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# Introduction to Communication Theory



A recent advertisement for the AT&T cellular service has a bold headline that asserts, "If only communication plans were as simple as communicating." We respectfully disagree with their assessment. Cellular communication plans may indeed be intricate, but the process of communicating is infinitely more so. Unfortunately, much of popular culture tends to minimize the challenges associated with the communication process. We all do it, all of the time. Yet one need only peruse the content of talk shows, classified ads, advice columns, and organizational performance reviews to recognize that communication skill can make or break an individual's personal and professional lives. Companies want to hire and promote people with excellent communication skills. Divorces occur because spouses believe that they "no longer communicate." Communication is perceived as a magical elixir, one that can ensure a happy long-term relationship and can guarantee organizational success. Clearly, popular culture holds paradoxical views about communication: It is easy to do yet powerful in its effects, simultaneously simple and magical.

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The reality is even more complex. “Good” communication means different things to different people in different situations. Accordingly, simply adopting a set of particular skills is not going to guarantee success. Those who are genuinely good communicators are those who understand the underlying principles behind communication and are able to enact, appropriately and effectively, particular communication skills as the situation warrants. This book seeks to provide the foundation for those sorts of decisions. We focus on communication theories that can be applied in your personal and professional lives. Understanding these theories, including their underlying assumptions and the predictions that they make, can make you a more competent communicator.

### ❖ WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

This text is concerned with communication theory, so it is important to be clear about the term *communication*. The everyday view of communication is quite different from the view of communication taken by communication scholars. In the business world, for example, a popular view is that communication is synonymous to information. Thus, the communication process is the flow of information from one person to another (Axley, 1984). Communication is viewed as simply one activity among many others, such as planning, controlling, and managing (Deetz, 1994). It is *what* we do in organizations.

Communication scholars, on the other hand, define communication as *the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning* (Conrad & Poole, 1998). As such, communication both reflects the world and simultaneously helps to create it. Communication is not simply one more thing that happens in personal and professional life; it is the very means by which we produce our personal relationships and professional experiences—it is *how* we plan, control, manage, persuade, understand, lead, love, and so on. All of the theories presented in this book relate to the various ways in which human interaction is developed, experienced, and understood.

### ❖ WHAT IS THEORY?

The term *theory* is often intimidating to students. We hope that by the time you finish reading this book, you will find working with theory to

be less daunting than you might have expected. The reality is that you have been working with theories of communication all of your life, even if they haven't been labeled as such. Theories simply provide an abstract understanding of the communication process (Miller, 2002). As an abstract understanding, they move beyond describing a single event by providing a means by which all such events can be understood. To illustrate, a theory of customer service can help you to understand not only the bad customer service you received from your credit card company this morning, it can also help you to understand a good customer service encounter you might have had at a restaurant last week. Moreover, it can assist your organization in training and developing customer service personnel.

At their most basic level, theories provide us with a lens by which to view the world. Think of theories as a pair of glasses. Corrective lenses allow wearers to observe more clearly, but they also impact vision in unforeseen ways. For example, they can limit the span of what you see, especially when you try to look peripherally outside the range of the frames. Similarly, lenses can also distort the things you see, making objects appear larger or smaller than they really are. You can also try on lots of pairs of glasses until you finally pick one pair that works the best for your lifestyle. Theories operate in a similar fashion. A theory can illuminate an aspect of your communication so that you understand the process much more clearly; theory also can hide things from your understanding or distort the relative importance of things.

We consider a communication theory to be *any systematic summary about the nature of the communication process*. Certainly, theories can do more than summarize. Other functions of theories are to focus attention on particular concepts, clarify our observations, predict communication behavior, and generate personal and social change (Littlejohn, 1999). We do not believe, however, that all of these functions are *necessary* for a systematic summary of communication processes to be considered a theory.

What does this definition mean for people in communication, business, and other professions? It means that any time you say that a communication strategy *usually* works this way at your workplace, or that a specific approach is *generally* effective with your boss, or that certain types of communication are *typical* for particular media organizations, you are in essence providing a theoretical explanation. Most of us make

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**Table 1.1** Three Types of Theory

<i>Type of Theory</i>	<i>Example</i>
Commonsense theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Never date someone you work with—it always ends up badly.</li> <li>• The squeaky wheel gets the grease.</li> <li>• The more incompetent you are, the higher you get promoted.</li> </ul>
Working theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience analysis should be done prior to presenting a speech.</li> <li>• To get a press release published, it should be newsworthy and written in journalistic style.</li> </ul>
Scholarly theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effects of violations of expectations depend on the reward value of the violator (expectancy violations theory).</li> <li>• The media do not tell us what to think, but what to think about (agenda-setting theory).</li> </ul>

these types of summary statements on a regular basis. The difference between this sort of theorizing and the theories provided in this book centers on the term *systematic* in the definition. Table 1.1 presents an overview of three types of theory.

