CHAPTER 1

Talk About Theory

I met Glenn Sparks and Marty Medhurst my first year as a teacher at Wheaton College. Glenn and Marty were friends who signed up for my undergraduate persuasion course. As students, both men were interested in the broadcast media. After graduating from Wheaton, both went on to earn master's degrees at Northern Illinois University. Each then earned a doctorate, at two different universities, and both are now nationally recognized communication scholars. Glenn is on the faculty at Purdue University; Marty is at Texas A & M University.

Despite their similar backgrounds and interests, Glenn and Marty are radically 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 the humanities. Glenn does science; Marty does art.

Glenn and Marty represent two distinct perspectives within the field of communication theory. Ernest Bormann, a theorist at the University of Minnesota, refers to communication theory as an "umbrella term for all careful, systematic and self-conscious discussion and analysis of communication phenomena."[1] I like this definition because it's broad enough to include the different kinds of work that both Glenn and Marty do, and it also covers the diverse theories presented in this book.

To understand the theories ahead, you need to first grasp the crucial differences between the humanistic and scientific approaches to communication. As a way to introduce the distinctions, I asked Glenn and Marty to bring their scholarship to bear on a contemporary communication phenomenon—a television commercial.

ART OR SCIENCE: TWO VIEWS OF A SWIMMING ELEPHANT

In the competitive soft drink market, Diet Coke vies with Diet Pepsi for audience attention. In the previous edition of this text, Glenn and Marty analyzed a

Diet Pepsi commercial that used supermodel Cindy Crawford to hold viewer interest. For this edition I've chosen a Diet Coke ad that features an equally arresting model—a swimming elephant. Under the title, "Diet Coke's Refreshment Packed in Swimming Trunks," *Advertising Age* columnist Bob Garfield sets the scene.

> The spot opens with an underwater camera, panning left from the tendrils of some marine plant to an enormous, shadowy figure swimming awkwardly toward the lens, Is it an octopus? Is it a manatee? Is it Aunt Bernice?
>
> Oh, dear me, it's an elephant. A swimming elephant. . . .
>
> The elephant is swimming through a lagoon toward a brightly colored raft, where a slim and beautiful woman is drinking Diet Coke from the new contour bottle. The lady, who has an ice bucket full of Diet Cokes on her raft, returns to her paperback, oblivious to the approaching company. . . .
>
> The floating sun goddess is neither the subject of the elephant's affections, nor the reason for the 200-meter pachyderm crawl. What he's after is the soda pop. Reaching with his prehensile trunk, he pilfers one from the ice bucket, leaving on the raft in exchange four damp peanuts.[2]

Glenn: A Scientific Perspective

As a behavioral scientist, I want to understand the causes of human behavior. As my understanding increases, I'll be able to offer explanations of why people act the way they do. I'll also be able to predict people's behavior before it occurs.

My particular area of interest is media effects. I would like to discover how mass media messages *affect* people's thoughts, values, feelings, attitudes, and behavior. So my approach to the Diet Coke ad is to ask, "What can I learn about the effects of advertising from this commercial?"

The answer to this question can never be found by simply discussing the words and pictures that appear on the screen. It's true that an in-depth analysis might reveal all sorts of interesting things about the content of the ad. And I could even speculate about how the commercial will affect the viewers. But my scientific instincts would not be satisfied with mere speculation.

After identifying a particular feature of the ad that might affect people, most scientists would like to develop a *theory* that explains the effect. For example, I might think that the image of a swimming elephant is so rare that it will be particularly powerful in holding the attention of viewers. Given that most people have a positive emotional reaction to elephants, I could also predict that this increased audience attention will result in people wanting to buy Diet Coke. My theory would present a rationale for why we pay attention to unusual things and why positive feelings should result in wanting to buy the advertised product.

Constructing a theory is not enough, however. Along with other scientists, I want to test media theories to find out if they are valid. Perhaps I could run a

study to see if the ad is, in fact, a more powerful attention-getter than other ads that don't feature bizarre sights like swimming elephants. After people watch the ad, I'd check which brand of soft drink they preferred. Testing the audience is a crucial scientific enterprise. I might think I know the meaning that the audience will assign to the ad, or how the ad will affect them—but until I actually measure its impact, I can't be sure.

As a media effects researcher, I want to go beyond this single commercial. I'm interested in gathering support for general principles that apply across *many* advertisements. I might hypothesize that "increased attention to objects that cause pleasant feelings will result in greater persuasion." By testing principles such as this, our knowledge of communication processes can accumulate and progress over time.

Marty: A Humanistic Perspective

This ad is best understood as an allegory. An allegory is a symbolic story in which there is both a surface (or manifest) meaning and a deeper (or latent) meaning.

On the surface, this ad seems pretty simple: an elephant swims across part of the ocean to snatch a bottle of Diet Coke from a bathing beauty who is perched on an isolated floating raft. The elephant's journey is set to the tune of an old-fashioned sounding song that asks:

> Is it love? Yes my dear.
> Is it love that draws me near?
> Is it love that brings me back into your arms?

The elephant seems at home in the water—almost as though he is dancing along with the music. He single-mindedly makes his way to the raft, deposits four peanuts, snatches a bottle of Diet Coke, then swims away to the sounds of "Is it Love?" As we watch the elephant swim away, a voice-over says, "The irresistible taste of Diet Coke." The Diet Coke logo then appears on the screen with the slogan, "This is refreshment."

But there is more to this ad than immediately meets the eye. It is significant that of the nineteen separate shots that make up the ad, the elephant appears in fourteen of them—far more than the bathing beauty or the bottle of Diet Coke. This is a crucial interpretive key, for it indicates the significance that the makers of the ad attach to the elephant.

I believe this ad is an allegory about what all "elephants" (i.e., overweight people) need to do if they want to attract the attention (or perhaps even love) of a beautiful woman:

First, overweight people must earnestly want that which they do not have. This is symbolized by the effort the elephant makes to swim across a large body of water to obtain what he wants. The water stands between the elephant

and the object of his desire. To reach the object requires swimming—a form of exercise without which the object cannot be obtained.

Second, when the elephant reaches the raft he immediately turns in his peanuts—a high-fat food item—in exchange for the Diet Coke. Clearly this symbolizes a need for a change in one's eating habits before one can attain the desired object. It is also a none-too-subtle allusion to the low cost of Diet Coke (mere peanuts).

Finally, it is not until after the elephant has exercised, changed his eating habits, and made off with the Diet Coke that the bathing beauty even notices his existence. The implication of the visual text seems clear: If overweight people want beautiful people to notice them, they had better change their behaviors—and what better way to start that change than by drinking Diet Coke.

Although both Glenn and Marty focus on the unique image of the swimming elephant, their respective scientific and humanistic approaches to communication study are clearly distinct in starting point, method, and conclusion. The separate world views of the arts and sciences reflect contrasting assumptions about ways of arriving at knowledge, the core of human nature, questions of value, the very purpose of theory, and methods of research. The rest of this chapter sketches these differences.

WAYS OF KNOWING: DISCOVERING THE TRUTH VERSUS 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.

Scientists assume that Truth is singular. There's one reality "out there" waiting to be discovered through the five senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Since the raw sense data of the world are accessible to any competent observer, seeing is believing. Of course, no one person can know it all, but individual researchers pool their findings and build a collective body of knowledge about how the world operates. Scientists consider good theories to be mirrors of nature. They are confident that once a valid principle is discovered, it will continue to be recognized as true as long as the conditions remain relatively the same.

Humanists seek truth as well, but they are much more tentative about the possibility of revealing objective reality. They believe, in fact, that truth is largely subjective; meaning is highly interpretive. Humanists like Marty are not relativists, arbitrarily assigning meaning on a whim. They do maintain, however, that we can never entirely separate the knower from the known. Convinced that meaning is in the mind rather than the verbal sign, humanists are comfortable with the notion that a text has multiple meanings. Rhetorical critics are successful when they convince others to share their interpretation of the way a text works. In that sense, "truth is a struggle, not a status."[3]

HUMAN NATURE: DETERMINISM VERSUS FREE WILL

One of the great debates throughout history revolves around the question of human choice. 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"[4]). Although few communication theorists are comfortable with either extreme, most tend to cluster into one of these two camps. Scientists stress the forces that shape human behavior; humanists focus on conscious choices made by individuals.

The difference between these two views of choice inevitably creeps into the language people use to explain their actions. 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. The explanation makes no appeal to mental reasoning or any kind of inner life, seeing behavior

instead as a result of stimulus-response bonds. As Glenn suggested, people *will* watch a swimming elephant.

