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Demystifying Theory: Building Foundations for Knowledge and Research

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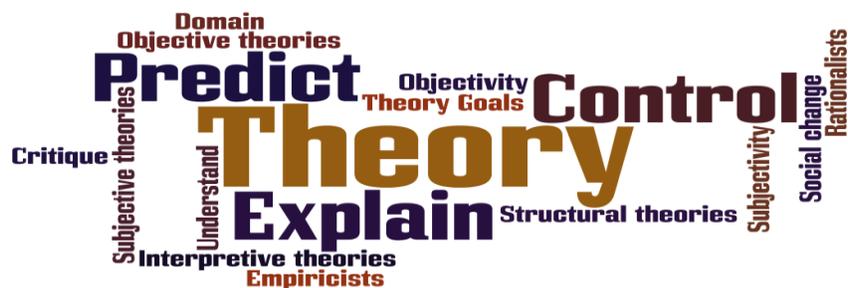
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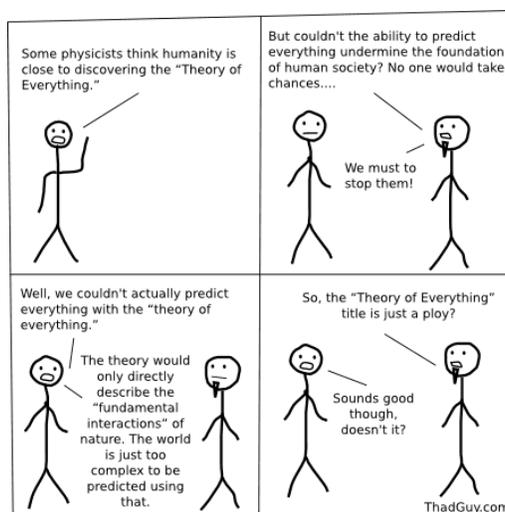
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Demystifying Theory: Building Foundations for Knowledge and Research



On the first day of a new class, you notice two students interacting. The young woman, Eva, twirls her hair in her finger as she talks, smiles, lightly laughs at times to what her partner says, asks questions, and maintains eye contact. Do you think her behaviors reflect her level of attraction or interest in the other student? If so, your conclusions about Eva reflect your own personal theories of human communication.

For most of us, the term “theory” is a little intimidating and suggests something that is boring or of little value to us. What you might not realize is that you depend upon theories to help you make it through each day. Theories are not just abstract, vague, complex sets of weird ideas. Instead, they can be simple and practical principles, guidelines, hunches, and predictions that help you make sense and respond effectively to the world. You develop, test, and tweak a set of personal theories that help you interpret perceptions and guide your behaviors. Your creation of personal theories reflects an important principle that is also true of the theories included in this text: *humans are theory creating beings*.



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Defining Theory: “So, what is a theory anyway?”

One of our goals in these first two chapters is to demystify and explain theory in a way that you can relate to and see as relevant to your everyday life. Rather than presenting a wide assortment of definitions of theory, we offer a definition that best fits the theories discussed in this textbook. We define **theory** as *an abstract, symbolic representation of reality that identifies a set of interrelated elements (concepts/variables) and their relationships*. Examining what each component of this definition means should help you get a handle on it.

A theory is **abstract**—they are intangible and represent ideas rather than objects. Theories exist as ideas and thoughts. In essence, theories are abridged versions of the world; there is a lot that is left out.

A theory is a **symbolic representation of reality**. Theories are not the actual thing, but a stand in, a substitute, or placeholder for the actual thing. Just as a map is a symbolic representation of reality and not actually the roads and highways, so is a theory.

A theory is a **set of interrelated elements**. Theories have at least two components (concepts or variables) that are presented as related to each other in some way. Any number of components can be included in a theory with each additional component increasing the complexity of the theory. The theory applied to Eva involved two components, first, her nonverbal cues (smiling, laughing, etc.) and second, attraction.

