Introduction

Meta-theory and Theory in Interpersonal Communication Research

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Our goal for this book is to provide a resource for students and researchers who are interested in studying interpersonal communication. Some of us will be studying the topic as students or instructors who want to better understand interpersonal communication theory. Others may be undertaking studies of interpersonal communication as researchers and may be looking for theories to guide their research projects. Some people will be studying interpersonal communication to better understand their own relationships—for example, their friendships, dating, or close workplace relationships. In most textbooks or handbooks of interpersonal communication (e.g., Knapp & Daly, 2002; Wood, 2000), a reader would expect to find summaries of research programs on different topics (e.g., deception, relational maintenance). Our goal in this book, rather, is to provide a collection and overview of important theories that are, or have the potential to be, useful for studying interpersonal communication. For the student and the scholar alike, this collection is a toolbox to help you approach and understand interpersonal communication from a variety of angles.

In this chapter we present first a brief background on the study of interpersonal communication, explain our approach to interpersonal communication, and discuss meta-theoretical perspectives for research on interpersonal communication. Second, we present findings from our own analysis of the 958 data-based studies of interpersonal communication conducted since 1990 by scholars affiliated with communication studies. Third, we discuss some of our own thoughts about the state of interpersonal communication theory today.
and where we wish to see the field move in the future. Finally, we overview the
chapters in this book as top experts in interpersonal communication present
more than 30 different theories to guide our thinking and studying about
interpersonal communication.

Roots of Interpersonal Communication

Today’s students likely think that interpersonal communication has been
around forever. Well, yes, people have been communicating interpersonally
since the beginning of human existence. However, the academic study of inter-
personal communication is relatively recent and, in fact, most of the senior
authors writing our chapters were students at its early stages. To help you
understand how interpersonal communication theories have developed and
why, we provide a brief history of the study of interpersonal communication
in the larger context of the discipline of communication studies.

Those of us from the discipline of communication studies know that our
roots trace back to ancient Greece and Rome, and most believe earlier than
that, to Africa and China. The study of communication has always been a prac-
tical one. The earliest studies were of rhetoric and persuasion where commu-
nication was studied as a speechmaking activity in the public domain
(Ehninger, 1968). Early theories of rhetoric and communication focused on
speakers and the best way to get their ideas across to audiences.

Moving forward to the twentieth century, there were no communication
departments in universities yet, but courses in public speaking, performance of
literature, debate, and persuasion were taught most often in English or theatre
departments under the title of “speech.” In the early part of the twentieth cen-
tury, two main approaches to the study of speech emerged. The Cornell School
included those who approached the study of speech from a humanistic per-
spective, and the Midwestern School included those who thought it best to
study speech from a scientific basis (Pearce & Foss, 1990). These schools
formed the two main approaches of rhetoric and speech (later, communica-
tion) and these scholars later formed speech departments, breaking off from
English and theatre departments. As many of you recognize from your own
campuses, communication studies departments often include mass communi-
cation and other specialties.

After World War II, speech teachers also began teaching courses in small
group discussion. Social scientists, especially in psychology, began studying
persuasion and obedience to authority, trying to understand the process of
interpersonal influence to help explain some of the atrocities that happened
during that war. While they were interested in the psychology of persuasion,
many also realized that we needed to study how persuasion was enacted. After
World War II, scholars of communication who took a social scientific approach were focusing on persuasion and social influence in mass communication and models of information transmission, and on systems thinking about relationships (Berger, 2005; Bormann, 1980; Delia, 1987).

As the 1960s began, cultural shifts like the civil rights and women’s movements, as well as changes in families and relationships, were in full swing. The practical reasons for wanting to understand communication persisted and, as Gerald Miller (1976) explained, “students themselves began to demand answers about how to relate communicatively with their acquaintances and close friends, and romantic partners” (p. 10). Some scholars whose work had originated in social psychology and sociology were moving to speech departments and took with them a social scientific and post-positivist orientation to research (see below), focusing mostly on cognitive approaches to understanding communication behavior (Delia, 1987; Miller, 1983). These scholars were studying topics such as interpersonal persuasion, nonverbal message transmission, interpersonal attraction, self-disclosure, and deception, to name a few. They joined the rhetoricians in speech departments and, to this day, most departments in our discipline are made up of a blend of humanities and social science approaches to understanding human communication.

