally typical fashion. "To most women, conflict is a threat to connection—to be avoided at all costs."[12]

The dialogue illustrates another feature of conflict between men and women. As often happens, Sally's attempt to avert a similar outburst in the future sparks new conflict with Harry. Tannen says men have an early warning system that's geared to detect signs that they are being told what to do. Harry bristles at the thought that Sally is trying to limit his autonomy, so her efforts backfire.

"NOW YOU'RE BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND"

What if Tannen is right and all conversation between men and women is best understood as cross-cultural communication? Does this mean genderlect can be taught, like French, Swahili, or any other foreign language? Tannen offers a qualified yes. She regards sensitivity training as an effort to teach men how to speak in a feminine voice, while assertiveness training is an effort to teach women how to speak in a masculine voice. But she's aware of our ethnocentric tendency to think it's the other person who needs fixing, so she expresses only guarded hope that men and women will alter their linguistic styles.

Tannen has much more confidence in the benefits of multicultural understanding. She believes that understanding each other's style, and the motives behind it, is a first move in overcoming destructive responses.

> The answer is for both men and women to try to take each other on their own terms rather than applying the standards of one group to the behavior of the other. . . . Understanding style differences for what they are takes the sting out of them.[13]

Tannen suggests that one way to measure whether we are gaining cross-gender insight is a drop in the frequency of the oft-heard lament *You just don't understand.* Sally basically says that when Harry declares his love for her at a New Year's Eve party after months of estrangement. "It just doesn't work that way," she cries. But Harry shows that he *does* understand what's important to Sally and that he can cross the cultural border of gender to connect through rapport talk.

"And do you, Deborah Tannen, think they know what they're talking about?"
© Peter Steiner/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

> Then how 'bout this way. I love that you get cold when it's seventy-one degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you're looking at me like I'm nuts. I love that after I spend a day with you I can still smell your perfume on my clothes. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night.

Dumbfounded, Sally realizes that Harry understands a lot more than she thought he did, and he used her linguistic style to prove it. The viewer hopes that Sally has an equal understanding of report talk, which is the native tongue of Harry and other men who live in the land of the status hierarchy.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: GILLIGAN'S DIFFERENT VOICE

For more than 30 years, Carol Gilligan was a professor of education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her book *In a Different Voice* presents a theory of moral development claiming that women tend to think and speak in an ethical voice different from that of men.[14] Gilligan's view of gender differences parallels Deborah Tannen's analysis of men as wanting independence and women as desiring human connection. Gilligan is convinced that most men seek autonomy and think of moral maturity in terms of *justice*. She's equally certain that women desire to be linked with others and that they regard their ultimate ethical responsibility as one of *care*.

On the basis of the quantity and quality of feminine relationships, Gilligan contrasts *women who care* with *men who are fair*. Individual rights, equality before the law, fair play, a square deal—all these masculine ethical goals can be pursued without personal ties to others. Justice is impersonal. But women's moral judgment is more contextual, more immersed in the details of relationships and narratives.[15] Sensitivity to others, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and peacemaking all reflect interpersonal involvement.

Gilligan's work arose in response to the theory of moral development of her Harvard colleague Lawrence Kohlberg, who identified increasing levels of ethical maturity by analyzing responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas.[16] According to his justice-based scoring system, the average young adult female was a full stage behind her male counterpart. Women were rated as less morally mature than men because they were less concerned about abstract concepts like justice, truth, and freedom. Instead, they based their ethical decisions on considerations of compassion, loyalty, and a strong sense of responsibility to prevent pain and alleviate suffering. Their moral reasoning was more likely to reflect Buber's call for genuine I-Thou relationships than Kant's categorical imperative.

Gilligan is comfortable with the idea that men and women speak in different ethical voices. But she's disturbed that when women don't follow the normative path laid out by men, "the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with women."[17] She points out "the unfair paradox that the very traits that have traditionally defined the 'goodness' of women are those that mark them as deficient in moral development."[18]

Although Gilligan's theory is more descriptive than prescriptive, the underlying assumption is that the way things *are* reflects the way things *ought to be*. Most ethical theorists are bothered by the idea of a double standard—justice from some, care from others. Traditional moral philosophy has never suggested different ethics for different groups. Yet readers of both sexes report that Gilligan's theory resonates with their personal experience.

CRITIQUE: IS TANNEN SOFT ON RESEARCH—AND MEN?

Is male–female conversation really cross-cultural communication? Tannen suggests we use the *aha factor* to test the validity of her two-culture hypothesis:

Aha factor
A subjective standard ascribing validity to an idea when it resonates with one's personal experience.

> If my interpretation is correct, then readers, on hearing my explanation, will exclaim within their heads, "Aha!" Something they have intuitively sensed will be made explicit. . . . When the subject of analysis is human interaction—a process that we engage in, all our lives—each reader can measure interpretation against her/his own experience.[19]

If we agree to this subjective standard of validity, Tannen easily makes her case. For example, in the book *You Just Don't Understand,* she describes how women who verbally share problems with men are often frustrated by the masculine tendency to offer solutions. According to Tannen, women don't want advice; they're looking for the gift of understanding. When I first read her book, I had the kind of *aha* reaction that Tannen says validates her theory. I suddenly realized that her words described me. Anytime my wife, Jean, tells me about a problem she's facing, I either turn coldly analytic or dive in and try to fix things for the woman I love. I now know that Jean would rather have me just listen or voice some version of *I feel your pain.*

Brittany's application log suggests that she's convinced. Perhaps her masculine upbringing explains why she experienced the *aha factor* even before she read about Tannen's theory.

> From ages 4 to 11, I was raised by my single father. During this developmental time in my life, I conversed mainly with Dad, and therefore adopted the kind of *report talk* that Tannen characterizes as primarily male. Most of my friends were boys and I had difficulties in making connection with girls my age. After my dad eventually remarried and I had a stepmother to talk with, I began to develop friendships with girls in high school. During a conversation one of them said, "You always try to think of a solution rather than just listen." I understand now that I picked up this communication trait from my dad. Whenever we faced conflict in our home, we immediately addressed it and figured out how we should deal with it. As I have developed more relationships with women I feel my genderlect style has moved towards *rapport talk,* which Tannen categorizes as primarily female. Sometimes though, I'll have a conversation with a close guy friend back home who will say, "You are the only girl who I've ever been able to talk with like this."

Apparently Tannen's analysis of common misunderstandings between men and women has struck a responsive chord in a million other readers. *You Just Don't Understand* was on the best-seller list for most of the 1990s. And in that decade it was rated by hundreds of mental health professionals as the best of 1,000 self-help books.[20] But does a chorus of *ahas* mean that she is right? The late astrologer and psychic Jeane Dixon might have made 10 predictions, and if only one came true, that's the prophecy people remembered and lauded her for. They forgot that the other nine turned out to be wrong. According to many social scientists, Tannen's "proof" may be like that.

Perhaps using selective data is the only way to support a reductionist claim that women are one way and men are another. Tannen's theme of intimacy versus independence echoes one of the dialectics Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery observe in Chapter 12. However, Tannen suggests none of the flux, internal contradiction, or ongoing complexity of human existence that relational dialectics describes. Tannen's women are programmed within their gendered culture to embrace connection and deny any desire for autonomy. Her men seek autonomy but avoid connection. Neither group feels any sense of internal contradiction. Saying it's so may eventually make it so—self-fulfilling prophecy is a powerful force. But as I stated in the introduction to this section, most gender researchers spot more diversity *within* each gender than *between* them.

Adrianne Kunkel (University of Kansas) and Brant Burleson directly challenged the different-cultures perspective that is at the heart of Tannen's genderlect

theory. Recall that Burleson headed a long-term research program on comforting communication as a skill of cognitively complex people who are able to craft person-centered messages (see Chapter 8). According to Tannen's two-culture worldview, this kind of verbal support should be highly desired in the world of women but of little value in the competitive world of men. Kunkel and Burleson's empirical research doesn't bear out Tannen's claim. They said while it's true that women often *do* it better, both sexes place an equally high value on comforting communication:

> Both men and women view highly person-centered comforting messages as most sensitive and effective; both see messages low in person-centeredness as relatively insensitive and ineffective. . . . Both sexes view comforting skills as important in the context of various personal relationships and as substantially more important than instrumentally focused communication skills.[21]

On the basis of this shared meaning, Kunkel and Burleson rejected the different-cultures perspective. They believed it was a myth that had lost its narrative force. Men and women do understand.

A very different critique comes from feminist scholars. For example, German linguist Senta Troemel-Ploetz accuses Tannen of having written a dishonest book that ignores issues of male dominance, control, power, sexism, discrimination, sexual harassment, and verbal insults. "If you leave out power," she says, "you do not understand talk."[22] The two genderlects are anything but equal. "Men are used to dominating women; they do it especially in conversations. . . . Women are trained to please; they have to please also in conversations."[23]

Contrary to Tannen's thesis that mutual understanding will bridge the culture gap between the sexes, Troemel-Ploetz believes that "men understand quite well what women want but they give only when it suits them. In many situations they refuse to give and *women cannot make them give.*"[24] She thinks it's ridiculous to assume that men will give up power voluntarily. To prove her point, she suggests doing a follow-up study on men who read Tannen's best seller. Noting that many women readers of *You Just Don't Understand* give the book to their husbands to read, Troemel-Ploetz states that if Tannen's theory is true, a follow-up study should show that these men are now putting down their papers at the breakfast table and talking empathetically with their wives. She doesn't think it will happen.

The discussion of gender and power will continue in the next two chapters.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Based on Tannen's *genderlect analysis,* do you agree with Harry that men and women can't be friends? Why or why not?

2. Apart from the topics of conflict, questions, listening, storytelling, and public vs. private speaking, can you come up with your own examples of how *rapport talk* is different from *report talk?*

3. What are the practical implications for you if talk with members of the opposite sex is, indeed, *cross-cultural communication?*

4. Tannen's *aha factor* is similar to Carl Rogers' standard of basing our knowledge on personal experience (see Chapter 4). What are the dangers of relying solely on the aha factor?

SELF-QUIZ

www.mhhe.com/griffin8

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand,* Ballantine, New York, 1990.

Conversational style: Deborah Tannen, *That's Not What I Meant!* William Morrow, New York, 1986.

Linguistic microanalysis of conversation: Deborah Tannen, *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends,* Ablex, Norwood, NJ, 1984.

Gender differences in children's talk: Deborah Tannen, "Gender Differences in Topical Coherence: Creating Involvement in Best Friends' Talk," *Discourse Processes,* Vol. 13, 1990, pp. 73–90.

Discourse analysis: Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse,* Oxford University, Oxford, UK, 1994/96.

Gendered language in the workplace: Deborah Tannen, *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work—Language, Sex, and Power,* Avon, New York, 1994.

Gendered language in the family: Deborah Tannen, *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking in Families,* Ballantine, New York, 2002.

Support of two-culture hypothesis: Anthony Mulac, James Bradac, and Pamela Gibbons, "Empirical Support for the Gender-as-Culture Hypothesis: An Intercultural Analysis of Male/Female Language Differences," *Human Communication Research,* Vol. 27, 2001, pp. 121–152.

Communication scholars' dialogue on two-culture hypothesis: "Reflections on the Different Cultures Hypothesis: A Scholars' Symposium," Sandra Metts (ed.), *Personal Relationships,* Vol. 4, 1997, pp. 201–253.

Critique of two-culture hypothesis: Adrianne Kunkel and Brant Burleson, "Social Support and the Emotional Lives of Men and Women: An Assessment of the Different Cultures Perspective," in *Sex Differences and Similarities in Communication,* Daniel Canary and Kathryn Dindia (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1998, pp. 101–125.

Critique centering on power discrepancy: Senta Troemel-Ploetz, "Review Essay: Selling the Apolitical," *Discourse and Society,* Vol. 2, 1991, pp. 489–502.

For a chapter-length description of
Carol Gilligan's different voice,
click on Theory List at
www.afirstlook.com.

CHAPTER 35

Standpoint Theory

of Sandra Harding & Julia T. Wood

As you've seen throughout the book, many communication theories raise questions about knowledge. For example,

> Can cognitive complexity help us craft person-centered messages?
>
> What's the best way to reduce uncertainty about someone you've just met?
>
> Does the "bottom line" in an annual report reflect corporate reality?
>
> How can we find out whether television has a powerful effect?
>
> Are men and women from different cultures?

If you're interested in communication, you'll want to find the answers. ("Inquiring minds want to know.") Standpoint theorists Sandra Harding and Julia Wood claim that one of the best ways to discover how the world works is to start the inquiry from the standpoint of women and other groups on the margins of society.

Standpoint
A place from which to critically view the world around us.

A *standpoint* is a place from which to view the world around us. Whatever our vantage point, its location tends to focus our attention on some features of the natural and social landscape while obscuring others. Synonyms for *standpoint* include *viewpoint, perspective, outlook,* and *position.* Note that each of these words suggests a specific location in time and space where observation takes place, while referring to values or attitudes. Sandra Harding and Julia Wood think the connection is no accident. As standpoint theorists, they claim that "the social groups within which we are located powerfully shape what we experience and know as well as how we understand and communicate with ourselves, others, and the world."[1] Our standpoint affects our worldview.

Harding is a philosopher of science who holds joint appointments in women's studies, education, and philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles. To illustrate the effect of standpoint, she asks us to imagine looking into a pond and seeing a stick that appears to be bent.[2] But is it really bent? If we walk around to a different location, the stick seems to be straight—which it actually is. Physicists have developed a theory of light refraction that explains why this visual distortion occurs. In like manner, a variety of standpoint theorists from different disciplines suggest that we can use the inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation to observe how different locations within the social hierarchy tend to generate distinctive accounts of nature and social relationships.

All of them concentrate on the relationship between power and knowledge. Specifically, Harding claims that "when people speak from the opposite sides of power relations, the perspective from the lives of the less powerful can provide a more objective view than the perspective from the lives of the more powerful."[3] Her main focus is the standpoint of women who are marginalized.

Just as Harding is recognized as the philosopher who has most advanced the standpoint theory of knowledge among feminist scholars,[4] Julia Wood, a professor of communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has championed and consistently applied standpoint logic within the field of communication. She regards all perspectives as partial, but she insists that some standpoints are "more partial than others since different locations within social hierarchies affect what is likely to be seen."[5] For communication researchers, taking women's location seriously means heeding Wood's call to choose research topics that are responsive to women's concerns:

> Abiding concern with oppression leads many feminist scholars to criticize some of the topics that dominate research on relationships. When four women are battered to death by intimate partners every day in North America, study of how abusive relationships are created and sustained seems more compelling than research on heterosexual college students' romances. Is it more significant to study friendships among economically comfortable adolescents or social practices that normalize sexual harassment and rape?[6]

As a male researcher who has studied romance and friendship on a private college campus, I am compelled to explore the logic of Harding and Wood's standpoint agenda. But their standpoint epistemology raises other questions. Do all women share a common standpoint? Why do Harding and Wood believe a feminist standpoint is more objective or less partial than other starting points for inquiry? Would grounding future research in the lives of women compel me to regard every report of feminine experience as equally true? Should we disregard what men have to say? The rest of this chapter will explore these issues and other questions raised by standpoint theory. The answers to these questions will make more sense if we understand the varied intellectual resources standpoint theorists have drawn upon to inform their analyses.

A FEMINIST STANDPOINT ROOTED IN PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

In 1807, German philosopher Georg Hegel analyzed the master–slave relationship to show that what people "know" about themselves, others, and society depends on which group they are in.[7] For example, those in captivity have a decidedly different perspective on the meaning of chains, laws, childbirth, and punishment than do their captors who participate in the same "reality." But since masters are backed by the established structure of their society, it is they who have the power to make their view of the world stick. They are the ones who write the history books.

Following Hegel's lead, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels referred to the *proletarian standpoint.* They suggested that the impoverished poor who provide sweat equity are society's *ideal knowers,* as long as they understand the class struggle in which they are involved.[8] Harding notes that standpoint theory "was a project 'straining at the bit' to emerge from feminist social theorists who were familiar with Marxian epistemology."[9] By substituting *women* for *proletariat,* and

gender discrimination for *class struggle,* early feminist standpoint theorists had a ready-made framework for advocating women's way of knowing.

