

# Survey of Communication Study/Chapter 5 - Communication Theory

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## Chapter 5

### Communication Theory

**Chapter Objectives:**

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define theory and explain its functions.
- Demonstrate how theories are developed.
- Explain what makes a useful theory.
- Understand the idea of Theoretical Paradigms.
- Explain the Empirical Laws Paradigm.
- Explain the Human Rules Paradigm.
- Explain the Systems Theory Paradigm.
- Explain the Rhetorical Theory Paradigm.
- Explain the Critical Theory Paradigm.

# H

ow did the universe begin? Where did it all come from? Scientists, theologians, and educators have been debating this topic for centuries. A common place for this debate occurs in school textbooks—should they teach creationism or the big bang theory? How you answer this question depends on the theoretical perspective you hold. In either case your theoretical perspective includes some common features—reasons to justify your theory, and evidence you use to prove that it is correct. Creationists cite the Bible or other religious texts as proof of their theoretical perspective. Advocates of the big bang theory argue that the earth emerged 13.7 billion years ago and cite the continued expansion of space (Hubble’s Law) as verifiable proof that this theory is correct. But how do we know which theory is right? Let’s apply this same reasoning to communication. Think about the many ways you develop, and try to answer, questions about the “right” ways to communicate. We want to leave the intricacies of the theoretical debate between creationism and the big bang theory to our colleagues in the physical sciences, religious studies, and philosophies. However, we’ll use this chapter to explore theoretical issues relevant to the study of Communication. By the end of this chapter you should understand what communication theories are, their functions, how we evaluate them, and the five major theoretical paradigms shaping Communication study today. You’ll also discover just how important communication theory is to your everyday life.

## Defining Theory

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hen we mention the word theory to our students, we often watch their eyes glaze over as if it is the most boring thing we could talk about. Students sometimes have the misperception that theory has absolutely no relevance in their lives. But, did you know that you use and test theories of communication on a daily basis? Really! Whether you know it or not, your theories guide how you actually communicate. For example, you may have a theory that attractive people are harder to talk to than less attractive people. If you believe this is true, you are probably missing opportunities to get to know entire groups of people. While our personal theories guide our communication, there are problems with them.

They generally are not complete or sophisticated enough to help us fully understand the complexities of the communication in which we engage. Therefore, it is essential that we go beyond personal theories to develop and understand ones that guide both our study and performance of communication. Before we get into what function theories perform for us, let's define what we mean by theory. Hoover (1984) defines **theory** as "*a set of inter-related propositions that suggest why events occur in the manner that they do*" (p. 38). Foss, Foss and Griffin (1999) define theory as, "*a way of framing an experience or event—an effort to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world*" (p. 8). Take a moment to reflect on the elegant simplicity of these two definitions. Any thoughts or ideas you have about how things work in the world or your life are your personal theories. Your theories are essentially your framework for how the world works, and therefore guide how you function in the world. You can begin to see how important it is that your theories are solid. As you'll see, well-developed Communication theories help us better understand and explain the communicative behaviors of ourselves and others.

## Functions of Communication Theory

# W

hile theories in many disciplines can be hard for some to understand, in a field like Communication, our theories are important to understand because they directly impact our daily lives. In this respect, they serve several functions in guiding our communication. The first function theories serve is that they help us organize and understand our communication experiences. We use theories to organize a broad range of experiences into smaller categories by paying attention to "common features" of communication situations (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 2003). For example, Deborah Tannen (2001) argues that men and women talk in significantly different ways and for significantly different reasons. As you well know, these differences cannot be applied to all men and women. We all have our own unique style of communication. But, theories on gender communication help us organize and understand the talk of the different genders in a more simplified context so we can understand general patterns of communication behavior. This helps us make appropriate decisions in gendered communication situations.

A second function of theories is that they help us choose what communicative behaviors to study. Theories guide where we choose to look, what we look at, and how we look at communicative phenomenon. Remember back to Chapter 1 where we defined communication study. Theories focus our attention on certain aspects of that definition. Let's look again at our example from above. If you find that Tannen's theories regarding how men and women talk differ from your own perceptions, you might choose to more closely study the talk of men and women to see if you can somehow rectify the difference in theoretical perspectives. We're sure you do this on a personal level almost every day. If you want to persuade someone to do something for you, you probably have a theory about what strategies you can use to get them to do what you want. Your theory guides how you approach your persuasive

attempts, and what you look for to see if you were successful or not.

#### Communication Theory and You

Go to the self-help section of any bookstore, or type in a search at Amazon.com, and you'll find countless books explaining how men and women communicate. In cross-gendered romantic relationships, people have long been theorizing how communication should work in these relationships. These books come and go, some with greater popularity than others. But, they do have the impact of altering our "best representation" of how these relationships work. What are some of your theories about how to communicate in a cross-gendered romantic relationship? How confident are you that your perspectives are correct?

A third function of theories is that they help us broaden our understanding of human communication. Scholars who study communication share theories with one another through books, journal articles, and at conferences. The sharing of theories generates dialogue, which allows us to further the theories developed in this field. Again, using Tannen's example above, she chose to write her theoretical conclusions for a non-academic audience in order to help dispel many of our common misperceptions (theories) about how men and women communicate. For many in the public, this was the first time they encountered theories that contrasted their own personal theories about the communication of men and women. Interestingly, Tannen received some criticism about her choice to take her theories to the "public," despite the tremendous benefit it has had for broadening the culture's perceptions of gendered communication. It's likely that you discuss your personal theories of communication with others on a regular basis to get their feedback.

A fourth function of theories is that they help us predict and control our communication. When we communicate, we try to predict how our interactions will develop so we can maintain a certain level of control. For example, you can use Tannen's theories of gendered communication to help you predict and control social situations in which people of different genders communicate. Imagine being at a party and you want to talk to someone of the opposite sex that you find attractive. You will use some sort of theory about how to talk to the opposite sex to approach this situation in order to make it more likely to be successful. As in all situations, the better your theoretical perspectives, the better chances for success when communicating. While theories do not allow us to predict and control communication with 100% certainty, they do help us function in daily interactions at a more predictable and controlled level.

A fifth function of theories is that they help us challenge current social and cultural realities and provide new ways of thinking and living. People sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the ways we communicate are innate rather than learned. This is not true. In order to challenge the communicative norms we learn, people use critical theories to ask questions about the status quo of human communication, particularly focusing on how humans use communication to bring advantage and privilege to particular people or groups. For example, Tannen argues that when men listen to women express their troubles, they listen with the purpose of wanting to provide a fix, or give advice. Tannen argues that many times, women are not looking for advice or a fix, but rather empathy or sympathy from their male conversational partners. With this understanding, it's possible to begin teaching men new strategies for listening in cross-gendered conversations that serve to build stronger communication ties. Critical theories challenge our traditional theoretical understandings, providing alternative communicative behaviors for social change. While theories serve many useful functions, these functions don't really matter if we do not have well-developed theories that provide a good representation of how our world works. While we all form our personal theories through examining our experiences, how are communication theories developed?