First, the summary statements described in the table are what are known as **commonsense theories**, or theories-in-use. This type of theory often is created by an individual's own personal experiences, or such theories might reflect helpful hints that are passed on from family members, friends, or colleagues. They are useful to us and are often the basis for our decisions about how to communicate. Sometimes, however, our commonsense backfires. For example, think about common knowledge regarding deception. Most people believe that liars don't look the person they are deceiving in the eyes, yet research indicates that this is not the case (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985). Let's face it: If we engage in deception, we will work very hard at maintaining eye contact simply *because* we believe that liars don't make eye contact! In this case, commonsense theory is not supported by research into the phenomenon.

A second type of theory is known as **working theory**. These are generalizations made in particular professions about the best techniques for doing something. Journalists work using the "inverted pyramid" of

story construction (most important information to least important information). Filmmakers operate using particular shots to invoke particular effects in the audience, so close-ups are used when a filmmaker wants the audience to place particular emphasis on the object in the close-up. Giannetti (1982), for example, describes a scene in Hitchcock's *Notorious* in which the heroine realizes she is being poisoned by her coffee, and the audience "sees" this realization through a close-up of the coffee cup. Working theories are more systematic than are commonsense theories, because they represent agreed-on ways of doing things for a particular profession. In fact, they may very well be based on scholarly theories. Such theories more closely represent guidelines for behavior rather than systematic representations. These types of theories are typically taught in content-specific courses (such as public relations, media production, or public speaking).

The type of theory we will be focusing on in this book is known as **scholarly theory**. Students often assume (incorrectly!) that because a theory is labeled as *scholarly*, it is not useful for people in business and the professions. Instead, the term scholarly indicates that the theory has undergone systematic research. Accordingly, scholarly theories provide more thorough, accurate, and abstract explanations for communication than do commonsense or working theories. The down side is that scholarly theories are typically more complex and difficult to understand than commonsense or working theories. If you are genuinely committed to improving your understanding of the communication process, however, scholarly theory will provide a strong foundation for doing so.

#### ❖ THE THEORY-RESEARCH LINK

Although theory and research are related, we have not yet articulated the exact nature of this link, in part because there is some debate about the theory-research relationship that is akin to the classic question, which came first, the chicken or the egg? In this case, scholars disagree as to what starts the process, theory or research.

Some scholars say that research comes before theory. This approach is known as **inductive theory development**. Also known as *grounded theory*, scholars using inductive theory development believe that the best theories emerge from the results of systematic study

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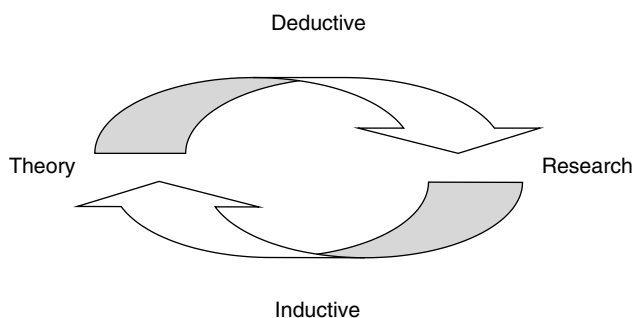
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). That is, these scholars study a particular topic, and, based on the results of their research, they develop a theory; the research comes *before* the theory. If someone wanted to develop a theory about how management style affects employee performance, then that person would study management style and employee performance in great depth before proposing a theory. Preliminary theories may be proposed, but the data continue to be collected and analyzed until adding new data brings little to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon or situation.

On the other hand, some scholars believe in **deductive theory development**. Deductive theory is generally associated with the scientific method (Reynolds, 1971). The deductive approach requires that a hypothesis, or a working theory, be developed before any research is conducted. Once the theory has been developed, the theorist then collects data to test or refine the theory (i.e., to support or reject the hypothesis). What follows is a constant set of adjustments to the theory with additional research conducted until evidence in support of the theory is overwhelming. The resulting theory is known as a **law** (Reynolds, 1971). In short, deductive theory development starts with the theory and then looks at data. As an example, a researcher might start with the idea that supportive management styles lead to increased employee performances. The researcher would then seek to support his or her theory by collecting data about those variables.

As indicated earlier, these two approaches represent different starting points to what is in essence a "chicken or the egg" type of argument. The reality is that neither approach advocates a single cycle of theorizing or research. Instead, both approaches suggest that theories are dynamic—they are modified as the data suggest, and data are reviewed to adjust the theory. Accordingly, the model in Figure 1 is the most accurate illustration of the link between theory and research. In this model, the starting points are different, but the reality of a repetitive loop between theory and research is identified.