The research interests of these social science scholars in the 1960s had an effect: interpersonal communication courses began to appear in college curricula in the early 1970s, and spread rapidly throughout the United States in the next 10 years. There was much excitement and momentum among those studying interpersonal communication during this time and the Interpersonal and Small Group Interaction Division formed and quickly became one of the largest in the Speech Communication Association. On college campuses, departments of speech were starting to change their names to “speech communication” and later to “communication.” Simultaneously, the national association changed its name from the Speech Communication Association to the National Communication Association. Interpersonal communication scholars were importing theories from other disciplines and beginning to develop their own theories.

Interpersonal communication was joined in the 1970s and 1980s by research and by new college classes in nonverbal communication, conflict, gender, workplace communication, and intercultural communication, followed in the late 1980s and into the 1990s by family communication and health communication classes, among others. Some of the scholars studying in these contexts used qualitative data and interpretive methods that are humanistic in nature. Interestingly, most of these new topics were initially thought of as part of interpersonal communication. Slowly, they have developed into their own specializations, leaving us to wonder at times, “What is the center of interpersonal communication?”
Over the years, colleagues stressing humanistic and social science approaches to communication have gotten along well at times and less well at other times, largely because they do not speak the same research language, nor do they share the same perspectives on how communication works and how we should study it. Since the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, communication departments are also home to scholars who take a critical perspective on communication, which we will discuss below. While these groups of scholars pursue different approaches to understanding interpersonal communication, we will contend that, ultimately, it will be in this diversity of perspectives that our field will find strength.

Defining Interpersonal Communication

Before we define interpersonal communication, we need to focus on our definition of communication, as our perspective on interpersonal communication grows out of that. Early definitions of communication focused on the exchange of messages, for example in one of the early interpersonal communication textbooks, Giffin and Patton (1971) defined communication as “a process involving the sending and receiving of messages” (p. 5). As the thinking about communication developed, scholars began to focus on communication as a symbolic process humans use to create meaning. For example, John Stewart (1999) stressed that humans build their own reality:

Communication is the way humans build our reality. Human worlds are not made up of objects but of peoples’ responses to objects, or their meanings. And these meanings are negotiated in communication. Try not to think of communication as simply a way to share ideas, because it’s much more than that. It’s the process humans use to define reality itself. (p. 25)

From this perspective, interpersonal communication is more than information transmission between two people. Instead, it becomes the way that humans negotiate meanings, identity, and relationships through person-to-person communication.

In terms of interpersonal communication, different approaches to understanding it and studying it abound. A complete discussion is impossible here; we recommend sources dedicated to giving a more detailed history and overview (e.g., Berger, 2005; Knapp, Daly, Albada, & Miller, 2002). Authors often divide interpersonal communication into processes (e.g., social support), developmental stages (e.g., initiating, disengaging), contexts (e.g., family, workplace), or types or channels (e.g., nonverbal, computer-mediated). For our purposes in this book we would like to talk about three broad approaches to interpersonal communication theories that form our organization of theories in this book: interpersonal communication as (a) individually centered, (b) discourse or interaction centered, and (c) relationship centered.
The first focus of interpersonal communication theory is what we are calling individually centered theories of interpersonal communication. This perspective is centered on understanding how individuals plan, produce, and process interpersonal communication messages. These theories envision communication as an individually centered cognitive activity. This work began with Gerald Miller and others who argued that interpersonal communication occurs when people make predictions about the other interactants based on perceiving the person as an individual rather than based on a social role—for example, a teacher or store clerk (see G. R. Miller, 1976; G. R. Miller & Steinberg, 1975). Those taking this perspective on interpersonal communication focus on mental representations that influence how people interpret information and how they behave (Berger, 2005; Knapp, Daly, Albada, & Miller, 2002; Vangelisti, 2002). These approaches have been prominent in interpersonal communication research and theory, as we will see.