In contrast, humanists tend to use phrases such as *in order to* or *so that*, since they attribute behavior to conscious intent. Their choice of words suggests that people are *free agents*, that they could decide to respond differently under an identical set of circumstances. For example, Marty would hold that an obese viewer could identify with the elephant's quest on one occasion, yet scoff at the fantasy the next time around. The consistent humanist wouldn't ask *why* the viewer chose a given response. "True choice demands to be its own cause and its own explanation."[5]

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 freedom. 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:

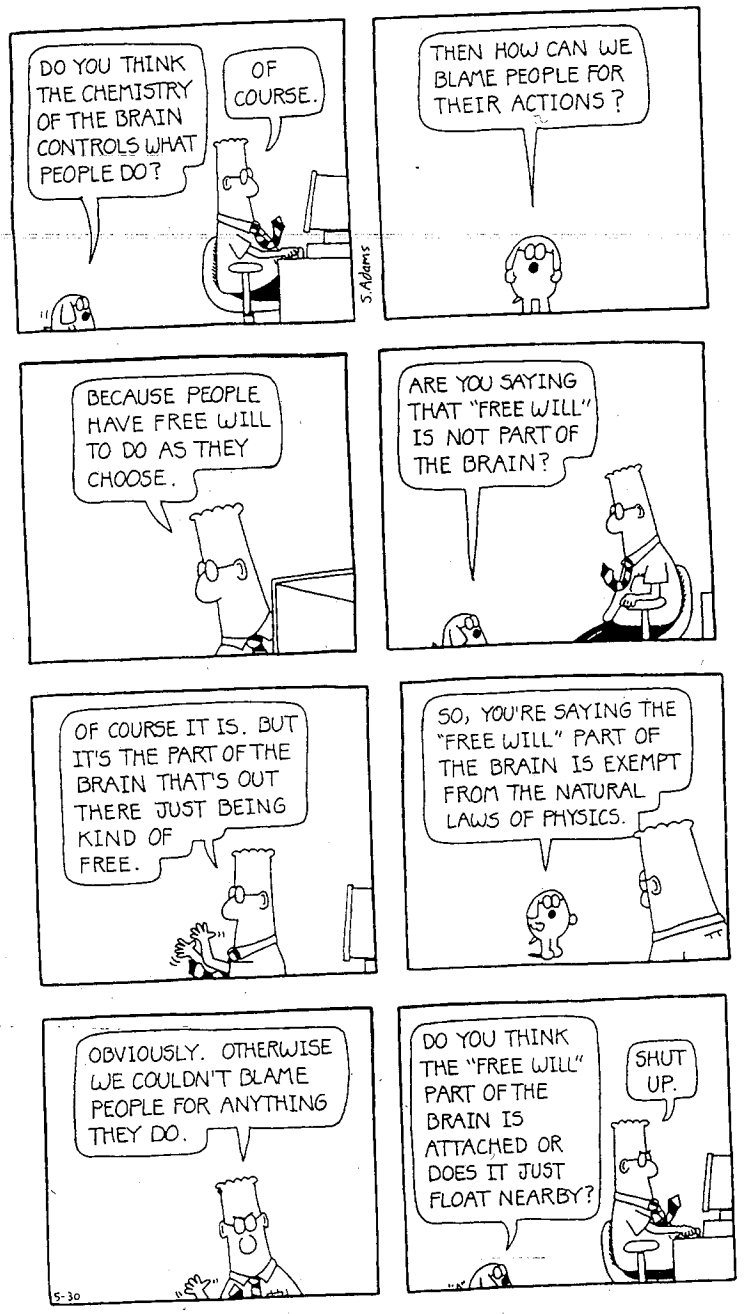
> In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.[6]

WHAT DO WE VALUE MOST? OBJECTIVITY VERSUS EMANCIPATION

When we talk about *values*, we are discussing questions of relative worth. Values are the traffic lights of our lives, priorities 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 regard Truth as singular, they place a high value on objectivity. Because most humanists 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, but he doesn't want his personal values to distort human reality or confuse what *is* with what he thinks *ought to be*. Glenn is particularly upset when he hears about researchers who fudge the findings of a study to shore up a questionable hypothesis. He shares the academic commitment 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."[7]

Marty is aware of his own ideology and is not afraid to bring his values to bear upon a communication text under scrutiny. By revealing the psychological appeals built into the swimming elephant spot, Marty provides people with the resources to resist the commercial message. Humanists value socially relevant research that seeks to liberate people from oppression of any sort—economic, political, religious, emotional, and so on. They decry the detached stance of scientists who refuse to take responsibility for the results of their



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work. Whatever the pursuit—a Manhattan Project to split the atom or a Genome Project to map human genes, humanists insist that knowledge is never neutral.

THE PURPOSE OF THEORY: UNIVERSAL LAWS VERSUS RULES FOR INTERPRETATION

Even if Glenn and Marty could agree on the nature of knowledge, the extent of human autonomy, and the ultimate value 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 humanist, Marty strives to articulate unique acts of interpretation.

If these two scholars were engaged in fashion design rather than research design, Glenn would probably find or 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 a statement for a single client—a one-of-a-kind, custom creation. Glenn constructs and tests. Marty interprets and applies.

Theory testing is the basic activity of the behavioral scientist. Glenn starts with a hunch about how the world works, and 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. Prediction and control are the name of the game.

The humanist explores the web of meaning that constitutes human existence. When Marty creates scholarship, he isn't trying to *prove* theory. However, he could *use* rhetorical theory to interpret the written, spoken, and nonverbal texts of people's lives. Robert Ivie, former editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, suggests that 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.[8]

RESEARCH METHODS: EXPERIMENTS, SURVEYS, TEXTUAL ANALYSIS, ETHNOGRAPHY

Whether the quest is for prediction and control, or for interpretation and understanding, theorists know that the task demands research. A leading textbook on communication inquiry presents four primary techniques for the study of communication.[9] Experiments and survey research offer quantitative ways for the scientist to test theory. Textual analysis and ethnography provide qualitative tools that aid the humanist's search for meaning. I'll briefly describe

the distinct features of each method. After working through the differences, take a look at Figure 1.1, which gives you questions to ask as you read about a study of communication that uses one of these four methods.

1. Experiments

Working on the assumption that human behavior is not random, an experimenter tries to establish a cause-and-effect sequence by systematically manipulating one variable (called the independent variable) in a tightly controlled situation to learn its effects on another variable (called the dependent variable). For example, Glenn suggested showing the Diet Coke commercial to a panel of soft drink consumers to determine whether attention to an engaging visual stimulus of a swimming elephant would affect response to the advertiser's product. For purposes of comparison, he could show a less novel ad for Diet Coke to a similar group. To make certain that he had successfully manipulated the independent variable of attention, he might use lab equipment to monitor eye blinks, pupil dilation, and the direction of gaze of each subject.

After the ads were shown, Glenn would then measure each group's expressed desire for Diet Coke—on attitude scales, through competitive taste tests with Diet Pepsi, or by actual consumer behavior in the store. If viewers captivated by the sight of a swimming elephant responded more favorably to the sponsor's product than subjects who were exposed to a more mundane appeal, the centrality of attention to the persuasion process would gain support.

2. Surveys

Using questionnaires or through interviews, survey researchers rely on self-report data to discover what people think, feel, or intend to do. Coca-Cola committed a classic market blunder in 1985 by altering its basic formula to take away the familiar bite and make the soda sweeter. The company introduced the change after conducting one hundred thousand taste tests with non-Coke drinkers, but they neglected to check with their loyal customers. Sales plummeted until public outcry forced the company to restore the original taste. Marketed today as "Classic Coke," the name reminds us not to automatically assume that we know how people will react. They may not be charmed by a swimming elephant. If we want to know, we need to ask.

Survey methodology also helps scientists validate theory. For example, a researcher might question a representative sample of shoppers who purchased six-packs of cola the week following the ad's blanket buy on television. A positive correlation between vivid recall of the ad and a report of an uncharacteristic choice of Diet Coke over other no-calorie soft drinks would give credence to theories of influence that focus on attention. Of course, there's no

guarantee that these purchases weren't affected by prime shelf display or discount pricing. It's 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 than in an experiment, but more vigor.

3. Textual Analysis

The aim of textual research is to describe and interpret the characteristics of a message. You may have noticed from Marty's analysis of the Diet Coke ad that the word *text* is not limited to written materials. Communication theorists use this term to refer to any intentional symbolic expression—verbal or nonverbal. Marty's critique is a contemporary example of the oldest tradition in communication research—the intensive study of a single message grounded in a humanistic perspective. Rhetorical criticism is the most common form of textual analysis.

An increasing number of interpretive scholars aren't content merely to interpret the intended meanings of a text. They want to expose and publicly resist the ideology that permeates the accepted wisdom of society. Known alternatively as postmodernists, post-structuralists, deconstructivists, or hermaneuticists, these scholars reject any notion of permanent truth or meaning. To traditional thinkers, their activity looks like a few angry children in kindergarten knocking over other kids' blocks, but these scholars are using theory to carve out a space where people without power can be heard.

Lana Rakow, a feminist scholar in the Communication Department at the University of Wisconsin—Parkside, would have us consider the plight of women watching almost any female model in a television commercial. Female viewers can't escape the portrayal of unattainable thinness as the erotic ideal, and they are continually invited to see their body as "the object of men's fetishistic gaze."[10]

For Rakow and other theorists critical of the "culture industries," advertising is the linchpin of oppression that needs to be resisted by those who are aware that television imposes meaning on the viewer. Their form of textual analysis isn't a detached and impartial enterprise; it is a powerful tool in the service of a reformist agenda.

Although Marty's reading of the Diet Coke commercial may not appear particularly radical, it includes a significant—if implicit—social critique. Highlighting our culture's obsession with thinness, he suggests that the ad plays to viewer anxiety over excess pounds through association with the rotund pachyderm. In fact, Marty's claim that the ad targeted weight-conscious viewers was sufficiently subversive to incur the disapproval of Coca-Cola. The company expressed its displeasure with his analysis by denying me permission to run photos from the ad in this book. Diet Coke may be sugar-free, but the decision to

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

How precise are the hypotheses? Is each a clearly worded, simple, single cause-effect prediction?

Are the hypotheses interesting or are they self-evident?

Were subjects randomly assigned to the experimental groups? Did everyone studied in the experiment have an equal chance of being assigned to the different experimental conditions?

Was the manipulation of the independent variable "life-like" enough to allow the researcher to generalize the findings beyond the confines of this particular experiment?