## How We Develop Communication Theories

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ow that you understand the functions of communication theories in our lives, you may wonder where these theories come from. We cannot completely rely on our personal theories for accurately understanding the complexities of human communication. Therefore, people like your professors form communication theories by starting with their own personal interests, observations, and questions about communication (Miller & Nicholson, 1976). Those of us who study communication are in a continual process of forming, testing, and reforming theories of communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). There are three essential steps for developing Communication theories: 1) Ask important questions, 2) look for answers by observing communicative behavior, and 3) form answers and theories as a result of your observations (Littlejohn & Foss).

Asking important questions is the first step in the process of discovering how communication functions in our world. Tannen's work grew out of her desire to find out answers to questions about why men and women "can't seem to communicate," a commonly held theory by many. As a result of her line of questioning, she has spent a career asking questions and finding answers. Likewise, John Gottman has spent his career researching how married couples can be relationally successful. Many of his theories contradict common beliefs about long-term romantic relationships.

However, simply asking questions is not enough. It is important that we find meaningful answers to our questions in order to continue to improve our communication. In the field of Communication, answers to our questions have the potential to help us communicate better with one another, as well as provide positive social change. If you've ever questioned why something is the way it is, perhaps you're on your way to discovering the next big theory by finding meaningful answers to your questions.

When we find answers to our questions, we are able to form theories about our communication. Remember our definition of theories? Theories are "an effort to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world" (Foss, Foss & Griffin, 1999). Answering our questions helps us develop more sophisticated ways of understanding the communication around us – theories! You may have a theory about how to make friends. You use this theory to guide your behavior, then ask questions to find out if your theory works. The more times you prove that it works, the stronger your theory becomes about making friends. But, how do we know if a theory is good, or not?

### Developing Good Theories

Take a moment to compare Newton's theory of gravity to communication theories. Simply put, Newton theorized that there is a force that draws objects to the earth. We base our physical behaviors on this theory, regardless of how well we understand its complexities. For example, if you hold a pen above a desk and let go, you know that it will fall and hit the desk every time you drop it. In contrast, communication theories change and develop over time (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 2003; Kaplan, 1964; Kuhn, 1970). For example, you might theorize that smiling at someone should produce a smile back. You speculate that this should happen most of the time, but it probably would not surprise you if it does not happen every time. Contrast this to gravity. If you dropped a pen, and it floated, you would likely be very surprised, if not a little bit worried about the state of the world.

If Communication theories are not 100% consistent like theories in the physical sciences, why are they useful? This question initiates much debate among those of us who study communication. While there is no definitive answer to this question, there are a number of criteria we use to evaluate the value of communication theories. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005), scope, parsimony, heuristic value, openness, appropriateness, and validity are starting places for evaluating whether or not a theory is good.

- **Scope** refers to *how broad or narrow a theory is* (Infante, Rancer & Womack 2003; Shaw & Costanzo, 1970). If a theory is too broad, it may not account for specific instances that are important for understanding how we

communicate. If it is too narrow, we may not be able to understand communication in general terms.

- **Parsimony** refers to the idea that, *all things being equal, the simplest solution takes precedence over a more complicated one*. Thus, a theory is valuable when it is able to explain, in basic terms, complex communicative situations.
- **Heuristic Value** means that *a theory prompts other theorists to engage in further study and theorizing about a given problem*. The Greeks used the term *heurisko*, meaning “I find” to refer to an idea, which stimulates additional thinking and discovery. This is an important criterion that facilitates intellectual growth, development, and problem solving.
- **Openness** is *the quality that a theory allows for, and recognizes, multiple options and perspectives*. In essence, a good theory acknowledges that it is “tentative, contextual, and qualified” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p.30) and is open to refinement.
- **Appropriateness** refers to *the fit between the underlying theoretical assumptions and the research question*. Theories must be consistent with the assumptions, goals, and data of the research in question. Let’s say you want to understand the relationship between playing violent video games and actual violence. One of your assumptions about human nature might be that people are active, rather, than passive agents, meaning we don’t just copy what we see in the media. Given this, examining this issue from a theoretical perspective that suggests people emulate whatever they see in the media would not be appropriate for explaining phenomenon.
- **Validity** refers to *the worth and practical nature of a theory*. The question should be asked, “is a theory representative of reality?” If, according to Littlejohn and Foss, “no single theory will ever reveal the whole ‘truth’ or be able to totally address the subject of investigation,” how do we know if a given theory is “right” for a given problem? (p. 17). There are three qualities of validity — value, fit, and generalizability. Is a theory valuable for the culture at large? Does it fit with the relationship between the explanations offered by the theory and the actual data? Finally, is it generalizable to a population beyond the sample size? In our example of the relationship between violent video games and actual violence, let’s say we studied 100 boys and 100 girls, ages 12-15, from a small rural area in California. Could we then generalize or apply our theories to everyone who plays video games?

The above criteria serve as a starting point for generating and evaluating theories. As we move into the next section on specific theoretical paradigms, you will see how some of these criteria work. Let’s now turn to look at ways to more easily conceptualize the broad range of communication theories that exist.

## Theoretical Paradigms

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ne way to simplify the understanding of complex theories is to categorize multiple theories into broader categories, or paradigms. A paradigm is a collection of concepts, values, assumptions, and practices that constitute a way of viewing reality for a community that shares them, especially an intellectual community. According to Kuhn (1962), intellectual revolutions occur when people abandon previously held paradigms for new ones. For example, when Pythagoras in the 6th century B.C. argued the earth was a sphere, rather than flat, he presented a paradigm shift.

In the field of Communication there are numerous ways to categorize and understand theoretical paradigms. No single way is more valuable than another, nor is any paradigm complete or better in its coverage of Communication. Instead, paradigms are a way for us to organize a great number of ideas into categories. For our purposes, we’ve divided communication theories into five paradigms that we call the Empirical Laws, Human Rules, Rhetorical, Systems, and Critical Paradigms.

## Empirical Laws Paradigm

Theories in the **Empirical Laws Paradigm approach Communication from the perspective that there are universal laws that govern how we communicate**. Other names for Empirical Laws include: hard science, the positivist approach, the covering-laws approach, and the classical approach. Physical scientists look for universal laws to understand and explain our world. Using our example of gravity, we know that objects fall to the earth 100% of the time when we drop them. This is a universal law. As Chapter 2 showed, in the late 1950's scholars began studying human communication using approaches developed in the physical sciences (aka the Scientific Method). Thus, early proponents of Empirical Laws theories studied communication to see if there were universal communication laws similar to those in the physical world.