#### ❖ WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Thus far, we have talked about the nature of communication and the nature of theory. Next we turn our attention to the question of what

**Figure 1.1** The Theory–Research Link

counts as research. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2002) described research as “disciplined inquiry that involves studying something in a planned manner and reporting it so that other inquirers can potentially replicate the process if they choose” (p. 13). Accordingly, we do not mean informal types of research, such as reflections on personal experience, off-the-cuff interviews with acquaintances, or casual viewing of communication media. When we refer to **research**, we mean the methodical gathering of data as well as the careful reporting of the results of the data analysis.

Note that *how* the research is reported differentiates two categories of research. **Primary research** is research reported by the person who conducted it. It is typically published in academic journals. **Secondary research** is research reported by someone other than the person who conducted it. This is research reported in newspapers, popular or trade magazines, handbooks, and textbooks. Certainly, there is value to the dissemination of research through these media. Textbooks, for example, can summarize hundreds of pages of research in a compact and understandable fashion. Newspaper articles or news broadcasts can reach thousands of people. Trade magazines can pinpoint the readers who may benefit most from the results of the research. Regardless of whether the source is popular or academic, however, primary research is typically valued more than secondary research as a source of information; with secondary research, readers risk the chance that the writers have misunderstood or distorted the results of the research.

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## ❖ RESEARCH METHODS IN COMMUNICATION

"The sheer volume of research we are exposed to in our daily lives is formidable and growing" (Crossen, 1994, p. 17). Even if you aren't an academic, even if your job doesn't require you to conduct research, we are all inundated with research "facts," both at work and at home. Politicians cite polls and surveys to bolster their platforms. Advertisers cite research studies that indicate their product is superior. Organizations use research to make decisions for strategic planning. Even if you never conduct a research study in your life, understanding how research is performed will help you make more informed personal and professional decisions. This section focuses on the four research methods commonly used in the development of communication theory. When reading about these methods, pay particular attention to the types of information revealed and concealed by each method. This approach will allow you to be a better consumer of research.

### Experiments

When people think of "experiments," they often have flashbacks to high school chemistry classes. People are often surprised that communication scholars also use experiments, even though there isn't a Bunsen burner or beaker in sight. What makes something an experiment has nothing to do with the specific equipment involved; rather, experimentation is ultimately concerned with **causation** and **control**. It is important to emphasize that an experiment is the *only* research method that allows researchers to conclude that one thing causes another. For example, if you are interested in determining whether friendly customer service causes greater customer satisfaction, whether advertisers' use of bright colors produces higher sales, or whether sexuality in film leads to a more promiscuous society, the only way to determine these things is through experimental research.

Experimental research allows researchers to determine causality because experiments are so controlled. In experimental research, the researcher is concerned with two variables. A **variable** is simply any concept that has two or more values (Frey et al., 2002). Sex is a variable, because we have men and women. Note that just looking at maleness is not a variable because there is only one value associated with it; it doesn't *vary*, so it isn't a *variable*. Masculinity is considered a variable,



however, because you can be highly masculine, moderately masculine, nonmasculine, and so on.

Returning to our discussion of experimental research, then, the research is concerned with two variables. One of the variables is the presumed cause. This is known as the **independent variable**. The other is the presumed effect. This is known as the **dependent variable**. If you are interested in knowing whether bright colors in advertisements cause increased sales, your independent variable is the color (bright vs. dull) and the dependent variable is the amount of sales dollars (more, the same, or less). The way the researcher determines causality is by carefully controlling the study participants' exposure to the independent variable. This control is known as **manipulation**, a term which has a negative connotation but is not meant in a negative fashion in the research world. In the study of advertisements just described, the researcher would expose some people to an advertisement that used bright colors and others to an advertisement that used dull colors, and she or he would observe the effects on sales based on these manipulations.

Experiments take place in two settings. **Laboratory experiments** take place in a controlled setting, so that the researcher might better control his or her efforts at manipulation. In the communication field, laboratories are often rooms that simulate living rooms or conference rooms. Typically, however, they have two-way mirrors and cameras mounted on the walls to record what happens. For example, John Gottman has a mini "apartment" at the University of Washington. He has married couples "move in" to the apartment during the course of a weekend, and he observes all of their interaction during that weekend.

Some experiments don't take place in the laboratory, and these are called **field experiments** because they take place in participants' natural surroundings. These sorts of experiments often take place in public places, such as shopping malls, libraries, or schools, but they might take place in private areas as well. In all cases, participants must agree to be a part of the experiment to comply with ethical standards set by educational and research institutions.