Were important extraneous variables that may confound the findings controlled for? Might the findings be due to other events that occurred between the time the subjects experienced the independent variable and when they were measured on the dependent variable?

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW RESEARCH

Is there a response bias in the sample? Could there be differences between those who participated and those who did not? Was the response rate sufficient for the purposes of the research?

Was the choice of a questionnaire or an interview appropriate for answering the research question posed?

Were the questions worded clearly and leading questions avoided?

Were respondents guaranteed anonymity?

Did the interviewers receive sufficient training? Did they probe effectively?

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Were the most appropriate texts selected for analysis?

Is the researcher sure that the text selected are complete and accurate? What might be left out of these tests, and how might any omissions affect the results?

What type of rhetorical criticism was it: historical, Neo-Aristotelian, generic feminist, metaphoric, narrative, dramatistic, fantasy theme analysis?

Did the critic produce a compelling argument about the meaning of the text?

In the final analysis, did the essay produce a richer understanding of human persuasion?

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

What justified observation or interviews as the appropriate methods to use? Were the observations conducted on-site, where people are communicating naturally?

Did the observers exhaustively record all the communication behavior related to the research questions?

Are the findings described in sufficiently rich and vivid detail (a "thick description") so the reader may visualize the communication behavior observed and the context in which it occurred?

What assurances are provided that inferences are grounded in the data, not imposed or biased by the researcher's a priori assumptions?

Do the article's findings "put you in the respondents' shoes," so that you now have a better sense of how people in the group being studied act, think speak and/or react to others?

FIGURE 1.1
Twenty Questions to Guide Evaluation of Four Research Methods (Selected from Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps, *Interpreting Communication Research: A Case Study Approach.*)

prohibit publication illustrates the humanist claim that knowledge is never value-free.

4. Ethnography

In the 1990 Academy Award–winning film *Dances with Wolves,* Kevin Costner plays John Dunbar, a nineteenth-century Army lieutenant alone on the Dakota plains.[11] Amidst some anxiety and with 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!

Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz says that ethnography is "not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive (approach) in search of meaning."[12] 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.

Most people have long regarded advertising as a world unto itself. A communication researcher could view the Diet Coke commercial as an artifact of this particular subculture and seek to understand the web of meaning surrounding the creation of this and other television spots. An ethnographer would look for the rites, ceremonies, rituals, myths, legends, stories, and folklore that reflect the shared meanings and values of the advertising industry. Perhaps Coca-Cola's ad agency would welcome an intern who is willing to assume a participant-observer role.

A LOOK AHEAD: SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN THE THEORETICAL TENSION

In this opening chapter I have tried to outline some important differences between scientific and humanistic views. While some communication theorists have a foot in both camps and their ideas don't fit neatly into one category or the other, the majority of the thirty-three theories I feature in this book are spread evenly among the arts and sciences. A basic grasp of the distinctions will help you understand where like-minded scholars are going and why they've chosen a particular path to get there.

You can't have read this far without realizing that a certain wariness exists between those who do science and those who do art. Glenn and Marty sometimes have trouble appreciating each other's scholarship. In their case, it's a creative tension that causes each man to expand his academic horizon. In other instances, advocates of the two traditions have lobbed academic Scud missiles in each other's direction. Chapter 2 chronicles how this conflict has influenced the study of communication. This historical summary will help you understand why two professors in the same department may be a bit cautious in each other's presence.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Compare Glenn Sparks's and Marty Medhurst's approaches to the Diet Coke commercial. Which analysis makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. How do scientists and humanists differ in their answers to the question *What is truth?* Which perspective do you find more satisfying?
3. Think of the communication courses you've taken. Which perspective undergirded the teaching? Was this due to the subject matter or to the professor's orientation?
4. How would a rhetorician view experiments, surveys, textual analysis, and ethnography as research methods? How do empiricists regard the same methodologies?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: James A. Anderson, *Communication Theory: Epistemological Foundations*, Guilford, New York, 1996.

Introduction to theory: Ernest Bormann, *Communication Theory*, Sheffield, Salem, Wisc., 1989, pp. 105–256.

Contemporary scientific scholarship: Charles Berger and Steven Chaffee, *Handbook of Communication Science*, Sage, Newbury Park, Calif., 1987.

Contemporary rhetorical scholarship: Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, 2d ed., Waveland, Prospect Heights, Ill., 1991.

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*, 2d ed., Mark Knapp and Gerald Miller (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1994, pp. 21–41.

Scientific research: Glenn Sparks, Cheri Sparks, and Kirsten Gray, "Media Impact on Fright Reactions and Belief in UFOs: The Potential Role of Mental Imagery," *Communication Research*, Vol. 22, 1995, pp. 3–23.

Rhetorical analysis: Martin J. Medhurst, "The Rhetorical Structure of Oliver Stone's *JFK*," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 10, 1993, pp. 128–143.

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

Research methods: Lawrence R. Frey, Carl H. Botan, Paul G. Friedman, and Gary L. Kreps, *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1991.

Communication Encyclopedia: International Encyclopedia of Communications, Vols. 1–4, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989.

CHAPTER 2

Talk About Communication

Communication is a hard term to define. Most definitions probably say more about the author than they do about the nature of communication.

Consider, for example, the different views of two theorists you will read about in the Verbal Messages section. Engineer Claude Shannon takes a scientific approach: "Communication is the transmission and reception of information."[1] Philosopher I. A. Richards worked from a humanistic perspective: "Communication is the generation of meaning."[2] Although not contradictory, neither definition speaks to the concerns that are voiced by the other theorist.

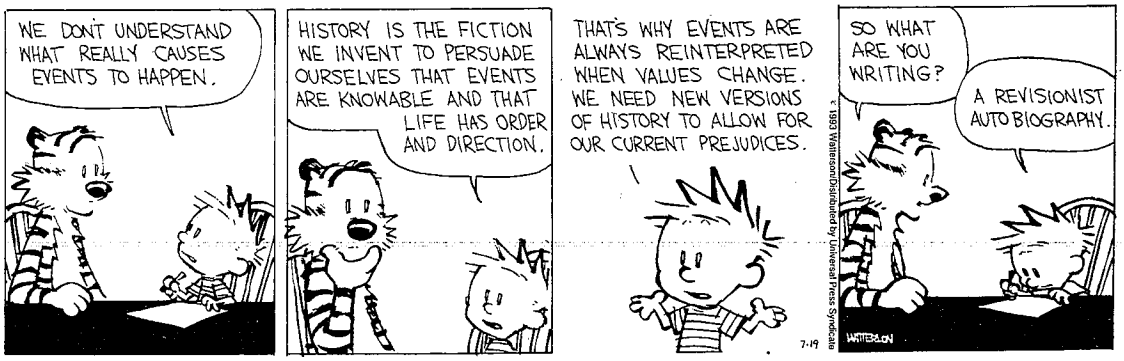
Because the field of communication embraces both scientific and humanistic views of the world, I choose to adopt a definition that doesn't favor one approach over the other. I like the definition given by Lawrence Frey, Carl Botan, Paul Friedman, and Gary Kreps in their research methods text. These writers define communication in a way that describes the essence of the process without being biased against any particular way of examining the subject:

> Communication is the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning.[3]

This broad definition regards communication as an intentional activity, while not ruling out accidental outcomes. It gives equal weight to messages and meanings and opens the door for studying both content and relationships. The limits of the field are set sufficiently wide by this definition to include verbal and nonverbal symbols. In other words, the definition describes what communication scholars have really studied.

Folk wisdom suggests that we don't know who we are unless we know where we've been. We need to grasp a bit of our field's history before we can understand what the theorists in this book are trying to accomplish. The rest of this chapter provides that historical backdrop.

The first line of the song "Time," sung by the Alan Parsons Project, declares that "Time keeps flowing like a river."[4] Because a single river may contain many tributaries and more than one current, this stream-of-events metaphor captures nicely the history of communication theory and research. Chapter 1



focused on the twin currents of science and humanism. These diverse viewpoints surfaced in communication studies early in the 1900s, and the arts and sciences have ebbed and flowed within the discipline ever since.

All history is an interpretation of past events. I've identified seven significant historical periods of communication theory, research, and instruction during this century—a time in which the flow of communication study has swelled from a trickle to a flood (see page 29). But don't be surprised when you see that the dates for the seven periods often overlap. Like the stages of a river's course, these periods are hard to separate.

THE EARLY YEARS (1900–1950): THE RISE OF RHETORIC

In the early 1900s, college speech teachers were members of English departments. Speech teachers stressed oral performance and were often looked down upon as "poor cousins" by those who studied and taught literature. In an attempt to gain respect and to carve out an academic discipline for themselves, a small group of speech teachers broke away from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1914 and formed the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. (Even teachers of speech had a tough time pronouncing the acronym, NAATPS.) The name of the organization was later changed to the Speech Association of America (SAA). Although some speech teachers continued to occupy back offices in English departments, by 1935 more than 200 American college and university catalogues listed a separate department of speech.

The first issue of this new discipline's journal, the *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*, called for NAATPS members to have "a sufficiently scientific frame of mind,"[5] and a subsequent article stated that the main goal of the organization was to help members "undertake scientific investigation to discuss true answers to certain questions."[6] But for most speech professionals, this early tip of

the hat to science seems to have been a concern for academic respectability within the university rather than a drive to discover laws of oral effectiveness. Other than the specialized study of speech disorders, such as stuttering and vocal strain, the scientific perspective didn't have a major impact on the field until after World War II.