A second focus of interpersonal communication theory is what we are calling discourse- or interaction-centered theories of interpersonal communication. The central focus of this perspective is on understanding interpersonal communication as a message or a joint action behaviorally enacted between persons. The focus in this perspective moves from a focus on the individual and his or her dispositions or cognitive states to a wide variety of theories that share a focus on the content, forms, and functions of messages, and the behavioral interactions between interacting parties. Scholars are interested in “the ways our understandings, meanings, norms, roles, and rules are worked out interactively in communication” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 45). Work in this second tradition has many origins, including the classic volume by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) on behavioral patterns of joint actions, and scholarship by language philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1962).

The third focus of interpersonal communication theory is what we are labeling relationship-centered theories of interpersonal communication. Scholars taking this perspective on interpersonal communication focus on understanding the role of communication in developing, sustaining, and terminating social and personal relationships, including friendships, dating relationships, romantic relationships, and cohabiting relationships. Important classics in this third approach were two 1973 volumes, one by Murray Davis and the second by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor. Beginning in the 1980s, scholars interested in personal relationships across psychology, communication, sociology, and family studies started meeting and founding journals. In fact, the initial goal of the founders of these associations was to create a separate interdisciplinary field devoted to studying personal relationships. While there are diverse approaches to studying relational communication, scholars taking a relational perspective on interpersonal communication focus on messages within relationships that influence (Guerrero, Andersen, & Affifi, 2001) or constitute (Baxter, 2004) those relationships.
What we notice about these three broad approaches to studying interpersonal communication is that they each have distinct differences in how they help us understand what interpersonal communication is and how it functions in human life. In order to be able to define interpersonal communication, we will need to concentrate on what these approaches have in common. As we examined books and articles on interpersonal communication, we found that all authors seem to agree that there are many different definitions and that defining interpersonal communication will be problematic, as it will highlight some dimensions and leave others out. Most scholars agree that interpersonal communication is a process; it involves a dyad or normally a small number of people; it involves creating meanings; and it is enacted through verbal and nonverbal message behaviors. Because our purpose in this book is to represent the breadth of interpersonal communication, we are best served by viewing interpersonal communication in the most inclusive way we can. Thus, our definition of interpersonal communication is the production and processing of verbal and nonverbal messages between two or a few persons. This definition includes elements that speak to each of the three broad approaches to interpersonal communication that organize this book: (a) “the production and processing of . . . messages” emphasizes the first approach, (b) “verbal and nonverbal messages between . . . persons” emphasizes the second approach, and (c) “two or a few persons” emphasizes the relational orientation of the third approach.

Meta-theory and Theory in Interpersonal Communication

As we seek to explore the theories of interpersonal communication, it is important to know that scholars do differ, at times greatly, on how to study and develop interpersonal communication theory. It will help to understand that scholars use different meta-theoretical discourses, which are intellectual traditions or paradigms that scholars use to think about and talk about a phenomenon of interest (Deetz, 2001). These discourses are points of view that help us to understand and appreciate the different approaches to asking questions about interpersonal communication, to choose research methods to answer these questions, and to provide the criteria by which to evaluate research findings and conclusions (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Our goal here is not to argue for one of the discourses as superior, but rather to value them equally. For our purposes here, we have adopted three general discourses of interpersonal communication that have been identified by many scholars (e.g., Baxter & Babbie; Bochner, 1985; Habermas, 1971; Miller, 2002): post-positivist; interpretive, and critical.
POST-POSITIVIST PERSPECTIVE