### Survey Research

The most common means of studying communication is through the use of surveys. Market research, audience analysis, and organizational

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audits all make use of surveys. Unlike experiments, the use of surveys does not allow researchers to make claims that one thing causes another. The strength of survey research is that it is the *only* way to find out how someone thinks, feels, or intends to behave. If you want to know what people think about your organization, how they feel about a social issue, or whether they intend to buy a product after viewing an advertising spot you created, you need to conduct a survey.

In general, there are two types of survey research. **Interviews** ask participants to respond orally. They might take place face-to-face or over the phone. One special type of interview is a focus group, which is when the interviewer (called a facilitator) leads a small group of people in a discussion about a specific product or program (Frey et al., 2002). **Questionnaires** ask participants to respond in writing. They can be distributed by mail or administered with the researcher present. Particular types of research are more suited for interviews rather than questionnaires. Interviews, for example, allow the researcher to ask more complex questions because he or she can clarify misunderstandings through probing questions. Questionnaires, however, might be more appropriate for the collection of sensitive information because they provide more anonymity to the respondent (Salant & Dillman, 1994).

The key concepts associated with either type of survey research are **questioning** and **sampling**. First, the purpose of a survey is quite simple; surveys provide a means to ask questions of a group of people to understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Questionnaires might take two forms. **Open-ended questions** allow respondents to answer in their own words, taking as long (or short) as they would like. For example, a market researcher might ask study participants to describe what they like about a particular product. Or an interviewer might ask someone to respond to a hypothetical situation. **Closed-ended questions** require respondents to respond using set types of answers. In this case, a market researcher might say something like, "Respond to the following statement: product X is a useful product. Would you say you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree?" Neither method is better than the other; the two types of questions simply provide different kinds of data that are analyzed using different means.

The second key concept associated with survey research is **sampling**. Researchers are typically concerned with large groups of people

when they conduct surveys. These groups are known as a **population**, which means all people who possess a particular characteristic (Frey et al., 2002). For example, marketing firms want to study all possible consumers of a product. Newspaper publishers want to gather information from all readers. Pharmaceutical industries want to study everyone with a particular ailment. The size of these groups makes it difficult simply to study everyone of interest. Even if every member of the population can be identified, which isn't always the case, studying all of them can be extremely expensive.

Instead, survey researchers study a **sample**, or a small number of people in the population of interest. If the sample is well selected and of sufficient size, the results of the survey are likely also to hold true for the entire group. **Random samples**, in which every member of the target group has an equal chance of being selected, are better than **nonrandom samples**, such as volunteers, convenience samples (people who visit a particular physician), or purposive samples (people who meet a particular requirement, such as age, sex, race, etc.). Essentially, a random sample of consumers is more likely to give representative information about brand preferences than a convenience sample, such as stopping people at the mall on a particular day to answer a few questions.

### Textual Analysis

The third method used frequently by communication scholars is textual analysis. A **text** is any written or recorded message (Frey et al., 2002). A television show, a transcript of a medical encounter, and an employee bulletin can all be considered texts. Textual analysis is used to uncover the **content**, **nature**, or **structure** of messages. It can also be used to **evaluate** messages, focusing on their strengths, weaknesses, effectiveness, or even ethicality. So textual analysis can be used to study the amount of violence on television, how power dynamics play out during doctor-patient intake evaluations, or even the strategies used to communicate a corporate mission statement.

There are three distinct forms that textual analyses take in the communication discipline. **Rhetorical criticism** refers to "a systematic method for describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the persuasive force of messages" (Frey et al., 2002, p. 229). There are numerous specific types of rhetorical criticism, including historical criticism

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(how history shapes messages), genre criticism (evaluating particular types of messages, such as political speeches, or corporate image restoration practices), and feminist criticism (how beliefs about gender are produced and reproduced in messages).

**Content analysis** seeks to identify, classify, and analyze the occurrence of particular types of messages (Frey et al., 2002). It was developed primarily to study mass mediated messages, although it is also used in numerous other areas of the discipline. For example, public relations professionals often seek to assess the type of coverage given to a client. Typically, content analysis involves four steps: the selection of a particular text (e.g., newspaper articles), the development of content categories (e.g., "favorable organizational coverage," "neutral organizational coverage," "negative organizational coverage"), placing the content into categories, and an analysis of the results. In our example, the results of this study would be able to identify whether a particular newspaper has a pronounced slant when covering the organization.