During these early years, speech departments offered courses that gave practical advice to those trying to influence audiences through public address, oral interpretation of literature, radio announcing, drama, debate, and round-table discussion. Teachers drew on a body of wisdom from Greek and Roman times—the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian were the authoritative sources for instruction in public address.

As for scholarly research, a 1925 essay by Herbert Wichelns of Cornell University established rhetorical criticism as *the* appropriate theoretical activity of the field. He wrote that unlike the critical study of literature, the analysis of public address

> is not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect. It regards a speech as a communication to a specific audience, and holds its business to be the analysis and appreciation of the orator's method of imparting his ideas to his hearers.[7]

Wichelns's work established Aristotle's categories of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals as the standard way to evaluate persuasive discourse. This neo-Aristotelian method of speech criticism dominated the field for the next few decades. Rhetoric was an *art*, and for the majority of speech teachers, who had been schooled in the humanities, the scientific study of public address with its quantitative methodology seemed silly and trite. As for the rhetorical analysis of radio, film, or television, these media were dismissed as forms of entertainment that didn't have the importance of a formal political address or the public discussion of issues.

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCE (1930–1960): MEDIA EFFECTS

Prior to World War II, few scholars referred to their study as "communication research." Those who did used the term to describe the scientific study of media effects and worked out of departments of sociology, psychology, political science, and journalism rather than within the field of speech. Rhetoricians ignored the new mass communication technologies of film, radio, and television, dismissing them as mere entertainment. But the armed conflict across two oceans created an urgent need to find effective ways to inform, influence, and inspire maximum citizen support for the war effort.

Leading social scientists from around the country converged on Washington in a cooperative attempt to discover how broadcast messages affected listeners. In his 1963 book, *The Science of Human Communication*, Wilbur Schramm, Director of the Stanford Institute for Communication Research, referred to four of these men as the "founding fathers" of communication research.[8] Each man

took a behavioral science approach to the effects of persuasive messages on mass audiences.

Political scientist Harold Lasswell analyzed the content of Nazi propaganda to determine why it had a powerful effect on many who heard it. He broke the communication process into five component parts: *Who* says *what* through *which channel*, to *whom*, with *what effect*.

Kurt Lewin was a social psychologist who had escaped Hitler's holocaust. His strong aversion to authoritarian leadership led him to investigate prejudice and the way groups influence the decisions of individual members.

Sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld founded the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University as a way to attract business and government funding. He tested his current theories on any marketing problem posed by his clients. His Radio Research Project pioneered innovative survey and focus-group techniques to capture the emotional impact of broadcasting.

Through his Yale attitude change studies, experimental psychologist Carl Hovland tested the persuasive effects of source credibility (the believability of a speaker) and the order of arguments within a message. Working for the Army during the war, Hovland analyzed the effect of *Why We Fight* training films on soldier morale.

In a 1959 article entitled "The State of Communication Research," University of Chicago social scientist Bernard Berelson declared that communication research was "withering away."[9] He based this gloomy conclusion on the fact that all the founding fathers Schramm identified had either retired, died, or abandoned communication research. Berelson's assessment proved overly pessimistic, mainly because of Schramm's tireless efforts. Following his wartime experience, in which he helped draft President Franklin Roosevelt's famous fireside chats, Schramm set out to create a "crossroads discipline" of communication to complement the five established social sciences of psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology.

Schramm brought a rich mix of talents and experience to his endeavor. Trained in English, he was an accomplished journalist, wrote stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*, played the flute in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, flew an airplane, and was even offered a contract to play AAA baseball. By the end of the 1960s Schramm had created the first doctoral program in mass communication (University of Iowa), established the Institute of Communication Research along the lines of Lazarsfeld's model (University of Illinois), and gained stature for communication studies by establishing a similar program at one of the prestigious private universities—Stanford.

Many communication scholars regard Schramm as the true founder of the field, and some suggest that he created a "founding fathers" myth to borrow the credibility of respected social scientists.[10] Whatever the case, it is clear that Schramm trained the first generation of empirically oriented communication researchers while avoiding any dialogue with existent departments of speech based in the humanities. This lack of contact set a pattern for the division between the rhetorical arts and behavioral sciences within the field, and also in-

hibited any blending of interest in interpersonal and mass communication study. Despite Schramm's indifference to the broader field, a number of his students joined speech department faculties and introduced their scientific methodologies and research agendas. Because of these social scientists, the discipline would never be the same.

THE EMPIRICAL REVOLUTION (1950–1970): THEORY IN A TEST TUBE

Speech departments in the 1950s continued to promote the ancient rhetorical wisdom that persuasive discourse was a matter of an ethical speaker using logical arguments—"the good man speaking well."[11] 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).[12] 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 SAA, 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 change was undoubtedly speeded up by Shannon and Weaver's linear model of communication, which appeared at the beginning of this period (see Chapter 4). David Berlo, who wrote the leading communication textbook of the 1960s, reduced that model to four simple parts.[13]

Source-Message-Channel-Receiver

His SMCR model provided a common vocabulary and a standard way to view the communication process.

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.

THE TURBULENT SIXTIES (1960–1970): A LAUNCHING PAD FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

If time is like a river flowing through the field of communication, the decade of the 1960s was a ten-year stretch of white-water rapids. For America, it was the time of civil rights confrontations, urban riots, U.S. involvement in Vietnam, campus sit-ins, the coming of the Beatles, the hippie movement, the sexual revolution, the drug culture, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Bobby, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The unrest throughout the country was reflected in departments of speech and communication. Nowhere was the turbulence felt more than in the rocky transition from a focus on public address to a concentration on interpersonal communication.

In 1960, most members of the Speech Association of America still thought of speech as a platform art. Course titles in academic departments mirrored this mental image—Public Address, Oral Interpretation, Argumentation and Debate, Persuasion, History of American Public Address, and Classical Rhetoric. Even the study of small-group communication centered on discussion and decision making in the context of a structured meeting. Collegewide service courses were set up to improve message organization, reduce speech fright, and eliminate distracting *and ah's* and *you know's* from speakers' delivery.

For many professors and students, however, the niceties of formal public speaking seemed irrelevant in light of the raw struggle for power taking place on the streets outside the classroom. After all, who gave well-reasoned speeches any more? Who would listen? By 1970, most faculty regarded public address as outdated, and the shape of communication departments was radically altered. Consider the following evidence:

> At many schools, interpersonal communication replaced public speaking as the required course for all students. The curriculum centered on dyadic interactions that are characterized by a mutual awareness of the individuality of the others.
>
> Leading professors no longer taught public speaking courses. They focused instead on nonverbal communication, trust building, self-disclosure, conflict resolution, and other interpersonal issues. Behavioral scientists did the research, while humanists wrote the textbooks. Neither group seemed excited about public address.
>
> The encounter group movement had a strong influence on the way group courses were taught. Known also as "sensitivity training" or "humanistic psychology," the movement promoted an open and honest sharing of feelings between members and encouraged them to disregard social conventions that might inhibit gut-level expression.

Persuasion became a dirty word. The prevailing do-your-own-thing attitude in society sanctioned an individualism that left little room for corporate responsibility or conscious attempts to change another person's behavior.

The focus of communication ethics switched from telling the truth to loyalty to your communication partner. *What* was said became secondary to *how* it was said and to the way it *affected* others. Relationships were more important than message content.

The popularity of concentrations within communication departments changed significantly. Interpersonal and media communication were hot. Oral interpretation, public address, and its history were not. Voice science and drama had a life of their own and often broke away and formed separate departments. Contrary to the expectation of empiricists who were riding high, however, rhetoric did not disappear. After decades of neo-Aristotelian sameness, new methods of rhetorical analysis emerged which guaranteed that rhetoric would not only survive, but thrive.

THE NEW RHETORICS (1965–1980)

A 1965 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* contained an article that used Aristotle's categories of *logos, pathos,* and *ethos* to analyze the relationship between message arguments and figures of speech in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.[14] This historical-critical study is remarkable today only as a typical example of speech scholarship from 1925 to 1965. Rhetoricians were apparently locked into a single method of analyzing a text. What had once been considered mainstream research was now in danger of being relegated to the backwaters of the discipline.

That same year, Edward Black's book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study of Method* launched a rebellion against traditional rhetorical scholarship by advocating multiple approaches to analyzing speech events.[15] Douglas Ehninger was only one of many scholars who was quick to proclaim the demise of rhetorical orthodoxy:

> If Wichelns' landmark essay of 1925 gave neo-Aristoteleanism its birth, this book published exactly 40 years later may well deal the school its death blow.[16]

As it turned out, he was wrong. Aristotle's categories continue to offer a helpful way to analyze a message, the speaker who gives it, and the audience that hears it. (See Chapter 23.) Yet a host of new approaches came to prominence soon after Black's call for new rhetorics.

Observing the protest movements of the 1960s, rhetorical critics reached the same conclusion as behavioral scientists—that the impact of public marches and sit-ins had little to do with carefully crafted speeches or well-reasoned arguments. The sheer numbers of demonstrators and their militant behavior spoke louder than any phrase or figure of speech. Articles on "The Rhetoric of Black Power," "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," and other "rhetoric of . . ." studies began to appear in communication journals.[17]

Many humanists took offense at the nonartistic methods demonstrators used to capture the public's attention. There is nothing particularly subtle about a raised fist, a shouted obscenity, or the takeover of a public building. But if rhetoric was truly an effort "to discover all possible means of persuasion,"[18] scholars in the field decided they could no longer ignore the coercive techniques of social agitation and the way in which nonverbal behavior communicates.