As opposed to the economic determinism of Marx, George Herbert Mead claimed that culture "gets into individuals" through communication (see Chapter 5). Drawing on this key principle of symbolic interactionism, Wood maintains that gender is a cultural construction rather than a biological characteristic. "More than a variable, gender is a system of meanings that sculpts individuals' standpoints by positioning most males and females in disparate material, social and symbolic circumstances."[10]

Strains of postmodernism also weave throughout standpoint theory. When Jean-François Lyotard announced an "incredulity toward metanarratives," he included Enlightenment rationality and Western science.[11] Since many feminists regard these two enterprises as dominated by men who refuse to acknowledge their male-centered bias, they embrace a postmodern critique. In reciprocal fashion, postmodernists applaud the standpoint emphasis on knowledge as locally situated, though they push the idea to the point where there is no basis for favoring one perspective over another. As we will see, Harding and Wood reject that kind of absolute relativism.

Harding and Wood have drawn upon these somewhat conflicting intellectual traditions without letting any one of them dictate the shape or substance of their standpoint approach. The resulting theory might seem a bewildering crosshatch of ideas were it not for their repeated emphasis on starting all scholarly inquiry from the lives of women and others who are marginalized. In order to honor this central tenet of standpoint theory and to illustrate the way of knowing that Harding and Wood propose, I've excerpted events and dialogue from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved.* Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for this book about Sethe, an African American woman who escapes from slavery.

Sethe is raised and married on a Kentucky farm belonging to a comparatively benign man who owns six slaves. When the owner dies, an in-law known as "schoolteacher" arrives to "put things in order." Besides overseeing the farm, he is working on a book about the lives of slaves. In a grim caricature of ethnographic analysis, schoolteacher asks slaves many questions and writes down what they say in the notebook he always carries. He also tutors his two teenage nephews on the way to whip Sethe without breaking her spirit, instructs them to keep a detailed record of her animal characteristics, and refers to Sethe's value in terms of breeding potential—property that reproduces itself without cost.

The pivotal event in the novel occurs a month after Sethe and her children have escaped to her mother-in-law's home in Ohio. While working in the garden she sees four men in the distance riding toward the house—schoolteacher, a nephew, a slave catcher, and the sheriff. Sethe frantically scoops up her kids and runs to the woodshed behind the house. When schoolteacher opens the door a minute later, he sees a grisly scene of death—two boys lying open-eyed in sawdust, a girl pumping the last of her blood from a throat slit by a crosscut saw, and Sethe trying to bash in the head of her baby girl. Speaking for the four men, the nephew asks in bewilderment, "What she want to go and do that for?"[12] Much of the book is an answer to that question as Toni Morrison describes the oppositional standpoints of a male slaveowner (schoolteacher) and a female slave (Sethe).

WOMEN AS A MARGINALIZED GROUP

Standpoint theorists see important differences between men and women. Wood uses the relational dialectic of autonomy–connectedness as a case in point (see Chapter 12): "While all humans seem to seek both autonomy and connectedness, the relative amount of each that is preferred appears to differ rather consistently between genders."[13] Men tend to want more autonomy; women tend to want more connection. This difference is evident in each group's communication. The masculine community uses speech to accomplish tasks, assert self, and gain power. The feminine community uses speech to build relationships, include others, and show responsiveness.[14]

Wood does not attribute gender differences to biology, maternal instinct, or women's intuition. To the extent that women are distinct from men, she sees the difference largely as a result of cultural expectations and the treatment that each group receives from the other. For example, Sethe is enraged whenever she hears a slur against any woman of color. When Paul D, the only living black male from her slave past, tells Sethe that he has a "bad feeling" about a homeless young woman she's taken in, Sethe retorts that he should feel what it's like to be able to lay down at night without someone troubling you to put out daily for the privilege. And if he still doesn't understand, he should "feel how it feels to be a coloredwoman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on you."[15] Paul D protests that he never mistreated a woman in his whole life. Sethe snaps back, "That makes one in the world."

Sethe's words illustrate how otherness is *engendered* in women by the way men respond to them. The reality she describes also reflects the power discrepancies that Harding and Wood say are found in all societies: "A culture is not experienced identically by all members. Cultures are hierarchically ordered so that different groups within them offer dissimilar power, opportunities, and experiences to members."[16] Along these lines, feminist standpoint theorists suggest that women are underadvantaged and, thus, men are overadvantaged—a gender difference that makes a huge difference.

Harding and Wood are quick to warn against thinking of women as a monolithic group. They point out that not all women share the same standpoint, nor for that matter do all men. Besides the issue of gender, Harding stresses economic condition, race, and sexual orientation as additional cultural identities that can either draw people to the center of society or push them out to the fringes. Thus, an intersection of minority positions creates a highly looked-down-upon location in the social hierarchy. Impoverished African American lesbian women are almost always marginalized. On the other hand, positions of high status and power are overwhelmingly "manned" by wealthy, white, heterosexual males.

Even more than Harding, Wood is troubled by the tendency of some feminists to talk as if there were an "essence of women," then to "valorize" that quality. She believes that Carol Gilligan makes this mistake by claiming that women, as opposed to men, speak in an ethical voice of care (see Chapter 34). For Wood, biology is not destiny. She fears that "championing any singular model of womanhood creates a mold into which not all women may comfortably fit."[17] Yet as an unapologetic feminist committed to the equal value of all human life, Wood understands that a sense of solidarity is politically necessary if women are to effectively critique an androcentric world.

"Actually, Lou, I think it was more than just my being in the right place at the right time. I think it was my being the right race, the right religion, the right sex, the right socioeconomic group, having the right accent, the right clothes, going to the right schools . . ."

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Standpoint theorists emphasize the importance of social location because they are convinced that people at the top of the societal hierarchy are the ones privileged to define what it means to be female, male, or anything else in a given culture. We can see this power when Sethe recalls a time that schoolteacher accuses a slave named Sixo of stealing a young pig. When Sixo denies stealing the animal, schoolteacher is incredulous and tries to pin him down with a series of questions. Hadn't Sixo slaughtered it, roasted it, and eaten it? Sixo acknowledges that he had. Then how can Sixo say with a straight face that that's not stealing? If it's not stealing, schoolteacher demands, "What is it then?" Sixo answers, "Improving your property, sir." He goes on to explain that just as the crops in the field grow better if you feed them, Sixo will work better if he's fed. "Clever," writes Toni Morrison, "but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined."[18]

KNOWLEDGE FROM NOWHERE VERSUS LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Why is standpoint so important? Because, Harding argues, "the social group that gets the chance to define the important problematics, concepts, assumptions, and hypotheses in a field will end up leaving its social fingerprints on the picture of the world that emerges from the results of that field's research process."[19] Imagine how different a book by schoolteacher entitled *Slaves* would be from one of the same title written by Sethe (as told to Toni Morrison). The texts would surely differ in starting point, method, and conclusion.

Harding's insistence on *local knowledge* contrasts sharply with the claim of traditional Western science that it can discover "Truth" that is value-free and accessible to any objective observer. In her book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Harding refers to empiricism's claims of disembodied truths as "views from nowhere," or in the words of feminist writer Donna Haraway, the *God trick,* which Harding describes as "speaking authoritatively about everything in the world from no particular location or human perspective at all."[20] As for the notion of value-free science, Harding characterizes the claim as promoting "a fast gun for hire" and chides detached scientists that "it cannot be value-free to describe such social events as poverty, misery, torture, or cruelty in a value-free way."[21] Even Galileo's democratic ideal of interchangeable knowers is open to question. His statement *Anyone can see through my telescope* has been interpreted by empirical scientists as dismissing concern for any relationship between the knower and the known.

Local knowledge
Knowledge situated in time, place, experience, and relative power, as opposed to knowledge from nowhere that's supposedly value-free.

Harding and other standpoint theorists insist there is no possibility of an unbiased perspective that is disinterested, impartial, value-free, or detached from a particular historical situation. The physical and the social sciences are always situated in time and place. She writes that "each person can achieve only a partial view of reality from the perspective of his or her own position in the social hierarchy."[22] Unlike postmodernists, however, she is unwilling to abandon the search for reality. She simply thinks that the search for it should begin from the lives of those in the underclass.

Suppose you were to do research on the topic of *family values.* Rather than analyzing current political rhetoric or exploring the genesis of the growing homeschool movement, Harding would suggest that you frame your research questions and hypotheses starting with the family values of people like Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law. Morrison explains why this freed slave values a son more than a man. All the men in her life "were moved around like checkers," so her eight children were fathered by six men. The incredible meanness of life hits her when she finds out "nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children."[23]

Neither Harding nor Wood claims that the standpoint of women or any other marginalized group gives them a clear view of the way things are. *Situated knowledge*—the only kind there is—will always be partial. Standpoint theorists do maintain, however, that "the perspectives of subordinate groups are more complete and thus, better than those of privileged groups in a society."[24] They recognize that this is a controversial claim. Judge Sonia Sotomayor voiced the same idea in a 2001 lecture on law and multicultural diversity: "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life."[25] That one remark was the stated reason why many white male congressmen voted against her confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2009.

STRONG OBJECTIVITY: LESS PARTIAL VIEWS FROM THE STANDPOINT OF WOMEN

Harding uses the term *strong objectivity* to refer to the strategy of starting research from the lives of women and other marginalized groups whose concerns and experience are usually ignored.[26] Her choice of label not only suggests the wisdom of taking all perspectives into account but also suggests that knowledge generated from the standpoint of dominant groups offers, by contrast, only a

weak objectivity. To illustrate this claim, she speaks directly of the oppositional standpoints of the kind described in Toni Morrison's *Beloved:* "It is absurd to imagine that U.S. slaveowners' views of Africans' and African Americans' lives could outweigh in impartiality, disinterestedness, impersonality, and objectivity their slaves' view of their own and slaveowners' lives."[27]

Why should the standpoints of women and other marginalized groups be less partial, less distorted, or less false than the perspectives of men who are in dominant positions? Wood offers two explanations: "First, people with subordinate status have greater motivation to understand the perspective of more powerful groups than vice versa."[28] Even if the meek don't inherit the earth, they have a special interest in figuring out what makes it turn. Taking the role of the other is a survival skill for those who have little control over their own lives. Lacking this motivation, those who wield power seem to have less reason to wonder how the "other half" views the world.

Wood's second reason for favoring the standpoint of groups that are constantly put down is that they have little reason to defend the status quo. Not so for those who have power. She asserts that "groups that are advantaged by the prevailing system have a vested interest in not perceiving social inequities that benefit them at the expense of others."[29]

Robbie, a student in my class, expressed a new realization of the link between a standpoint of privilege and the tunnel vision that may go with it.

> This is a hard theory to write on. I am an upper-middle-class white male and this theory deals with the marginalized and underappreciated, particularly women. I struggled to think of any way the theory related to me. But then I got it. My standpoint made it difficult for me to apply the theory. I was born into the dominant culture and have been taught to maintain the status quo. Our opinion is the "right" one because it follows the "rules" (rules that we wrote, by the way). Admittedly, my standpoint is probably one of the least objective of all, and what's worse, I have been taught to think that it is objective.

For the overprivileged, ignorance of the other's perspective is bliss, so it's folly to be wise. Certainly the men who come to take Sethe and her children back into slavery could be assigned to that clueless category. If they or anyone else really wanted to know why a runaway slave would slit her daughter's throat, they'd need to begin their inquiry from the standpoint of slaves—women slaves—not from the perspective of masters, or even that of black men.

Those who paid attention to Sethe's story would learn of her utter desperation when she spotted schoolteacher coming to take her family back. Her mind screamed, "No. No Nonono. . . . By the time she faced him, looked him dead in the eye, she had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none. 'I stopped him,' she said [later]. . . . 'I took and put my babies where they'd be safe.'"[30]

As gripping as these words are, Harding would not ask us to automatically accept Sethe's explanation or approve of her drastic response just because they are the words and actions of a marginalized woman. After all, many of the free African American women in Morrison's novel condemn Sethe's drastic way of keeping her daughter Beloved safe from schoolteacher's hands. But Sethe's wrenching fear for her children's welfare is the stark reality of enslaved women everywhere (see the book/film *Sophie's Choice*). Harding insists it's the "objective perspective *from women's lives*" that provides a preferred starting place from

Strong objectivity
The strategy of starting research from the lives of women and other marginalized groups, which upon critical reflection and resistance provides them with a less false view of reality.

which to generate research projects, hypotheses, and interpretations.[31] Yet even that starting point doesn't guarantee *strong objectivity.*

Harding and Wood emphasize that a woman's location on the margin of society is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to attain a feminist standpoint. It is only through critical reflection on unjust power relations and working to resist this oppression that a feminist standpoint is formed. Sethe has not only suffered oppression, but as her interactions with Paul D, Sixo, Baby Suggs, and schoolteacher suggest, she has thought through the politics of slavery and has refused to accept the taken-for-granted realities that a female slave in her time and place confronted. Of course, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is itself a strong form of gender and racial resistance. Her novel demonstrates that a feminist standpoint is an *achievement* rather than a piece of territory automatically inherited by virtue of being a woman.[32]

THEORY TO PRACTICE: COMMUNICATION RESEARCH BASED ON WOMEN'S LIVES

If we want to see a model of communication research that starts from the lives of women, a good place to begin is Julia Wood's in-depth study of caregiving in the United States. Consistent with standpoint theory's insistence that all knowledge is situated in a time and place, the first chapter of Wood's *Who Cares? Women, Care, and Culture* describes her own situation as a white, heterosexual, professional woman who for nine years took on the consuming responsibility of caring for her infirm parents until they died. Her experience squared with her subsequent research findings:

> First, it seems that caring can be healthy and enriching when it is informed, freely chosen, and practiced within a context that recognizes and values caring and those who do it. On the other hand, existing studies also suggest that caring can be quite damaging to caregivers if they are unaware of dangers to their identities, if they have unrealistic expectations of themselves, and/or if caring occurs within contexts that fail to recognize its importance and value.[33]

Wood discovered that gendered communication practices reflect and reinforce our societal expectation that caregiving is women's work. After rejecting his daughter's proposal to hire a part-time nurse, her father mused, "It's funny, Julia. I used to wish I had sons, but now I'm glad I have daughters, because I couldn't ask a son to take this kind of time away from his own work just to take care of me."[34] She heard similar messages that devalued caregiving from male colleagues at her university. While praising Wood for her sacrifice, they reassured a fellow professor that he had taken the proper action by placing his mother in a nursing home: "Well, she surely understood that as busy as you are with your work you couldn't be expected to take on that responsibility."[35] Wood says these comments reveal the opposing, gender-based privileges and restraints in our society. As illustrated in the book/film *One True Thing,* women are given the freedom to make caregiving a priority but are denied the right to put their work first and still be a "good woman." Men are given the freedom to make their work a priority but are deprived of the right to focus on caregiving and still be a "good man."

Wood suggests that a standpoint approach is practical to the extent that it generates an effective critique of unjust practices. She believes that "our culture itself must be reformed in ways that dissociate caring from its historical

affiliations with women and private relationships and redefine it as a centrally important and integral part of our collective public life."[36] Perhaps a proposal in President Clinton's 1999 State of the Union address was a first step. He endorsed a $1,000 tax write-off for families taking care of an incapacitated relative in their homes. A male network news commentator dismissed the idea as "more symbolic than significant." The female cohost chided that the symbolic recognition of worth was *quite* significant. She shared Wood's standpoint.

THE STANDPOINT OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Patricia Hill Collins, an African American sociologist at the University of Maryland, claims that the patterns of "intersecting oppressions" that black women in the United States have experienced puts them in a different marginalized place in society than either white women or black men are. "Countless numbers of Black women have ridden buses to their white 'families' where they not only cooked, cleaned, and executed other domestic duties, but where they also nurtured their 'other' children, shrewdly offered guidance to their employers, and frequently became honorary members of their white 'families.'"[37] She refers to this social location as that of an "outsider within," a status that provides a privileged view of white society, yet one in which a black woman will never belong. She agrees with other black feminists that "we have to see clearly that we are a unique group set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges."[38] That different social location means that black women's way of knowing is different from Harding and Wood's standpoint epistemology.