Researchers adopting a post-positivist discourse take a scientific approach to research. This approach is often also called the “logical-empirical tradition.” These scholars believe in an objective reality that can be discovered through appropriate research methods. That is, they believe in a knowable reality apart from the researcher. The goal of post-positivist theory and research is to advance predictions and to offer generalized, law-like cause and effect explanations or functional explanations about how variables or structures are interdependent with one another. Causal explanations view the social world as webs of variables, some of which function as independent variables in causing outcomes or effects on other variables known as dependent variables. Functional explanations are organized around the presumption that the social world is a system of interdependent parts: the functioning of one part depends on its patterns of interdependence with other parts of the system. Researchers committed to the discourse of post-positivism favor an a priori process in which they initially identify a theory relevant to the phenomenon they wish to explain and predict. Theories should consist of law-like statements, which apply across situations, about how variables or structures relate, causally or functionally. Post-positivists are committed to value-neutral theorizing in which researcher subjectivity should be controlled or neutralized. According to the post-positivist perspective, a good theory is one that is accurate (i.e., in agreement with observations), testable (i.e., capable of being falsified or proven wrong), logically consistent, parsimonious or simple, broad in scope, and useful in generating predictions and explanations about interpersonal communication.

In its idealized form, the researcher’s task is to deduce testable hypotheses from a theory. For example, a researcher adopting this perspective might be interested in explaining how talk about one’s occupation functions in self-presentation and impression management. He or she would begin with a relevant theory in which variables have been logically linked causally or functionally. From this theory, the researcher would derive testable hypotheses. For instance, a researcher might adopt one of the theories discussed in Part III of this book, Social Penetration Theory, because it focuses on the process of self-disclosure of personal information as people become acquainted. Based on this theory, the researcher might argue that there are various kinds of information that a person can reveal about his or her occupation and that this information can vary in its superficiality or depth. Because Social Penetration Theory argues that we disclose relatively superficial information early in a forming relationship and more in-depth information later in a relationship’s development, our researcher might hypothesize that superficial disclosures about one’s occupation (e.g., “I’m a professor of communication studies,” “A professor’s job has three components—teaching, research, and service”) are more likely with strangers than are more in-depth disclosures about one’s occupation.
(e.g., “I earn about half of what a physician earns,” or “The worst part of my job is grading papers”). Additionally, more in-depth disclosures about occupation would be more characteristic of communication among acquaintances than among strangers. In this example, depth of disclosure about one’s occupation is the dependent variable because it is the consequence of the independent variable, the closeness of the relationship with the other person (stranger versus acquaintance). The assumption of the researcher is that both relationship closeness and depth of disclosure can be objectively measured.

INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE

The meta-theoretical discourse of interpretivism rejects a single objective view of reality that can be discovered. From the interpretive perspective, the social world consists of multiple realities according to the subjective position of the person or group. Humans are agents who act on their world in light of their subjective positions. Although humans often act to reproduce existing patterns, they can choose also to change those patterns. Interpretive researchers are committed to a detailed understanding of how particular social realities are produced and maintained through the everyday practices of individuals, relational parties, families, and so on. Researchers committed to the discourse of interpretivism value the “native’s point of view”: the perspectives and language choices of the individuals being studied. In addition, they tend to value context or situation-specific research. Because the interpretive project is committed to local meanings and rule-governed meaning-making processes, the theories valued by interpretive researchers are those focused on meanings and meaning-making.

Interpretive theories might be used by researchers as sensitizing devices or guides to getting started in a research study and subsequently put into conversation with locally emergent meanings. The goal is not to test a theory in a specific situation, but rather to engage the theory in conversation with the emergent observations and interpretations that flow from the natives’ experiences. Thus, from an interpretive perspective, a theory can be a heuristic device, useful in sensitizing a researcher; it is a conversational partner, if you will; it is open to transformation when put into play with the native’s point of view and the interpretations of the researcher.

For example, an interpretive researcher might be interested in how members of a local community—let’s say neighbors in a given neighborhood populated with middle-class Euro-Americans—construct their identities in interaction with one another and the role that one’s occupation holds in such identity work. That is, the researcher is interested in how the natives—members of the neighborhood—make sense of one another as persons and how occupation figures into the meaning-making process. There might be a local theory available
in existing scholarship that examines the code of communication among middle-class Euro-Americans more generally. However, it does not directly address the question of interest to our researcher—the role of occupation talk in identity constructions. Nonetheless, our researcher could use this theory as a sensitizing device, which is perhaps helpful in guiding preliminary interview questions or in making findings intelligible at the analysis stage of the study. For example, the communication code for middle-class Euro-Americans might emphasize concepts of “self,” “achievement,” and “independence.” These concepts might be helpful in rendering intelligible the observation by our researcher that neighbors appear to value more positively occupations that appear to have a great deal of autonomy of action. Our researcher would not test hypotheses derived from the theory. In the end, the researcher would conclude that the theory was more or less useful in illuminating the natives’ experiences in the particular neighborhood group under observation.