### Communication Theory Now

#### The Environmental Paradigm Shift

Not long ago those concerned about environmental issues were considered minority or fringe groups and, as a result, many of their concerns were dismissed. Yet today environmental concerns have so infiltrated the mainstream that it is now "trendy" to be an environmentalist. Thanks to scientists asking difficult theoretical and practical questions about consumption of scarce resources, awareness about air and water quality, food safety, and global warming has become part of global public discourse and "environmentalism has caught on everywhere." According to Jackson, "There's been a paradigm shift in society away from thinking of the Earth as an unending source of resources to instead looking at it as a wider living ecosystem that we are slowly killing. The shift is evident in everything from popular movies to eco-friendly products. From international political treaties regarding environmental policies to waste management strategies within small communities."

Brian Jackson Oct. 22. 2006

### Laws and Communication

Physical laws at work in our world influence every moment of our lives. Every time you fly in an airplane or cross a bridge you trust that the people who designed and built the plane and bridge followed the physical laws that allow a plane to fly and a bridge to span a distance without collapsing. Every time you press the brakes on a car you trust them to slow you down based on the laws explaining how long a mass, traveling at a certain speed, takes to stop. Even if you do not understand all of these laws, you live by them and believe the laws themselves hold true 100% of the time.

Are there laws you follow about communication with this kind of regularity? Are there laws of communication that are applicable 100% of the time, in all situations, and with all people? What happens if someone breaks one of these laws? Are the consequences similar to when you break physical laws? For example, is the consequence for calling someone by the wrong name comparable to that of hitting your brakes and them not working?

Those who approach communication from an empirical laws perspective believe there are laws that govern human communication. The premise of this approach can be stated as a simple equation of causation: If X, then Y. For example, if I greet a person with "Hi, how are you?" then I anticipate a response, "Fine, how are you?" It's likely that you conduct much of your communication using this equation. But, does that mean that it works all of the time?

### Communication Theory Then

#### The Empirical Revolution (1950–1970): Theory In A Test Tube

*Speech departments in the 1950s promoted the ancient rhetorical wisdom that persuasive discourse was a matter of an ethical speaker using logical arguments—"the good man speaking well."<sup>11</sup> But younger faculty with training in the social sciences were no longer willing to accept this "truth" by faith. Armed with a scientific skepticism and new methods to assess attitudes, they put rhetorical principles to the test...*

Aristotle, for example, wrote that ethos was a combination of a speaker's intelligence, character, and goodwill toward the audience. Empirically oriented speech researchers subsequently discovered that audience rankings of "communicator credibility" did indeed include factors of competence (intelligence) and trustworthiness (character).<sup>12</sup> But they found no evidence that audiences regarded goodwill or positive intentions as traits separate from character.

Scholars interested in this kind of study adopted the media-effects term communication research to distinguish their work from the historical-critical textual analysis of rhetoricians. In 1950 a group of communication researchers founded what is now the International Communication Association (ICA) as a science-based professional organization to rival the Speech Association of America, which was grounded in the humanities. Traditional speech teachers of this era often accused communication researchers of succumbing to “the law of the hammer.” This was a not-so-subtle dig at those who would pound away with newly acquired statistical tools no matter what the job required.

But irony did little to slow the radical transformation within the communication discipline....The empiricists continued to borrow their core ideas from other disciplines—especially social psychology. Indeed, five of the thirty-three communication theories in this book come from that specialized branch of psychology. Their common methodology and unity of world view gave social scientists in the communication field a greater impact than their numbers alone would indicate. In 1969, the SAA changed its name to the Speech Communication Association (SCA). The term communication in the title was tacit evidence that the scientific approach now dominated the discipline. At the start of the 1960s few departments that taught speech had the word communication as part of their title. By the mid 1970s there were few that didn't.

[www.afirstlook.com/archive/talkabout.cfm?source=archther](http://www.afirstlook.com/archive/talkabout.cfm?source=archther)

There are three characteristics that help us understand empirical laws theories: causation, prediction, and generalization (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 2003). **Causation** states that *there is a “cause and effect” relationship for all actions*. In the physical world, if someone drops a pen it will fall. In human communication, if someone says “hello” to someone, that person responds. **Prediction** suggests that *once someone determines a particular law is at work, he/she will use it to predict outcomes of communication situations*. Have you ever rehearsed how you will ask someone out on a date and tried to predict the outcome? What evidence did you use to make your prediction? In this example, you are using the “if X, then Y” equation to predict the outcome of the interaction. **Generalization** suggests that *if a prediction shows that a behavior produces a certain outcome, we can generalize our predictions to include a wide variety of people, situations, and contexts*. We make generalization such as, “If I’m friendly to others, they will be friendly to me” based on our past experiences with this type of behavior.

In the physical sciences, laws are absolute. This is comforting because it allows us to make informed decisions based on what we know about the laws that govern the world around us. In our example of gravity, we know that dropping an object will produce the same result every time. We could spend the rest of our lives testing this theory, but we don’t have to. We know what the result will be without having to continuously drop an object. Now, imagine what it would be like to always know what the outcome would be of every communication situation! Would that be comforting to you, or make your life boring?

Unlike the physical world, laws that govern human communication are not absolute and are most often bound by culture and context. Empirical laws theories are generally approached from the perspective of probability rather than absoluteness (Miller & Berger, 1978). **Probability** states that *under certain conditions it is highly likely that we can predict communication outcomes*. For example, when you greet someone with “hello” it is probable, not absolute, they will respond back with a greeting of their own. If they do not, you might run through a variety of reasons why the other person did not respond in accordance with the “laws” that govern greetings in our culture. Even though empirical laws theories do not produce absolutes about communication, we still use them in our everyday interactions with one another. Businesses, advertisers, schools, and other organizations use this approach to predict consumer, educational, and behavioral habits of particular demographic groups. While their approaches never produce a 100% cause-effect relationship, the information they gather helps them determine what actions to take to be successful in their communicative behaviors.

### ***Empirical Laws in Action***

Empirical laws theories are a relatively new approach for understanding communication. We have only been developing empirical laws theories of communication for the past 100 years. To date, none of this research has come to the conclusion that, given a certain circumstance, a particular communicative behavior will ALWAYS produce a particular outcome. However, working under an empirical laws approach that accepts probability, we have many

research examples that demonstrate probable laws that govern human communication.

#### Communication Theory Then

*Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) were some of the first to use empirical laws theories to explain communication. Their interests in mass communication and propaganda during World War II led them to study effective persuasion in mass communication and propaganda campaigns. They theorized that the more attractive a communicator, along with other traits, the more likely people would be persuaded. Their empirical laws theories still influence how a great deal of mass media is produced today. Think about movies, television shows, and advertisements you see. Are most of the people you watch in these mediums considered attractive and intelligent? Those who produce mass media use tremendous resources to research probabilistic empirical laws of human behavior before making decisions about what and who to include in their messages. On a smaller scale, we all use probabilistic empirical laws to govern, predict, and control our communication with others.*

The area of leadership in group and organizational communication has a body of well-established empirical laws theories called the **trait approaches**. These theories suggest that *there are certain physical, personality, and communicative characteristics that make one person more likely to be a leader over another* (Northouse, 2004). Trait theories propose that people in western societies who are physically tall, charismatic, intelligent, white, and male are more likely to be leaders, be perceived as leaders, be placed in more leadership positions, and make better leaders than those who don't exhibit these characteristics. You may be thinking, "But what about people like Mother Theresa, Mohatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Caesar Chavez?" This question brings up two important points. First, it shows that communication theories are not absolute. Second, it shows that some theoretical viewpoints may work to promote a certain worldview of those in positions of power, an idea we'll explore more thoroughly when we look at the Critical Theories Paradigm. Despite feeling uncomfortable with some of the assumptions of trait theories, if you look at those in the highest levels of leadership in the U.S., the vast majority have characteristics described in trait theories.