A theory is **relationships**. At the core of a theory is identifying and asserting the specific relationships among the components that constitute the theory. In terms of the component relationship for Eva the theory asserts the greater a person’s attraction for someone, the more they display more positive nonverbal and verbal behaviors.

Goals of Theory: “Why do we create theories?”

We create theories to meet two primary goals, explanation and prediction, and three additional goals, understanding, control, and social change.

1-A Think about two or three of the personal theories you have. What motivated you to create them? What do those theories do for you? Do they provide explanations for why people behave in certain ways? Do any of your theories allow you to predict how someone will act or react? These last two questions reflect two of the goals of theories—explanation and prediction.

EXPLANATION and UNDERSTANDING Theories developed to explain help answer questions such as “Why are we embarrassed when we can’t remember someone’s name?” or “Why do we pursue a relationship with one person and not another?” The first question resulted in Face theory to explain our desire to be seen as competent. The second can be explained through Social Exchange theory where we assess costs and rewards associated with a relationship. Such theories are created to explain a multitude of communication phenomena. The earlier example of identifying a theory as to why some students have more friends or some people are successful reflects two interrelated goals of theory: **explanation** and **understanding**.

We typically demonstrate that we understand something by explaining it. Explaining relates to identifying the mechanisms that underlie a phenomenon and understanding is the grasp

of the phenomenon that emerges from that explanation. Sometimes we think we understand something but have a hard time actually explaining it. Perhaps you feel you understand what makes a plane fly, but couldn't really explain it in detail, or you understand your best friend but still find it hard sometimes to explain your friend's behaviors.

Scientists apply an objective, rational, cause and effect approach to finding the single, universal explanation for a particular phenomenon. Social scientists, just like most of us, generally are more subjective, intuitive, and interpretive in making sense of the world. Thus, more than one theory might be used as the basis for explaining and understanding a particular phenomenon. For example, there are a number of different explanations as to why two people are attracted to one another, such as physical attractiveness, commonalities, differences, compatibility of needs, and proximity.

1-B As you read the communication theories presented in this book, consider how well each one explains your own experiences and observations or leads to a different understanding of a given phenomenon.

PREDICTION You can also use your theories to make decisions based on predictions. For example, suppose you are interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with someone you have just met, so you smile, show interest by asking questions, and share some information about yourself. Your personal theory is that by engaging in such behaviors you will increase the other person's positive feelings toward you. Your theory, like many theories, has prediction as its goal. A theory's strength can be evaluated according to how well it predicts what it claims. If your behaviors failed to increase positive feelings, your theory might be judged as weak. Having strong communication theories that predict what happens lets you develop and implement effective communication plans and strategies. Communication theories exist that predict the communication behavior found in interpersonal relationships, during small group decision making, within organizations, in public forums, and across mediated channels such as TV and the Internet.

CONTROL Related to prediction is another goal associated with theories—**control**. In the previous example where you predicted certain behaviors would produce positive feelings, those behaviors represent an attempt to control or manipulate the other person. Noted communication theorist Frank E. X. Dance (1982) explains that the goal of control in a theory is to 1) cause the phenomena (in this case starting a relationship) 2) prevent the phenomena (medical theories often have this goal), 3) stop the phenomena once it's begun (for example, ending a relationship), or 4) interfere with the phenomena's activity. Theories empower us to manage the world around us and accomplish personal goals.

SOCIAL CHANGE In extending the notion of control, theories are increasingly being developed to initiate or facilitate **social change**. Robert Craig (1993) made the case that theories can be created with the goal of moral and political change. Such theories are often **critical**—they challenge the ethics, fairness, or appropriateness of a given phenomenon or condition. For instance, in the 1960's theories were developed that were critical of the language used in the United States for being heavily biased in favor of males (for example, textbooks were written only in terms of "He" or "Him"). Such criticism led to social change, and today's textbooks

strive to be gender neutral. Theories developed to be critical often challenge and attempt to discredit existing theories, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, perspectives, norms, cultures, social practices, and even organizations. Critical theories might or might not offer an alternative to what they critique.

