

## 2.5: Group Communication Theory

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify ways in which group communication theory can help groups
2. Understand how theories are properly developed
3. Identify prominent theoretical paradigms regarding communication

*"[C]reating a new theory is not like destroying an old barn and erecting a skyscraper in its place. It is rather like climbing a mountain, gaining new and wider views, discovering unexpected connections between our starting point and its rich environment. But the point from which we started out still exists, and can be seen, although it appears smaller and forms a tiny part of our broad view gained by the mastery of the obstacles on our adventurous way up."* - Albert Einstein (Einstein, A., & Infeld, L. (1938). *The Evolution of Physics*. New York: Simon and Schuster.)

*"In making theories, always keep a window open so that you can throw one out if necessary."* - Béla Schick

### Functions of Group Communication Theory

*Theory helps us to bear our ignorance of facts.* - George Santayana in *The Sense of Beauty*

What can theories about group communication do for us? Like all theories, they can help us explain, postdict, and predict behavior. Specifically, theory can help us deal with group communication in four ways. (Hahn, L.K., Lipper, L., & Paynton, S.T. (2011). *Survey of Communication Study*. <http://bit.ly/ImokVO>).

First, these theories can help us interpret and understand what happens when we communicate in groups. For example, a person from a culture such as Japan's may be taken by surprise when someone from mainstream US culture expresses anger openly in a formal meeting. If we're familiar with a theory which describes and identifies "high" versus "low-context" cultures, we can make better sense of interactions like this with people from cultures other than our own.

Second, the theories can help us choose what elements of our experience in groups to pay attention to. As Einstein wrote, "It is theory that decides what can be observed." If we know that cultures can be "high-" or "low-context," then when we interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds we'll watch for behaviors that we believe are associated with each of those categories. For example, if people are from high-context cultures they may tend to avoid explicit explanations and questions.

Third, the theories can enlarge our understanding. Theories strengthen as they're examined and tested in the light of people's experience. Students, scholars, and citizens can all broaden their knowledge by discussing and explaining theories. Reflecting on questions and other reactions they receive in response can also refine theories and make them more useful.

Fourth, the theories may impel us to challenge prevailing cultural, social, and political practices. Most of the ways that people behave in groups are products of habit, custom, and learning. They aren't, in other words, innate. By applying theoretical perspectives to how groups operate, we may be able to identify fairer and more just approaches.

### Where Group Communication Theories Come From

*"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data."* - Arthur Conan Doyle (via Sherlock Holmes in "A Scandal in Bohemia," 1891)

To develop group communication theories, people generally follow a three-step process that parallels what Western science calls "the scientific method." (Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, K. A. (2005). *Theories of Human Communication* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth).

1. Ask important questions. What stages should most groups expect to pass through as they form and adopt goals? How does the size of a group affect its ability to pursue its goals? What methods of group decision-making work best with which kinds of people? Which blend of individual personalities contributes most to the satisfaction of a group? All these questions are meaningful and significant to groups, and all of them have served as the foundation of theories about group communication.
2. Observe people's behavior in groups. To be productive, this observation should proceed on the basis of well-defined terms and within clear boundaries. To find out which blend of individual personalities contributes most to group satisfaction, for instance, it's necessary first to define "personality" and "satisfaction." It is also important to decide which kinds of groups to observe under which circumstances.

3. Analyze the results of the observation process and base new theories upon them. The theories should fit the results of the observations as closely as possible.

You may want to go online and look at a journal devoted to group communication topics, such as “Small Group Research.” If you do, you’ll see that the titles of its articles refer often to existing theories and that the articles themselves describe experiments with groups that have tested and elaborated upon those theories.

## Theoretical Paradigms for Group Communication

Groups of theories may compose theoretical paradigms, which are collections of concepts, values, assumptions, and practices that constitute a way of viewing reality for a community that shares them. (Hahn, L.K., Lipper, L., & Paynton, S.T. (2011). *Survey of Communication Study*. <http://bit.ly/ImokVO>) Group communication theories tend to cluster around the following five paradigms:

- The systems theory paradigm. Systems theory examines the inputs, processes, and outputs of systems as those systems strive toward balance, or homeostasis. This paradigm for group communication emphasizes that processes and relationships among components of a group are interdependent and goal-oriented. Thus, the adage that “it is impossible to do just one thing” is taken to be true by systems theorists. Focus is placed more on developing a complete picture of groups than upon examining their parts in isolation.
- The rhetorical theories paradigm. The field of rhetoric originated with the Greeks and Romans and is the study of how symbols affect human beings. For example, Aristotle’s three elements of persuasion—ethos (credibility), logos (logic), and pathos (appeal to emotion)—are still used today to describe and categorize people’s statements. Rhetorical analysis of group communication lays the greatest emphasis on describing messages, exploring their functions, and evaluating their effectiveness.
- The empirical laws paradigm. This paradigm, also known as the positivist approach, bases investigation of group communication on the assumption that universal laws govern human interaction in much the same way that gravity or magnetism act upon all physical objects. “If X, then Y” statements may be used to characterize communication behavior in this paradigm. For instance, you might claim that “If people in a group sit in a circle, a larger proportion of them will share in a conversation than if they are arranged in rows facing one direction.” The effects of empirical laws governing group communication are usually held to be highly likely rather than absolute.
- The human rules paradigm. Instead of contending that behavior by people in groups conforms to absolute and reliable laws, this paradigm holds that people construct and then follow rules for their interactions. Because these rules are subjective and arise out of social circumstances and cultural environments which may change, they can’t be pinned down the way that laws describing the physical world can be and are apt to evolve over time.
- The critical theories paradigm. Should we simply analyze and describe the ways in which groups communicate, or should we challenge those ways and propose others? The critical theories paradigm proposes that we should strive to understand how communication may be used to exert power and oppress people. (Foss, K. A., & Foss, S. K. (1989). Incorporating the feminist perspective in communication scholarship: A research commentary. In C. Spitzack & K. Carter (Eds.), *Doing Research on Women’s Communication: Alternative Perspectives in Theory and Method* (pp. 64–94). Norwood, NJ: Ablex). When we have determined how this oppression takes place, we should seek to remedy it. This combination of theory and action is defined as praxis.

No single theoretical paradigm is accepted by everyone who studies group communication. Whether a description or prediction concerning people’s behavior in groups is found to be accurate or not will depend on which viewpoint we come from and which kinds of groups we observe.

## Key Takeaway

If they are properly developed, theories of group communication can help group members understand and influence group processes.

### Exercise 2.5.1

1. Identify a group that you’ve been part of at school or in the workplace. What aspects of its behavior do you feel you might have better understood if you’d had a grasp of group communication theory?
2. Think of another significant experience you’ve had recently as part of a group. Of the theoretical paradigms for group communication described in this section, which would you feel most comfortable in applying to the experience? Which paradigm, if any, do you feel it would be inappropriate to apply? Why?

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