The same logic applied to the influence of television, film, and popular music. Originally dismissed as "mere entertainment," the mass media were obviously shaping popular culture. English professor Marshall McLuhan captured public attention with his claim that the content of television was almost irrelevant (see Chapter 26). "The medium is the message," he announced, and thousands of students set out to investigate his assertion. Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *logos, pathos,* and *ethos* seemed pale in comparison with the excitement of taking part in a media revolution.

Until the late 1970s, most U.S. speech communication professionals were unaware of European thinking on the connection between communication and culture. Although British, French, Italian, and German scholars might differ on details, most offered a Marxist analysis of the media's role in shaping societal values.

Known as "critical theorists," these humanistic philosophers and sociologists were especially critical of American empirical researchers who claimed to be doing objective science. Critical theorists scoffed at a media research establishment that professed to be neutral, but always ended up serving those who held political and economic power. By the end of this period, European critical theory had crossed the Atlantic and provided U.S. rhetoricians with fresh ammunition for periodic clashes with social scientists.

THE HUNT FOR A UNIVERSAL MODEL (1970–1980)

While rhetoricians were diversifying in the 1970s, communication scientists were trying to consolidate. After two decades of empirical research, they could boast of scant new knowledge about the process of communication. Many suspected that the absence of a scientific breakthrough was due to the lack of a single grand theory that was needed to focus research efforts.

Each communication interest group had isolated and studied separate variables that members thought crucial to the process of communication. For example, public address researchers tried to find causes and cures for speech anxiety. Group dynamics investigators centered on traits and styles of leadership. Mass communication scholars focused on the effects of television violence. Persuasion researchers sought the different factors of source credibility, and the new area of interpersonal communication was all over the conceptual map with studies of self-disclosure, self-esteem, trust, nonverbal signals, conflict resolution, and much more. There was little discipline within the discipline.

In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn argues that a universal paradigm or model is the mark of a mature science.[19] Social scientists in communication departments were painfully aware that they hadn't achieved that status. Although successfully redefining the field as "communication" and assuming leadership in the newly titled departments, they still couldn't claim a unifying theory or approach that would guarantee academic respectability among their colleagues in departments of psychology or physics. So throughout the decade of the 1970s, empiricists pursued the dream of a universally accepted communication model.

Ultimately they failed, but it wasn't for lack of trying. At the same SAA-sponsored summit conference that prompted the change in the organization's name, communication scholars sought to define the central research focus of the discipline. They agreed that "spoken symbolic interaction" was their object of study, and calls for journal articles and convention papers over the next decade stressed a preference for message-oriented inquiry.

In an attempt to chart the factors that affect message creation and interpretation, textbook writers of the 1970s offered pictorial models of the communication process, each more complex than the one that came before. The various illustrations looked like Monopoly boards, bedsprings, whirlpools, schematic drawings of electrical circuits, diagrams of football plays, family trees, furnace-thermostat feedback loops, splitting amoebas, Rubic cubes, ladders, hydraulic plumbing, and wheels within wheels. As intriguing as they were, no one model generated a consensus as *the* paradigm of the communication process.

The entire 1977 spring issue of *Communication Quarterly* featured a debate among advocates of three types of theory—laws, rules, and systems. From Chapter 1 you already know that *covering laws* are the goal of science and that *interpretive rules* are the product of a humanistic approach. An *open systems* approach doesn't fit neatly into either camp.

Systems theory refuses to treat any conversation as an isolated event. Theorists working with this model see a human communication system as a set of interdependent people who work together to adapt to a changing environment. Systems theorists differ from rules theorists in that they play down the role of individuals and concentrate on patterns of relationships within the entire system. They depart from a laws approach in that they regard the communication event as greater than the sum of its parts.

Debate as a cocurricular activity has a long and proud tradition of excellence in our field. Many public figures point to their collegiate debate training as superb preparation for critical analysis and thinking on their feet. But debaters rarely credit their opponents' arguments, and spectators are seldom swayed by what they hear. So it was with the theoretical debates of the 1970s. Champions of systems, rules, and laws took potshots at each other, while bystanders caught in the cross-fire decided that no single way of viewing communication was so compelling that they should become a true believer and join the fray. Perhaps a single paradigm wasn't really necessary. Over time, the quest for a universal model of communication lost much of its steam.

FERMENT IN THE FIELD (1980–PRESENT)

The title for this section comes from a special 1983 issue of the *Journal of Communication* devoted to taking stock of the discipline. Thirty-five separate articles offered perspectives on the health of communication scholarship. The term *ferment* captures the mix of creative energy and stressful agitation that writers spotted then, and that continues to mark the field today.[20]

On the positive side, college and university communication departments are more numerous than ever before—about two thousand in the United States alone. They often boast more majors and greater course enrollments than any other department on campus. Twenty-five years ago students began to flock to courses in interpersonal and mass communication, and growth continued through new interest in organizational communication and the applied skills of leadership, conflict negotiation, advertising, and public relations. In 1970, there were 11,000 seniors graduated as communication majors; by 1990 the annual rate had risen to over 50,000. During the same two decades, the number of sociology graduates fell from 36,000 to 14,000 per year.

Communication researchers sought to keep pace with an expanding field. As a result, students can now find research summaries in handbooks of interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and communication science, or consult entries in the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Communications*. They can also locate journal articles on specific interests in *Communication Theory, Language and Social Interaction,* and the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*—all launched since the *Ferment* review appeared. Taken as a whole, the contents of these publications suggest five recent trends in communication study:

1. Increasing interest in interpretive research—especially cultural studies and feminist critiques that seek to unmask and redress power imbalances.
2. More studies using ethnographic methods. For example, media analysts are now paying less attention to the content of television messages and focusing more on how the messages are interpreted by individual viewers.
3. Attempts to penetrate the "black box" of the mind by modeling the mental structures and cognitive processes that guide communication behavior.
4. Interpersonal scholarship converging on the study of personal relationships. Persuasion and group behavior headed the agenda in the 1960s and 1970s; today the focus is on romance, friendship, and family.
5. Wildly diverse interests and research agendas within the field of communication. Once hailed as a strength because it guaranteed success at the registrar's desk, this pluralism now strikes many as evidence that there is no discipline within the discipline. *Fragmentation* has replaced *ferment* as a label for communication studies in the 1990s.

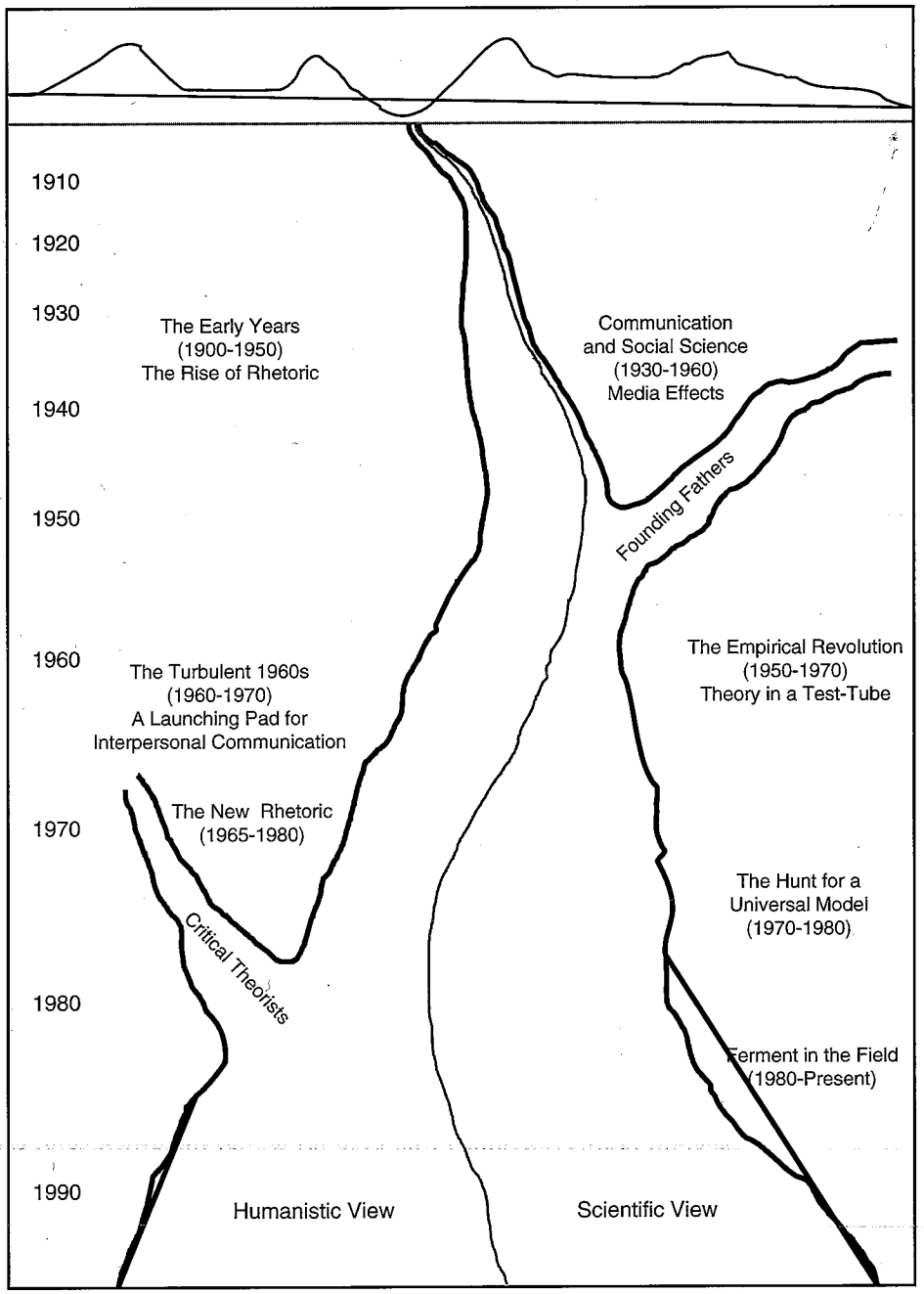


FIGURE 2.1
Communication Theory and Research—The Flow of History

Lack of cohesion within the field makes it difficult for those outside the field to understand the nature of communication study. At a time when money for education is tight, our place at the academy is at risk if college deans are looking for unifying theory or agreed-upon methods of research. Legitimacy may be further threatened when departments adopt a cafeteria approach to learning that doesn't require students to master a common core of knowledge.[21] "No one knows who we are," is a lament sometimes heard when communication professors gather together. Yet we often duck the nagging question "Do *we* know who we are?" Your current study of communication theory is the optimal time for you to craft a satisfying answer to that question of scholastic self-identity.