The third type of textual analysis typically conducted by communication scholars is **interaction analysis** (also known as **conversation analysis**). These approaches typically focus on interpersonal or group communication interactions that have been recorded, with a specific emphasis on the nature or structure of interaction. The strength of this type of research is that it captures the natural give-and-take that is part of most communication experiences. The weakness of interaction analysis, content analysis, and rhetorical criticism is that *actual* effects on the audience can't be determined solely by focusing on texts.

### Ethnography

Ethnography is the final research method used by scholars of communication. First used by anthropologists, ethnography typically involves the researcher immersing him- or herself into a particular **culture** or **context** to understand communication rules and meanings for that culture or context. For example, an ethnographer might study an organizational culture, such as Johnson & Johnson's corporate culture, or a particular context, such as communication in hospital emergency rooms. The key to this type of research is that it is naturalistic and emergent, which means that it must take place in the natural environment for the group under study and that the particular methods used will be adjusted on the basis of what is occurring in that environment.

Typically, those conducting ethnographies need to decide on the role they will play in the research. **Complete participants** are fully involved in the social setting, and the participants do not know that the researcher is studying them (Frey et al., 2002). This approach, of course, requires that the researcher knows enough about the environment to be able to fit in. Moreover, there are numerous ethical hurdles that the researcher must overcome. Combined, these two challenges prevent much research from being conducted in this fashion. Instead, **participant-observer** roles are more frequently chosen. In this case, the researcher becomes fully involved with the culture or context, but she or her has admitted his or her research agenda before entering the environment. In this way, knowledge is gained firsthand by the researcher, but extensive knowledge about the culture is not necessarily a prerequisite (Frey et al., 2002). Researchers choosing this strategy may also elect which to emphasize more, participation or observation. Finally, researchers may choose to be **complete observers**. Complete observers do not interact with the members of the culture or context, which means they do not interview any of the members of the group under study. As such, this method allows for the greatest objectivity in recording data, while simultaneously limiting insight into participants' own meanings of the observed communication.

In sum, communication scholars use four primary research methods. These methods include experiments, which focus on causation and control; surveys, which focus on questioning and sampling; textual analyses, which focus on the content, nature, or structure of messages; and ethnography, which focuses on the communication rules and meanings in a particular culture or context. A summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the four methods is summarized in Table 1.2.

#### ❖ SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE HUMANITIES

Communication has been described as both an art and a science (Dervin, 1993). On one hand, we respect the power of a beautifully crafted and creatively designed advertisement. On the other hand, we look to hard numbers to support decisions about the campaign featuring that advertisement. Although art and science are integrally related in the everyday practice of communication, in the more abstract realm of theory the two are often considered distinct pursuits. This concept

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**Table 1.2** Four Methods of Communication Research

<i>Research Method</i>	<i>What It Reveals</i>	<i>What It Conceals</i>
Experiment	Cause and effect	Whether the cause-effect relationship holds true in less controlled environments
Survey	Respondents' thoughts, feelings, and intentions	Cannot establish causality; cannot determine what people actually do
Textual analysis	The content, nature, and structure of messages	The effect of the message on receivers
Ethnography	Rules and meanings of communication in a culture or context	May provide a highly subjective (and therefore biased) view of the culture or context

can be traced to distinctions between the academic traditions of the humanities (which includes the arts) and the social sciences.

You might have some ideas about the terms *humanistic* and *social scientific*, because most college students are required to take some courses in each of these areas. The distinctions between the humanities and social science are based on more than just tradition, however; they are based on very different philosophical beliefs. With regard to the humanities, the interpretation of meaning is of central concern (Littlejohn, 2002). Meaning is presumed to be something that is subjective and unique to the individual, even though meanings are likely influenced by social processes. For individuals trained in the humanistic tradition, **subjectivity** is a hallmark; one's own **interpretation** is of interest. Think about the study of English literature, a discipline at the heart of the humanities. English scholars study the interpretation of texts in an effort to understand the meaning of the object of study.

On the other hand, **objectivity** is a central feature of social science. Social scientists believe that through careful standardization (i.e., objectivity), researchers can observe patterns of communication that can hold true for all (or most) people, all (or most) of the time. These patterns that

**Table 1.3** Differences Between Social Scientific and Humanistic Approaches to Communication

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Social Science</i>	<i>Humanities</i>
Belief about human nature	Determinism	Pragmatism
Goal of theory	Understand and predict	Understand only
Process of theory development	Deductive	Inductive
Focus of research	Particularism	Holism
Research methods	Experiments; quantitative survey and textual analysis	Ethnography; qualitative survey and textual analysis

hold true across groups, time, and place are known as **generalizations**. To illustrate, psychology is a discipline rooted in the social sciences. As such, psychology scholars seek to explain general principles of how the human mind functions. These principles are intended to explain all people, all over the world, throughout history.