I'll use Collins' words from her book *Black Feminist Thought* to describe the four ways she says black women collectively validate what they know:[39]

1. *Lived experience as a criterion of meaning.* For most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experience about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences.
2. *The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims.* For ideas to be tested and validated, everyone in the group must participate. To refuse to join in, especially if one really disagrees with what has been said, is seen as "cheating."
3. *The ethic of caring.* Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument. The sound of what is being said is as important as the words themselves, in what is, in a sense, a dialogue of reason and emotion.
4. *The ethic of personal accountability.* Assessments of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics.

Collins doesn't claim that a black feminist standpoint epistemology provides African American women with the best view of how the social world works. She rejects an additive model of oppression that would claim that poor, black, lesbian women are more oppressed than any other marginalized group. But when the same ideas are validated through black feminist thought, and from the standpoints

of other oppressed groups as well, those ideas become the least partial, most "objective" truths available.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: BENHABIB'S INTERACTIVE UNIVERSALISM

Seyla Benhabib has undertaken a formidable task. Recall that Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Locke, and Habermas believed "that reason is a natural disposition of the human mind, which when governed by proper education can discover certain truths."[40] Benhabib, who is a professor of political science and philosophy at Yale University, wants to maintain that a universal ethical standard is a viable possibility. But she also feels the force of three major attacks on Enlightenment rationality in general, and Habermas' discourse ethics in particular (see pages 242–243). Thus, she sets out to "defend the tradition of universalism in the face of this triple-pronged critique by engaging the claims of feminism, communitarianism, and postmodernism."[41] At the same time, she wants to learn from these theories and incorporate their insights into her interactive universalism. I'll discuss them in reverse order.

Postmodern critique. Recall that in his widely discussed 1984 treatise *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard declares that there are no longer any *grand narratives* on which to base a universal version of truth.[42] Postmodernists dismiss any *a priori* assumptions, or givens, that attempt to legitimate the moral ideals of the Enlightenment and Western liberal democracy. They are suspicious of consensus and Habermas' attempt to legislate rationality. Benhabib sums up the postmodern critique: "Transcendental guarantees of truth are dead; . . . there is only the endless struggle of local narratives vying with one another for legitimization."[43] She appreciates the postmodern insistence that a moral point of view is an accomplishment rather than a discovery, but she is not "content with singing the swan-song of normative thinking in general."[44] Benhabib holds out the possibility that instead of reaching a consensus on how everyone *should act*, interacting individuals can align themselves with a *common good*.

Communitarian critique. If there is one commitment that draws communitarians and postmodernists together, it is the "critique of Western rationality as seen from the perspective of the margins, from the standpoint of what and whom it excludes, suppresses, delegitimatizes, renders mad, imbecilic or childish."[45] Benhabib realizes the danger of pressing a global moral template onto a local situation. If we regard people as disembodied moral agents devoid of history, relationships, or obligations, we'll be unable to deal with the messiness of real-life contexts. To avoid this error, Benhabib insists that any panhuman ethic be achieved through interaction with collective concrete others—ordinary people who live in community—rather than imposed on them by a rational elite.

Feminist critique. Carol Gilligan, Deborah Tannen, Sandra Harding, Julia Wood, and Cheris Kramarae (see Chapter 36) all agree that women's experiences and the way they talk about them are different from men's. But, typical of rationalistic approaches, Habermas virtually ignores gender distinctions. His conception of discourse ethics speaks to issues of political and economic justice in the masculine-dominated public sphere. And he relegates the activities to which women have historically been confined—rearing children, housekeeping,

satisfying the emotional and sexual needs of the male, tending to the sick and the elderly—to a private sphere where norms of freedom, equality, and reciprocity don't seem to apply.[46] Because of its emphasis on open dialogue in which no topics are regarded as trivial, interactive universalism would avoid privatizing women's experiences.

Despite these three critiques, Benhabib believes that a new breed of universal ethic is possible. "Such a universalism would be interactive not legislative, cognizant of gender differences, not gender blind, contextually sensitive and not situation indifferent."[47] It would be a moral framework that values the diversity of human beliefs without thinking that every difference is ethically significant.[48] Perhaps it would include a commitment to help all people survive and thrive.

CRITIQUE: DO STANDPOINTS ON THE MARGINS GIVE A LESS FALSE VIEW?

As you might predict, many scientists and other objective theorists dismiss Harding and Wood's concept of *strong objectivity.* It certainly runs counter to their stated commitment to discovering universal truth and covering laws. What may surprise you is that a number of feminist thinkers are dubious as well. The first of three reservations is whether there is an essential quality of women that situates all of them at the same standpoint. Julia Wood says that the concept of women as a single social group is politically useful to bring about needed reforms, but is this reality or just needed fiction? Patricia Collins warns that "if African-American women's experiences are more different than similar, then black feminist thought does not exist."[49] She claims the similarities are greater than the differences—but can the same be said for all women? As proponents become more and more specific about the standpoints from which particular women communicate, the concept of group solidarity that is at the heart of standpoint theory becomes questionable.

Feminist scholars such as Susan Hekman and Nancy Hirschmann are concerned that Harding's version of standpoint theory underestimates the role of language in expressing one's sense of self and view of the world.[50] As theorists throughout this book have maintained, people's communication choices are never neutral or value-free, so people can't separate their standpoint from the language they use to describe it. The words they choose inevitably are influenced by their cultural and societal filters. This critique of standpoint theory doesn't negate the importance of situated knowledge, but it complicates our reception of anyone's take on reality, whether it comes from the center or the margins of the social fabric. In fact, voices from the edge might be particularly difficult to express, since linguistic conventions traditionally are controlled by the privileged. This point is developed in the context of *muted group theory* in the next chapter.

Finally, some critics see the concept of *strong objectivity* as inherently contradictory.[51] In postmodern fashion, Harding and Wood argue that standpoints are relative and can't be evaluated by any absolute criteria. Yet they propose that the oppressed are less biased or more impartial than the privileged. This appears to bring universal standards of judgment back into play. Thus, on the matter of transcendental truths, the theory seems to want to have it both ways.

Despite these difficulties, I find the logic of standpoint theory appealing. If all knowledge is tainted by the social location of the knower, then we would do well to start our search for truth from the perspective of people who are most sensitive

to inequities of power. They will have the least to lose if findings challenge the status quo. Wood acknowledges that we may have trouble figuring out which social groups are more marginalized than others. As a white, professional woman, is Wood lower on the social hierarchy than her African American male colleague who has attained the same faculty rank at the university? Standpoint theory doesn't say, but it clearly suggests that we should question much of the received wisdom that comes from a male-dominated, Western European research establishment and replace it when a *strong objectivity* provides a more complete picture of the world. The idea energizes Idaho State University rhetorician Lynn Worsham and others who believe that minority standpoints can be a partial corrective to the biased knowledge that now passes for truth:

> In what I consider, in all sincerity, to be a heroic and marvelous conception, Harding turns the tables on philosophy and the sciences and constructs a sort of feminist alchemy in which the idea of standpoint, revamped by postmodern philosophy, becomes the philosophers' stone capable of transforming the West's base materials into resources for producing a more "generally useful account of the world."

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What is common to the standpoints of *women, African Americans, the poor,* and *homosexuals* that may provide them with a *less false view* of the way society works?

2. How could we test the claim that *strong objectivity from women's lives* provides a more accurate view of the world than knowledge generated by a predominantly male research establishment?

3. I am a privileged white male who decided which theories would be covered in this book. Suppose I were a disadvantaged African American woman. What theories might I drop and which might I keep? Why might this be a ridiculous question?

4. *Standpoint epistemology* draws on insights from *Marxism, symbolic interactionism,* and *postmodernism.* Based on what you've read in this chapter, which of these intellectual influences do you see as strongest? Why?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Julia T. Wood, *Communication Theories in Action,* 3rd ed., Wadsworth, Belmont, CA, 2004, pp. 212–220.

Comprehensive statement: Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991.

Diverse forms of standpoint theory: Sandra Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies,* Routledge, New York, 2004.

Explanation and defense of strong objectivity: Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?" in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader,* pp. 127–140.

Reconstruction of scientific objectivity: Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms and Epistemologies,* Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, 1998.

Standpoint critique of science: Sandra Harding, *Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues*, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, 2006, pp. 80–97.

Avoiding essentialism: Julia T. Wood, "Gender and Moral Voice: Moving from Woman's Nature to Standpoint Epistemology," *Women's Studies in Communication,* Vol. 15, 1993, pp. 1–24.

Women and care: Julia T. Wood, *Who Cares? Women, Care, and Culture,* Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL, 1994.

Standpoint of women in communication discipline: Lynn O'Brien Hallstein (ed.), *Women's Studies in Communication,* Vol. 23, Spring 2000 (special issue on standpoint theories).

Black feminist thought: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* 2nd ed., Routledge, New York, 2000.

Collins' stand on standpoint theory: Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice,* University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, 1998, pp. 201–228.

Comparing two feminist theories: Julia T. Wood, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and Muted Group Theory: Commonalities and Divergences," *Women and Language,* Vol. 28, 2005, pp. 61–64.

Interactive universalism: Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics,* Routledge, New York, 1992.

Feminist critiques: Susan Hekman, "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited" in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader,* pp. 225–241; Lynn Worsham, "Romancing the Stones: My Movie Date with Sandra Harding," *Journal of Advanced Composition,* Vol. 15, 1995, pp. 565–571.

For self-scoring quizzes that will help you gauge your understanding of standpoint theory, click on Self-Help Quizzes under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com.*

CHAPTER 36

Critical tradition
Phenomenological tradition

Muted Group Theory

of Cheris Kramarae

Cheris Kramarae maintains that language is literally a *man*-made construction.

> The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men.[1]

According to Kramarae and other feminist theorists, women's words are discounted in our society; women's thoughts are devalued. When women try to overcome this inequity, the masculine control of communication places them at a tremendous disadvantage. Man-made language "aids in defining, depreciating and excluding women."[2] Women are thus a muted group.

For many years Kramarae was a professor of speech communication and sociology at the University of Illinois. She has also served as a dean for the International Woman's University in Germany and is now a visiting professor at the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon. She began her research career in 1974 when she conducted a systematic study of the way women were portrayed in cartoons.[3] She found that women were notable mostly by their absence. A quick survey of the cartoon art I've used in this book will show that little has changed since Kramarae's study. Only 20 of the 54 cartoons contain female characters, and only 10 of these women speak. All but two of the cartoonists are men.

Kramarae discovered that women in cartoons were usually depicted as emotional, apologetic, or just plain wishy-washy. Compared with the simple, forceful statements voiced by cartoon males, the words assigned to female characters were vague, flowery, and peppered with adjectives like *nice* and *pretty.* Kramarae noted at the time that women who don't appreciate this form of comic put-down are often accused by men of having no sense of humor or simply told to "lighten up." According to Kramarae, this type of male dominance is just one of the many ways that women are rendered inarticulate in our society. For the last 35 years Kramarae has been a leader in the effort to explain and alter the muted status of women and other marginalized groups.

MUTED GROUPS: BLACK HOLES IN SOMEONE ELSE'S UNIVERSE

The idea of women as a *muted group* was first proposed by Oxford University social anthropologist Edwin Ardener. In his monograph "Belief and the Problem of Women," Ardener noted the strange tendency of many ethnographers to claim to have "cracked the code" of a culture without ever making any direct reference to the half of society made up of women. Field researchers often justify this omission by reporting the difficulty of using women as cultural informants. Females "giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic," and generally make life difficult for scholars trained in the scientific (masculine) method of inquiry.[4] Ardener acknowledged the challenge, but he also reminded his colleagues how suspicious they'd be of an anthropologist who wrote about the men of a tribe on the sole basis of talking to the women.

Ardener initially assumed that inattention to women's experience was a problem of gender unique to social anthropology. But along with his Oxford co-worker Shirley Ardener, he began to realize that mutedness is due to the lack of power that besets any group occupying the low end of the totem pole. People with little clout have trouble giving voice to their perceptions. Mutedness doesn't mean that low-power groups are completely silent.[5] The issue is whether people can say what they want to say when and where they want to say it. Muted groups must change their language when communicating in the public domain, and thus cannot fully share their true thoughts.[6] As a result, they are often overlooked, muffled, and rendered invisible—"mere black holes in someone else's universe."[7]

Muted group
People belonging to low-power groups who must change their language when communicating publicly, thus, their ideas are often overlooked; e.g., women.

Cheris Kramarae is certain that men's dominant power position in society guarantees that the public mode of expression won't be directly available to women. Her extension of the Ardeners' initial concept offers insight into why women are muted and what can be done to loosen men's lock on public modes of communication. Kramarae argues that the ever-prevalent *public–private* distinction in language is a convenient way to exaggerate gender differences and pose separate sexual spheres of activity. This is, of course, a pitfall into which Deborah Tannen virtually leaps (see Chapter 34). Within the logic of a two-sphere assumption, the words of women usually are considered appropriate in the home—a "small world" of interpersonal communication. This private world is somehow less important than the "large world" of significant public debate—a place where the words of men resonate.

Elizabeth, who is now a grad student at Purdue University preparing to become a professor of critical rhetoric, describes how men's public discourse shapes the meaning of one of her favorite activities:

> I am a passionate knitter. In the dominant communication code, knitting is associated with domestic women. I cannot count the number of times when men have made jokes or comments about me preparing to be a good wife, or looking for a husband, while I am knitting. But I knit because I enjoy it. I love working with my hands and knitting makes a good change from schoolwork. My choice to knit has nothing to do with finding a husband or preparing to be a housewife. Still, even though knitting is an activity that is primarily engaged in by women, it is men who define its meaning.

Kramarae wonders what it would be like if there were a word that pointed to the *connection* of public and private communication. If there were such a word in everyone's speaking vocabulary, its use would establish the idea that both

spheres have equal worth and that similarities between women and men are more important than their differences. Since there is no such word in our lexicon, I think of this textbook as a *public* mode of communication. I am a male. I realize that in the process of trying to present muted group theory with integrity, I may unconsciously put a masculine spin on Kramarae's ideas and the perceptions of women. In an effort to minimize this bias, I will quote extensively from Kramarae and other feminist scholars. Kramarae is just one of many communication professionals who seek to unmask the systematic silencing of a feminine *voice.* I'll also draw freely on the words and experiences of other women to illustrate the communication double bind that Kramarae says is a feminine fact of life. This reliance on personal narrative is consistent with a feminist research agenda that takes women's experiences seriously.

THE MASCULINE POWER TO NAME EXPERIENCE

Kramarae starts with the assumption that "women perceive the world differently from men because of women's and men's different experience and activities rooted in the division of labor."[8] Kramarae rejects Freud's simplistic notion that "anatomy is destiny." She is certain, however, that power discrepancies between the sexes ensure that women will view the world in a way different from men. While women vary in many ways, in most cultures, if not all, women's talk is subject to male control and censorship. French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir underscored this common feminine experience when she declared, "'I am woman': on this truth must be based all further discussion."[9]

The problem facing women, according to Kramarae, is that further discussions about how the world works never take place on a level playing field. "Because of their political dominance, the men's system of perception is dominant, impeding the free expression of the women's alternative models of the world."[10]

Note that my phrase *level playing field* is a metaphor drawn from competitive team sports—an experience familiar to more men than women. This is precisely Kramarae's point. As possessors of the public mode of expression, men frame the discussion. If a man wants to contest the point about a tilted playing field, he can argue in the familiar idiom of sports. But a woman who takes issue with the metaphor of competition has to contest it with stereotypically masculine linguistic terms.

Mead's symbolic interactionist perspective asserts that the extent of knowing is the extent of naming (see Chapter 5). If this is true, whoever has the ability to make names stick possesses an awesome power. Kramarae notes that men's control of the dominant mode of expression has produced a vast stock of derogatory, gender-specific terms to refer to women's talking—*catty, bitchy, shrill, cackling, gossipy, chitchat, sharp-tongued,* and so forth. There is no corresponding vocabulary to disparage men's conversation.