At the start of this historical overview, I compared communication scholarship in the twentieth century to a river with twin currents representing the arts and sciences. Figure 2.1 illustrates the stages and events that punctuate that flow. Note that as the study of communication has swelled from a trickle to a broad river, the relative strengths of scientific and humanistic inquiry have varied greatly from past to present. With the increase of critical and ethnographic analysis in the last decade, the two distinct approaches of the humanities and social sciences are now roughly equal in the amount of interest they generate. But I've drawn the arts and sciences separate in this depiction of communication theory and research over the years, because that's the way it has tended to be. Only on rare occasions have the two currents of study actually blended together.

The editors of the *Handbook of Rhetoric and Communication* are forced to conclude:

> In the present state of knowledge we cannot organize research and theory concerning rhetoric and communication within any single framework.[22]

This tension between behavioral scientists and rhetoricians continues to be a chief cause for ferment and fragmentation in the field.

Since communication research and rhetorical study differ so markedly and yet both hold an important place within our discipline, it's crucial for us to understand how to evaluate both kinds of theory. Applying the standards of science to rhetorical theory would be just as unfair as judging empirically grounded theory by artistic criteria. In Chapter 3, I will explore the basic ways you can identify good theory in each category. Surprisingly, you may discover several points of contact that give hope that the artistic and scientific currents within the field of communication sometimes flow downriver at the same pace, and may increasingly merge.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. At the start of the chapter *communication* was defined as "the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning." How does this definition embrace the concerns of both the *arts* and *sciences*?

2. The *boundaries of the discipline* seem to be so fluid that it's hard to say what communication scholars do *not* study. Which human thoughts or activities would you exclude from communication research?

3. From your perspective, has there been a turning point in the history of the speech communication field that has special significance?

4. Think of yourself as rowing a boat on the river depicted in Figure 2.1. What part of the river would your interest in communication lead you to occupy?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Thomas Benson (ed.), *Speech Communication in the 20th Century*, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 1985.

Early years (rhetoric): Herman Cohen, *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914–1945*, Speech Communication Association, Annandale, Virginia, 1994.

Early years (mass communication): Everett Rogers, *A History of Communication Study*, Free Press, New York, 1994.

Empirical roots: Jessie Delia, "Communication Research: A History," in *Handbook of Communication Science*, Charles Berger and Steven Chaffee (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, Calif., 1987, pp. 20–98.

History of SCA: William Work and Robert Jeffrey (eds.), *The Past Is Prologue*, Speech Communication Association, Annandale, Virginia, 1989.

Interpersonal communication: Mark Knapp, Gerald Miller, and Kelly Fudge, "Background and Current Trends in the Study of Interpersonal Communication," in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 2d ed., Mark Knapp and Gerald Miller (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1994, pp. 7–24.

Laws, rules, and systems: Communication Quarterly, Vol. 25, 1977, No. 1, entire Winter issue.

Critique of received history of communication: Gertrude Robinson, " 'Here Be Dragons': Problems in Charting the U.S. History of Communication Studies" and Willard Rowland, "Recreating the Past: Dilemmas in Rewriting the History of Communication Research," *Communication*, Vol. 10, 1988, pp. 97–119 and 121–140.

Ferment and fragmentation in the field: "Ferment in the Field," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 1983, and "The Future of the Field I & II", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43, Nos. 3 and 4, 1993.

CHAPTER 3

Weighing the Words of Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory

In Chapter 1 we looked at two distinct approaches to communication theory—humanistic and scientific. In Chapter 2, I traced the history of tension between rhetoricians and behavioral scientists in the field of speech communication. Both groups have trouble understanding and appreciating the value of each other's efforts. This workplace tug-of-war parallels the struggle between ranchers and growers 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 scientists and humanists. Differences in ways of knowing, views of human nature, values, goals of theory building, and methods of research seem to ensure tension and misunderstanding.

Friendly attitudes between the arts and sciences 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 in to making the same mistake. If you've had training in the scientific method and judge the value of every communication theory by whether or not 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 unmask the meaning of a text, you'll easily dismiss the other half.

Regardless of which approach you favor, not all scientific or humanistic communication theories are equally good. In each case, 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 arts and the sciences, 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 rhetoricians use to weigh the works and words of their colleagues.

A TEST CASE: ERNEST BORMANN'S SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY

University of Minnesota professor Ernest Bormann developed a theory of communication that is unusual in that it draws from both the humanities and the sciences. The project started as a method of rhetorical criticism, a long-honored tradition in humanistic study. Bormann called his method *fantasy theme analysis*, and he used it to study a type of communication that takes place in small groups.

Bormann soon discovered a link between the dramatic imagery members use when they talk to each other and the degree of group consciousness and solidarity. In standard social science fashion, he defined his terms and then crafted a cause-and-effect hypothesis, which he now believes holds for all groups, regardless of where they meet, who they are, or why they get together. Simply stated, Bormann's symbolic convergence theory maintains that "the sharing of group fantasies creates symbolic convergence."[2]

Some people restrict the term *fantasy* to children's literature, sexual desire, or things "not true." Bormann, however, uses the word to refer to "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need."[3] In a small group setting, this definition includes any reference to events in the group's past, speculation about what might happen in the future, and any talk about the world outside the group. The term does not cover comments about actions taking place "here and now" within the group. Fantasies are expressed in the form of stories, jokes, metaphors, and other imaginative language that interprets or places a "spin" on familiar events. Voiced fantasies become vehicles to share common experiences and invest them with an emotional tone.

Picture a group of cattlemen having a regular Saturday morning breakfast in a Great Falls, Montana, cafe. One rancher tells a story about a man carrying a briefcase who knocked on his door. "Hello, Mr. Clayton Rogers," the stranger says. "I'm from the federal government and I'm here to help you."

Whether or not the event really happened is not the issue. Symbolic convergence theory is concerned with the group's response. Does the punch line fall flat, or is it greeted with a burst of derisive laughter? Do others lose their self-consciousness and vie to tell their own tales of bureaucratic interference? Bormann says that we can spot a *fantasy chain reaction* by an increased energy within the group, an upbeat tempo in the conversation, and especially through a common response to the imagery.

Most fantasies don't chain out; they fall on deaf ears. But when one catches fire within the group, the same *fantasy theme* runs throughout the multiple narratives. Perhaps at the Saturday breakfast the hero of every man's account is a crafty rancher, while the villain of each story is a bumbling federal agent. Or maybe each image reflects a collective suspicion of a Washington conspiracy to take away grazing rights. Whatever the theme, Bormann believes that by sharing common fantasies, a collection of individuals is transformed into a cohesive group. He calls the process *symbolic convergence.*

Through symbolic convergence, individuals build a sense of community or a group consciousness. References to *I, me,* and *mine* give way to pronouns that assume a joint venture—*we, us,* and *ours*. Groups draw even closer when they share a cluster of fantasy themes. Along with a distrust of Washington, the Saturday morning breakfast group might express disdain for "interfering gun-control lobbyists" and "tree-hugging environmentalists." They may also talk nostalgically about the "Old West," where rugged individuals took care of their own problems. When the same set of integrated fantasy themes is voiced repeatedly across many groups, Bormann describes people's view of social reality as a *rhetorical vision.*

The concept of rhetorical vision moves symbolic convergence theory beyond its original small group context. A coherent rhetorical vision can be spread and reinforced through recurring media messages. Often an entire master script is triggered by a single code word, slogan, or nonverbal symbol. For example, the mere mention of "Waco," "Ruby Ridge," or the "Endangered Species Act" may evoke the ranchers' collective hostility toward the federal government on any Saturday morning. Bormann is convinced that symbolic convergence explains the meeting-of-minds and sense of communion taking place among the men at that breakfast table in a Montana cafe.

Now that you have a thumbnail sketch of fantasy themes and symbolic convergence, let's take a look at the distinct criteria that science and humanism use to judge the quality of Bormann's theory. We'll start with the wisdom of science.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SCIENTIFIC THEORY GOOD?

Symbolic convergence theory is credible because it fulfills what a leading text on social research methods calls the "twin objectives of scientific knowledge." The theory explains the past and present, and it predicts the future. Scientists of all kinds agree on three other criteria for a good theory as well—simplicity, testability, and usefulness. The rest of this section takes a closer look at these five requirements.

Scientific Standard 1: Explanation of the Data

A good scientific theory explains an event or behavior. British philosopher Karl Popper writes that "Theories are nets cast to catch what we call the world."[4] Scientific philosopher Abraham Kaplan says that theory is a way of making

sense out of a disturbing situation.[5] A good theory brings clarity to an otherwise jumbled situation; it draws order out of chaos.