Alternatively, an interpretive researcher might prefer to operate entirely inductively, developing a theory from the “bottom up” from observations. This process is often referred to as “grounded-theory construction.” Returning to our example, our researcher might discover that no scholarship exists on how middle-class, Euro-American neighbors interact more generally, or in the neighborhood of interest more specifically. Our interpretive researcher would of necessity adopt an inductive approach with the goal of developing a grounded theory of the role of occupation talk in constructing the identity of persons.

Whether the researcher uses a general interpretive theory or constructs a grounded theory, common criteria apply in evaluating an interpretive theory. The theory needs to be heuristic—that is, it must shed fruitful insights into the meanings and meaning-making process of the “native” group of individuals under study. A heuristic theory moves beyond mere description: it does more than summarize the “native’s point of view.” Specifically, it provides an interpretation of observations that renders them intelligible or understandable. This goal of understanding or intelligibility differs from the prediction and explanation of post-positivist theories. Furthermore, the emphasis is on the local, not the general, which is (again) unlike post-positivist theories. However, like post-positivist theory, interpretive theory should be logically consistent and parsimonious.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Third, in contrast to both post-positivist and interpretive researchers, a critical scholar would view identity work in general and occupation talk in particular as social constructions that serve some interests more than others. A critical researcher would rely on a theory of institutional or ideological power to provide the analytic guide that would uncover silenced voices, and to inform
his or her explanation or understanding of the process by which other voices become dominant. Key to this analysis would probably be the role of various societal structures and ideologies—for example, the ideology of individualism or the ideology of patriarchy, in personal identity. Critical researchers often focus on the interests of predetermined, identifiable groups, such as women, people of color, or nonelite social groups, such as people with disabilities. The work of critical researchers is often characterized by a goal of emancipation or enlightenment and an agenda that is activist and that supports social change. As Katherine Miller (2002) noted, critical theorists come in a variety of stripes. Some critical scholars (for instance, those who adopt late Marxism as their preferred critical theory) share a belief in an objective reality of material conditions typical of post-positivism. Other critical scholars (for instance, those who adopt early Marxism as their preferred critical theory) adopt a more subjective perspective typical of the interpretive tradition. In communication, most critical scholars probably align more with the assumptions of the interpretive tradition than with the assumptions of post-positivism. Regardless of basic assumptions, a good critical theory is evaluated by its capacity to accomplish social change, thereby emancipating disempowered groups from oppressive social structures or ideologies.

Returning to our example one final time, a critical researcher might be interested in examining whose interests are served (and whose are not served) when, for example, the media marks a person’s occupation as the central feature of his or her identity. Such marking clearly privileges persons who are employed outside of the home, for example. One critical consequence of such marking might be that people whose occupation is relatively invisible (for example, homemakers and parents who work without pay in the home) might have reduced status in the society because their occupation is not formally legitimated.

Researchers rarely articulate explicitly their meta-theoretical commitments (and perhaps they should do so more than they do). Rather, scholars’ philosophical alignments often float at a latent level, between the lines of their prose. The sophisticated reader needs to know how to interpret a given researcher’s choices in order to infer what his or her meta-theoretical commitments are in a given study. Once one knows what key signs to look for, it is possible to locate a given researcher’s commitments. Why is this helpful and important? Because it tells the reader what the researcher values about theory and how theory should be used and evaluated in the given study. Thus, we have asked each of the authors in the book to locate their theory, or cluster of theories, within its appropriate meta-theoretical discourse. As you read each chapter, we encourage you to work through the intellectual exercise of identifying the specific ways in which a meta-theoretical discourse seeps through in the articulation of that chapter’s theory(ies).
But let’s bring down the level of abstraction a bit, and turn our attentions to interpersonal communication research. In doing so, we will note some interesting patterns and trends with respect to both theories and the meta-theoretical discourses in which they are embedded.