Everyday Application: What effect might there have been on children and teenagers reading textbooks that only used male references? How might the effect have differed between boys and girls? To what degree might making the books gender neutral eliminate these effects?

Types of Theories

At the most basic level, a theory consists simply of empirical (observable or measurable) assertions connecting two or more concepts or variables. These theories are often called **structural or objective theories** because they are *theories that are grounded in observable, measurable, and manipulatable variables*. There are also **interpretive or subjective theories** that are *theories that focus on people's interpretation of the world they experience, the world as seen through their eyes*. For example, an autobiography is an interpretive theory of a person's own life. The accuracy of the autobiography might be challenged by a structural theorist, but would be considered valid by interpretive theorists because it reflects a description of the world from one particular person's mind. For instance, in George W. Bush's autobiography, *Decision Points* when he discusses the war in Iraq, he contends that in spite of not finding weapons of mass destruction, deposing Saddam was the right decision because it made America safer (which is essentially a "theoretical" claim). Whether you agree with him or not, his statement represents his "interpretation" of the experience. How might President Bush's theory that America was safer be tested from an empirical perspective?

Construction and Presentation of Theories

Most theories in the hard sciences are structural theories and often consist of assertions that are primarily empirical because the concepts and variables are universally accepted and defined (Water = two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen). The theories you read about in this text use everyday language as the basis for capturing and reflecting their corresponding phenomena. However, using everyday language leads to a fair amount of ambiguity and even dissent over the meaning of the terms and corresponding concepts used. Therefore, theorists must include definitions for the terms that constitute the theory (Gibbs, 1972). In, *The Functions of Human Communication*, Dance (1975) provides 125 different definitions found in the scholarly publications for the term "communication." That was in 1975, imagine how many more definitions have been added since then.

So, how does everyday language affect theory development? Suppose a theory asserts that "Empathy leads to more friendships." What does it mean to have empathy? The accuracy of the theory is dependent upon what the theorist means by "empathy"—is it sharing the same emotion, seeing the world from the other's perspective, knowing what people think? Even the term "friendships" is ambiguous because our friends vary from casual to intimate. In addition to terms being interpreted differently, Robert Hanneman (1988) notes that theories written in everyday language tend to be both overgeneralized and abbreviated, which leads to a failure to

precisely specify the relationships among the concepts. You're likely to observe these problems first hand as you read the about the theories in this text, particularly the snippets taken directly from the theorists' writings.

In contrast to theories written in everyday language, theories might also be presented in mathematical language or logical models. Scientific theories tend to gravitate (with all due respect to Newton) toward the use of mathematical language and models, attempting to present relationships among the concepts in a logically connected and mathematically rigorous format. Such models are intended to be precise, unambiguous, and objective. The limitations of applying mathematical language to social science theories include trivializing simple theories and producing models that are too complex to understand or explain (Hanneman, 1988).

Nevertheless, the appeal of mathematical language has led some communication theorists to present their theories in mathematical or semi-mathematical terms while also incorporating everyday language. For example, one theory covered in this text, uncertainty reduction theory, uses axioms (accepted truths) and theorems (relationships logically derived by combining axioms) to explain initial interactions between strangers. Another theory, the elaboration likelihood theory, is presented as a logical model of the process of persuasion. The analysis of data in communication research often applies statistical analyses that create mathematical models specifying the relationships among the concepts being investigated. Semi-mathematical language provides more precision than everyday language and more flexibility than mathematical (Hanneman, 1988) and tends to be the language used in many communication theories.

The language of a theory becomes particularly important in identifying the context, application, and focus of the theory. Communication scholar, John Greene (2008) provides this advice, "A good place to start in seeking to understand a theory is to determine what phenomena the theory seeks to address or illuminate. In other words, what was the theorist trying to explain? (p. 25)." People develop theories as they apply to specific phenomena, issues, questions, topics, puzzles, concerns, or what is referred to as a **domain**. Domains set the boundaries for what is included in and excluded from a theory. At the broadest level, the theories covered within this book deal with the domain of human interaction—the what, how, and/or why's of people interacting with one another.