#### Strengths

A particular strength of empirical laws theories is that they helps us determine cause and effect relationships in our communication with others. Understanding communication using these theories helps us predict the outcomes of our interactions with others. While we know that not all outcomes can be determined with 100% reliability, prediction and control allows us to more easily navigate our encounters. Think about the number of encounters you have each day in which you quickly predict and control your interaction with others. While not 100% conclusive, its comforting that a great number of our interactions have a certain level of probable outcomes.

#### Communication Theory Now

##### Trait Theories of Female Leadership

*What is the relationship between personality profiles and leadership styles? This is the central question Blema Steinberg takes up in her new book, Women in Power: The Personalities and Leadership Styles of Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher. Using a mixture of politics and psychology she seeks to understand personality and leadership of the three prominent female leaders. According to Zamprelli's review of the book:*

The three female leaders were categorized on the basis of 10 different personality traits and classified as "normal," "prominent," or "mildly dysfunctional." Those results were then crossed against five areas of behavior reflecting leadership styles – expressive behavior, interpersonal relationships, cognitive style, self-image and mood/temperament – allowing the analyst to understand how different scores in personality traits might translate into specific leadership behaviors. A leader who scores in the normal range on the "dominance" personality trait, for example, would exhibit expressive behavior that is assertive and strong-willed, while a leader who scores at the prominent level may get into the territory of being controlling and overbearing.

That dominant trait, it turned out, was particularly important to Steinberg's research, because all her subjects scored highest in that category. So how does a prominent dominant trait manifest itself in leadership style? "Individuals scoring high on this trait are tough and competitive," Steinberg said. "They are very controlling and, cognitively, what emerges is that they are inflexible in terms of their thinking. The implication of this kind of a trait is the view that one knows better than others. They pride themselves on being unsentimental and often it expresses itself in terms of being intimidating."



So does that mean there is only one successful mould for female politicians? Steinberg feels it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions since her sample was so small. "I do think that the notion that women speak in a different voice may well be true," she said, but conceded that "I don't think it applies to women leaders. Successful female leaders may be more dominant, and the reason these traits are more in evidence than in male leaders is that women have always had to prove themselves."

But make no mistake, these traits are innate – a woman without them seeking to fit this mould would have a hard time doing so. "It's not that they get a primer on how to be tough and controlling," Steinberg said. "It's because of the fact that in order to accomplish their political goals they need to be strong."

Pascal Zamprelli. "New book explores the impact of personalities in politics." McGill Reporter April 3, 2008 Vol. 40 N. 15

### **Weaknesses**

A criticism of empirical laws theory is that while it is useful for understanding relatively simple interactions, it can oversimplify or fail to explain situations where a number of variables exist. Your classroom environment serves as a good example. While there are certain predictions you can make about how communication will occur in your classes, why is it that each classroom experience is unique? In your classrooms, it is impossible to predict, control, and generalize how a class will go with 100% accuracy because it is impossible to replicate classes in exactly the same ways. This approach does not account for the variety of human choices and behaviors that are brought into every communication context. It operates under the assumption that, given the same context, people bring the same things to the context each time. Obviously, this is not the case. Human behaviors are complex and cannot be predicted at a 100% accuracy rate. However, empirical laws theories work well for showing us patterns of behavior that guide our communication.

### **Human Rules Paradigm**

Some Communication scholars believe that we cannot, and should not, try to study communication with an approach that will never work as accurately as it does in the physical sciences (Winch, 1958). Because they believed empirical laws theories could not explain communication effectively, scholars began developing theories around the idea of rules rather than laws. You are probably aware that we all follow rules that guide our communication. If we didn't, human communication would be total chaos and confusion. Theories in the **Human Rules Paradigm approach communication from the perspective that we all follow shared rules of communication, not strict laws** (Shimanoff, 1980; 1992). While Human Rules theories share similar assumptions with empirical laws, they promote a more adaptable approach to communication by suggesting that we follow general rules of communication rather than absolute laws that apply 100% of the time.

#### ***The Difference Between Rules and Laws***

There is an old saying, "rules are meant to be broken." This simple statement highlights the fundamental difference between empirical laws and human rules approaches to communication. If you break a law in the physical world there is always a consequence. For example, no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. A car accident is often a disastrous example of an attempt to break this law. If you break a rule, it likely does not have the same consequences as breaking a law. For example, your parents may have set a curfew for you when you were younger. Imagine you were on your way home at night but stopped to help a friend change a flat tire. Your parents may choose not to punish you after you explained to them the reason you violated the rule.

Those who approach communication using human rules theories believe that communication rules are created by people, and are thus always open to change. Put another way, empirical laws theories seek absolute "Truth" that we can discover through careful observation and testing. Human rules theories see "truth" as subjective and created by humans, not set by the universe in which we live.

Rules are dynamic, whereas laws are not. Rules are contextually and culturally dependant and change as we change. Take for example **Social Exchange Theory**, which theorizes that *people participate in relationships when there is a fair exchange of costs and rewards* (Rolloff, 1981; Walster, Walster & Berscheid; 1978). When the rules of

exchange are violated, participants may choose to terminate the relationship. For example, you've likely had a friend who began dating a new boyfriend or girlfriend. When this happens, you probably realized quite quickly that your friend suddenly, "did not have time for you anymore." If you were upset over this, you were most likely upset that your friend violated the rules of social exchange; in this case the exchange was time spent together. In this example, you may feel like the change in relationship results in you not having your needs met by your friend, while he/she is likely getting his/her needs met by the new relationship. Thus, a violation of social exchange has occurred.

Using human rules theories we are still able to predict how people might communicate, much like empirical laws theories. However, unlike empirical laws theories, rules are bound by context and not universal to all situations. For example, we predict that most people abide by posted speed limits on roadways. While we know that there are always exceptions to this (sometimes we are the exception!), we can predict a certain type of driving experience based on rules. Not all places approach speed limits from this perspective.

One of your authors had an exchange student who came to class one day extremely upset. When asked what was wrong, the student stated he had received a speeding ticket. To this student, the speeding ticket made no sense at all. In the U.S. we approach speed limits as a maximum speed, and risk a ticket when we exceed it. It's a law. However, this student stated that in his country, speed limits are considered guidelines for how fast to drive. The student went on to explain that police officers in his country are not interested in determining if people accidentally or purposefully drive above the posted speed limit. Instead, they let people make their own decisions regarding the guidelines of the posted speed limits. In this example, the U.S. approach to speed limits is one of law; break the law and there are consequences. The student's country approached speed limits from a rules perspective; there is flexibility to interpret and act according to the interpretation of the rules based on the current driving conditions, or context.