In case you think this lexical bias is limited to descriptions of speech, consider the variety of terms in the English language to describe sexually promiscuous individuals. By one count, there are 22 gender-related words to label men who are sexually loose—*playboy, stud, rake, gigolo, player, Don Juan, lothario, womanizer,* and so on. There are more than 200 words that label sexually loose women—*slut, whore, hooker, prostitute, trollop, mistress, harlot, Jezebel, hussy, concubine, streetwalker, strumpet, easy lay,* and the like.[11] Since most surveys of sexual activity show that more men than women have multiple sexual partners, there's no doubt that the inordinate number of terms describing women serves the interests of men.

Under the socio-cultural tradition in Chapter 4, I introduced the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which claims that language shapes our perception of reality. Kramarae suggests that women are often silenced by not having a publicly recognized vocabulary through which to express their experience. She says that "words constantly ignored may eventually come to be unspoken and perhaps even unthought."[12] After a while, muted women may even come to doubt the validity of their experience and the legitimacy of their feelings.

MEN AS THE GATEKEEPERS OF COMMUNICATION

Even if the public mode of expression contained a rich vocabulary to describe feminine experience, women would still be muted if *their* modes of expression were ignored or ridiculed. Indeed, Kramarae describes a "good-ole-boys" cultural establishment of gatekeepers that virtually excludes women's art, poetry, plays, film scripts, public address, and scholarly essays from society's mass media. She notes that women were locked out of the publishing business for 500 years. It wasn't until the 1970s and the establishment of women's presses in the Western world that women could exercise ongoing influence through the print medium. For that reason, Kramarae sees traditional mainstream communication as *malestream expression.*

Gatekeepers
Editors and other arbiters of culture who determine which books, essays, poetry, plays, film scripts, etc. will appear in the massm edia.

Long before Edwin Ardener noted women's absence in anthropological research, Virginia Woolf protested women's nonplace in recorded history. The British novelist detected an incongruity between the way men characterize women in fiction and how women concurrently appear in history books. "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history."[13]

Feminist writer Dorothy Smith claims that women's absence from history is a result of closed-circuit masculine scholarship.

> Men attend to and treat as significant only what men say. The circle of men whose writing and talk was significant to each other extends backwards in time as far as our records reach. What men were doing was relevant to men, was written by men about men for men. Men listened and listen to what one another said.[14]

As an example of men's control of the public record, Cheris Kramarae cites the facts surrounding her change of name. When she was married in Ohio, the law required her to take the name of her husband. So at the direction of the state, she became *Cheris Rae Kramer.* Later, when it became legal for her to be her own person, she reordered the sounds and spelling to Cheris Kramarae. Many people questioned Kramarae about whether her name change was either loving or wise. Yet no one asked her husband why he kept *his* name. Kramarae points out that both the law and the conventions of proper etiquette have served men well.

SPEAKING ONLINE: THE POTENTIAL OF THE INTERNET

With the advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, some thought the technology might end men's gatekeeping role. Gender is difficult to ignore when face-to-face, but as social information processing theory observes, nonverbal cues indicating gender are often absent when communicating online (see Chapter 11). Kramarae was skeptical, noting that most leading computer scientists were male. Dominant Internet metaphors like *information superhighway* and *new frontier* bore a masculine flavor. In the Internet's early days, women often appeared only as

objects of men's sexual gratification, such as on sex-oriented listservs and popular pictures of *Playboy* nudes.[15]

Though recent history suggests that the Internet hasn't ended women's muting, Kramarae is cautiously optimistic. Her recent work identifies three forms of online communication that, with a bit of creativity, might give voice to muted groups.

Online education. Many women work at least eight hours a weekday—their first shift. The *second shift* begins when they commute home to cook dinner, tidy the house, and corral resistant children for bedtime. After completing these traditionally feminine chores, some women begin what Kramarae describes as the *third shift*—education. Compared to studying in brick-and-mortar classrooms, online education allows such students to learn around the demands of their first two shifts.[16] But despite the flexibility of online classes, men often dominate women in online class discussions. Kramarae argues that professors should serve as discussion moderators who actively work against muting and sexual harassment. She also criticizes university administrators for treating female online students like they're "on the sidelines of higher education" while ignoring the social realities that limit women's participation in traditional classrooms.[17]

Second shift/third shift
Work as family caretaker, then work as a student, both undertaken after working a full-time job.

Blogs. Kramarae is enthusiastic about *blogs*—online journals that are immediately publishable and available to all Internet users—because they are "more decentralized forms of interaction than the traditional essay or argument. . . . For example, many woman bloggers post personal stories, which may invite empathy, critical reflection, and an open conversation."[18] On the other hand, not all blogs are created equal. News media and Internet users in general regard political and news blogs as particularly important. Kramarae claims that these "A-list" blogs are in the masculine mode of public expression. Perhaps that's why women bloggers who enter this stream of conversation receive more abusive comments than do their male counterparts.[19]

Wikis. You've probably accessed Wikipedia, a free online encyclopedia editable by anyone. But you may not know that many other *wikis* exist, devoted to topics ranging from cooking to job hunting to *Harry Potter.* Kramarae experimented with the use of a wiki to co-author an academic article. Comparing with other methods of collaboration, she praised wikis as "more like a nurturing and reflective dialogue rather than a threatening and oppositional conflict which might silence one or the other collaborator."[20] You can access her wiki online,[21] but as of this writing, few have contributed to the essay. Only time will tell whether wikis foster the sort of creative collaboration that Kramarae and other feminists value.

SPEAKING WOMEN'S TRUTH IN MEN'S TALK: THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION

Assuming masculine dominance of public communication to be a current reality, Kramarae concludes that "in order to participate in society women must transform their own models in terms of the received male system of expression."[22] Like speaking a second language, this translation process requires constant effort and usually leaves a woman wondering whether she's said it "just right." One woman writer said men can "tell it straight." Women have to "tell it slant."[23]

Think back again to Mead's symbolic interactionism (see Chapter 5). His theory describes *minding* as an automatic pause before we speak in order to consider how those who are listening might respond. These periods of hesitation grow longer when we feel linguistically impoverished. According to Kramarae, women have to choose their words carefully in a public forum. "What women

want to say and can say best cannot be said easily because the language template is not of their own making."[24]

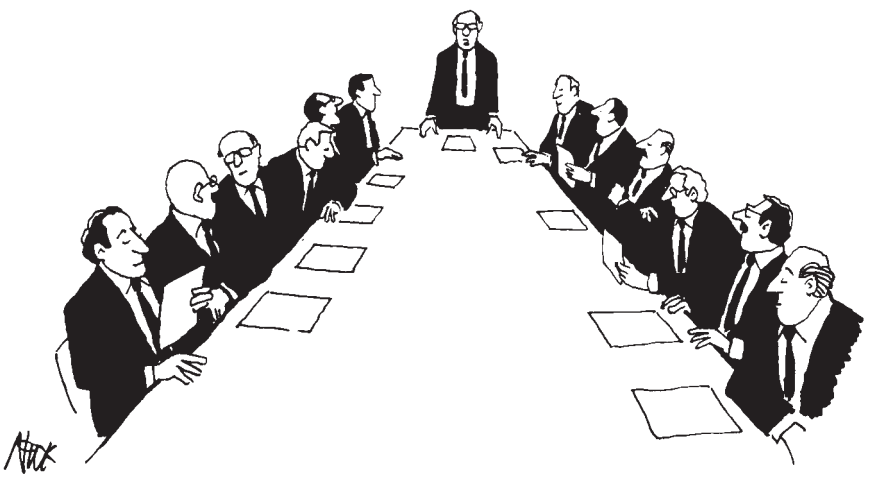
I have gained a new appreciation of the difficulty women face in translating their experiences into man-made language by discussing Kramarae's ideas with three women friends. Marsha, Kathy, and Susan have consciously sought and achieved positions of leadership in professions where women are rarely seen and almost never heard.

Marsha is a litigation attorney who was the first woman president of the Hillsborough County Bar Association (Florida) and was chair of a branch of the Federal Reserve Board that advised Alan Greenspan. A local magazine article spotlighted five "power players of Tampa Bay": The hero of the 1991 Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf, was one; Marsha was another. Marsha attributes her success to a conscious shifting of gears when she addresses the law.

> I've learned to talk like a man. I consciously lower my voice, speak more slowly, think bigger, and use sports analogies. I care about my appearance, but a woman who is too attractive or too homely has a problem. A man can be drop-dead gorgeous or ugly as sin and get along OK. I've been told that I'm the most feared and respected attorney in the firm, but that's not the person I live with day by day. After work I go home and make reindeer pins out of dog biscuits with my daughters.

Kathy is an ordained minister who works with high school students and young adults. She is the best speaker I've ever heard in a public address class. Working in an organization that traditionally excludes women from up-front speaking roles, Kathy is recognized as a star communicator. Like Marsha, she feels women have little margin for error when they speak in public.

> Women have to work both sides to pull it off. I let my appearance and delivery say feminine—jewelry, lipstick, warm soft voice. But I plan my content to appeal to men as well. I can't get away with just winging it. I prepare carefully, know my script, use lots of imagery from the world of guys. Girls learn to be interested in whatever men want to talk about, but men aren't used to listening to the things that interest women. I rarely refer to cooking or movies that might be dismissed as "chick flicks."



"The committee on women's rights will now come to order."

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Susan is the academic dean of a professional school within a university. When her former college closed, Susan orchestrated the transfer of her entire program and faculty to another university. She recently received the Professional of the Year award in her field. When she first attended her national deans' association, only 8 out of 50 members were women.

> I was very silent. I hated being there. If you didn't communicate by the men's rules you were invisible. The star performers were male and they came on strong. But no one was listening; everyone was preparing their own response. The meeting oozed one-upmanship. At the reception it was all "Hail fellow well met." You wouldn't dare say, "Look, I'm having this rough situation I'm dealing with. Have you ever faced this problem?" It was only when some of the women got together for coffee or went shopping that I could be open about my experiences.

Although their status and abilities clearly show that Marsha, Kathy, and Susan are remarkable individuals, their experience as women in male hierarchical structures supports muted group theory. Kramarae says that "men have structured a value system and a language that reflects that value system. Women have had to work through the system organized by men."[25] For women with less skill and self-confidence than Marsha, Kathy, or Susan, that prospect can be daunting.

SPEAKING OUT IN PRIVATE: NETWORKING WITH WOMEN

Susan's relief at the chance to talk freely with other female deans illustrates a central tenet of muted group theory. Kramarae states that "females are likely to find ways to express themselves outside the dominant public modes of expression used by males in both their verbal conventions and their nonverbal behavior."[26]

Kramarae lists a variety of back-channel routes that women use to discuss their experiences—diaries, journals, letters, oral histories, folklore, gossip, chants, art, graffiti, poetry, songs, nonverbal parodies, gynecological handbooks passed between women for centuries, and a "mass of 'noncanonized' writers whose richness and diversity we are only just beginning to comprehend."[27] She labels these outlets the female "sub-version" that runs beneath the surface of male orthodoxy.

Men are often oblivious to the shared meanings women communicate through alternative channels. In fact, Kramarae is convinced that "males have more difficulty than females in understanding what members of the other gender mean."[28] She doesn't ascribe men's bewilderment to biological differences between the sexes or to women's attempts to conceal their experience. Rather, she suggests that when men don't have a clue about what women want, think, or feel, it's because they haven't made the effort to find out.

When British author Dale Spender was editor of *Woman's Studies International Quarterly,* she offered a further interpretation of men's ignorance. She proposed that many men realize that a commitment to listen to women would necessarily involve a renunciation of their privileged position. "The crucial issue here is that if women cease to be muted, men cease to be so dominant and to some males this may seem unfair because it represents a loss of rights."[29] A man can dodge that equalizing bullet by claiming, "I'll never understand women."

ENRICHING THE LEXICON: A FEMINIST DICTIONARY

Like other forms of critical theory, feminist theory is not content to merely point out asymmetries in power. The ultimate goal of muted group theory is to change

the man-made linguistic system that keeps women "in their place." According to Kramarae, reform includes challenging dictionaries that "ignore the words and definitions created by women and which also include many sexist definitions and examples."[30] Traditional dictionaries pose as authoritative guides to proper language use but, because of their reliance on male literary sources, lexicographers systematically exclude words coined by women.

Kramarae and Paula Treichler have compiled a feminist dictionary that offers definitions for women's words that don't appear in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and presents alternative feminine readings of words that do. The dictionary "places *women* at the center and rethinks language from that crucially different perspective."[31] Kramarae and Treichler don't claim that all women use words the same way, nor do they believe women constitute a single, unified group. But they include women's definitions of approximately 2,500 words in order to illustrate women's linguistic creativity and to help empower women to change their muted status. Figure 36–1 provides a sample of brief entries and acknowledges their origin.

Appearance: A woman's appearance is her work uniform. . . . A woman's concern with her appearance is not a result of brainwashing; it is a reaction to necessity. (A Redstockings Sister)

Cuckold: The husband of an unfaithful wife. The wife of an unfaithful husband is just called a wife. (Cheris Kramarae)

Depression: A psychiatric label that . . . hides the social fact of the housewife's loneliness, low self-esteem, and work dissatisfaction. (Ann Oakley)

Doll: A toy playmate given to, or made by children. Some adult males continue their childhood by labeling adult female companions "dolls." (Cheris Kramarae)

Family man: Refers to a man who shows more concern with members of the family than is normal. There is no label *family woman,* since that would be heard as redundancy. (Cheris Kramarae)

Feminist: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." (Rebecca West)

Gossip: A way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting; a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role, but also gives the comfort of validation. (Deborah Jones)

Guilt: The emotion that stops women from doing what they may need to do to take care of themselves as opposed to everyone else. (Mary Ellen Shanesey)

Herstory: The human story as told by women and about women. . . . (Anne Forfreedom)

Ms.: A form of address being adopted by women who want to be recognized as individuals rather than being identified by their relationship with a man. (Midge Lennert and Norma Wilson)

One of the boys: Means NOT one of the girls. (Cheris Kramarae)

Parenthood: A condition which often brings dramatic changes to new mothers — "loss of job, income, and status; severing of networks and social contacts; and adjustments to being a 'housewife.' Most new fathers do not report similar social dislocations." (Lorna McKee and Margaret O'Brien)

Pornography: Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice. (Andrea Dworkin)

Sexual harassment: Refers to the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power. (Catharine MacKinnon)

Silence: Is not golden. "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you." (Zora Neale Hurston) "In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppressive, is violence." (Adrienne Rich)

FIGURE 36–1 Excerpts from Kramarae and Treichler's Feminist Dictionary
Kramarae and Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary: Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones*

SEXUAL HARASSMENT: COINING A TERM TO LABEL EXPERIENCE

Sexual harassment
An unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power.

Perhaps more than any other single entry in the Kramarae and Treichler dictionary, the inclusion of *sexual harassment* illustrates a major achievement of feminist communication scholarship—encoding women's experience into the received language of society. Although stories of unwanted sexual attention on the job are legion, women haven't always had a common term to label what has been an ongoing fact of feminine life.

In 1992, the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* published 30 stories of communication students and professionals who had been sexually embarrassed, humiliated, or traumatized by a person who was in a position of academic power. All but 2 of the 30 accounts came from women. As Kramarae notes, "Sexual harassment is rampant but not random."[32] The following testimony is typical.