Benefits of Studying Human Communication Theory: “What will I gain from learning about theories?”

We hope that by now we have convinced you that theories aren't as intimidating as you might have thought. But, you might still be wondering “What's in it for me? If you're reading this book because it's required, then your interest might be to simply gain enough understanding to succeed on exams and papers. But, believe it or not, there are some very practical and valuable outcomes from learning about communication theories.

Understanding the World The most obvious reason for studying theories is the practical application that comes from a better understanding of your world. Studying the theories in this text can increase your understanding of what happens when people connect through communication whether it's in face-to-face interpersonal relationships, while working in an

organization, through watching a speech on TV, browsing Twitter, or interacting through social media. Studying the theories in this text will also increase your ability to predict and ultimately manage the world around you. That might sound like a rather bold claim, but a good theory can help you make strategic decisions and accomplish your goals. For example, imagine one of your friends who is a good student tells you about failing a recent exam. Face Theory (one of the theories you'll be reading about) explains that the low exam grade is a threat to your friend's face (being seen as a good student). Knowing this, you can help repair or restore your friend's face by reminding your friend of his or her academic successes and how recent family problems really cut into his or her study time, thus restoring his or her image (face) as a strong student.

Saving Time Studying the theories in this text reduces the time and effort needed to develop your own theories to manage your world—you can just adopt established theories. These adopted theories will generally be more accurate than your own since they have been analyzed, tested, and refined by many people. For example, how do you explain the development of romantic relationships? There are five theories in this text that provide some explanation about what happens as relationships develop which provide a foundation for understanding and managing your romances..

When you read and learn about each theory there are two major issues you might ask yourself: first, “Is this theory really relevant to my life,” and second, “Does the theory really explain or predict what it claims to—is it valid?” Each theory chapter is geared to provide you with enough information to help you answer these questions for yourself. As you read about each theory, take time to see how well it applies to your interactions, relationships, and experiences. Then, if the theory seems to fit, you've saved yourself the trouble of trying to figure it out yourself. If it doesn't fit, consider becoming a communication scholar so you can develop a theory that does fit and share it with others 😊.

Increasing Awareness The theories in this text focus on phenomenon and variables that affect your life that you probably aren't even aware of. While everyone knew that apples fell from trees, it wasn't until Sir Isaac Newton coined the term “gravity” that people gained insight into how objects of mass affected each other. After studying the theories you are likely to see the world differently, specifically the world of communication. Communication scholar, Leslie Baxter (2011) argues that theory can be sensitizing and useful in leading us to see things in a different way. And the more completely you see the world around you, the greater your ability to effectively manage that world.

Creating a Foundation for Learning Understanding the theories in this text provides a foundation for any other communication courses you might take. Communication courses often rely on theories for examining communication contexts or developing communication skills and strategies. Success in those courses is often easier when you have already established a fundamental understanding of relevant theories. You will find it easier to make sense out of any communication research studies you read if you already grasp the theories on which those studies are based.

Becoming a Better Thinker Finally, reading about, reflecting on, and evaluating communication theories enhances your cognitive abilities. Pushing yourself to think about

abstract concepts can be daunting, but it is an important step in the development of higher order thinking. While your personal theories have probably developed in a somewhat haphazard manner, the theories you will read about have been carefully thought out and often tested, critiqued, revised, and expanded. Mulling over these theories, examining their merits and weaknesses, and evaluating their validity and utility is a way for you to further your critical thinking ability as well as your skills in developing solutions to complex problems.

Here's a sample of how your mind might have to stretch a bit. Social theorist, George Herbert Mead, used the term gestures to refer to a stimuli that one animal creates that affects another animal. Read the following excerpt from Mead's book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), and see what sense you can make of it. Here's a hint to deciphering the excerpt: substitute the notion of gestures as significant symbols with "words and language."