Think of rules you choose to follow or break every day. Sitting in a classroom, taking notes, listening to your instructor, and doing homework are all "rules" of how to communicate being a student. However, no one is really standing over your shoulder enforcing these rules. You can choose to follow them or not. If you choose to follow them, you probably do so for a variety of reasons. Each rule we choose to follow is a choice. As with all things, there are outcomes as a result of our choices, but unlike empirical laws theories, human rules theories suggest that our experiences are socially constructed in ways that make it easier to organize experience into collectives of general rules that we follow. That way, we are not overly surprised when our interactions do not produce predicted outcomes 100% of the time.

### ***Strengths***

One of the primary strengths of human rules theories is that they account for choice in communication behaviors. They suggest that we are not controlled by external laws when it comes to our communication. Instead, we develop rules to help facilitate and understand our interactions, while at the same time not being bound to abide by these rules at all times (remember, rules are sometimes meant to be broken). Thus, we can take comfort in following rules of communication to guide our interactions, but also know that we have flexibility to "play" with the rules because they are dynamic and contextual.

### ***Weaknesses***

The primary criticism with human rules theories is that they cannot fully predict behavior or outcomes. However, as of now all theories fail to do this when applied to human communication. Another criticism of human rules theories is that they are culturally and contextually bound. So, when we develop theories about something like communication anxiety as it relates to public speaking, we do so under the framework of our cultural perspective. These same theories often do not apply to other cultures.

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## Systems Theory Paradigm

The Systems Theory Paradigm represents a dramatic theoretical shift from empirical laws and human rules approaches for understanding communication. Systems thinking began in the social and physical sciences in the 19th century with Georg Hegel (Kaufmann, 1966), and was more fully developed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 20th century. von Bertalanffy argued that everything is interconnected and therefore, we should study the interconnectedness as a means of understanding the world. This departs from empirical approaches that traditionally study phenomena by looking at individual components. Conversations surrounding global warming are among the most recognizable ideas of systems theory. In effect, those that warn us of global warming tell us that all of our actions have an impact on one another and our environment, and thus, we must be mindful of what we do, or we will continue to cause harm to everything on earth.

### Case In Point

**Bike and Surf California** -- as written for [www.Phoresia.org](http://www.Phoresia.org)

*It started off as a simple idea. My friend Mike and I wanted to go on a surf trip. Nothing strange about that! However, we have grown increasingly alarmed at how much we drive around looking for surf and the environmental impact this has. It's been much easier to recognize the amount of gas we burn as fuel prices have now pushed \$5.00 a gallon in our area. As a result of our increasing awareness and concern, Mike and I wanted to do our trip with minimal environmental impact. How close to a zero-carbon footprint could we come?*

I wondered if it would be possible to tow boards and gear behind bikes. We began to plan out all of the details of our trip, preparing to do the ride from Fort Bragg, CA to Santa Barbara, CA over a nine day period in May, 2008. All seemed perfectly simple as we began to put together the pieces for a successful trip. Then, at 4:00 a.m. on a February morning I woke up and thought, "I wonder if we can get sponsors?" We began a letter writing campaign to environmentally friendly gear manufacturers letting them know what we were doing, why we were doing it, and asked if they would like to donate sustainable gear to help us on our journey. While having new gear is great, it was our intent and promise to use the donated gear to educate others about our environmental impacts as consumers and sports enthusiasts, and to demonstrate the alternatives that are available. To our surprise, we received sponsorships from 22 organizations! Going back to systems theory, each of our sponsor's actions impacted Mike and me. We can never fully realize the full scope of our actions. We can only hope that our actions do more positive than negative. What we were seeing taking place was a real-world example of systems theory.

Systems theory is easily summed up with a simple definition: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Put another way, anything we do as individuals impacts others around us, as well as the environment in which we exist. Discussions about global warming are, in reality, debates about a global version of systems theory. We are becoming increasingly aware that none of us truly exist as individuals without impacting others. Many cultures have long-recognized the importance of thinking from a collectivist perspective, looking out for the good of the whole rather than pursuing the good of the individual. For those of us born and raised in cultures that value the experience of the individual, we are beginning to learn the larger consequences of trying to exist outside the scope of systems theory. We can never fully realize the full scope of our actions. We can only hope that our actions do more positive than negative.

For more information see [www.bikeandsurfcalfornia.com](http://www.bikeandsurfcalfornia.com)

When applied to communication, the Systems Theory Paradigm seeks to understand the interconnectedness of human communication rather than looking at just one part. The basic idea behind **Systems Theory** is, "***The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.***" An easy example of this is baking a cake. If you were to lay out all of the ingredients of a cake, you would not have a cake. Instead, you would have the ingredients of cake. But, combine those ingredients in a particular way, you produce a cake. Not only that, you produce an experience surrounding the cake (think birthday, anniversary, wedding, etc.). What is produced by making a cake equals so much more than the simple combination of ingredients.

Another example is an automobile engine. If you have all the pieces of an automobile engine on a garage floor, you do not have an engine. You have parts of an engine. But, if you put the engine parts together in the right way, you get something much greater than the parts; you get a working engine that has the ability to transport you. These examples demonstrate the idea that, what makes a cake or automobile engine is the actual interaction or combination of their parts, not the simple sum of the parts themselves.

One area of communication study that utilizes systems theory extensively is the study of Organizational Communication. Scholars in this specialization are interested in the interaction of people to see how they create what we know as organizations (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Katz & Kahn, 1966). For example, what makes Wal-mart different than Target? It's not simply their products or prices. Instead, these two mega-retail stores have a certain "personality" and way of functioning that is different from the other. Those who look at communication from a systems perspective believe that it is the interaction of the participants that makes organizations what they are.

One characteristic of the Systems Theory Paradigm is that systems are **teleological** (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 2003), meaning that *they seek to achieve a particular goal or outcome*. The goal of combining the ingredients of a cake is to produce a cake and facilitate an occasion. The goal of a working automobile engine is transportation. The goal of having a family is love and support. The goal of a business is to produce products and profit. Communication researchers examine the interactions of those that make up systems to understand the systems' goals, as well as how they attempt to achieve goals.

Another characteristic of systems is they are always trying to achieve **homeostasis**, or **balance**. Using the idea of a family, most families attempt to fit in with their neighbors, co-workers, friends, city, country, culture, etc. Systems are always in a process of trying to achieve a level of homeostasis with their environment that is acceptable to them. When changes occur in either the environment or a system, system participants will adapt in order to maintain balance. For example, if you moved away from your immediate family to attend college your move had an impact on the homeostasis of your family. As a result, everyone in your family had to adjust in some way to the change brought about by your move in order to create a new sense of homeostasis. Even though you are still part of the family system, the system changed as a result of your move, and must respond in order to adapt to the change.