> He was fifty; I was twenty-one. He was the major professor in my area; I was a first year M.A. student. His position was secure; mine was nebulous and contingent on his support of me. He felt entitled; I felt dependent. He probably hasn't thought much about what happened; I've never forgotten.
>
> Like most beginning students, I was unsure of myself and my abilities, so I was hungry for praise and indicators of my intellectual merit. . . . Then, one November morning I found a note in my mailbox from Professor X, the senior faculty member in my area and, thus, a person very important to me. In the note Professor X asked me to come by his office late that afternoon to discuss a paper I'd written for him.
>
> The conversation closed with his telling me that we should plan on getting to know each other and working together closely. I wanted to work with him and agreed. We stood and he embraced me and pressed a kiss on me. I recall backing up in surprise. I really didn't know what was happening. He smiled and told me that being "friends" could do nothing but enhance our working relationship. I said nothing, but felt badly confused. . . . This man was a respectable faculty member and surely he knew more about norms for student–faculty relationships than I did. So I figured I must be wrong to feel his behavior was inappropriate, must be misconstruing his motives, exaggerating the significance of "being friendly." . . . So I planned to have an "open talk" with him.
>
> I was at a disadvantage in our "open talk," because I approached it as a chance to clarify feelings while he used it as an occasion to reinterpret and redefine what was happening in ways that suited his purposes. I told him I didn't feel right "being so friendly" with him. He replied that I was over-reacting and, further, that my small-town southern upbringing was showing. . . . I told him I was concerned that he wasn't being objective about my work, but was praising it because he wanted to be "friends" with me; he twisted this, explaining he was judging my work fairly, BUT that being "friends" did increase his interest in helping me professionally. No matter what I said, he had a response that defined my feelings as inappropriate.[33]

Muted group theory can explain this woman's sense of confusion and lack of power. Her story is as much about a struggle for language as it is a struggle over sexual conduct. As long as the professor can define his actions as "being friendly," the female student's feelings are discounted—even by herself. Had she been equipped with the linguistic tool of "sexual harassment," she could have validated her feelings and labeled the professor's advances both inappropriate and illegal.

According to Kramarae, when *sexual harassment* was first used in a court case in the late 1970s, it was the only legal term defined by women. Senatorial response

to Anita Hill's testimony at the 1991 Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings showed that there is more work to be done before women can make their definition stick. For muted group theory, the struggle to contest man-made language continues.

CRITIQUE: DO MEN MEAN TO MUTE?

In 2005, a group of scholars met at George Mason University to celebrate muted group theory's insight into how people use language to shape power relations. Convention speakers from two continents addressed the theory's relevance not only for women, but also for any group at the margins of society. The convention reflected the theory's broad *community of agreement,* and their words, later published in a special issue of the journal *Women and Language,* revealed their dedication to *understanding people, clarifying values,* and *reforming society.*[34] Muted group theory stands up well to these criteria for good critical scholarship (see Chapter 3).

Feminist scholars insist that "the key communication activities of women's experiences—their rituals, vocabularies, metaphors, and stories—are an important part of the data for study."[35] In this chapter I've presented the words of 30 women who give voice to the mutedness they've experienced because they aren't men. I could have easily cited hundreds more. It strikes me that ignoring or discounting women's testimony would be the ultimate confirmation of Kramarae's muted group thesis.

Readers might be uncomfortable with muted group theory's characterization of men as oppressors and women as the oppressed. Kramarae addresses this issue:

> Some people using the theory have boxed oppression within discrete, binary categories, e.g., women/men; AfricanAmericans/EuroAmericans. A focus only on the categories of women and men, or white and non-white, for example, is simplistic and ignores other forms of struggle. . . .[36]

Kramarae acknowledges that oppression is more complex than identification with any one group. Yet she also states that "fixing names to the ones we call 'oppressors' may be necessary in order to have clear discussions" about oppressive power differences.[37] How can we name an oppressive group without speaking in terms of demographic categories? The theory's lack of clarity regarding this thorny question may frustrate activists looking for practical answers.

The question of men's motives is also problematic. Tannen criticizes feminist scholars like Kramarae for assuming that men are trying to control women. Tannen acknowledges that differences in male and female communication styles sometimes lead to imbalances of power but, unlike Kramarae, she is willing to assume that the problems are caused primarily by men's and women's "different styles." Tannen cautions that "bad feelings and imputation of bad motives or bad character can come about when there was no intention to dominate, to wield power."[38]

Kramarae thinks Tannen's apology for men's abuse of power is naïve at best. She notes that men often ignore or ridicule women's statements about the problems of being heard in a male-dominated society. Rather than blaming *style differences,* Kramarae points to the many ways that our political, educational, religious, legal, and media systems support gender, race, and class hierarchies.

Your response to muted group theory may well depend on whether you are a beneficiary or a victim of these systems.

For men and women who are willing to hear what Kramarae has to say, the consciousness-raising fostered by muted group theory can prod them to quit using words in a way that preserves inequities of power. The term *sexual harassment* is just one example of how women's words can be levered into the public lexicon and give voice to women's collective experience. Phrases like *glass ceiling* and *second shift* weren't even around when Kramarae and Treichler compiled their feminist dictionary in 1985, but now these terms are available to label social and professional injustices that women face. Cheris Kramarae's insights and declarations of women as a group muted by men have helped shake up traditional patterns of communication between the sexes.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What words do you use with your same-sex friends that you don't use with members of the opposite sex? Does this usage support Kramarae's hypothesis of *male control of the public mode of expression?*

2. In a journal article about *dictionary bias,* Kramarae wrote the sentence "I *vaginated* on that for a while."[39] Can you explain her wordplay in light of the principles of muted group theory? How does the meaning of the sentence change when you replace her provocative term with alternative verbs?

3. Given a definition of *sexual harassment* as "unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a *relationship of unequal power,"* can you think of a time you harassed or were harassed in this way by someone?

4. Do you tend to agree more with Tannen's genderlect perspective or Kramarae's muted group theory? To what extent is your choice influenced by the fact that you are a *male* or a *female?*

CONVERSATIONS

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In my conversation with Cheris Kramarae, she suggests that the creation of university departments of women's studies is an encouraging sign that women aren't doomed to remain muted. When I asked if there should also be a "men's studies" program, her unexpected response not only made me laugh but also underscored the rationale for her theory. Describing her *Encyclopedia of Women's Experience* entry on *witches,* she gives a fascinating account of how the meaning of that word has changed to women's disadvantage. I conclude the interview by asking Kramarae to look back on our conversation to see if I had said or done something that constrained what she said. See if you agree with her assessment.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: "Cheris Kramarae," in *Feminist Rhetorical Theories,* Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1999, pp. 38–68.

Comprehensive statement: Cheris Kramarae, *Women and Men Speaking,* Newbury House, Rowley, MA, 1981, pp. v–ix, 1–63.

Original concept of mutedness: Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women" and "The 'Problem' Revisited," in *Perceiving Women,* Shirley Ardener (ed.), Malaby, London, 1975, pp. 1–27.

Kramarae's reflection on her theory: Cheris Kramarae, "Muted Group Theory and Communication: Asking Dangerous Questions," *Women and Language,* Vol. 22, 2005, pp. 55–61.

Dictionary of women's words: Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary: Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones,* 2nd ed., Pandora, London, 1992.

Worldwide feminist scholarship: Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender (eds.), *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge* (4 vol.), Routledge, New York, 2000.

Unfulfilled promise of the Internet: Jana Kramer and Cheris Kramarae, "Women's Political Webs: Global Electronic Networks," in *Gender, Politics and Communication,* Annabelle Sreberny and Liesbet van Zoonen (eds.), Hampton, Cresskill, NJ, 2000, pp. 205–222.

Reviewing books on women in CMC vocations: Cheris Kramarae, "Women, Work and Computing/Unlocking the Clubhouse," *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 207–210.

Sexual harassment: Julia T. Wood (ed.), "Special Section—'Telling Our Stories': Sexual Harassment in the Communication Discipline," *Journal of Applied Communication Research,* Vol. 20, 1992, pp. 349–418.

Giving voice to women through online learning: Cheris Kramarae, *The Third Shift: Women Learning Online,* American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, Washington, DC, 2001.

Alternative interpretations of gender differences in discourse: Candace West, Michelle M. Lazar, and Cheris Kramarae, "Gender in Discourse," in *Discourse as Social Interaction,* Vol. 2, Teun van Dijk (ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997, pp. 119–143.

Further theoretical construction based on muted group and standpoint theories: Mark Orbe, "From the Standpoint(s) of Traditionally Muted Groups: Explicating a Co-Cultural Communication Theoretical Model," *Communication Theory,* Vol. 8, 1998, pp. 1–26.

Critique: Celia J. Wall and Pat Gannon-Leary, "A Sentence Made by Men: Muted Group Theory Revisited," *European Journal of Women's Studies,* Vol. 6, 1999, pp. 21–29.

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that illustrate muted group theory, click on
Suggested Movie Clips under Theory Resources at
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DIVISION SIX

Integration

CHAPTER 37

Common Threads in Comm Theories

The first four chapters in this book laid the groundwork for understanding the relationship among the wide range of theories you would study. Chapter 1 presented a working definition of both *theory* and *communication* so you could see what all these communication theories have in common. Chapter 2 introduced the objective–interpretive distinction that is the basis for placing theories along a scale according to their authors' core intellectual commitments. Chapter 3 laid out separate lists of six criteria for evaluating these two types of theories—another way of spotting similarities and differences. And Chapter 4 mapped out seven distinct scholarly traditions that spawned different types of theories, the offspring within a tradition bearing a marked family resemblance. Hopefully these integrative tools have helped you compare and contrast the theories you've studied throughout the course.

In this final chapter, I present another approach to identifying similarities and differences among the theories; I couldn't do this earlier because it wouldn't have made sense until you were familiar with them. I'll identify 10 recurring principles that in one form or another appear in multiple theories. I refer to these as *threads* because each strand weaves in and out of theories that might otherwise seem unrelated.

In order to qualify as a thread in the tapestry that is communication theory, I've decided that the principle or concept must be a significant feature of at least five different theories covered in the text. The feature could be the engine that drives a theory, a common characteristic of messages, a variable that's related to the process of communication, or the outcome of symbolic interaction. To avoid merely repackaging comparisons made previously, I restrict my selection of theoretical threads to ideas that span at least two of the traditions presented in Chapter 4, and also apply to a minimum of two communication contexts—interpersonal, group and public, mass, and cultural.

Threads
Explicit or implicit principles of communication that are integral to multiple and varied communication theories.

Unraveling these threads isn't intended to exhaust all possibilities—nor to be exhausting. I therefore limit the number of theories a thread ties together to no more than seven. Some of you might enjoy thinking of additional theories that I've either skipped over or missed by mistake.

Each thread is introduced with a *shorthand label* followed by a summary statement set in boldface. I then illustrate the principle with an *exemplar* theory that's clearly entwined with that thread. The rest of the section recounts how

other theorists employ this key idea, often with a twist, and sometimes at odds with how it's used in the exemplar. That's the *contrast* of this compare-and-contrast integration.

A review of how different theorists employ an idea can produce some *aha moments* of realization that deepen your understanding of the matrix of ideas you've studied this term. Consistent with the critique sections that close each theory chapter of the text, I end each thread discussion with a *cause for pause* reservation that those who warmly embrace the thread might ponder. Since almost all the ideas I recap are referenced in Chapters 5–36, with a few exceptions, I limit citations to chapter numbers in parentheses. This will give you an easy way to revisit how each theorist uses the core concept.

One final note. When I've presented these threads in my comm theory class, students tell me that the principles serve a dual purpose: the threads not only help make new connections between the theories, but also serve as a comprehensive review. I hope they do both of these for you.

1. MOTIVATION

Communication is motivated by our basic social need for affiliation, achievement, and control, as well as our strong desire to reduce our uncertainty and anxiety.

Social exchange theory holds that relationships develop based upon the perceived benefits and costs of interaction. Recall that in *social penetration theory,* Altman and Taylor adopt the principles of *social exchange theory* in order to predict when people will become more vulnerable in their depth and breadth of self-disclosure (Ch. 9). The greater the probable outcome (benefits minus costs), the more transparent a person will be. Of course, potential rewards and costs are in the eye of the beholder. As Katz' *uses and gratifications* maintains, people act to gratify their felt needs, but those needs vary from person to person. It follows, therefore, that the rewards and costs that satisfy those needs can be quite diverse as well. Despite this range of potential motives, almost every theory you've read about in the book invokes at least one of the five motives named in the thread. I've selected five different theories to illustrate the strong pull that these five different needs exert.

Motivation
Needs and desires that drive or draw us to think, feel, and act as we do.

Need for affiliation. Since *social penetration theory* describes the development of close relationships, it assumes a human need for affiliation is a strong panhuman drive and concentrates on how that desire is satisfied through mutual self-disclosure (Ch. 9).

Need for achievement. Hirokawa and Gouran's *functional perspective on group decision making* claims that problem-solving groups must analyze the problem, set goals, identify alternatives, and evaluate the relative merits of each option in order to achieve a high-quality solution (Ch. 18). Any member comment that doesn't directly address one of these four requisite functions is considered a distraction that disrupts the group's effort to achieve their goal.

Need for control. Hall's *cultural studies* is based on a broad Marxist interpretation of history that claims money is power. Society's "haves" exercise a hegemonic control over the "have-nots" in an effort to maintain the status quo. Corporately controlled media shape the dominant discourse of the day that frames the interpretation of events. They provide the guiding myths that shape our perception of the world and serve as a means of social control (Ch. 27).

Need to reduce uncertainty. Berger's *uncertainty reduction theory* suggests that the motive for most communication is to gain knowledge and create understanding. When we first meet another person, we want to discover information that will increase our ability to predict how future interaction will go (Ch. 10). Our desire to reduce uncertainty is especially high when we know we'll see someone in the future, the other person has something we want, or the person is acting in a weird way.

Need to reduce anxiety. Burke's "Definition of Man" suggests that the language of perfection makes us all feel guilty that we aren't better than we are. Guilt is his catchall term to cover every form of anxiety, tension, embarrassment, shame, and disgust intrinsic to the human condition. His *dramatism* offers two ways to get rid of this noxious feeling. The first option is to confess our sin and inadequacy and then ask for forgiveness. The second option is to blame someone else—redemption through victimage (Ch. 23).

Cause for pause: If it's true that all of my communication—including this book—is undertaken solely to meet my own personal needs and interests, then it strikes me that I am a totally selfish person. I don't doubt that my desire for affiliation, achievement, and control shape much of my conversation, as does my desire to reduce my levels of doubt and fear. But I prefer to think that I'm drawn by these desires rather than driven to them by an irresistible force. There are times when I could (and should) say no to the pull of these needs out of a care for others or a sense of ethical responsibility. As the two lexical roots of the word suggest, *responsibility* implies being *able* to *respond*. To the extent that any theory of motivation suggests I have no choice, I choose to be skeptical.

2. SELF-IMAGE

Communication affects and is affected by our sense of identity, which is strongly shaped within the context of our culture.

Mead's ***symbolic interactionism*** claims that our concept of self is formed through communication (Ch. 5). By taking the role of the other and seeing how we look to them, we develop our sense of identity. In turn, this looking-glass self shapes how we think and act within the community. According to Aronson and Cooper's revisions of *cognitive dissonance theory*, dissonance negatively impacts our self-image until we find a way to dissipate this distressing feeling (Ch. 17).

Self-image
Identity; a mental picture of who I see myself to be, which is greatly influenced by the way others respond to me.

Three theories that address culture deal with the relationship between culture and identity. In her *face-negotiation theory*, Ting-Toomey defines face as our public self-image (Ch. 32). She says that people raised in individualistic cultures tend to have an *I-identity* and are concerned with saving face. People born into collectivistic cultures almost always have a *we-identity* and are mainly concerned with giving face to others. Giles' *communication accommodation theory* postulates that during intergroup encounters, people whose identity is tied to their membership in a social or cultural group will communicate in a way that diverges from the speaking style of out-group members (Ch. 31). Philipsen's study of Nacirema and Teamsterville *speech codes* illustrates Giles' contention. The ethnographer found that every Nacirema seeks to be a unique, independent self, whereas the Teamsterville code defines residents as bundles of social roles (Ch. 33).

Cause for pause: Self-concept is a major topic discussed within the field of communication. The accepted wisdom suggests that most of us have been put down by others and need to find ways to boost our self-esteem. As a counterpoint

to this concern, social psychologists have identified a fundamental attribution error—a basic perceptual bias we consistently show.[1] When we have success, we interpret it as the result of our hard work and ability, but when others have that same success, we tend to think of them as lucky. Conversely, when others fail, we consider it their own fault, but when we fail, we blame others or curse the fickle finger of fate. As a corrective to this biased perception, we should consider giving others the benefit of the doubt while holding ourselves to a more rigorous standard of accountability.

