

**Third Edition**

# **Building Communication Theory**

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# Preface

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**T**his book is designed to introduce college students to theories in the field of communication. Theory courses are offered at many levels in the curriculum. If a course in communication theory is the only communication course a student takes, it is important that the material present a fairly detailed picture of the current thinking in the discipline. The different approaches taken to understanding human communication, major theories within the structure of each approach, and representative research conducted to test the validity of theory building are all important areas to emphasize.

In addition to conveying current thinking, it is also important to reveal the traditions which gave rise to contemporary theory. The field of communication has a very rich intellectual history. Some of the great thinkers of ancient times, including Plato and Aristotle, devoted attention to human communication. In advancing a discipline, researchers frequently stand on the shoulders of those who preceded them. Early communication theorists have greatly influenced the development of the field. For readers who want to explore the historical context from which current theory grew, appendix B offers a concise review.

If the introductory theory course is the first of many that students will take in the field of communication, this book provides a solid foundation for pursuing advanced study. The possibility that students using this book might become more than casual observers of communication was very much on our minds as we wrote. We attempted to reveal the importance of the field, the value of its teachings, and the richness of the discipline's thinking. We have tried to give equal treatment to the areas in which people specialize so that we do not "persuade" the student to specialize in one area of the field instead of another. We intend this book to be used by communication majors or minors as a springboard to discover for themselves their strongest interests. It would be nice if equal treatment resulted in some students liking the major areas of the field

equally. However, the current composition of the discipline suggests otherwise. Generalists are rather rare in the communication field; as in other disciplines, specialists are more the rule. A more realistic expectation might be that the first course in communication theory would provide a would-be specialist in organizational communication, for example, with an understanding and appreciation of the major tenets of other areas of the field.

There are six distinctive features of this book that we would like to highlight. First, the book emphasizes the complementary relationship of theory building and research in the communication discipline. Gary Cronkhite has explained persuasively that the focus and scope of the communication discipline is defined by human symbolic activity. This book utilizes Cronkhite's conceptualization and rejects earlier models based on the "you cannot not communicate" notion. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on human symbolic activity. This turns our attention more to researchers in the field of communication and less to scholars in other disciplines who, although interested in communication, give it attention only insofar as communication enhances understanding of broad social processes such as risk taking, cooperation, apathy, violence, and prejudice.

A limited amount of work by scholars in fields such as social psychology will be discussed in this book. In the 1960s, there was so little original theory building in the discipline that textbook writers in the communication field had little choice other than to "import" theories from related disciplines. However, that condition began shifting in the 1970s with Berger's uncertainty reduction theory and McCroskey's model of communication apprehension and then changed markedly in the 1980s. It will be evident to the reader that there is now no shortage of theory building in communication. If communication journals have reflected sufficient interest in theories from outside the field (Petty and Cacioppo's work, for example), we have used that criterion to include some theories from outside the discipline. The fact that this book is able to rely so heavily on the work of communication scholars may be viewed as a sign of the maturity of contemporary communication theory. This helps resolve the identity issue for the field which was raised often in the 1960s and 1970s.

A second feature of this book is that the coverage of theory is selective. In writing a book such as this, it is tempting to try to mention everything. The author trying to survey an entire field is limited to a brief mention of many theories because of the vast amount of theory and research in each area. At the other extreme, if too few theories are covered, a sense of the scope of theorizing is lost. We chose an intermediate position in order to emphasize how contemporary scholars build on past theory and research. This book presents overviews of areas of the field which

include basic concepts and trends. Several theories are then discussed in depth. We hope this will be more intellectually satisfying than reading “handbook-type” statements about theories. In selecting this middle course, we have included a sufficient number of theories to present an overview of the different theory-building approaches in each area. Our main concern has been to highlight the development of theory building rather than a particular set of theories.

The third area of emphasis is that theories are positioned with respect to the laws, rules, and systems perspectives to studying communication. Since the mid-1970s, the communication discipline has recognized these three perspectives as acceptable ways to theorize about communication. The three approaches are distinctive; it is fairly easy to identify a given theory as falling within the assumptions of one approach or another. Although more advanced writings have made ample use of the laws-rules-systems idea, introductory works have ventured less into this framework. For the beginning student, we felt that this approach would best illustrate the different approaches to communication theory. As we will make clear, the nature of each perspective is easily understood and provides a meaningful framework for viewing theory building in communication.