The power of looking at communication from a systems perspective is that every communicative act impacts the system as a whole. When there is a change in one part of a system, it changes the entire system to some degree. Let's revisit our example of an automobile engine. One day, the truck of one of your author's started making a terrible noise. He shuddered at the idea of possibly paying hundreds of dollars to fix the problem. However, a mechanic quickly found that a small bolt had fallen out. Fifty-three cents later (tax included), and five minutes of time, the engine no longer made the terrible noise. Homeostasis was reached once again.

Like a car engine, we form systems with whom we interact. One of the reasons each of your college classes is unique is that each person (component) is unique, and thus, the interaction among the components is unique and cannot be duplicated. When we apply this approach to our communication exchanges we can learn many things about the impacts that our interactions have in the systems in which we interact. Think about systems you belong to like family, work, church, friends, etc. How do your communicative acts, whether big or small, impact the dynamics of these systems?

### ***Strengths***

A strength of the Systems Theory Paradigm is that instead of looking at isolated people or communication acts, it seeks to understand a more complete picture by examining multiple layers of communication as interconnected. This paradigm does not try to predict human behavior, but instead explain it in ways that highlight the interconnectedness of people and their communicative acts. Because much of our communication is culturally and contextually specific, this approach does not seek to make universal generalizations about human communication, but instead, explain the totality of our interactions.

### ***Weaknesses***

One of the primary criticisms of the Systems Theory Paradigm is that it can be too broad in its focus. If everything is interconnected, how do we know what to study? What do we focus on when trying to understand communication interactions? This can prove challenging considering the dynamic and changing nature of systems, particularly human systems built on changing relationships. It can be difficult to answer why things happen when we use this approach, making it problematic for generating further theories of human communication. Finally, because it is a relatively new approach for understanding communication, this paradigm has yet to produce a definitive body of

research. Studies from this perspective tend to take significant time and money to accomplish.

## Rhetorical Theories Paradigm

As you learned in the Chapter 4, rhetoric is the oldest tradition of the Communication field. An effective definition of **rhetoric** is, *“any kind of human symbol use that functions in any realm—public, private, and anything in between”* (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 2002, p. 7). Remember that one of our definitions for **theory** is, *“a way of framing an experience or event—an effort to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world”* (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 1999, p. 8). If we combine these two definitions, we can define the **Rhetorical Theories Paradigm** as, *“a way to understand and account for the way any kind of human symbol use functions in any realm.”* Scholars have historically used rhetorical theories as a way to produce and evaluate messages.

### Theories of Message Production

If you have taken a public speaking course, you were likely exposed to rhetorical theories of message production. In public speaking classes students are taught methods for organizing presentations, building credibility with audience members, making messages more entertaining, informative, and/or persuasive, etc. You probably intuitively understand that there are effective ways for putting together messages. How do you know what is truly effective or ineffective? Whether you are preparing a public presentation, an advertising campaign, or a persuasive appeal to a friend, rhetorical theories guide the ways you produce messages. When companies devote millions of dollars to putting together an advertising campaign, you can bet that significant research has gone into what messages will work the best. Audience analysis, context, goals, etc., are all considered before producing and delivering these messages.

Over the centuries Communication scholars have devoted entire careers to the study what it takes to produce effective messages. Aristotle gave us his ideas of *ethos* (credibility), *logos* (logic), and *pathos* (emotions) as fundamental components for constructing persuasive messages. Cicero gave us the five canons of rhetoric, or the five necessary steps for putting together an effective message. In the modern era, Stephen Toulmin (2003) developed the **Toulmin model** as a *means for constructing persuasive arguments*. Toulmin’s model of message production includes a **claim**, **grounds**, **warrant**, **backing**, **modal qualifier**, and **rebuttal**. A **claim** is *the conclusion or argument being made*. The **grounds** are *the data and facts offered to support the claim*. To *logically connect the grounds to the claim*, a **warrant** is given. The **backing** is used to *support the warrant* and the **qualifiers** *make a statement about the strength of the claim*. Words such as “possible,” “certainly,” and “definitely” are examples of qualifiers. Any exception to the claim is the rebuttal. Even if you are unfamiliar with rhetorical theories of message production, you likely have a good idea of what makes an effective message. For Toulmin, effectiveness was based on issues of practicality—to find a claim that is of interest to people and the ability to justify it. The greater understanding you have of rhetorical theories of message production, the greater potential you have for producing effective messages in a variety of contexts.

### Theories of Message Evaluation

Super Bowl Sunday is a day that many people gather together to watch a big football game on television. It is also a day that many people give special attention to watching commercials. It has become a popular pastime for people to evaluate the quality of commercials shown during the Super Bowl. In fact, all of the commercials from the Super Bowl are put on the internet for people to watch and evaluate. Many people spend a considerable amount of time discussing the effectiveness of commercials. Those who engage in these conversations are, at a basic level, engaging in message evaluation. If you make a comment about these commercials such as, “that was funny” or “that was stupid” you are using some kind of criteria to come to those conclusions. A person approaching these messages using rhetorical theories would ask “why was that funny or stupid?” In other words, what works, or doesn’t work, about certain messages?

There are many ways we can use rhetorical theories to evaluate messages. We might choose to use a feminist approach, an ideological approach, or a narrative approach to evaluate message effectiveness. For example, Kenneth

Burke (1969) argues that we can evaluate messages by understanding them as a dramatic play. He contends that all messages contain acts, scenes, agents, purposes, and agencies. If you were to evaluate your relationships with your friends from this perspective, who are the agents, what is the scene, and what act of the play are you in? Jean Baudrillard (2003) states that we can evaluate messages from the perspective that messages are commodities that we exchange. Michel Foucault (2003) asserts that we can evaluate messages by looking at how power is enacted in them. Rhetorical theories give us different “lenses” for us to understand messages. No interpretation is right or wrong. Instead, each interpretation allows us to have a more comprehensive understanding of communication.

As with message production, we are constantly in the process of evaluating messages. The greater understanding you have of rhetorical theories for both putting together and evaluating messages, the greater potential you have to be an effective communicator in a variety of contexts. For rhetorical theorists, the message is the primary focus of inquiry when approaching the study of communication.

### ***Strengths***

The primary strength of the Rhetorical Theories Paradigm is its ability to help us produce and evaluate effective messages. Rhetorical theories provide a way for us to take context into consideration as we examine messages. Unlike empirical laws theories, rhetorical theories highlight the importance of considering context as essential for understanding messages. Finally, rhetorical theories provide a way for us to foster multiple perspectives in the evaluation and construction of messages.

### ***Weaknesses***

A primary weakness of rhetorical theories comes from one of its strengths. With such an intense focus on messages, it is possible to overlook alternative interpretations of messages. Also, some theories of message evaluation are not critical enough to reveal power dynamics at work in message exchanges. Finally, rhetorical theories are often not generalizable across a variety of communication contexts. While some rhetorical theories can be generalized, rhetorical theories are most often highly contextualized.

