

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

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For over 2,500 years, scholars have written and theorized about the process of human communication. The philosopher Plato, living and writing in fifth century B.C. Athens, initially attacked savagely the study of human communication, in his dialogue *Gorgias*. Then, in his later dialogue *Phaedrus*, he proposed that the subject be studied systematically, not only in the law courts and assemblies but in families and intimate relationships as well. Plato's colleague, Aristotle, is said to have conducted empirical research into verbal messages and their effects in civil affairs. Thus, these early scholars foreshadowed what was only much later to become one of the major research topics in the study of human behavior, the study of how humans engage in the process of communication, and the effects that various patterns of messages have in lives and societies.

Although there is a rich tradition of communication scholarship down through the centuries, it was not until the twentieth century that there has been a sustained effort to investigate empirically the processes and effects of human communication. In this century, communication—its models, theories, research methods, and pedagogies—has become one of the major topics of theory and research in contemporary scholarship. There is now a substantial body of empirical and theoretical writing that can be categorized as research into human communication. It appears that in terms of everyday life as well as in terms of scholarship, this is, as the philosopher Richard McKeon phrased it, “the age of communication” (McKeon 1956).

At first glance, the statement that we live in “the age of communication” looks like a cliché. Certainly, since McKeon's famous assertion of that idea was published (McKeon 1956), it has been repeated many times in print and it undergirds much that we read and hear about communication in these times. But those of us who study communication know that although the

phrase is said over and over, it is not overused or trite because the more we study communication the more we discover how much there is to be known and how much remains unknown. For us, the compilers of this volume, the study of communication continues to be a fresh and exciting endeavor, and our efforts at study are repaid by a host of new and promising lines of research and theorizing about this fundamental aspect of social life.

Our belief in the importance of communication to human life, and in the possibility of learning something about the way communication works in human life, have led us to an interest in communication theory—to systematic statements about the nature and dynamics of human interaction. This volume is an extensive and thought-provoking expression of that interest.

The title of this volume, *Developing Communication Theories*, makes reference to substance and to process. The *substance* is communication theory. In this volume we present five theoretical essays about human communication, along with a concluding essay that provides a commentary on the overall corpus of works. Thus, we present a substantial body of original papers about human communication as an important human activity. The volume is also about the *process* of constructing communication theories. In presenting the theoretical fruits, as it were, of their work, each of the contributors has provided a chronicle of how their theoretical insights developed over time. The concluding interpretive essay thus addresses not only the substance of the theories presented, but also is a commentary on how these theories were constructed.

Each of the theoretical essays included here presents work that is well known to scholars in communication. Each of these authors was given the same commission—to write a chapter in which they set forth their own original ideas about communication and in which they also discuss explicitly how their theories were developed. We were particularly interested in the interplay of theory, concepts, and data. That is, we asked each author to discuss how existing concepts and theoretical insights informed each other, what problems they encountered (and solved or did not solve) in terms of reconciling theory, concepts, and data, and how their work with concepts and data informed the eventual substance and shape of the theory proposed.

Books about communication theory abound. Such books can be classified into at least four distinct types. One is a book that sets out an original theory of communication, such as the important statements by Ruesch and Bateson (1951, 1968), Cherry (1957, 1966), Watzlavick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), Pearce and Cronen (1980), Berger and Bradac (1982), Sanders (1984), and Cushman and Cahn (1985). A second is a book that contains a collection of theoretical readings by a variety of authors, such as the influential volumes edited by Barnlund (1968) or Dance (1982). A third is a textbook survey of communication theory and communication theories, such as Bormann (1980,

1989), Fiske (1982), Trenholm (1986, 1991), and Littlejohn (1989). A fourth is the encyclopedia or handbook of communication theory, such as Arnold and Bowers (1984) and Berger and Chaffee (1987).

*Developing Communication Theories* is unique among the various kinds of books about communication theory. It presents a variety of authors who not only present their own theories, but who in the process describe, from their own vantage points, the processes by which they construct their theories. Thus, *Developing Communication Theories* provides a glimpse into not only what is made but into the making as well. Why is such an emphasis important? We believe there are two reasons. First, theories are humanly constructed products. They come from the efforts of one or more people actively to make something. As such, an understanding of the theories themselves is enhanced by learning about the making itself. In this volume, the authors reveal something about how it is they came to pose the questions they have posed, what led them to a particular formulation of those questions, and how early experiences at observing the empirical world shaped the making of their product. Studying a communication theory as a construction by a human agent provides a perspective on the product which could not as easily be gleaned without the author's self-reflective commentary.