Because the humanities and social sciences have different areas of interest, they treat theory and research differently. Table 1.3 seeks to identify some of those distinctions. The first area of difference is the philosophical commitment to understanding the **nature of human beings** and the extent of their free will. Certainly, no one believes that human beings are mere puppets that have no choice in how they behave. Communication theorists vary, however, in the extent to which they believe people *act* versus *react* to communication situations. For example, social scientists tend to take a **deterministic** stance, which means that they believe that past experience, personality predispositions, and a number of other antecedent conditions *cause* people to behave in certain ways. Accordingly, deterministic approaches to human interaction propose that people in general tend to react to situations. Social scientists tend to look at the causes and effects of communication, such as what causes a marriage to fail or the effects of a particular marketing campaign.

Conversely, most humanists believe that people have control over their behavior; they believe that people make *conscious choices* to communicate to meet their goals. Theorists taking this stance are called

**pragmatists** because they believe that people are practical and that they plan their behavior. In short, pragmatists believe that human beings are not passive reactors to situations, but dynamic actors. Humanists, then, tend to focus on the choices that people make, such as the communication strategies a company such as Exxon chose to enact in the face of a corporate crisis.

A second way to differentiate between humanistic and social scientific scholarship is through a focus on *why* theories are developed. For example, the **goal** of social scientific theory is both to **understand and predict** communication processes. Because social science is interested in generalizations, the ability to predict is paramount; if a theorist understands the general pattern that is at the heart of a social scientific theory, then she or he should be able to predict how any one individual might communicate. Those in the humanities, however, believe that interpretations are always subjective; they are unique to the individual. Accordingly, humanists believe that theorists can never actually predict how a person will behave; all that can be done is to try to **understand** human communication.

Although not directly related to the distinction between social science and the humanities, we note that some theories strive to do more than simply predict or understand. A special group of theories, called **critical approaches**, seeks to improve the world through social change. The goal of critical theory is to empower people in their professional and personal lives. For more information about critical communication theory, see Craig (1999).

The third difference between social science and the humanities is the process of **theory development**. Recall our discussion of the theory–research link discussed earlier in the chapter. Deductive theory is based on the scientific method, so it should be no surprise to you that the social scientific approach to theory development is **deductive**. Those in the humanities, however, tend to start with data and subsequently develop theory. For example, scholars of English literature would start with reading Shakespeare’s plays before developing a theory about them. Thus, those in the humanities tend to use **inductive** theory development.

Finally, the focus and methods of research also vary in the social scientific and humanistic approaches. Regarding the focus of research, the social scientific method requires standardization and control. Because of these objectives, social scientists incrementally study narrowly defined



areas at a time, believing that the whole picture will be uncovered eventually. This approach is known as **particularism**. Humanists, on the other hand, believe in looking at the big picture; they propose that all pieces of the puzzle contribute to an understanding of the problem. Accordingly, they utilize **holism**, looking at the situation in its entirety, as the focal point of research.

Given the different areas of focus, it's not a surprise that the final difference between social scientists and humanists are the research methods they use. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the four research methods used by communication scholars. Of the four, one is clearly social scientific, and one is clearly humanistic. **Experimental methods**, with their concern for causation and control, are uniquely suited for the social sciences. Remember that social science seeks to make predictions, and the best way to do that is to have research that supports particular causes and effects. Similarly, ethnography is uniquely suited for humanistic research. **Ethnography** leans to the understanding of communication in contexts and cultures, which is appropriate for theory that uses holism in its quest for interpretation of communicative events.

The uses of survey research and textual analysis cannot be easily classified. Instead of the methods themselves being associated with either social science or the humanities, the specific way data are analyzed determines whether the method is social scientific or humanistic. The two methods of data analysis are quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methods are adapted from those used in the hard sciences, such as chemistry and biology. Accordingly, quantitative methods are associated with social science. Qualitative methods are those that have historically been used by the humanities.

**Quantitative methods** typically rely on numbers or *statistics* as the source of data (Reinard, 1998). These data and statistics are generally explanatory and comprehensive in nature; they seek to predict what will happen for large groups of people. To accomplish this, researchers control the study by identifying the variables of interest before data collection takes place and trying to prevent extraneous influences from affecting the data. As described earlier, these commitments allow social scientists to make generalizations.

**Qualitative methods** reject the limitations on individual interpretation that control requires. Moreover, qualitative research eschews the use of numbers and uses verbal descriptions of communicative

phenomena. Typically, the data are in the form of extended quotes or transcripts of communication. Finally, qualitative research typically centers on a description or critique of communication rather than on generalizations (Reinard, 1998).