3. CREDIBILITY

Our verbal and nonverbal messages are validated or discounted by others' perception of our competence and character.

More than two thousand years ago, ***The Rhetoric*** of Aristotle used the term ethical proof (*ethos*) to describe the credibility of the speaker, which affects the probability that the speech will be persuasive. Aristotle defined *ethos* as a combination of a speaker's perceived intelligence or competence, character or trustworthiness, and goodwill toward the audience (Ch. 22). Since credibility is in the eye of the beholder, audience perceptions of the speaker's ability, virtue, and concern for their well-being can change while he or she is speaking.

Credibility
Theintell igence, character, and goodwill that audience members perceive in a message source.

Two other theories of influence employ credibility as an explanation for the persuasive effects of a message. Sherif's *social judgment theory* claims that a wide latitude of acceptance among listeners and readers increases the possibility of significant attitude change (Ch. 15). High source credibility is an effective way to expand the range of discrepant messages they'll consider. Petty and Cacioppo's *elaboration likelihood model* is the theory of public and personal influence that claims that credibility facilitates persuasion, but ELM isn't optimistic about credibility's long-term effects. That's because we usually process credibility cues through a peripheral route that leads to short-term attitude change that's vulnerable to challenge and doesn't predict behavior (Ch. 16).

Burgoon's *expectancy violations theory* identifies communicator reward valence as a key variable in predicting the effect of words or deeds that surprise the other person. This index is the sum total of all positive and negative attributes that the other person brings to the encounter plus the potential he or she has to reward or punish us in the future (Ch. 7). In like manner, for election studies based on the second level of McCombs and Shaw's *agenda-setting theory,* researchers not only monitor the frequency of candidate attributes mentioned by the media, but also note the affective tone of these references. The way the media frame a public figure's competence, personality, and morality clearly affects voters' perception of a candidate's credibility and has a major effect on the election (Ch. 30). Harding and Wood's *standpoint theory* recognizes that women, racial minorities, and others on the margins of society have low credibility in the eyes of those who have higher status. But the irony of this negative judgment is that the powerless occupy a position that affords them a less false view of social reality than is available to the overprivileged who look down on them (Ch. 35).

Cause for pause: All the theories cited in this thread regard perceived credibility as a valuable asset in the communication process. But as ELM points out, our focus on the source of a message may cause us to lose sight of the intrinsic value of what's being said. Before embracing the speaker's point of view, we might ask ourselves, "Would I think that this is such a good idea if it were presented by someone less

attractive, sexy, or popular?" A parallel question is equally appropriate when we don't like or respect the message source: "Just because this idea is voiced by a creep I can't stand, does that mean it's totally wrong and without merit?"

4. EXPECTATION

What we expect to hear or see will affect our perception, interpretation, and response during an interaction.

Expectation
Inhu man interaction, our anticipation of how others will act or react toward us.

Burgoon's ***expectancy violations theory*** defines expectation as what we anticipate will happen rather than what we might desire (Ch. 7). In interpersonal encounters, our expectations are shaped by the cultural and situational context; communicator characteristics such as age, gender, appearance, personality, and style of speaking; and the nature of our relationship. And according to Burgoon's subsequent *interaction adaptation theory,* we change our interaction position as a result of our expectations. When our expectations are violated, we react either positively or negatively depending on the violation valence and the communicator's reward valence.

Expectation is integral to other interpersonal theories as well. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a major implication of the looking-glass self described by Mead's *symbolic interactionism*. Others tend to behave the way we expect them to act; they become what we behold (Ch. 5). Berger's *uncertainty reduction theory* states that the expectation of future interaction increases our motivation to reduce uncertainty (Ch. 10). This prediction is echoed in Walther's *social information processing theory*. According to his *hyperpersonal perspective* extension of SIP, this anticipation of future interaction coupled with an exaggerated sense of similarity results in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The person who is perceived to be wonderful starts acting that way (Ch. 11).

Theories introduced in the media-effects section classify expectation as a crucial variable. Gerbner's *cultivation theory* maintains that a steady diet of symbolic violence on television creates an exaggerated fear that the viewer will be physically threatened, mugged, raped, or killed. This expectation causes heavy viewers to have a general mistrust of others, which leads them to urge more restrictions and the use of force against those whom they fear (Ch. 29).

As Burgoon indicates, culture strongly affects our expectations. According to Ting-Toomey's *face-negotiation theory*, interdependent people raised in a collectivistic culture expect others to support their public image—to give them "face"—while their independent counterparts reared in an individualistic culture have no such expectation (Ch. 32).

Cause for pause: Expectations are projections of our perceptions into the future—we anticipate a repeat performance. Perceptions are interpretations of sensory experience occurring in the present. The two concepts are easy to confuse and tricky to measure. Since we never can know for sure what another person experiences, theories that appeal to the concept of expectation may sound more definitive than they really are.

The first four threads of motivation, self-image, credibility, and expectation that I've laid out are psychological variables that strongly affect communication. But they don't necessarily involve "creating and interpreting messages," the activity I suggested in Chapter 1 that sets the discipline of communication apart. The remaining six threads I discern running through multiple theories do have that message focus.

5. AUDIENCE ADAPTATION

By mindfully creating a person-centered message specific to the situation, we increase the possibility of achieving our communication goals.

Audience adaptation
Thes trategic creation or adjustment of a message in light of the audience characteristics and specifics etting.

Person-centered messages described in Delia's ***constructivism*** are the epitome of adaptation to an audience of one. After selecting multiple goals, the communicator develops a message plan tailored to a particular person in a specific situation (Ch. 8). According to Delia, not everyone possesses the cognitive complexity to pull it off. But those who are able to draw upon a broad array of interpersonal constructs are more likely to achieve their goals.

Sherif's *social judgment theory* predicts that those who want to influence another will be most successful if they first figure out the other's latitude of acceptance, and then craft a persuasive message that falls within it (Ch. 15). Petty and Cacioppo's *elaboration likelihood model* suggests that the persuader first assess whether the target audience is ready and able to think through issue-relevant arguments that support the advocate's position. If not, the persuader can still achieve a temporary change of attitude by focusing attention on peripheral cues (Ch. 16).

The idea of strategic or thoughtful adaptation to an audience isn't limited to theories of interpersonal communication. In a public address context, Aristotle's entire *Rhetoric* is a comprehensive analysis of how audiences respond to different types of messages and messengers (Ch. 22). For example, in order for a speaker to adjust his or her message so as to appear credible to listeners, the speaker must first figure out the characteristics and attitudes of the audience. Burke's *dramatism* is even more concerned with the speaker's ability to successfully identify with the audience. Without identification there is no persuasion. To the extent that the speaker can establish common ground by demonstrating a similar background, personality, speaking style, and belief and value system, the speech will be successful (Ch. 23).

In an intercultural setting, Giles' *communication accommodation theory* focuses on parties' adjustment of their speech styles. CAT regards convergence of speaking styles as a natural outcome of wanting to be accepted by the other, usually drawing a positive response. Divergence—accentuating differences through manner of speech—occurs when the communicator is concerned with maintaining his or her distinctive group identity. As all the theories in this thread would predict, divergence induces a negative response from the other.

Cause for pause: All of these theories suggest that for maximum effectiveness, we should consciously adapt our message to the attitudes, actions, or abilities of the audience. Makes sense. There is, however, a danger that in doing so we'll lose the authenticity of our message or the integrity of our own beliefs. Adjusting becomes pandering when we say whatever others want to hear. Raymond Bauer's article "The Obstinate Audience" suggests a third intriguing possibility—that audience adaptation ends up changing the speaker more than the speaker changing the audience.[2] If so, the counterattitudinal advocacy studies of Festinger's *cognitive dissonance theory* might explain this surprising prediction (Ch. 17).

6. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.

This statement of social construction is taken directly from Pearce and Cronen's ***coordinated management of meaning*** (Ch. 6). They see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world as opposed to social scientists who they describe as detached observers trying to discover singular Truth. Because CMM claims that people jointly create the social worlds in which they live, the theorists urge us to ask, "What are we doing? What are we making together? How can we make better social worlds?" Like CMM, Deetz' *critical theory of communication in organizations* challenges the traditional idea that communication is merely the transmission of information or that it describes an independent reality. Language is constitutive; it is constantly creating rather than merely representing what already exists (Ch. 21). But unlike CMM, Deetz' version of social construction focuses on the issue of power. He describes the covert way managers use language to gain workers' consent to practices that expand corporate control over their lives.

Social construction
Theco mmunal creation of the social world in which we live.

Other theories of language, relationships, and media regard communication as creating meaning rather than reflecting it. Mead's *symbolic interactionism* describes how our concept of self is formed by the verbal and nonverbal communication of significant others (Ch. 5). Baxter's second generation of *relational dialectics* states that communication is constitutive in that it creates the contradictions all relational partners experience. But our communication also creates fleeting moments of mutual consummation, completion, or wholeness that support a close relationship in the midst of dialectical tension (Ch. 12). Watzlawick's *interactional view* sees every family as playing a one-of-a-kind game with homemade rules that create the family's own reality—one that's often destructive. He regards the function of therapy as helping members frame an alternative social reality in which they can survive, and perhaps even thrive (Ch. 14).

McLuhan's *media ecology* describes a more subtle construction process, summarized in his statement that we shape our tools and they in turn shape us (Ch. 25). McLuhan claimed that television and other communication inventions change the sensory environment in which we live. In this mass age, the medium is the message, and also the massage.

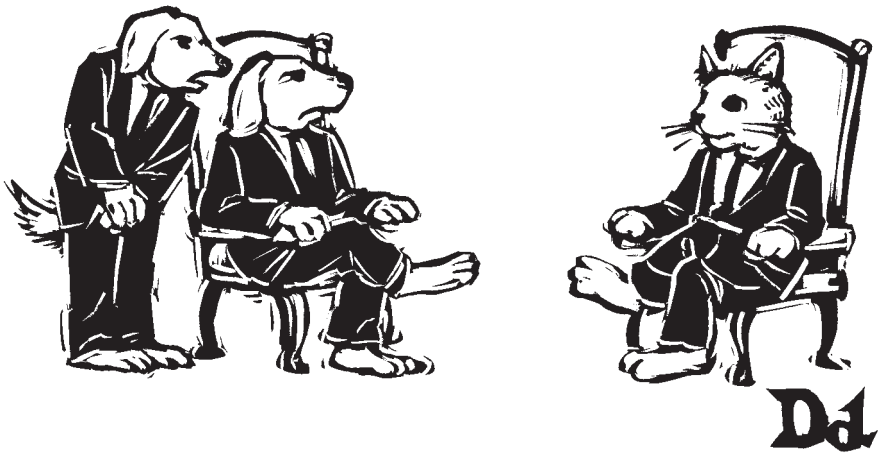
Cause for pause: The range of theories just cited shows that the idea of social construction is well-established in the field of communication. But is there a foundational reality that language can describe, however poorly? As I ask in the Questions to Sharpen Your Focus at the end of the chapter on *CMM* (Ch. 6), are you willing to give up the notion of a Truth you can count on for a linguistically created social reality that has no existence apart from how it's talked about?

7. SHARED MEANING

Our communication is successful to the extent that we share a common interpretation of the signs we use.

Geertz and Pacanowsky's ***cultural approach to organizations*** describes culture as webs of significance, that is, systems of shared meaning. In light of this definition, Geertz said we should concern ourselves not only with the structures of cultural webs, but also with the process of their spinning—communication. Applying Geertz' ideas to organizations, Pacanowsky focuses on the collective interpretation of stories, metaphors, and rituals (Ch. 20). Philipsen defines a *speech code* as a historically enacted, socially constructed system of terms, meanings, premises, and rules pertaining to communicative conduct (Ch. 33). He

Shared meaning
People's common interpretation or mutual understanding of what a verbal or nonverbal messages ignifies.



"You'll have to phrase it another way. They have no word for 'fetch.'"

© Drew Dernavich/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

champions ethnography—participant observation within the community—as the way to determine what a speech code means to those who use it.

Petronio's *communication privacy management* theory states that persons who are told or given access to private information become co-owners of that information. It's possible that all co-owners will be on the same page concerning future disclosure, but that shared meaning isn't automatic. CPM says that co-owners need to negotiate mutually agreeable privacy rules about letting others in on the secret (Ch. 13).

Unlike the theories just cited, others describe the road to mutual understanding as bumpy and contentious. As the title of their theory suggests, Pearce and Cronen's *coordinated management of meaning* insists that meaning is socially created and must be constantly managed. Shared interpretation (what they call *coherence*) does not, however, imply that those parties will see eye to eye. Pearce says that two people might coordinate their conversation and actions with each other even when they do not—and perhaps should not—agree (Ch. 6).

Along with most interpretive theorists, Deetz regards meanings to be in people rather than in words, but he goes on to ask, "*Whose* meanings are in people?" His *critical theory of communication in organizations* condemns the corporate executive suite for seeking to impose their meanings on workers and other stakeholders through both overt and covert means (Ch. 21).

Hall's *cultural studies* levels the same charge against those who control the media, calling the practice hegemony. The theorist doesn't regard hegemony as a plot or conspiracy among media practitioners, yet the end result is that media conglomerates and other culture industries establish the meanings that shape society. Viewing culture from a Marxist perspective, Hall sees media as powerful ideological tools that frame interpretation of events for the benefit of the haves over the have-nots (Ch. 27). Barthes' *semiotics* describes how this works. The media take a denotative sign and use it as a signifier to be paired with a different signified. The image that results is a new connotative sign that borrowed the original sign but has lost its historical meaning (Ch. 26).

Cause for pause: The idea that it's people rather than words that *mean* suggests that texts don't interpret themselves. If that's true, shared interpretation is an

accomplishment of the audience rather than of the clarity of the message. Pushed to an extreme, however, the meaning-in-persons idea implies that what is said face-to-face, written on a page, or portrayed on a screen makes little difference. Every text is wide open for interpretation, no matter what the communicator intended. As an author, I'm uneasy about this notion. I take words and images seriously and try to choose them carefully. When I write about a theory, my aim is to create a mutual understanding that's consistent with what I had in mind. To the extent that this takes place, I see communication as successful. You're then free to respond as you choose.

8. NARRATIVE

We respond favorably to stories and dramatic imagery with which we can identify.

Fisher's ***narrative paradigm*** claims that people are essentially storytellers. We experience life as a series of ongoing narratives—as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends (Ch. 24). Almost all communication is story that we judge by its narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. In other words, does a story hang together? Does it ring true? Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory* can't predict when a story or other dramatizing message will catch fire among group members. But when it does, the resultant fantasy chain shows that it not only rings true, but also creates a symbolic explosion. When a group's fantasies are shared this way, the result is symbolic convergence—a common group consciousness and often a greater cohesiveness (Ch. 19).

Narrative
Story; words and deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.

Burke saw all life as drama. But, unlike Fisher, he believed it's difficult to discern the meaning behind the lines. His dramatism offers a toolbox of literary techniques, such as the dramatistic pentad, so that rhetorical critics can figure out the speaker or author's motivation (Ch. 23). He was convinced that the master plot of most public communication is the purging of guilt by blaming others for misfortune or failure.

Gerbner's *cultivation theory* says that television has become the dominant force in our society because it tells most of the stories, most of the time. Because the stories that TV runs are filled with symbolic violence, the world it creates for heavy viewers is a mean and scary place. These stories gradually cultivate fear by slowly changing viewers' perception of their social environment (Ch. 29).

Three other theories refer to story as a major means of creating a desired end. Pearce and Cronen's *coordinated management of meaning* claims that the stories we tell are a way to manage meaning (Ch. 6). Our stories told are always framed by our identities, our relationships with others, the episodes to which they refer, and the culture of which we are a part. Trying to coordinate our stories told with our stories lived is a lifetime project that will never be complete. Geertz and Pacanowsky's *cultural approach to organizations* regards oft-repeated stories as a way to socialize new employees. For participant observers, the stories are lenses through which to view a unique corporate culture (Ch. 20). And Tannen observes that the disparity between men's and women's *genderlect styles* can be seen in how they tell a story. As the heroes of their own stories, men try to elevate their status. By telling stories about others, or downplaying their role in their narratives, women seek connection (Ch. 34).