## **Critical Theories Paradigm**

At this point you have learned about four different theoretical paradigms we use to understand communication. One criticism of these approaches is they often lack an explicit critique of the status quo of communication. Put another way, they serve as a general approach to understand communication norms rather than challenge them. We all realize that there are communication realities in the world that are hurtful and oppressive to particular people, and that there are people in the world that use communication to serve their own needs and interests. How do we bring these to the forefront of conversation and work to change communication practices that are hurtful?

### ***The Need for Critical Theories***

#### **Communication Theory Now**

*Byron Hurt is a modern theorist who uses film to critique how sexism impacts both men and women in our society. His cutting-edge film “Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes” looks at the Hip-Hop industry from a critical perspective, focusing on how it enables sexism against women while keeping men in narrowly defined gendered roles.*

The **Critical Theories Paradigm** helps us *understand how communication is used to oppress, and provides ways to foster positive social change* (Foss & Foss, 1989; Fay, 1975). Critical Theories challenge the status quo of communication contexts, looking for alternatives to those forms of oppressive communication. Critical theories differ from other theoretical approaches because they seek praxis as the overarching goal. **Praxis is the combination of theory and action.** Rather than simply seeking to understand power structures, critical theories actively seek to change them in positive ways. Easily identifiable examples of critical approaches are Marxism, postmodernism, and feminism. These critical theories expose and challenge the communication of dominant social, economic, and political structures. Areas of inquiry include language, social relationships, organizational structures, politics, economics, media, cultural ideologies, interpersonal relationships, labor, and other social movements.

**Cultural Studies** focus on *understanding the real-life experiences of people, examining communication contexts for hidden power structures, and accomplishing positive social change as a result of the revelation of hidden power structures* (Dines and Humez, 2003; Kellner, 2003). According to Kellner, cultural studies involves three interconnected elements necessary for understanding, evaluating and challenging the power dynamics embedded in communication—political economy, textual analysis, and audience reception.

- **Political economy** focuses on *the macro level of communication*. Specifically, this part of cultural studies looks at the way a media text, People magazine for example, is situated in a given cultural context and the political and economic realities of the cultural context. In the U.S., we would note that the political economy is one marked with gender, racial, and class inequities.

#### Case In Point

*Today, Marxist thought influences critical theories in two ways. First, Marxist theory critiques power structures in media, focusing on how media owners construct media messages, as well as how media consumers interpret those messages (Grossberg, 1984; Croteau & Hoynes, 2003; Dines & Humez, 2003). In fact, the field of Communication has an entire journal devoted to the critical evaluation of the media entitled Critical Studies in Mass Communication. Second, Marxist theory examines how dominant cultural ideologies weaken other ideological perspectives in social institutions such as political organizations, schools and universities, religious institutions, and media organizations. For example, dominant ideology in the U.S. endorses heterosexual marriage. Critical perspectives challenge this ideological framework and argue that same-sex partners should have the same rights and benefits as cross-sex partners. At the time of writing this book, California just recognized same-sex marriage. This is an example of how critical theories can change the world around us.*

- **Textual analysis** involves *the process of deconstructing and analyzing elements of a media text*. So, if we were going to look at People magazine with a critical eye, we would pay attention to the visual elements (the pictures in the ads; the celebrity photos, and any other drawings, cartoons or illustrations), the verbal messages (the text of the ads, the copy, captions that accompany the photographs), and the relationship between the advertisements and the copy. For example is there an ad for Clinique eye shadow next to an article on the “hot new beauty tips for fall?” We would also pay attention to the representation of gender, race, and class identities as well. Are there any differences or similarities between the portrayal of white women and women of color? What sort of class identity is being offered as the one to emulate?
- **Audience reception** asks us to consider *the role of the text for the audience that consumes it*. We would thus try to learn why people read People magazine—what purpose does it fill, what is the social function of this text?

#### Origins of Critical Theories in Communication

Marxism is one of the earliest origins of critical theory. In addition, postmodernism feminism, and postcolonialism have greatly influenced how critical theories have grown and expanded to challenge a greater number of social power structures. While each of these approaches examines a different area of oppression, all have used critical approaches to enact great social changes, not only in western societies, but in cultures worldwide.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Karl Marx’s ideas challenged the status quo of newly emerging industrial societies. As societies moved from agrarian-based economies to ones based in industrial manufacturing, there became an increasing division between the rich and the poor. Marx, in two of his most well-known works, The Communist Manifesto and Capital, argued that working class laborers were being oppressed by those in power, specifically the owners of manufacturing plants.

In any discussion of **Postmodernism**, another critical theoretical perspective, the difficulty of defining the term is invariably part of the discussion. Part of that problem can be located in the etymology of the word itself. Modern refers to just now (from modo in Latin) and post means after. Thus, this term translates into “after just now”—an idea that can be difficult to wrap our heads around. How do you, for example, point to or mark the period after just now? (Covino & Jolliffe, 1995, p. 76). Some qualities that characterize postmodernism are that of fragmentation, nonlinearity, and instability. In discussing the postmodern condition, Lyotard (1984) explains the relationship between those who have and don’t have social power: “The [decision makers] allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on optimizing the

system's performance—efficiency” (p. 27).

A third major influence on the development of the Critical Theories Paradigm comes from feminist theories. **Feminist theories** explore *power structures that create and recreate gendered differentiations in societies* (Foss & Foss, 1989; Dervin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1988). Critical feminist theories contend that gender relations are often oppressive to both men and women, and that they support an institution based on patriarchal values. Thus, critical feminist theories challenge dominant assumptions and practices of gender in ways that foster more equal and egalitarian forms of communication and social structures in society.

### Communication Theory Now

#### Critical Theory Sucks Life From Pop Culture Classes - A Student's Perspective

*The Phoenix (UBC Okanagan)*

(CUP) KELOWNA, B.C. - As an English student with a focus on the contemporary, I've always looked to pop culture classes as a means to easier credit. There are a number of reasons for this: I feel like I might recognize the texts studied in pop classes. I'd rather study Toni Morrison and Timothy Findley than William Shakespeare. I can relate to characters and grasp thematic concepts more quickly. Perhaps, most importantly, I enjoy reading about places and things, and then connecting those places and things to Kevin Bacon, and eventually, to myself.

Unfortunately, pop culture study has a dark side. It has the potential to be downright excruciating. This happens when cultural texts are hammered into frames for literary, psychological, or sociological theories. Suddenly a film's mise en scene, a novel's mention of the colour red or a musical track's white space cease to exist as independent acts of creative expression and become expressions of a cultural theory.

Interpreting text using the work of theorists like Foucault or Lacan (just to name two who seem fairly well used in academia) is neat. When a professor actually took the time to explain Lacan's ideas about lack to me, I felt really excited. Suddenly I had a new perspective that I could apply to things.