In summary, then, social scientists tend to use quantitative surveys or textual analyses. For example, they'll collect data about how many people prefer a new formulation of a product versus a previous formulation of a product or how frequently a manager uses a particular communication strategy in interaction. Humanists tend to use qualitative surveys and textual analyses. They ask participants to respond at length to questions in their own words about a particular product or they identify various communication themes evident in a corporate brochure.

A final note should be made about the distinctions between social science and the humanities. The purpose of talking about these two academic traditions is because communication is *both* social scientific and humanistic. As such, you shouldn't view these distinctions as dichotomies, but as continua. Individual theories may be more or less social scientific or humanistic (not either-or), with elements borrowed from both traditions.

#### ❖ EVALUATING THEORY

The final topic of this chapter is evaluating theory. Earlier we suggested that all theories have strengths and weaknesses; they reveal certain aspects of reality and conceal others. An important task that students and scholars face is to evaluate the theories that are available to them. We are not talking about evaluation in terms of "good" versus "bad," but evaluating the *usefulness* of the theory. Each of you is likely to find some of the theories presented in this text more useful than others. Such a determination is likely due at least in part to your own background and experiences, as well as your profession. We would like to challenge you to broaden your scope and consider not just the usefulness of each theory to you personally, but the usefulness of the theory for people's personal and professional lives in general.

A number of published standards can be used to evaluate theories (e.g., Griffin, 2003; Littlejohn, 2002; West & Turner, 2000). All are appropriate and effective tools for comparing the relative usefulness of a

**Table 1.4** Criteria for Evaluating Theory

<i>Area of Evaluation</i>	<i>What to Look For</i>
Accuracy	Has research supported that the theory works the way it says it does?
Practicality	Have real-world applications been found for the theory?
Simplicity	Has the theory been formulated with the appropriate number (fewest possible) concepts or steps?
Consistency	Does the theory demonstrate consistency within its own premises and with other theories?
Acuity	To what extent does the theory make clear an otherwise complex experience?

given theory. Because this text is geared toward working professionals, however (or those who wish to soon be working in the profession of their choice), we believe that the following five criteria best capture the way to assess the relative usefulness of communication theories in the communication, business, and related the professions. Note that we are talking about the *relative* usefulness of the theory. We are not talking about either—ors—good or bad, weak or strong. Instead, we hope you look at these distinctions as *continua* that range from very useful at one end to not particularly useful at the other end. A description of these criteria are in Table 1.4.

The first area of focus is **accuracy**. Simply put, the best theories correctly summarize the way communication actually works. Recall, however, that we are referring to scholarly theories. As such, we do not mean accuracy in terms of whether the theory accurately reflects your own personal experience (although we would hope that it does!). Instead, when we use the term *accuracy* we are suggesting that systematic research supports the explanations provided by the theory. Thus, in assessing this quality, you should look at research studies that have used the theory and see whether the research supports the theory or fails to find support for it.

A second way to evaluate theories is **practicality**. The best theories can be used to address real-world communication problems; in fact,

Lewin (1951) said “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169). Clearly, there are some profound theories that have changed the way we understand the world that aren’t actually *used* by most people on a daily basis (Einstein’s theory of relativity, or Darwin’s theory of evolution, for example). In terms of *communication* theories, however, theories that are accurate but can’t be used in everyday life are not as good as theories that have great practical utility. For example, a theory that can help a person make better communicative decisions in his or her interactions with coworkers is better than a theory so abstract that it cannot be used by an individual in daily communication. Thus, a theory with more applications is better than a theory without practical uses. In assessing this criterion, you should look for how the theory has been used in the research literature, as well as whether the theory has made the leap to professional practice.

**Simplicity** is the third way to evaluate a good business or professional communication theory. This does not mean that the theory is easy to understand; because the world is complex, theories trying to explain the world are often fairly complex as well. What we mean by simplicity is that the theory is formulated as simply as possible. The “three bears” analogy works here. Theories that have extra steps or include variables that don’t help us to understand real-world experiences would be considered overly complex. Theories that do not have enough steps, that don’t delve beneath the surface, or that don’t have enough variables to understand real-world problems are too simple. Theories that include no more nor no less than necessary to understand a phenomena thoroughly are just right; they have a useful amount of simplicity. The best way to think of simplicity is to compare how much of communication is explained by the theory versus how many concepts are being used to explain it.

The fourth way to evaluate a theory is to consider its **consistency**. The most useful theories have both internal and external consistency. By **internal consistency**, we mean that the ideas of the theory are logically built on one another. A theory that proposes at one point that cooperation among team members guarantees success and at a different point proposes that competition is more effective than cooperation has a logical flaw. Similarly, theories that “skip” steps do not have much internal consistency. A theory predicting that age is related to the experience of jealousy and that one’s expression of jealousy affects the future of the relationship, but then fails to tell us how the experience of

jealousy is related to the expression of jealousy, has a logical gap. As such, it does not have strong internal consistency.