Cause for pause: I believe stories are both fascinating and powerful. In most chapters I've used extended examples to make the theories come alive. But as Warnick reminds us in her commentary on the *narrative paradigm*, there are bad stories that can effectively lead people astray or destroy them. Unless we filter

narratives through the values of justice, goodness, and integrity that Fisher and the National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication advocate, we could embrace a lie or perpetuate error. Well-told tales are inherently attractive, but they might not all be good.

9. CONFLICT

Unjust communication stifles needed conflict; healthy communication can make conflict productive.

Deetz' ***critical theory of communication in organizations*** describes managerial efforts to suppress conflict through discursive closure rather than address legitimate disagreements through open discussion (Ch. 21). He believes that corporations and their stakeholders would be well served by more conflict rather than less when decisions are made. The managerial quest for greater control counters any attempt to establish democracy in the workplace. Opportunities for employees to voice complaints are a chance to let off steam but rarely lead to meaningful participation in the decisions that affect their lives. From a *cultural studies* perspective, Hall sees the same corporate control of communication in the way the mass media interpret current events. Disputes are discussed, but that discussion is framed in a way that furthers the ideology of those who already have power (Ch. 27). Money talks.

Conflict
Thes truggle between people who are contesting over scarce resources or who perceive that they have incompatible values andgoals .

Theories of face-to-face interaction also deal with the use of power to quell conflict rather than work through differences. The *double bind* that Watzlawick describes in his *interactional view* is a classic case of the dominant person in a complementary relationship insisting that the low-power person act as if the relationship were symmetrical (Ch. 14). Pearce and Cronen's *coordinated management of meaning* refers to culture-war arguments as reciprocal diatribes that demonize the opponent rather than invite a response the speaker would honestly consider (Ch. 6). CMM offers an alternative model of communication that doesn't minimize differences, yet consciously seeks to move away from power-play politics. Pearce's model of the cosmopolitan communicator describes one who speaks in such a way that others will listen, and listens in a way that encourages others to speak.

Other theories suggest that conflict must be headed off by proactively talking about the potential problem. A core principle of Petronio's *communication privacy management* warns that when co-owners of private information don't effectively negotiate and follow mutually held privacy rules, boundary turbulence is the likely result (Ch. 13). And Collins' *black feminist thought* version of *standpoint theory* maintains that any woman who refuses to join the discussion is cheating, especially if she really disagrees with what's been said (Ch. 35).

Cause for pause: As a mediator, I try to facilitate straight talk between parties in conflict. Confronting the problem but not the person is a well-accepted principle of conflict resolution in the West. But, in her *face-negotiation theory,* Ting-Toomey warns that a free and open discussion of conflicting needs and interests within a collectivistic society is counterproductive (Ch. 32). In societies where giving face to others is the cultural norm, straight talk creates great embarrassment. Those of us from Western individualistic cultures need to appreciate and employ subtlety when we're together with people from the East.

10. DIALOGUE

Dialogue is transparent conversation that often creates unanticipated relational outcomes due to parties' profound respect for disparate voices.

Dialogue
Transparent conversation that often creates unanticipated relational outcomes due to parties' profound respect for disparate voices.

Drawing upon Bakhtin's conception of dialogue, Baxter's second generation of ***relational dialectics*** describes dialogue as an aesthetic accomplishment that produces fleeting moments of unity through a profound respect for disparate voices (Ch. 12). Baxter stresses that dialogue doesn't bring resolution to the contradictions that parties experience in close relationships. But dialogue and relationship rituals that honor multiple voices provide assurance that living within changing tensions can be exhilarating, never boring.

In their *coordinated management of meaning*, Pearce and Cronen adopt Buber's view of dialogue, which is more optimistic than Bakhtin's. The theorists agree that dialogue can't be produced on demand, but they think we can experience it if we seek and prepare for it. Buber says dialogue takes place only in I–Thou relationships where we regard our partner as the very one we are. We stand our own ground yet are profoundly open to the other. We meet in the "between" and the result is usually unanticipated. Dialogue is typically not a way to accomplish a task; what we get is an authentic relationship. Pearce believes that dialogic communication is learnable, teachable, and contagious (Ch. 6).

With his *experential approach* to healthy relationships, psychologist Carl Rogers was even more confident that dialogue is within reach when people seek it. He laid out three necessary and sufficient conditions for us to fulfill before another will reciprocate: We must demonstrate (1) congruence between our words and who we genuinely are, (2) unconditional positive regard for the other, and (3) listening with empathic understanding (see Relationship Development). To the extent that we fulfill these communication criteria, Rogers believed that others and our relationship with them will be transformed.

Most communication theorists who discuss dialogue focus on the openness or transparency that Rogers' first condition describes. According to Altman and Taylor's *social penetration theory*, the vulnerability of self-disclosure is the way close relationships develop (Ch. 9). Kramarae doesn't disagree, but suggests that it's difficult for women to take part as equal partners in a dialogue while speaking in a man-made language in which the rules for its use are frequently controlled by men. Because women are often a *muted group* in the public sphere, they've developed back-channel routes to openly share their experiences with other women (Ch. 36).

Habermas' *discourse ethics* imagines an ideal speech situation where people are free to speak their minds without fear or constraint (Ch. 18). He believes that any ethical conclusions they reach will be valid only when (1) everyone has a chance to participate regardless of their status, (2) all participants exchange their views in a spirit of reciprocity and mutual understanding, and (3) their ethical judgments apply equally to everyone. It's the kind of forum that Deetz in his *critical theory of communication in organizations* suggests all corporate stakeholders deserve (Ch. 21).

Cause for pause: In the communication discipline, *dialogue* is a term that's often used and highly favored, yet advocates have a tough time describing what it is or how to achieve it. The boldfaced statement at the beginning of the thread is my best effort to put the concept into words, but I'm not sure I've captured the essence of what many theorists mean when they use the term.

In practice, dialogue is also exceedingly rare. Whether we use the criteria set forth by Baxter, Pearce, Rogers, or Habermas, probably less than 1 in 1,000 conversations would qualify as dialogue. Scarcity doesn't negate the value of this authentic and supportive form of communication. But it does suggest that a

full-blown theory of relational communication must also take into account legitimate authority, jealousies, boredom, insecurities, interruptions, distractions, time pressures, headaches, and all the other "stuff" that make everyday communication less than ideal. Even so, I look forward to being pleasantly surprised the next time I'm fortunate enough to take part in dialogic communication.

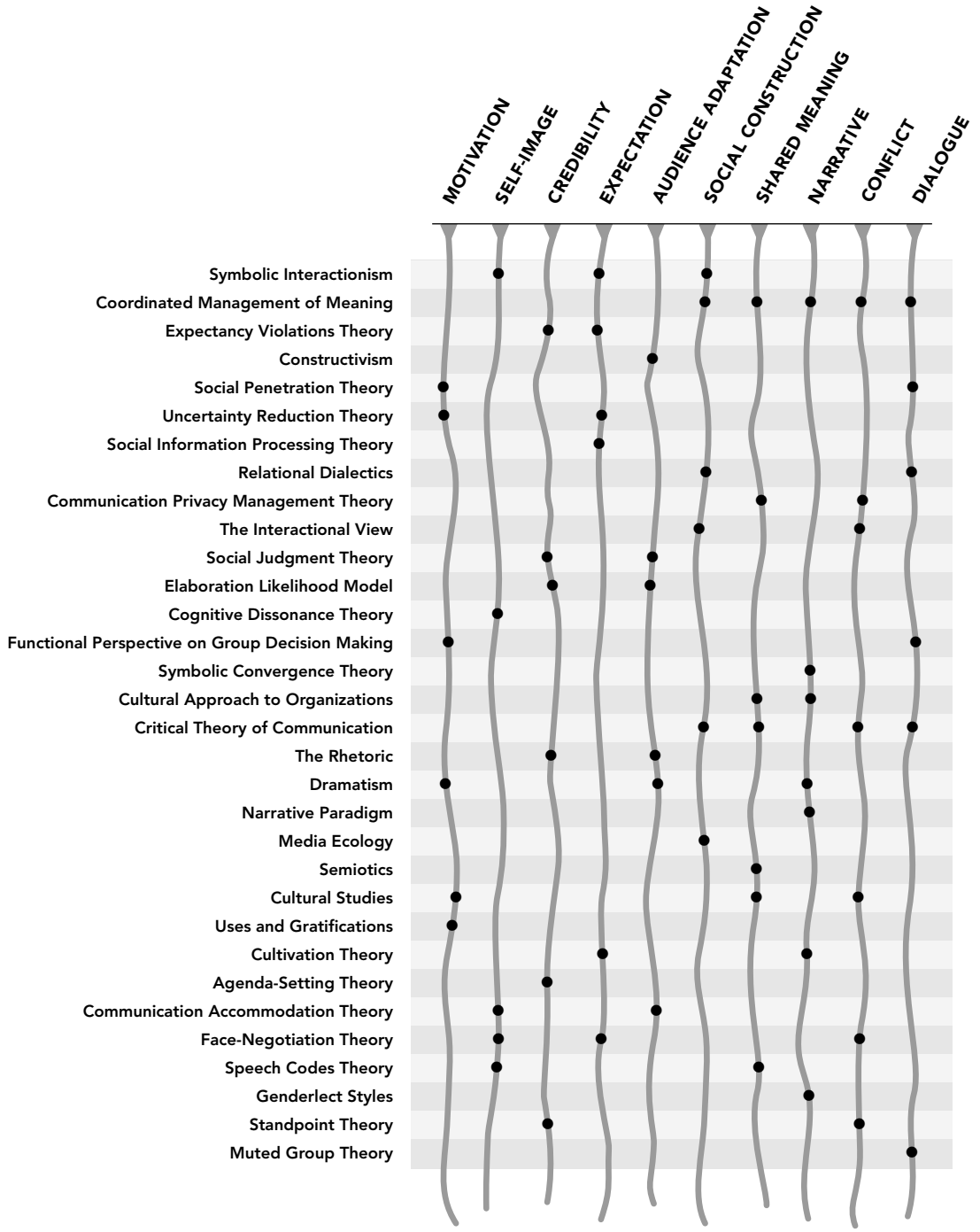


FIGURE 37–1 Common Threads That Run Through Communication Theories

UNRAVELING THE THREADS

I hope these 10 threads have helped you integrate the theories covered this term in a new way. It's possible, however, that you are overwhelmed by the 75 connections I've drawn. The 10 threads could be tangled together in your mind like intertwined pieces of string in a drawer. If so, Figure 37–1 may help bring order out of chaos.

In the figure, the labeled threads are separated and stretched out vertically. These threads are crosshatched horizontally with the 32 major theories featured in the text. Each marked intersection represents a link described in this chapter. You can let your eyes run down a thread and quickly review theories that draw upon that idea. This knowledge can help you when you study social construction, audience adaptation, dialogue, or any of the other principles in your course work ahead. Conversely, you can select a given theory and scan across the page to see which principles it employs. These are the kinds of connections you'll want to review if you're writing a term paper or looking to the theory for practical advice. I also hope you'll be intrigued by some links that didn't occur to you when you first studied the theories.

A FINAL NOTE

In the first chapter I compared this book to a collection of charts—a scenic atlas of communication maps that professionals in the field consider worth viewing. I hope you've found your first look intriguing and now have a desire to explore particular areas. I urge you not to be content with watching other people's travel slides; the study of communication isn't an armchair activity. By all means, consider the perspectives of Burgoon, Baxter, Burke, and all the others. But also take a look for yourself. Unlike many academic disciplines, communication is one in which we're all practitioners. Remember, however, that unexamined raw experience is not a substitute for true understanding. You need to ponder, probe, speculate, and follow your hunches if you wish to take advantage of the rich database that everyday talk provides.

Appendix B offers my recommendations for feature films that illustrate different aspects of the communication process. If you liked my extended references to *Nell, Bend It Like Beckham, Thank You for Smoking, Erin Brockovich,* and *When Harry Met Sally*, you may want to rent a DVD and cull your own examples of theoretical principles at work.

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The field is wide open for new ideas. There's no reason you have to stop with a first look at communication theory or settle for a secondhand glance. You've probably been mulling over an idea not suggested in these pages. Perhaps that notion could be developed and become the focus of a new chapter in a revised edition of this book. Choose the theoretical perspective or communication context that fascinates you, and switch from casual observation to an intensive gaze. Keep looking.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Which *thread* most intrigues you? Are the theories it connects *objective* or *interpretive*? What *communication principle* that you've learned or discovered isn't represented in this chapter? Why do you think it's missing?

2. Which five theories presented in this book are your personal favorites? Do they tend to line up with a *thread* or *principle*, come out of a single *scholarly tradition*, or address a particular *communication context*?

3. In Figure 37–1, some theories appear in quite a few more threads than others. Can you spot a pattern that explains this uneven distribution?

4. What questions do you have about communication that weren't addressed by any of the theories covered in this book? Under what *communication contexts* would theories that speak to these issues fit best?

A SECOND LOOK

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Self-image: Bruce Bracken (ed.), *Handbook of Self-Concept: Developmental, Social, and Clinical Considerations,* Wiley, New York, 1995.

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APPENDIX A

Abstracts of Theories

What follows are brief summaries of the 32 theories featured in the book. There's potential danger, of course, in trying to capture the gist of a theory in a few cryptic lines, but I didn't craft the abstracts to convey new concepts. Instead, these capsule statements are designed to jog your memory of ideas already considered. The abstracts are arranged in the same order as the theories appear in the text. At the end of each summary, I've labeled the communication theory tradition or traditions that undergird each theorist's thought. I hope you'll find the summaries as well as their intellectual roots helpful.