**Interpersonal Communication Research, 1990–2005**

Before choosing the theories we wanted to include in this book, we needed to map the current state of research and theory in interpersonal communication. We knew an empirical study of interpersonal communication research would be an ambitious undertaking, because we had done a similar study two years earlier for our family communication theories book (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). We knew there would be much more interpersonal literature to analyze—and we were right: there were 958 interpersonal communication citations in our current data set, compared to 289 family communication citations. While we were aware that interpersonal communication research began well before 1990, we decided to start at that date, because our goal was to understand the current state of interpersonal communication theory, rather than to track its entire history.

We included in our analysis all data-based research that was published by interpersonal communication researchers who professionally identify with the communication studies discipline. Our goal was to analyze all interpersonal communication studies published during this period. Our approach to interpersonal communication was intentionally broad, encompassing all studies of person-to-person communication (face-to-face or mediated). We included studies of dyadic interpersonal communication (e.g., communication in dating, committed, cohabiting, friendship, or marital relationships), and we excluded studies situated in role-based relationships (e.g., manager-employee, doctor-patient—what G. R. Miller and Steinberg (1975) would have categorized as “sociological”). The only family-related relationship we included was marital communication, because partners relate to one another as intimates, and not only in their respective roles as “husband” and “wife.” We chose to include interpersonal communication research that is located at the level of the individual (e.g., studies of message planning, production, and processing) and we included persuasion research when the focus was interpersonal (e.g., compliance-gaining or planning and processing of persuasive messages in a person-to-person context). We also included research on language and social interaction in interpersonal contexts and data-based critical studies of interpersonal communication. Finally, we included only data-based studies (rather than conceptual essays) in this analysis because our goal was to assess the role of meta-theory and theory in qualitatively oriented or quantitatively oriented research.
For this study of the literature we identified 19 journals that would be most likely to contain the published research of interpersonal communication scholars. We included in our search 14 communication journals sponsored by the International Communication Association (ICA), the National Communication Association (NCA), or the four NCA-affiliated regional communication associations: Communication Monographs, Communication Quarterly, Communication Reports, Communication Research Reports, Communication Studies, Human Communication Research, Journal of Applied Communication Research, Journal of Communication, Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, Quarterly Journal of Speech, Southern Communication Journal, Text and Performance Quarterly, Western Journal of Communication, and the Western States Communication Association affiliate organization’s Women’s Studies in Communication. In addition, we included five journals that regularly published articles authored by interpersonal communication scholars: Communication Research, Journal of Language and Social Psychology, Research on Language and Social Interaction, and the two interdisciplinary journals on social and personal relationships: Journal of Social and Personal Relationships and Personal Relationships.

We are, of course, aware that researchers in other disciplines undertake studies on interpersonal communication. Thus, some may criticize our choice not to include these articles in our analysis. We certainly value the work on communication by scholars from outside the communication discipline, and there are excellent volumes of work that takes an interdisciplinary approach. However, our goal in the present project was to focus on work by the community of scholars whose primary intellectual affiliation is communication studies.

In the end, a total of 958 research-based articles on interpersonal communication were included in our analysis. For each study analyzed, we determined the meta-theoretical commitment (paradigm) of the researchers, and the theory(ies), if any, engaged by the researcher.

META-THEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

We analyzed the research articles included in the analysis to determine the meta-theoretical approaches taken by interpersonal communication researchers. From our analysis, we determined that 83.2% of the interpersonal communication research articles from 1990–2005 were embedded in a post-positivist discourse, 13.9% were interpretive in nature, and a scant 2.9% displayed a critical perspective. At this point in time, it is clear that interpersonal communication research springs largely from the discourse of post-positivism. There are some interpersonal communication scholars doing research from within the interpretive paradigm. Critical studies are rarely found in interpersonal communication.
THEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