**External consistency**, on the other hand, refers to the theory's consistency with other widely held theories. If we presume that the widely held theories are true, then the theory under evaluation that disagrees with those believed supported theories also presents a logical problem. As such, the notion of consistency, whether internal or external, is concerned with the logic of the theory. The most useful theories are those that have a strong logical structure.

The final area for evaluation is **acuity**. Acuity refers to the ability of a theory to provide insight into an otherwise intricate issue. Earlier we said that theories that are simple are not necessarily easy to understand, because the real world is often complex. A theory that explains a difficult problem, however, is better than a theory that explains something less complex. For example, a theory that explains a complex problem such as how organizational cultures can influence employee retention is a more useful theory than a theory that explains a relatively straightforward problem such as how to gain attention in a speech. Those theories that explain difficult problems show acuity; those that focus on fairly obvious problems demonstrate superficiality.

#### ❖ CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed the popular perception of communication, which suggests that the communication process is paradoxically simple yet powerful. We defined communication as **the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning**. Next, we discussed the nature of theory. The distinctions between common-sense theories, working theories, and scholarly theories were addressed. Because scholarly theory must be researched, regardless of whether the research precedes or follows the initial formulation of a theory, we then turned our attention to the nature of research. We differentiated between primary and secondary research. We also identified the four primary research methods used by communication scholars: experiment, survey, textual analysis, and ethnography. In addition to describing the key elements of each of these methods, the chapter focused on what each reveals and conceals about communication. Next we turned our attention to the differences between social scientific and humanistic

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approaches to theory and research, centering our discussion on beliefs about human nature, the goal of theory, the development of theory, the focus of research, and the research methods used. Finally, we provided a means by which scholarly theories of communication can be evaluated, including accuracy, practicality, simplicity, consistency, and acuity.

### **Case Study 1** Theory and Research in Communication Consulting

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Community General Hospital was facing a crisis. As a small, urban hospital, it was having difficulty balancing its budget. The Balanced Budget Act (BBA) of 1997 reduced Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements, which typically make up nearly two-thirds of billed hospital charges (Jones, 2001). Accordingly, revenues are down. The Balanced Budget Refinement Act (BBRA) of 1999 has restored some of the budget cuts, but small rural hospitals have benefited over urban hospitals (Freeman, 2002). Moreover, the nationwide hospital workforce shortage has caused high turnover and vacancy rates, which costs the hospital money; inpatient and outpatient care capacity is reduced, surgeries are delayed, and laboratory and X-ray work has to be sent off-site (American Hospital Association, 2001).

Bruce Norris, the chief administrator of the hospital, has recognized the crisis and is committed to doing something about it. He has sought the advice of two consultants, one of whom was trained in the social sciences and one of whom was trained in the humanities. Here is their advice.

#### **Consultant A**

"I believe that reducing costs is not feasible, so the hospital needs to work on increasing demand. A possibility is to create a niche specialty so that Community General is the first place people consider when they need that type of medical care. Hospital marketing staff members should conduct a marketing survey and gather statistics about the particular health needs of people in the community. Then they should look at the services provided by their competitors and determine which niche Community General is not filling sufficiently. By creating a niche in the saturated health care market, Community General can develop a communication campaign that emphasizes how it stands out from the crowd; increased demand will mean increased revenues."

**Consultant B**

“This problem is complex and needs to be understood in the context of the entire health care industry in the United States, which is undergoing a major transition. Before assuming what the problem is, we need to understand thoroughly the challenges and motivations of all of the hospital’s stakeholders: members of the local community, the hospital’s staff and administration, suppliers, government agencies, and current and past patients. In so doing, the unique strengths and weaknesses of Community General should emerge. Once we uncover these qualities, we can develop a campaign that shares this vision with the necessary stakeholders.”

**Questions for Consideration**

1. Both Consultant A and Consultant B are operating on generalizations about how to market the hospital. These generalizations could be considered commonsense theories. Look at the advice each provides and develop a description of the commonsense theory each is using (i.e., create a name and prediction for the theories). Then recall the metaphor of theories as glasses (p. 3). What concepts do these commonsense theories highlight? What might be hidden or distorted because of the theory being used?
2. One of these consultants is demonstrating social scientific assumptions, and the other is demonstrating humanistic assumptions. Which is which? Which specific elements of their advice have led you to these conclusions? (*Hint:* See Table 1.3 for the key distinctions between these approaches.)