Group discussions are often chaotic. Even though a leader urges members to "speak one at a time" and "stick to the point," participants will often interrupt each other and go off on verbal tangents. According to symbolic convergence theory, graphic digressions and boisterous talk aren't signs of a flawed process. Rather, they are evidence that the group is coming together. As Bormann says, "The explanatory power of the fantasy chain analysis lies in its ability to account for the development, evolution, and decay of dramas that catch up groups of people and change behavior."[6]

A good theory synthesizes the data, focuses our attention on what's crucial, and helps us ignore that which makes little difference. Bormann's theory organizes these verbal inputs into a coherent whole. His focus on the cohesive effect of chained fantasy goes beyond the raw data. It explains what's happening.

A good theory also explains *why*. When Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, the Depression-era bandit replied, " 'Cuz that's where they keep the money." 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.

Symbolic convergence explains the process as well as the result. Bormann suggests that group members often voice fantasies as a way to relieve tensions within the group.[7] The atmosphere may be charged with interpersonal conflict, the group as a whole might be frustrated by its inability to come up with a good solution, or perhaps individuals import their own brand of stress as each walks in the door. Whatever the reason, a joke, story, or vivid analogy provides welcome relief. Most members really don't care how fantasy chains work; they're just thankful to have a pleasant diversion. In like manner, you can be a skillful public speaker without understanding why the audience likes what you say. But when you take a course in communication *theory*, you've lost your amateur status. The reason *why* something happens becomes as important as the fact that it does.

Scientific Standard 2: Prediction of Future Events

A good scientific theory predicts what will happen. Prediction is possible only when dealing with things we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste again and again. As we notice things happening over and over in the same way, we begin to speak of universal laws. In the realm of the physical sciences, we are seldom embarrassed. Objects don't have a choice about how to behave.

The social sciences are another matter. While 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 talk in terms of probability and tendencies—not absolute certainty. That's the

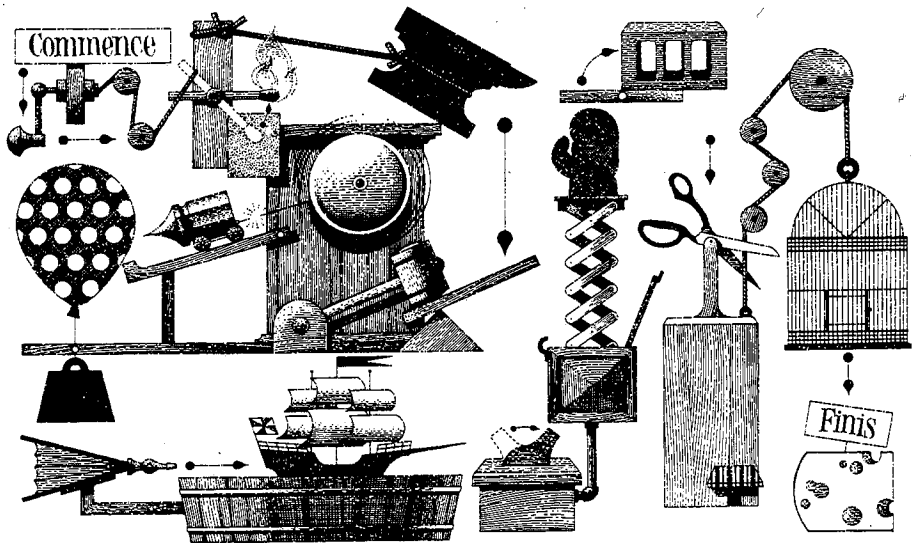
kind of soft predictive power Bormann claims for symbolic convergence theory.

Bormann believes that rhetorical visions contain motives that prompt or impel true believers to act out a fantasy. Consider what we've learned about one of the two men accused of bombing the federal building in Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh's antigovernment passions were reinforced by militia group members convinced that they must prepare for inevitable armed conflict with federal agents. McVeigh was also an avid reader of *The Turner Diaries*,[8] a hate novel that glorifies white supremacist violence against minority groups and the federal government. According to symbolic convergence theory, when we spot a people who are steeped in fantasies that exalt violence, we can anticipate the act itself.[9] Knowing who, when, and where is much less certain.

Bormann has had little success predicting when a fantasy will capture a group's imagination. 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. Even when a skillful imagemaker sparks 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. You can see why most social scientists want more predictive power than Bormann's theory offers.

Scientific Standard 3: Relative Simplicity

A good scientific theory is as simple as possible. 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 fifteen 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 complex. That can happen with scientific explanations as well; it's easy to get caught up in the grandeur of a theoretical construction. "Why say it simply when you can say it elaborately?" Yet the rule of parsimony states that given two plausible explanations for the same event, we should accept the simpler version.

College professors often criticize others for offering simple solutions to complex questions. It's a jungle out there, and we're quick to pounce on those who reduce the world's complexity to a simplistic "me Tarzan, you Jane." But every so often a few explorers will cut through the underbrush and clear a straight path to a truth, which they announce in simple, direct, concise terms. Consider Bormann's summary statement, cited earlier: "The sharing of group fantasies creates symbolic convergence."[10] Simplicity is a virtue of his theory.

Scientific Standard 4: Hypotheses That Can Be Tested

A good scientific theory is testable. If a prediction is wrong, there ought to be a way to demonstrate the error. Some theories are so ambiguous that it's impossible to imagine conditions that would definitively disprove their claims. If there is no potential way to prove a theory false, then the assumption that it's true is mere guesswork. A boyhood example may help illustrate this point.

When I was 12 years old, I had a friend named Mike. We spent many hours shooting baskets in his driveway. The backboard was mounted on an old-fashioned, single-car garage whose double doors opened outward like the doors on a cabinet. In order to avoid crashing into them on a drive for a lay-up, we'd open the doors during play. But since the doors would only swing through a 90-degree arc, they extended about four 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 arching 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 a third attempt was an air ball—it completely missed the rim.

Before I could make the kind of bratty comment junior high 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 and again 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 fabled 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 that he couldn't hear whether the shot went through. This would have forced him to declare from behind the door whether or not 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 similar fashion. They are presented 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.

Symbolic convergence theory is vulnerable at this point. Since Bormann claims that shared fantasies create cohesive groups, an empirical researcher's first task is to measure these variables separately. This is not as easy as it sounds. Because most groups already have a history, it's difficult to know whether a fantasy chain is a trigger for new solidarity among members or merely a reflection of a group consciousness that's already in place. Indeed, leading advocates of the theory seem to confound the two variables, often treating the presence of a fantasy chain as proof of group cohesiveness. Note, for example, how the two concepts merge in the following passage: "For a fantasy theme to chain out, a saga to exist, a symbolic cue to convey meaning, or a rhetorical vision to evolve, there must be a shared group consciousness within a rhetorical community."[11] You can see why many outside observers consider symbolic convergence theory a never-miss shot.

Scientific Standard 5: Practical Utility

A good scientific theory is useful. Since a fundamental goal of any science is increased control, scientific theories should offer practical help. Symbolic convergence theory does this well. Bormann and his followers have used fantasy theme analysis to advise small groups, 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.

Symbolic convergence theory claims that most rhetorical visions employ one of three competing master analogues—a righteous vision, a social vision, or a pragmatic vision. That's what Cragan's and Shields's students typically find.[12] 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 see college as a way to get away from home, meet new friends, and join others in a variety of social activities. High school seniors who buy into a *pragmatic* vision want a marketable degree that will help them get a good job. Knowledge of these distinct visions could help admissions officers develop a strategy to appeal to graduates who would most appreciate the character of their campus.

In the introduction to this book I cited Lewin's claim that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. This final standard of utility suggests that scientific theories that aren't practical aren't good. As you read about theorists who work from a scientific perspective, let usefulness be a crucial test of each theory. If a theory offers helpful advice, act on it; if it offers no pragmatic insight for your life, discard it. There is one caution, however. Most of us can be a bit lazy or shortsighted. We have a tendency to consider as unimportant anything

that's hard to grasp or can't be applied to our lives right now. Before dismissing a theory as irrelevant, make certain you understand it and consider how others have made use of its advice. I'll try to do my part by presenting each theory as clearly as possible and suggesting possible applications.

WHAT MAKES A HUMANISTIC THEORY GOOD?

Unlike scientists, humanists don't have an agreed-on five-point set of criteria for evaluating their theories. But even though there is no universally approved model for artistically oriented theories, humanists repeatedly urge that theories should accomplish some or all of the following functions: create understanding, identify values, inspire aesthetic appreciation, stimulate agreement, and change society. The rest of this chapter examines these oft-mentioned ideals.

Humanistic Standard 1: New Understanding of People

Humanistic scholarship is good when it offers fresh insight into the human condition. Working out of a humanistic tradition, rhetorical critics seek to gain new understanding by analyzing the activity that they regard as uniquely human—symbolic interaction. Suppose, for example, that a scholar in the humanities wanted to study communication during times of war. He or she would start by selecting one or more texts—Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Nazi propaganda during World War II, "Dear John" letters sent to soldiers in Vietnam, General Schwarzkopf's climactic Operation Desert Storm press briefing, or any other text that could shed light on wartime communication.

After verifying that the electronic or print record was accurate, the critic would do a "close reading" of the text. This is a fine-tooth–comb analysis of words, images, and ideas. The critic would also examine the historical *context* that influenced the creation of the message and the way the audience interpreted it.