Only in terms of gestures as significant symbols is the existence of mind or intelligence possible; for only in terms of gestures which are significant symbols can thinking—which is simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with him[her]self by means of such gestures—takes place. The internalization in our experience of the external conversations of gestures which we carry on with other individuals in the social process is the essence of thinking; and the gestures thus internalized are significant symbols because they have the same meanings for all individual members of the given society or social group... (p. 47)

If you have the chance, ask a friend or roommate to read the Mead excerpt and then share what each of you understand Mead to have meant. How did your interpretations compare? Did you gain insights from the other person? There are a lot of ideas infused into that one paragraph that are discussed in Chapter 6 on symbolic interactionism. In essence, Mead is talking about the fact that our mind and thoughts are the products of the words and symbols we learn through interactions with others who attach similar meanings to similar symbols. One of our goals in this text is to try and take the words and works of theorists like Mead and explain them in a way that you can both comprehend and relate to.

Epistemology: "How do we know what we know?"

Okay, we know the word "epistemology" doesn't crop up very often (if ever) in your everyday conversations, but the concepts the term represent are fundamental to theory building.

Epistemology is primarily that branch of philosophy concerned with the question of "What is knowledge?" or to put it another way, "How do we know what we know?" Since theory is rooted in knowledge, the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired is important for understanding issues surrounding the development and validity of any given theory. If the knowledge on which a theory is built is flawed, then obviously the theory is also flawed.

Within epistemology the largest focus is on what is labeled, **propositional knowledge**. Statements that begin with "I know that..." and "We know that..." are propositional. Think of some possible responses you can give: "I know that _____." Suppose you thought "I know that I'm 21 years old." But how do you really KNOW that? A lot of what we think we know is based on faith in others. You believe you were born 21 years ago because that's what

you've been told (we don't have firsthand knowledge of our actual birth, even if we have seen photos or video). But maybe you've been lied to and your birth certificate is a fake, or the dates on the photos or video are bogus. So, how can you really KNOW you're 21?

Epistemology is sometimes referred to as a theory of knowledge for which scholars have developed alternative explanations for how humans come to acquire knowledge. These explanations fall into a variety of classifications, but we're going to just focus on the two which represent general but contrasting approaches: empiricism and rationalism.

Empiricism and Rationalism: “What do your senses tell you?” “What does your mind tell you?”

Essentially, **empiricists** theorize that knowledge is based on what we can sense or observe; if we can't sense something, then it doesn't exist. Empiricists would have to see ghosts to believe they exist. So for empiricists, the senses are the basis for what we know and believe, and knowledge exists outside of the human mind waiting to be discovered through experiences and observations; this is called *a posteriori* knowledge (after the experience). So seeing and testing a dinosaur fossil convinces us that dinosaurs existed but what we observe is after the actual dinosaur's existence.

Rationalists, on the other hand, theorize that knowledge comes from within us, that it is intuitive, reasoned and inductively based, and even innate. In this way, knowledge exists before we sense or observe it; this is called *a priori* knowledge (before the experience). You know there will be a tomorrow (barring an apocalypse) even though there is no way to observe it before it happens. Rationalists don't ignore what we sense, they simply contend that without innate categories and reasoning what we sense would have no meaning.

Here's an oversimplified example to illustrate how these two schools of thought operate. Suppose a friend holds a book upright between the two of you and places a hand behind the book so that you can't see the hand. Does the hand exist? From a purely empirical perspective, the answer would be “No”, but you could walk around to look behind the book and “see” that the hand still existed. However, the rationalists would say “Yes”, because it exists in their minds whether they continue to actually see it or not. Which school of thought is correct? This takes us back to the basic epistemological question—how do we know what we know?