But, more often than not, there isn't time to explain - only to summarize books of innovative thought into three or four fatally reductive bullets on an overhead or handout. It's in these cases that I feel frustrated, because I'm being taught a Dummies version.

Teach it or don't. That's what I want. When a class on culture consists of little more than using bits of theory, I get the feeling that the professor is still trying to convince herself/himself that pop culture deserves to be studied.

The problem is that many theories merit entire courses, and cannot be crammed into the spaces between novels, film, or poems in an English class. Many professors only have time to present a vague, paint-by-number summary of one topic, one idea, out of context. For people like me, who are actually interested in learning more about these theorists, these incomplete forays into literature/critical theory are irritating because they are too specific and reductive to be useful outside of the course.

What do you think?

Mona Struthers June 12, 2007 The Brock Press

[http://media.www.brockpress.com/media/storage/paper384/news/2007/06/12/Opinion/Critical.](http://media.www.brockpress.com/media/storage/paper384/news/2007/06/12/Opinion/Critical.Theory.Sucks.Life.From.Pop.Culture.Classes-2914291.shtml)

[Theory.Sucks.Life.From.Pop.Culture.Classes-2914291.shtml](http://media.www.brockpress.com/media/storage/paper384/news/2007/06/12/Opinion/Critical.Theory.Sucks.Life.From.Pop.Culture.Classes-2914291.shtml)

When discussing feminism and feminist theories we refer to a set of multiple and diverse theories. Feminist theories include a wide range of philosophical arguments, economic structures, and political viewpoints. Some of these include Marxist feminism, which focuses on the division of labor as a source of gender inequality, and liberal feminism, which asserts that men and women should have equal status in the culture—such as voting rights, educational and professional opportunities, and equal pay. Eco-feminism recognizes that all parts of the universe are interconnected and that oppression of women and other minorities is analogous to the oppression of the natural environment such as in the cutting down of natural forests to meet consumer demands for paper goods, or the killing of animals for the eating of meat.

#### **Critical Theories in Action**

Whether we listen to our ipod, watch TV, go to the movies, or read a magazine, most of us consume media. Have you ever stopped to think about who puts together those messages? Have you wondered what their goals might be



and why they want to send the messages they do? One way we can use critical theories is to examine who owns what media to determine what they are trying to accomplish (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). For example, why does General Electric want to own companies like RCA and NBC? Why does a company like Seagram's want to buy MCA (Universal Studios) and Polygram records? What world-views are these companies creating in the media they produce? These are all questions for which we might consider using theories from the Critical Theories Paradigm. Did you know that by 1996 two companies (Borders/Walden and Barnes & Noble) sold 1/3 of all books, five movie companies accounted for over 75% of box office ticket sales, five companies distributed 95% of all music sold in the U.S., and television was still dominated by only four major networks (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003)?

Other examples from the critical paradigm include works that examine gender, consumerism, advertising, and television. In her work, *Who(se) Am I? The Identity and Image of Women in Hip-Hop*, Perry (2003) examines the potential danger and damage to African-American women through their objectification in Hip-Hop videos. Carole A. Stable (2003) examines the labor and marketing practices of Nike in her article, *Nike, Social Responsibility, and the Hidden Abode of Production*. Clint C. Wilson II and Felix Gutierrez (2003) discuss the portrayal of people of color in advertising in their article, *Advertising and People of Color*, while Jackson Katz (2003) explores violence in advertising with his piece, *Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From Eminem to Clinique for Men*. We use critical theories to reveal a vast range of possible ideological structures that create and foster dominant world-views, and to challenge and change those ideologies that oppress others.

### ***Strengths***

A significant strength of the Critical Theories Paradigm is that it combines theory and practice, seeking to create actual change from theoretical development. Rather than seeking prediction and control, or explanation and understanding, critical theories seek positive social change. The intent behind these theoretical perspectives is to help empower those whose world-views and ideological perspectives have not found equality in social contexts. At their best, critical theories have the potential to enact large-scale social change for both large and small groups of people.

### ***Weaknesses***

A potential weakness of critical theories is their dependence on social values. While empirical laws theories seek an objective reality, critical theories highlight subjective values that guide communication behaviors. When values conflict the question of, "whose values are better?" emerges. Because values are subjective, answering this question is often filled with much conflict and debate. The example of gay marriage highlights a current debate taking place over ideological values. How do we define marriage? And, whose definition is best?

## **Summary**

# T

heories are lenses for understanding the world around us. It is possible to use multiple theories to examine our communication. Theories allow us to organize and understand communication experiences, select communication behavior to study, broaden our understanding of human communication, predict and control communication situations, challenge current social and cultural relationships, and offer new ways of thinking and living. Forming theories is a three step process of asking important questions, looking for answers through observation, and forming answers or theories as a result of observation.

Are all theories alike in their usefulness? Of course not. Evaluating the usefulness or value of a theory is important. Six qualities are crucial for evaluating theories—scope, parsimony, heuristic value, openness, appropriateness, and validity. As you recall, scope refers to the breadth of the theory, parsimony to its level of simplicity, and heuristic value is the theory's ability to generate other theories. When a theory is open this means that it recognizes other perspectives and options. Appropriateness refers to the fit between the research question and theory used to answer it. Finally, validity is the overall worth or practicality of a theory which includes value, fit, and generalizability.

When these characteristics are present we can be confident of our choice of theory.

You have also learned five major paradigms for understanding, explaining, and changing the communication around you. It is important to recognize that no theoretical perspective is the right perspective, although most Communication scholars do favor particular theoretical approaches over others, and conduct communication research from their preferred perspectives. Those that believe there are universal laws which govern human communication conduct research from the empirical laws perspective. Those that think communication is a result of shared, adaptable rules utilize the human rules paradigm. The systems perspective recognizes the interconnectedness of people, relationships and communication. If the use of symbols for message creation and evaluation is the focus, then rhetorical theory is the corresponding paradigm. For scholars who are action oriented and desire social change as an outcome of their research, the critical perspective is the one of choice.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does understanding communication theory help you in your daily life?
2. Pick a theoretical paradigm. Now pick a communication phenomenon. How does that paradigm help explain that phenomenon to you?
3. What would you focus on using critical theories? What questions would you try to answer?
4. Think of a system in which you are a member? What communicative action could you change that would change the system? What do you think the effect would be?
5. What criteria do you use for constructing or evaluating a good persuasive message? How did you establish these criteria?

## Key Terms

- appropriateness
  - audience reception
  - causation
  - critical theories
  - cultural studies
  - empirical laws
  - explain
  - feminist theories
  - generalization
  - heuristic value
  - homeostasis
  - human rules
  - Marxism
  - openness
  - paradigm
  - paradigm shift
  - parsimony
  - political economy
  - postmodernism
  - praxis
  - prediction
  - probability
  - rhetoric
  - rhetorical criticism
-

- rhetorical theories
- scope
- social criticism
- social exchange theory
- systems theory
- teleological
- textual analysis
- theory
- Toulmin's model
- trait theory
- validity

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