Interpersonal Communication

Mead's symbolic interactionism: Humans act toward people, things, and events on the basis of the meanings they assign to them. Once people define a situation as real, it has very real consequences. Without language there would be no thought, no sense of self, and no socializing presence of society within the individual. (Socio-cultural tradition)

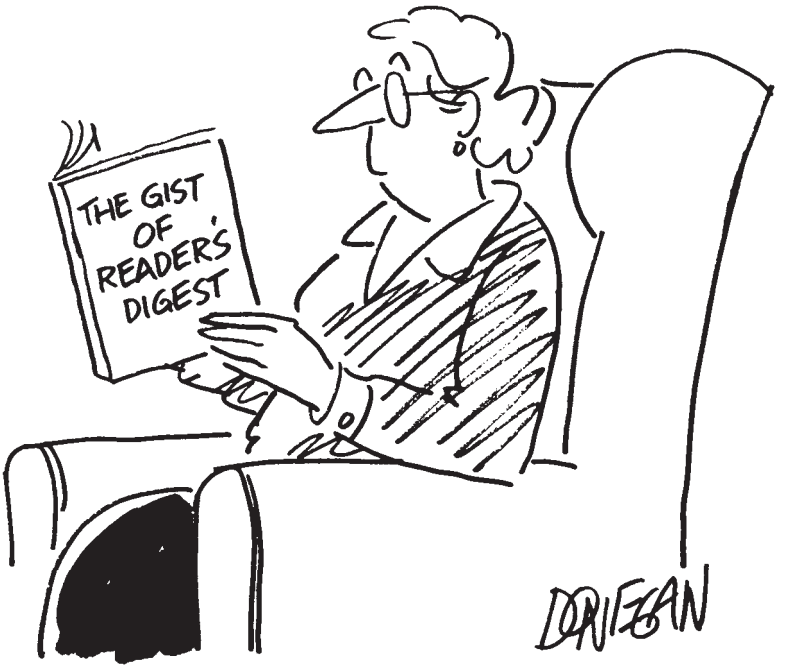
Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning: Persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create. They can achieve coherence through common interpretation of their stories told. They can achieve coordination by meshing their stories lived. Dialogic communication, which is learnable, teachable, and contagious, improves the quality of life for everyone. (Socio-cultural and phenomenological traditions)

Burgoon's expectancy violations theory: Violating another person's interpersonal expectations can be a superior strategy to conformity. When the meaning of a violation is ambiguous, communicators with a high reward valence can enhance their attractiveness, credibility, and persuasiveness by doing the unexpected. When the violation valence or reward valence is negative, they should act in a socially appropriate way. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Delia's constructivism: Individuals who are more cognitively complex in their perceptions of others have the mental capacity to construct sophisticated message plans that pursue multiple goals. They then have the ability to deliver person-centered messages that achieve the outcomes they desire. (Socio-psychological and rhetorical traditions)

Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory: Interpersonal closeness proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of anticipated present and future outcomes. Lasting intimacy requires continual and mutual vulnerability through breadth and depth of self-disclosure. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Berger's uncertainty reduction theory: When people meet, their primary concern is to reduce uncertainty about each other and their relationship. As verbal output, nonverbal warmth, self-disclosure, similarity, and shared communication



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networks increase, uncertainty decreases—and vice versa. Information seeking and reciprocity are positively correlated with uncertainty. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Walther's social information processing theory: Based solely on the linguistic content of computer-mediated communication (CMC), parties who meet online can develop relationships that are just as close as those formed face-to-face—though it takes longer. Because online senders select, receivers magnify, channels promote, and feedback enhances favorable impressions, CMC may create hyperpersonal relationships. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics: Social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contradictory or opposing tendencies such as integration–separation, stability–change, and expression–nonexpression. Quality relationships are constituted through dialogue, which is an aesthetic accomplishment that produces fleeting moments of unity through a profound respect for the disparate voices. (Phenomenological tradition)

Petronio's communication privacy management theory: People believe they own and have a right to control their private information; they do so by using personal privacy rules. When others are told, they become co-owners of the information. If co-owners don't effectively negotiate mutually agreeable privacy rules about telling third parties, boundary turbulence is the likely result. (Socio-cultural and cybernetic traditions)

Watzlawick's interactional view: Relationships within a family system are interconnected and highly resistant to change. Communication among members has a content component and a relationship component that centers on issues of control. The system can be transformed only when members receive outside help to reframe their metacommunication. (Cybernetic tradition)

Sherif's social judgment theory: The larger the discrepancy between a speaker's position and a listener's point of view, the greater the change in attitude—as long as the message is within the hearer's latitude of acceptance. High ego-involvement usually indicates a wide latitude of rejection. Messages that fall there may have a boomerang effect. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model: Message elaboration is the central route of persuasion that produces major positive attitude change. It occurs when unbiased listeners are motivated and able to scrutinize arguments that they consider strong. Message-irrelevant factors hold sway on the peripheral path, a more common route that produces fragile shifts in attitude. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory: Cognitive dissonance is an aversive drive that causes people to (1) avoid opposing viewpoints, (2) seek reassurance after making a tough decision, and (3) change private beliefs to match public behavior when there is minimal justification for an action. Self-consistency, a sense of personal responsibility, or self-affirmation can explain dissonance reduction. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Group and Public Communication

Hirokawa and Gouran's functional perspective on group decision making: Groups make high-quality decisions when members fulfill four requisite functions: (1) problem analysis, (2) goal setting, (3) identification of alternatives, and (4) evaluation of positive and negative consequences. Most group communication disrupts progress toward accomplishing these functional tasks, but counteractive communication can bring people back to rational inquiry. (Socio-psychological and cybernetic traditions)

Bormann's symbolic convergence theory: Dramatizing messages are group members' expressed interpretations of events other than those in the here-and-now. Message content becomes a group fantasy theme when it spontaneously chains out among members. The sharing of group fantasies creates symbolic convergence—group consciousness and often cohesiveness. Fantasy theme analysis across groups can reveal a rhetorical vision. (Rhetorical and socio-psychological traditions)

Geertz and Pacanowsky's cultural approach to organizations: Humans are animals suspended in webs of significance that they themselves have spun. An organization doesn't have a culture, it is a culture—a unique system of shared meanings. A nonintrusive ethnographic approach interprets stories, rites, and other symbolism to make sense of corporate culture. (Socio-cultural tradition)

Deetz' critical theory of communication in organizations: The naïve notion that communication is merely the transmission of information perpetuates managerialism, discursive closure, and the corporate colonization of everyday life. Language is the principal medium through which social reality is produced and reproduced. Managers can further a company's health and democratic values by coordinating stakeholder participation in corporate decisions. (Critical and phenomenological traditions)

Aristotle's rhetoric: Rhetoric is the art of discovering all available means of persuasion. A speaker supports the probability of a message by logical, ethical, and emotional proofs. Accurate audience analysis results in effective invention; arrangement; style; delivery; and, presumably, memory. (Rhetorical tradition)

Burke's dramatism: Life is drama. The dramatistic pentad of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose is the critic's tool for discovering a speaker's motives. The ultimate motive of rhetoric is the purging of guilt. Without audience identification with the speaker, there is no persuasion. (Rhetorical and semiotic traditions)

Fisher's narrative paradigm: People are storytelling animals; almost all forms of human communication are fundamentally narrative. Listeners judge a story by whether it hangs together and rings true with the values of an ideal audience. Thus, narrative rationality is a matter of coherence and fidelity. (Rhetorical tradition)

Mass Communication

McLuhan's media ecology: The media must be understood ecologically. Changes in communication technology alter the symbolic environment—the socially constructed, sensory world of meanings. We shaped our tools—the phonetic alphabet, printing press, and telegraph—and they in turn have shaped our perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behavior. Thus, the medium is the message. (Sociocultural tradition)

Barthes' semiotics: The significant visual sign systems of a culture affirm the status quo by suggesting that the world as it is today is natural, inevitable, and eternal. Mythmakers do this by co-opting neutral denotative signs to become signifiers without historical grounding in second-order connotative semiotic systems. (Semiotic tradition)

Hall's cultural studies: The mass media function to maintain the ideology of those who already have power. Corporately controlled media provide the dominant discourse of the day that frames interpretation of events. Critics should seek not only to interpret culture, but to change it. Media audiences do have the capacity to resist hegemonic influence. (Critical tradition)

Katz' uses and gratifications: The media-effects tradition focuses on what media do to people. Uses & grats focuses on what people do with media. Media consumption is a deliberate choice designed to satisfy particular needs. Media don't have uniform effects on the audience; effects vary according to the individual reasons for media use. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Gerbner's cultivation theory: Television has become society's storyteller. Heavy television viewers see a vast quantity of dramatic violence, which cultivates an exaggerated belief in a mean and scary world. Mainstreaming and resonance are two of the processes that create a homogeneous and fearful populace. (Sociocultural and socio-psychological traditions)

McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory: The media tell us (1) what to think about and (2) how to think about it. The first process (agenda setting) transfers the salience of items on their news agenda to our agenda. The second process (framing) transfers the salience of selected attributes to prominence among the pictures in our heads. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Cultural Context

Giles' communication accommodation theory: People in intercultural encounters who see themselves as unique individuals will adjust their speech style and content to mesh with others whose approval they seek. People who want to reinforce a strong group identification will interact with those outside the group in a way that accentuates their differences. (Socio-psychological tradition)

Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory: People who have an interdependent self-image in a collectivistic culture are concerned with giving other-face or mutual-face, so they adopt a conflict style of avoiding or integrating. People who have an independent self-image in an individualistic culture are concerned with protecting self-face, so they adopt a conflict style of dominating. (Socio-cultural and socio-psychological traditions)

Philipsen's speech codes theory: Through ethnography of communication, we know all cultures have multiple speech codes that involve a distinctive psychology, sociology, and rhetoric. The meaning of a speech code is determined by speakers and listeners, and is woven into speech itself. Artful use of the code can explain, predict, and control talk about talk. (Socio-cultural tradition)

Tannen's genderlect styles: Male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication. Masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects rather than as inferior or superior ways of speaking. Men's report talk focuses on status and independence; women's rapport talk seeks human connection. (Semiotic and socio-cultural traditions)

Harding and Wood's standpoint theory: Different locations within the social hierarchy affect what is seen. The standpoints of marginalized people provide less false views of the world than do the privileged perspectives of the powerful. Strong objectivity requires that scientific research start from the lives of women, the poor, gays and lesbians, and racial minorities. (Critical tradition)

Kramarae's muted group theory: Man-made language aids in defining, depreciating, and excluding women. Women are less articulate in public because the words and the norms for their use have been devised by men. As women cease to be muted, men will no longer maintain their position of dominance in society. (Critical and phenomenological traditions)

APPENDIX B

Feature Films That Illustrate Communication Theories

(With a strong assist from my cinematic colleagues Russ Proctor, Ron Adler, and Darin Garard)

Interpersonal Messages

The Miracle Worker (general)
Pygmalion / My Fair Lady (symbolic interactionism)
Nell (symbolic interactionism)
American Teen (symbolic interactionism)
*Ghost World** (symbolic interactionism)
Black Like Me (symbolic interactionism)
The Color Purple (symbolic interactionism)
Mask (symbolic interactionism)
Stand and Deliver (symbolic interactionism)
She's All That (symbolic interactionism)
Lars and the Real Girl (CMM)
Chocolat (CMM)
Don Juan DeMarco (CMM)
Life Is Beautiful (CMM)
Anger Management (CMM)
*Atonement** (expectancy violations)
The African Queen (expectancy violations)
*Almost Famous** (expectancy violations)
How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days (expectancy violations)
*Crash** [2004] (expectancy violations)
The Sting (expectancy violations)
Hotel Rwanda (constructivism)
*Dead Man Walking** (constructivism)
To Kill a Mockingbird (constructivism)
Anne of Green Gables (constructivism)

Relationship Development

*Four Weddings and a Funeral** (general)
*Good Will Hunting** (general)
Annie Hall (general)
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (general)
*Brothers McMullen** (general)
*Bridget Jones's Diary** (general)
Before Sunrise / Before Sunset** (social penetration)
Shrek (social penetration)
*Coming Home** (social penetration)
*The Breakfast Club** (social penetration)
Driving Miss Daisy (uncertainty reduction)
My Big Fat Greek Wedding (uncertainty reduction)
*Witness** (uncertainty reduction)
Down in the Delta (uncertainty reduction)
*Sideways** (uncertainty reduction)
The Chosen [1982] (uncertainty reduction)
The Social Network (SIP)
Catfish (SIP)
You've Got Mail (SIP)
Sleepless in Seattle (SIP)

*Asterisk indicates movie is rated R.

Relationship Maintenance

Breaking Away (general)
*Children of a Lesser God** (relational dialectics)
*Knocked Up** (relational dialectics)
Beaches (relational dialectics)
Bend It Like Beckham (relational dialectics)
*The Story of Us** (relational dialectics)
Mr. Holland's Opus (relational dialectics)
Whale Rider (relational dialectics)
I've Loved You So Long (CPM)
*The Darjeeling Limited** (CPM)
*Rachel Getting Married** (interactional view)
*Little Miss Sunshine** (interactional view)
*Soul Food** (interactional view)
*Ordinary People** (interactional view)
Pieces of April (interactional view)
*Parenthood** (interactional view)
What's Eating Gilbert Grape (interactional view)
*When a Man Loves a Woman** (interactional view)
*One True Thing** (interactional view)

Influence

Norma Rae (general)
*Dead Man Walking** (social judgment)
A Civil Action (social judgment)
*Schindler's List** (social judgment)
An Inconvenient Truth (ELM)
12 Angry Men (ELM)
*My Cousin Vinny** (ELM)
*Up in the Air** (cognitive dissonance)
Swing Kids (cognitive dissonance)
*Thank You for Smoking** (cognitive dissonance)
10 Things I Hate About You (cognitive dissonance)
Casablanca (cognitive dissonance)

Group Communication

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (general)
Fantastic Mr. Fox (general)
Stagecoach [1939] (general)
Apollo 13 (functional perspective)
Flight of the Phoenix (functional perspective)
Poseidon [2006] (functional perspective)
*Alien** (functional perspective)
*The 40-Year-Old Virgin** (symbolic convergence)
Dead Poets Society (symbolic convergence)
Paper Clips (symbolic convergence)

Organizational Communication

*Office Space** (general)
Gung Ho (cultural approach)
Outsourced (cultural approach)

Friday Night Lights (cultural approach)
For Love or Money (cultural approach)
*Good Morning, Vietnam** (cultural approach)
Up the Down Staircase (cultural approach)
*The Firm** (cultural approach)
*A Few Good Men** (cultural approach)
*Erin Brockovich** (critical theory)
The Devil Wears Prada (critical theory)
The Corporation (critical theory)
*North Country** (critical theory)
*Roger & Me** (critical theory)
*The Insider** (critical theory)
*Silkwood** (critical theory)

Public Rhetoric
*The King's Speech** (general)
Clarence Darrow (general)
Inherit the Wind (general)
Judgment at Nuremberg (general)
The Great Debaters (rhetoric)
Julius Caesar (rhetoric)
The Apostle (rhetoric)
*My Cousin Vinny** (rhetoric)
*The Verdict** (rhetoric)
*Amistad** (rhetoric)
*Nixon** (dramatism)
Malcolm X (dramatism)
Julius Caesar (dramatism)
*Hurricane** (dramatism)
Snow Falling on Cedars (dramatism)
*The Widow of St. Pierre** (dramatism)
Lars and the Real Girl (narrative paradigm)
*Smoke** (narrative paradigm)
Big Fish (narrative paradigm)
Forrest Gump (narrative paradigm)

Media and Culture
*Blade Runner** (media ecology)
*Network** (media ecology)
*Broadcast News** (media ecology)
*Medium Cool** (media ecology)
Being There (media ecology)
*Donnie Darko** (semiotics)
*Amarcord** (semiotics)
The Manchurian Candidate [1962] (semiotics)
Stardust Memories (semiotics)
*The Seventh Seal** (semiotics)
The Year of Living Dangerously (cultural studies)
*Bamboozled** (cultural studies)
Good Night and Good Luck (cultural studies)
*Blood Diamond** (cultural studies)
*Fahrenheit 9/11** (cultural studies)

Media Effects
*Network** (general)
*Bob Roberts** (general)
The Candidate (general)
*Nurse Betty** (uses & grats)
Avalon (cultivation)
Being There (cultivation)
All the President's Men (agenda-setting)
*Wag the Dog** (agenda-setting)
Absence of Malice (agenda-setting)
Quiz Show (agenda-setting)

Intercultural Communication
A Passage to India (general)
*Do the Right Thing** (general)
*Tsotsi** (general)
Lone Star (general)
*Crash** (CAT)
The Right Stuff (CAT)
Zelig (CAT)
Whale Rider (face-negotiation)
*The Joy Luck Club** (face-negotiation)
Iron and Silk (face-negotiation)
Antz (face-negotiation)
Gung Ho (face-negotiation)
Shall We Dance? [1997] (face-negotiation)
*Gran Torino** (speech codes)
Dances with Wolves (speech codes)
Kramer vs. Kramer (speech codes)
Hoop Dreams (speech codes)
Billy Elliot (speech codes)
Mean Girls (speech codes)
Clueless (speech codes)

Gender and Communication
*When Harry Met Sally** (genderlect styles)
The Break-Up (genderlect styles)
Sleepless in Seattle (genderlect styles)
*Diner** (genderlect styles)
Steel Magnolias (genderlect styles)
*Slumdog Millionaire** (standpoint)
The Cider House Rules (standpoint)
*Beloved** (standpoint)
*Waiting to Exhale** (standpoint)
*White Man's Burden** (standpoint)
*North Country** (muted group)
The Little Mermaid (muted group)
Fried Green Tomatoes (muted group)
*Maria Full of Grace** (muted group)
Tootsie (muted group)
Legally Blonde (muted group)

APPENDIX C

NCA Credo for Ethical Communication

Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live. Therefore, we, the members of the National Communication Association, endorse and are committed to practicing the following principles of ethical communication.

We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.

We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.

We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.

We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.

We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.

We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.

We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.

We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.

We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others.

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ENDNOTES

Chapter 1: Launching Your Study of Communication Theory

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