

*HUMAN COMMUNICATION THEORY:
ITS NATURE, FUNCTION, AND SCOPE*

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The primary purpose of human communication is to share symbolic information to establish, maintain, and terminate relationships among people and human institutions. Occasionally, very occasionally, a research scholar will pose a question or raise an issue regarding this foundational communication process that, when an answer is provided, will attract the attention and focus the energy of a group of scholars over an extended period of time. Frequently, that collective effort will put to rest the question or issue raised by providing an answer that is suggestive but temporary, insightful but not sustainable. Less frequently, but perhaps more significantly, a question is posed, an issue raised, and an answer provided by a group of scholars employing diverse methodologies that must be considered controlling in its insightfulness and enduring in its suggestiveness and thus is foundational to the study of human theory.

When such questions are posed and answers given, they normally attract sufficient attention to inspire a broad range of research that inquires into the question raised at philosophic, theoretic, and practical levels of analysis; then it may be termed a *watershed research tradition in human communication theory*. This book is a sampling of such contributions to our understanding of human communication processes.

This book represents a series of case studies of groups of researchers whose works are considered foundational to our understanding of human communication processes. This collection of intellectual efforts can never be comprehensive nor complete. The limits on space in a single book preclude comprehensiveness and dictate sampling from the available pool. In addition, completeness is equally impossible because all of these theories and research traditions are examples of ongoing arguments that seek to raise new issues, make new claims, and provide new proof for these claims. Such inquiries are, in a sense, a journey rather than a destination.

This book attempts to capture the excitement of several such journeys and shed insight into the skills and passions involved in pursuing such an inquiry with intellectual excellence. It also seeks to manifest how human communication theory is developed, defended, and extended at the philosophic, theoretic, and practical levels of inquiry from a plurality of research perspectives. In short, this book attempts to illustrate and inspire theoretic inquiry.

A research program normally arises when someone asks a question or raises an issue so central to the phenomena under analysis that an answer to that question or resolution of that issue can focus the productive inquiry of a group of scholars over an extended period of time. The human communication theorists in this book ask such questions and raise such issues as

- How are the meanings shared in human interaction formed?
- How does a speaker adapt to an audience?
- What motivates human communication?
- What role does the sequence of information play in communication coherence?
- What communication processes govern and guide the formation of interpersonal relationships?
- When does human communication become a controlling concern in organizations?
- How should communication function within an organization?
- What effects do mass media have?
- What are the central communication processes within a culture?

This book explores some of the more enduring answers to these questions and their implications for human communication theory. Whereas the questions and issues that are to serve as the beginning points for intellectual inquiry have multiple sources, as already indicated, the answers to those questions or the resolution of those issues that are to count as theories all take a common form. Each one takes the form of an argument supported by evidence. For an answer to count as a theory rather than a hypothesis, it must contain both an argument and a body of evidence in support of that argument; thus, we can draw a distinction between a well-formed or -grounded theory and a speculative hypothesis. When over time a given theory attracts a number of researchers employing a variety of examinable methodologies, we have a watershed research program.

Theories or arguments provided by a number of scholars employing a variety of diverse methodologies can seek to answer a question or resolve an issue at one or more of three levels of abstraction: (1) a philosophic level, (2) a theoretic level, or (3) a practical level.

A *philosophic perspective* seeks to provide an argument and evidence to resolve a question or issue by asking an audience to make certain assumptions

about the nature of communication. Then it seeks to demonstrate the unique insights into human interaction processes that come from investigating communication from within those assumptions. In this book, philosophic theories are developed that invite the reader to explore human interaction processes from within

- Structural rules
- Constructivist theory
- Self-monitoring
- Sequential interaction
- Functional rules
- Critical theory
- High-speed management
- Media effects
- Ethnographic sets of assumptions

In each case, the evidence and arguments presented seek to provide a unique and suggestive vantage point within which to explore human communication processes.

A *theoretic perspective* seeks to provide an argument and evidence in response to a question or issue that specifies a precisely verifiable set of relationships between a web of concepts and to demonstrate a unique and suggestive set of insights that comes from doing so. We sometimes forget how powerful a precisely specified web of relationships can be. In this book, arguments and evidence are provided for such a precise web of relationships between

- Hierarchy and meanings
- Cognitive complexity and meanings
- Uncertainty reduction, anxiety, and communication
- Sequential interaction and coherence
- Self-concept and different types of interpersonal relationships
- Speed to market and organizational success
- Democracy and organizational communication
- Environmental scanning, value chain, and continuous improvement communication
- Personal identity, social relations, and conduct in cultural communication

In each case, the evidence and argument presented seek to provide a unique and suggestive insight into human interaction processes.

A *practical perspective* seeks to provide an argument and evidence in response to a question or issue that outlines a strategy to be taken or a tool

to be employed in consciously selecting a means to some end, a way of practically obtaining a goal. We sometimes call these *message strategies* or *means of persuasion*. A practical perspective seeks to demonstrate the unique and suggestive insights that come from the appropriate use of such message strategies or tools of persuasion. In this book, practical theories are provided of

- Unwanted repetitive episodes
- Inculturation
- Coordination
- Message comprehensives
- Message adaptation
- Persuasion
- Establishing interpersonal relationships
- Maintaining interpersonal relationships
- Terminating interpersonal relationships
- Corporate colonization
- Alternatives to corporate colonization
- Communication in Teamsterville
- Communication in America
- Communication in Israel
- America's value system

In each case, one or more message strategies is provided for practically reaching some goal that provides unique and suggestive insight into human communication processes.

A watershed research program normally resolves questions or issues at each of these levels of analysis and, in so doing, provides an in-depth treatment of the phenomena under analysis.

This, then, is our book, our inquiry into the nature, function, and scope of watershed research programs in human communication theory. Enjoy the journey, profit from the insights and suggestiveness of the evidence and argument provided. The challenge for you is to begin a new or extend an existing watershed research program in human communication theory.