A second reason for examining theories as human constructions is the instructional value provided to students of communication who themselves are engaged in the study of communication, not as mere passive receivers of information, but as active interpreters of arguments and proposals. By following five theorists, and one commentator on their efforts, through a narrative about their research, those of us who read these stories are provided the opportunity to share, even if partially, in the intricate and difficult process by which these products were made. Such a sharing provides us as readers with models and moves to employ in our own search for understanding, whether it is a search for understanding the arguments made by others or an effort ourselves to contribute to the ongoing conversation about communication. Certainly, a volume such as this helps any of us who desire to move from the former role, a relatively passive receiver, to the latter, an active user and interpreter of the riches of the lode of communication theory.

The occasion for assembling such a body of work and for assembling this particular body of work was a particular set of circumstances at the University of Washington in the Department of Speech Communication. We had the opportunity to invite to the department several prominent scholars who had distinguished themselves in efforts to construct communication theories (Albrecht was then on the Washington faculty). Given the opportunity to schedule these visits during the span of about a year, we decided to ask each of these scholars to address the theme of developing communication theories, with explicit attention to their own processes of theoretical development.

These visits included appearances by Jan Bavelas, Charles Berger, Joseph Cappella, Barbara O'Keefe, Edna Rogers, and John Wilson. Berger, Cappella, and O'Keefe have each contributed a chapter to this volume, which grew out of that series of oral presentations. As the compilers of the volume, Albrecht and Philipsen each contributed a chapter reporting the respective stories of their own research efforts over a sustained period of time.

One important part of the series of presentations from which the present volume grew was that they were situated within a scholarly community. Faculty members and students from the department attended the presentations, raised questions, and then, in subsequent days and months, drew from the presentations in the ongoing conversation of the departmental community. Albrecht and Philipsen, as well as Susan Kline, then a member of the department's faculty (now at The Ohio State University), and John Stewart, a member of the faculty, participated in all the sessions. Because of his active role in responding to the oral presentations, and his long-standing interest in the philosophy of communication and communication theories (Stewart, *in press*), we asked Stewart to write a comparative and integrative commentary on the various presentations. Thus, the volume we have presented simulates in part the social context in which it took its initial shape: a departmental colloquium series, with a focused invitation to diverse scholars, and with an active response by an interpreting audience. Thus, this collection of essays about communication itself remains at least partially true to the particular form and fora of communication from which it grew.

These are diverse essays in substance and method, a fact discussed in detail by Stewart in his final chapter. As to substance, the themes include:

1. the intersection of the structure of interpersonal ties that people establish in their lives and how those ties and the shape of those ties influence perceptions and processes of human activity (Albrecht);
2. the kinds of messages that communicators produce when they must face uncertainty in relationships and situations (Berger);
3. psychological forces that explain the intricate ways that humans construct interpersonal relationships in and through details of interactional behavior (Cappella);
4. the logics revealed in differences in the ways people formulate strategic messages (O'Keefe);
5. cultural codes that interlocutors deploy in the distinctive times and places in which spoken life is constructed and enacted (Philipsen);

But for all the diversity in their particulars, these chapters share a common substantive focus and a common spirit, and it is useful to set these out

prior to the papers themselves. They have in common a concern with the theory and practice of the use of language and other means of communicative conduct in the living of social life. Their concern with language and other codes is not, primarily, with their structure or ecology or history, but with their use—with the practices they serve and which, in part, constitute them. That is, each of these chapters is concerned, broadly, with the pragmatics of human communication—with describing and/or explaining how people do things in and through communication as a structured human activity. They also have in common what could be called an empirical spirit. Although they differ in the particular research methods and styles employed, each of these chapters manifests a concern with grounding generalizations in some experience of the world. Each of the authors has built up a theory out of observations and experiences and has tested incrementally generalizations against the lessons of experience.

Much of the vitality of this volume derives from the commonality of focus on communication, studied systematically and with a recourse to some kind of data. Much of its vitality also derives from the substantive, stylistic, and methodological differences of the papers. Taken together they represent a diverse sample of the vitality of communication studies in these times.