We also wanted to know how much of the published interpersonal communication research displays theoretical presence and which specific theory(ies) were engaged. Determining theoretical presence is not as easy as it sounds. What does one count as a theory? Must the theory be used a priori, or may it be imposed post hoc after the data are analyzed, or both? How prominent must the use of theory in a study be to be counted as theory-based research? In the end, our choice was to be very generous in our approach to theory-based research. Thus, we included articles in which the author mentioned at least one theory in the introductory warrant or argument for the study, used at least one theory as a framework to analyze data, developed a grounded theory, or discussed at least one theory in the conclusions of the research report as a way to make post hoc sense of findings or to address their implications. As one of us commented to the other, “If the author waved the hot dog over the fire of theory, we counted it.” While our approach to identifying theoretical presence departs little from the idealized use of theory among interpretive or critical theorists, we took a more generous approach to post-positivist work. In our current study we acknowledged theoretical presence in many post-positivist studies that did not deduce testable hypotheses from an identified theory. In the end, using our criteria, 66.5% (n = 638) of the interpersonal communication studies had a theoretical presence of some sort, while 33.4% (n = 320) did not.

Many different theories were cited in the data-based studies. The top 10 most-frequently cited theories, in descending order of frequency, were

Politeness Theory (cited 77 times)
Social Exchange Theories (64)
Uncertainty Reduction Theory (55)
Dramatistic Symbolic Interaction Theory (Goffman) (51)
Relational Dialectics Theory (44)
Expectancy Violations Theory (33)
Social Penetration Theory (31)
Communication Accommodation Theory (30)
Constructivism Theory (29)
Attribution Theory (28)

Obviously, we made a decision to include all of these theories in the book, given their salience in the research. Of these 10 most-frequently cited theories,
half are homegrown. However, many other theories were cited with some frequency, as well, and we tried to include as many of those in the book as was feasible. In the end, all but seven of the theories in the book are “homegrown.” We take this as evidence of maturity of the field of interpersonal communication. As we noted above, in the early years of scholarship on interpersonal communication, researchers relied heavily on importing theories from allied disciplines of psychology and sociology.

IMPLICATIONS

As you might anticipate, as editors of a book devoted to theories of interpersonal communication, we advocate theoretically centered research as opposed to research that is not based on theory. It is important to note that not all scholars will agree with us on this point. Some believe it is enough to embed a study within the conversation of accumulated findings from others’ studies. While we appreciate all good research, we favor and recommend theoretically centered research for two reasons. First, we believe that theory helps researchers bring both intelligibility and coherence to their research findings. We understand that several atheoretical studies can produce a common finding, but we would argue that what makes these findings intelligible and useful is theory. We are also well aware that what we see and what we learn will be different depending on the theory guiding our attention, just as putting a different lens on a camera changes how we record our world. Given that theories operate out of different meta-theoretical discourses, we can change theories to enable us to take a different view of communication phenomenon. Not only does changing the lens of theory alter our view, but when we pay attention to theory we also have a heightened awareness that we are indeed seeing the world through a particular lens, focusing on certain things and not engaging others.

Second, we favor theory-based research because theory helps us launch new research, either by providing the basis of testable hypotheses (post-positivist) or by providing us with a heuristic sensitizing device (interpretive and critical). In addition, we believe that in the best of circumstances each study should also question and advance our body of theoretical knowledge. Thus, while we are heartened to see the percentage of theory-based research in interpersonal communication at 65.5%, we do hope to see it rise even higher as the years go on. We believe this book will be a helpful resource to researchers who want to see this happen, too.

A second implication of our study of interpersonal communication theory is that there is a clear imbalance among the meta-theoretical discourses, with the vast majority of research on interpersonal communication representing the post-positivist tradition. This is not a critique of the excellent research coming out of that paradigm. These scholars are doing important and high-quality
work. In the end, what we are calling for is a greater balance among the perspectives. We contend that our ability as a field to shed light on some of the most important issues in the lives of humans rests in our ability to embrace and apply multiple perspectives and methods to capture the complexity that is interpersonal communication. Thus, we argue that all three perspectives should have a comparable presence at the scholarly table.