When rhetorical theory is good, it helps the critic understand the text. The neo-Aristotelian classification of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals, for example, might help the critic figure out why people still memorize Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg. Or Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach could suggest that Norman Schwarzkopf's Desert Storm briefings were the product of a military culture that has its own rites, rituals, and myths. You'll read about these theories in the pages to come. If they help you make sense out of complex communication, then they fulfill the first humanistic standard for a good theory.

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 there are times when we should "just say no" to theory. But 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."[13]

Bormann's call for a powerful explanatory structure in humanistic theory is akin to the behavioral scientist's insistence that theory explains why people

do what they do. But the two notions are slightly 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 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."[14]

To the extent that Krippendorff's imperative means abandoning a detached and dispassionate stance, Bormann's fantasy theme analysis is self-referential. In his preface to *The Force of Fantasy*, the theorist describes the personal thrill of discovery and creation:

> Mulling over the materials for my book in the history of religious and reform speaking at the same time as I was caught up in these exciting new developments in small group communication resulted in one of those exhilarating moments of illumination when it seemed clear to me that the force of fantasy is just as strong in mass communication as it is in small group interaction. Merging the discoveries in group fantasies with recent developments in rhetorical criticism provided me with my critical method—the fantasy theme analysis of rhetorical visions.[15]

This is not the account of a detached observer. However, inasmuch as the self-referential imperative calls for explicit recognition that scholars affect and are affected by the communication they study, fantasy theme analysis remains a spectator sport.

Humanistic Standard 2: Clarification of Values

A good humanistic theory brings people's values into the open. The theorist readily acknowledges his or her own ethical stance and actively seeks to unmask the ideology behind the message under scrutiny. Since fantasy theme analysis is based on the assumption that meaning, emotion, and motive for action are manifest in the content of a message, value clarification is a particular strength of symbolic convergence theory.

Not all humanists occupy the same moral ground, but there are core values most of them share. For example, humanists usually place a high premium on individual liberty. Klaus 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."[16] When theorists follow this rule, monologue gives way to dialogue.

Many humanists value equality as highly as they do freedom. This commitment leads to a 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. "There is no safe harbor in which researchers can avoid the power structure."[17]

As for symbolic convergence theory, Bormann's method of analyzing group fantasies seems to be ethically neutral. However, his commentary on

nineteenth-century romantic pragmatism suggests that Bormann is a man who applauds restoring the American dream of freedom, equal opportunity, hard work, and moral decency.[18] His readers would probably conclude that he'd be more in sympathy with the rhetorical vision of the African-American Million Man March on Washington to pledge self-reliance than with the Rambo fantasies of the white Montana militia.

Humanistic Standard 3: Aesthetic Appeal

A good humanistic theory is not just *about* art. It *is* art. Art looks at old material in a new way. The *form* of a communication theory can capture the imagination of a reader just as much as the content. According to University of Washington professor Barbara Warnick, a rhetorical critic can fill one or more of four roles—artist, analyst, audience, and advocate.[19] As an artist, the critic's job is to spark appreciation.

Symbolic convergence writing sometimes fails the test of artistry. Readers of one journal article have to plough through a ponderous sentence that runs over two hundred words![20] Yet if Bormann and his followers don't write with the lucidity or wit of an essayist for the *Atlantic* or the *New Yorker*, they aren't afraid to support their key ideas with the words of people who do. For example, Bormann underscores the importance of fantasy with Robert Frost's observation that "society can never think things out; it has to see them acted out by actors."[21]

Even when symbolic convergence prose seems heavy going, I'm intrigued by the descriptions of fantasy themes that emerge from Harley-Davidson bikers, unwed mothers, and from *The Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous. An analysis of AA literature reveals a rhetorical vision that is best characterized as "Fetching Good Out of Evil," a felicitous expression introduced by Bormann.[22] It only takes a few such apt turns of phrase to heighten the aesthetic appeal of the theory.

Humanistic Standard 4: A Community of Agreement

We can identify a good humanistic theory by the amount of support it generates within a community of like-minded scholars. Interpretation of meaning is subjective, but whether or not the humanist's case is reasonable is decided ultimately by others in the field. Their acceptance or rejection is an objective fact that helps verify or vilify the theorists' judgment.

John Stewart is the editor of *Bridges, Not Walls*—a collection of humanistic articles on interpersonal communication. As the book has progressed through six editions, Stewart's judgment to keep, drop, or add each new theoretical work was made possible by the fact that humanistic 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."[23]

A rhetorical theory can't meet the community of agreement standard unless it becomes the subject of widespread analysis. Sometimes rhetoricians address their critical arguments only to an audience of "true believers" who are already committed to the author's approach. SCA past president David Zarefsky warns that rhetorical validity can be established only when a work is debated in the broad marketplace of ideas. For this rhetorical critic from Northwestern University, 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.[24]

When it comes to widespread scrutiny, Bormann has done it right. He's published his ideas in major journals that are open to rhetorical scholarship—the *Quarterly Journal of Speech, Communication Theory,* and *Journal of Communication* among them. While not all communication scholars find value in his theory, the majority do. When confronted by critics, Bormann has responded publicly and convincingly.[25]

Fantasy theme analysis has become a standard method of symbolic study. Based on the human nature assumption that people are symbol-users in general and storytellers in particular, the approach squares neatly with several other theories in this book.[26] As you can see, the community of agreement that supports Bormann's theory is both wide and articulate.

Humanistic Standard 5: Reform of Society

A good humanistic theory often generates change. Contrary to the notion that we can dismiss social philosophy as "mere rhetoric," the interpretive theorist is a reformer who can have an impact on society. 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.[27]

Fantasy theme analysis reliably documents rhetorical visions that contain motives to go public, gain converts, and use the mass media to spread their truth. Yet symbolic convergence theory itself has no reform agenda for society. Scholars trying to identify fantasy chains would rather probe than preach.

Bormann is trying to achieve a more modest change. As I've stressed in these first three chapters, social scientists and humanists in our disciplines have typically gone their separate ways. Bormann would like it otherwise. He's crafted a theory that understands fantasy theme analysis as "a liberal and humanizing art, a scholarly endeavor which aims to illuminate the human condition."[28] Definitely humanistic. But his claim that sharing fantasies (whatever they are) tends to draw people together (whoever they are) makes symbolic convergence theory a general theory of communication. Definitely scientific.

Inasmuch as Bormann's joint venture between the arts and sciences is a model that encourages rhetoricians and empiricists to work in harmony, it meets the reform agenda criterion.

BALANCING THE SCALE: SIMILAR WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Figure 3.1 summarizes the standards that I suggest you use as you evaluate a communication theory. You'll find that I often refer to these requirements in the critique sections at the end of each chapter. As you might expect, the thirty-three theories presented in this book stack up rather well against these criteria (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 cited readily admit a need for fine tuning, and some even call for major overhauls.

Throughout this chapter I have urged using separate measures for weighing the merits of scientific and humanistic theories. Yet a side-by-side comparison of the two lists in Figure 3.1 suggests that the standards used by humanists and scientists may not be as different as first thought. Consider the parallels at each of the five points:

1. *Explanation* tries to answer the question, Why? So does *understanding.*
2. *Prediction* and *value clarification* both look to the future. The first suggests what *will* happen; the second, what *ought* to happen.
3. For many students of theory, *simplicity* has *aesthetic appeal.*
4. *Testing hypotheses* is a way of achieving a *community of agreement.*
5. A theory that actually *reforms* part of the world is certainly very *practical.*

For teachers and students of communication, the parallels cited above suggest that scientists and the rhetors should be friends. At least they can respect

Scientific Theory	Humanistic Theory
Explanation of Data	Understanding of People
Prediction of Future	Clarification of Values
Relative Simplicity	Aesthetic Appeal
Testable Hypotheses	Community of Agreement
Practical Utility	Reform of Society

FIGURE 3.1
Summary of Criteria for Evaluating Communication Theory

the thoughts of scholars in the other camp. Chapter 36 revisits the possibility of linking behavioral and rhetorical ideas, but now we turn to a one-by-one description of individual communication theories. We'll start with verbal messages—theories of how words work.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Ernest Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory* has both *scientific* and *humanistic* features. Does it seem to be a better scientific or humanistic theory? Why?
2. How can we call a scientific theory good if it is *capable of being proved wrong*?
3. How can we decide if a humanistic theory provides a *reasonable interpretation*?
4. Any theory involves some trade-offs; no theory can meet every standard of quality equally well. Of the ten criteria discussed, which is most important to you?

A SECOND LOOK

Scientific approach: Steven Chaffee and Charles Berger, "What Communication Scientists Do," in *Handbook of Communication Science*, Charles Berger and Steven Chaffee (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, Calif., 1987, pp. 99–122.

Scientific critique: Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 5th ed., Wadsworth, Belmont, Calif., 1995, pp. 22–40.

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Humanistic critique: Klaus Krippendorff, "On the Ethics of Constructing Communication," in *Rethinking Communication*, Vol. 1, Brenda Dervin, Lawrence Grossberg, Barbara O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, Calif., 1989, pp. 66–96.

Recommended resource: Ernest Bormann, "Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Communication Formulation," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1985, pp. 128–138.

Fantasy theme analysis: Ernest Bormann, "Fantasy Theme Analysis and Rhetorical Theory," in *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 5th ed., James Golden, Goodwin Berquist, and William Coleman (eds.), Kendall/Hunt, Dubuque, Iowa, 1992, pp. 365–384.

Applied research: John Cragan and Donald Shields, *Symbolic Theories in Applied Communication Research: Bormann, Burke, and Fisher*, Hampton, Cresskill, N.J., 1995, chapters 2 and 6.

Critique and response: Ernest 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.