A fourth feature of the book is that the trait approach to studying communication is presented. In terms of sheer quantity of research, this approach is probably the major one taken by researchers during the past fifteen years or so. A trait approach involves discovering what is characteristic of a person’s communicative behavior—what regularities are consistent across situations. Researchers in the communication field tend to be either trait or situationist in terms of orientation. Situationists believe the factors in a given communication situation overwhelm characteristics of the individual so that the nature of the situation best explains communicative behavior. More and more contemporary theorists are emphasizing the interaction between traits and situational factors.

Interestingly, some introductory textbooks in communication include little or no discussion of the findings from trait research. This is puzzling since much of our current knowledge of communication involves traits. One of the most thoroughly researched topics in the history of the discipline is communication apprehension, yet some books do not address this topic. What is the explanation? Although a large portion of recent research has been conducted by trait researchers, many of the textbooks have been written by situationists or rhetoricians who conduct a very different kind of research. We have included both trait and situational research and delineate the usefulness of each.

A fifth distinguishing characteristic of this book is that the student is taught how theories are tested. To complement the theories presented,

we discuss how each has been studied by communication researchers. In addition, we have included material about communication research methods in appendix A. Lawrence Frey and Carl Botan emphasize the interdependence of theory and research and question “whether undergraduates are learning the research methods needed to fully appreciate and understand communication theory” (1988, p. 250). We agree with Frey and Botan’s concern. We would question how deeply a student understands a given communication theory if the student has no idea how to test the theory.

The sixth area of emphasis is the discussion of important new areas of research. We devote one chapter to intercultural communication and another to theories about family, political, and health communication. The recent growth of theory building in these areas has created sufficient material to justify such chapters. In addition, the intercultural communication context provides an opportunity to trace differences and similarities in the communication process. Basic communication concepts have been examined in a variety of different contexts. For example, Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory is first presented in chapter 8, the interpersonal chapter, and then its extensions are discussed in the intercultural chapter. This approach illustrates what we feel is one of the most important aspects of theory building: theorists often build on previous work and extend applications of particular approaches to new areas.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part provides an introduction and foundation. In these three chapters, we conceptualize communication as symbol-using activity; discuss the nature of theories; and explain the laws, rules, and systems perspectives on communication. The second part of the book focuses on several major approaches to understanding human communication: communication traits, persuasion, verbal behavior, and nonverbal behavior. The third part of the book looks at communication theory building contextually. A good deal of the literature in the field pertains to the set of circumstances where communication takes place—the context. Four chapters cover theory building in the traditional interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass media contexts followed by the intercultural and health/political/family chapters mentioned above.

The third edition of *Building Communication Theory* reflects several changes which we believe will enhance the book. We added sections on interpersonal motives and media dependency theory and expanded discussion of expectancy violations theory. Some theories were deleted if they had not attracted much recent attention from communication researchers. Some material, such as the axioms and theorems of uncertainty reduction theory, was deleted because it was distracting for undergraduate students. We moved “The Development of Approaches to Communication” to appendix B since it provided an overview of the his-



tory of theory building rather than a discussion of the nature or function of theory. For instructors who want to spend class time on research methods or history, the appendices can be structured into the syllabus. For those who prefer to emphasize particular theorists, the appendices are a valuable resource for optional assignments.

Finally, we tried to enhance the presentation of material in the third edition to make it more “user friendly” to undergraduate students. In addition to rewriting sections which students had described as problem areas, we have added visuals to highlight key concepts. We think communication theory is fascinating, but in order to convey interest to students the presentation must, above all, be clear.

We have not changed our view from the first edition that a book was needed which emphasized the theoretical contributions of communication scholars in the communication discipline. If anything, we are even more convinced of that position. It could be contended that the interdisciplinary approach by the communication field in investigating communication (from roughly the period 1960 to 1990) did little to advance the credibility, stature, and acceptance of the communication discipline. We have felt that it is now time for the field to “stand on its own two feet.” In completing the third edition of *Building Communication Theory* it became even clearer to us that not only is the discipline able to stand by itself, but its posture is rather impressive, and we are proud of it.

As we wrote this book, we were reminded of the excitement scientists feel as they create theories and conduct research to test them. Theory building is an exploratory process designed to extend the frontiers of knowledge. We are confident that this text will convince the reader of the importance of building theory. We also hope the book will lead the reader to share our enthusiasm for theory building in communication.



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