Related to the lack of paradigmatic balance, our third implication is to reflect on what a diversity of meta-theoretical perspectives might bring to interpersonal communication. Looking at the status quo, we conclude that interpersonal communication research is not as diverse as it could, and we believe, should be. We have also observed too little diversity within the ranks of interpersonal scholars and, we would argue, not enough diversity in the contexts, populations, and topics studied. We appreciate scholarship such as Wood and Duck’s (1995) call to focus on understudied relationships. We agree that scholars need continually to expand the parameters of our research and the populations studied.

We note that most of the research on person-to-person communication by scholars about underrepresented groups is not appearing in interpersonal communication, but rather in intercultural communication, language and social interaction, and family communication. The same is true for work by scholars using critical and interpretive paradigms. While the most important thing is that the research is done, we have to ask what the study of interpersonal communication is missing for having this work appear elsewhere. Our sense is that interpretive scholars—and especially critical scholars—perceive that interpersonal communication is not the right place for their work, given the lack of meta-theoretical balance. Thus, we offer a challenge to interpersonal communication to open our minds and make sure that all voices are heard around the table.

We want to see a continuation of excellent post-positivist research and, at the same time, we want to see interpretive and critical research on interpersonal communication grow. To facilitate this goal, in this book we have intentionally included selected theories that interpretive and critical scholars will find relevant to and facilitative of their work, in addition to those theories important to scholars with post-positivist meta-theoretical commitments.

The Organization of the Book

Analyzing such a large number of studies confirmed what we already knew: there are many interpersonal communication theories to choose from and it would be difficult to make choices about which we could include in the book. We applied three criteria when choosing the theories. First, as noted above, we chose theories that represent the most frequent presence in the interpersonal
communication literature. Second, we chose theories that we believe hold the
greatest promise for researchers and students to use. Third, we chose a group
of theories that produce a presence for all three meta-theoretical perspectives.
This meant that we had to make some difficult choices and were not able to
include all theories in one book.

We invited an outstanding group of researchers and theorists as first authors
to write chapters for the book. We received enthusiastic responses from them and
were delighted they wanted to be part of the project. Some invited coauthors to
work with them, in some cases, scholars of equal senior status and in other cases,
promising new scholars. We are pleased to welcome all of these colleagues and
appreciate their contributions to interpersonal communication theory.

After we chose the chapters we wanted to include in the book, we needed to
think about how to organize them. We knew that we did not want to divide the
theories into the three meta-theoretical discourses because we wanted, as much
as possible, to focus on how these discourses integrate (Deetz, 2001). In the
end, we chose to organize the book into three sections, modeled after the three
broad approaches to interpersonal communication we discussed earlier in this
chapter: interpersonal communication theories that are individually centered,
those that are discourse or interaction centered, and those that are relationship
centered. We organized the theories alphabetically in each of the three sections.

Section I of the book presents individually centered theories of interper-
sonal communication. As we described above, these theories are centered in
how individuals plan, produce, and process interpersonal communication
messages. Theories in this section of the book primarily envision communica-
tion as an individually centered cognitive activity. Of the three sections in the
book, this first section has the most meta-theoretical similarity—the post-
positivist paradigm.

Section II of the book includes theories with a focus on discourse or inter-
action. These theories share an understanding of interpersonal communica-
tion as a message, a discourse (i.e., a system of meaning), or a joint action
behaviorally enacted between persons. Meta-theoretical commitments are more
diverse in this second section of the book, drawing primarily from post-positivist
or interpretive traditions.

Section III includes relationship-centered theories of interpersonal com-
munication. This group of theories focuses on understanding the role of com-
munication in developing, sustaining, and terminating social and personal
relationships. All three meta-theoretical commitments are evident in the third
section of the book.

Interestingly, once we arrived at this structure for organizing the theories,
we found that they divided fairly evenly between the three sections. While we
highlighted some of our concerns about the state of interpersonal communi-
cation theory above, we also see great strengths, as this collection of theories by
a superior set of scholars demonstrates. As the twenty-first century is under-
way, we can imagine few undertakings more important than understanding
and improving interpersonal communication. We trust that the readers of this
book will find the work of these scholars engaging and accessible.

Note

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