Empiricists create theories that specify relationships among concepts that can be tested and confirmed or disconfirmed. The empiricists tend to adhere to the scientific method, which uses experimental designs in which variables are controlled or manipulated (independent variables) and other variables measured (dependent variables). This quantitative methodology relies primarily on statistical analysis of data to establish significant relationships and findings. Empiricists focus on sampling a given population so they can generalize the results to a given population or broad set of events.

Rationalists create theories that can be applied to specific situations and examined for how well they explain or don't explain what happened, but they aren't as concerned with generalizing to a larger population. Rationalists rely on qualitative methods such as personal

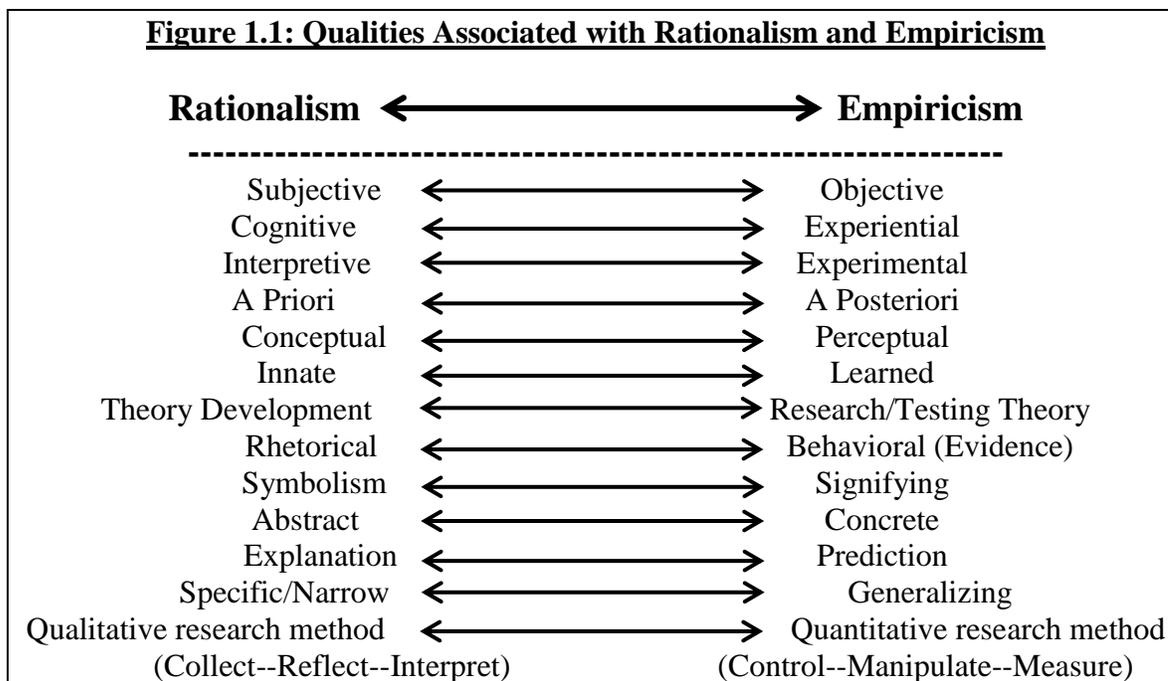
narratives (e.g., autobiographies or diaries). People’s personal stories regarding some issue might be collected and those stories studied for common themes or issues. For example, one such study had 202 respondents provide narratives about their experiences in online romantic relationships (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Those narratives were methodically examined, and several recurring themes were identified such as the experience of intense emotions and the need for caution.

Another qualitative method used by rationalists is ethnography. It involves collecting artifacts, reflecting on those artifacts, and identifying underlying principles or themes. Imagine at the end of the day you were to pick up all the garbage left in a classroom at your school, spread it out, and sort it into some sort of meaningful piles. What interpretation could you make about the students and activity that happened in that room based on the garbage? Now suppose you collected the garbage in an office and examined and sorted it. What differences might you find between the office garbage and the classroom (pop cans versus Starbucks cups; candy wrappers versus pastries, etc.)? What conclusions can you draw (the cognitive process) about the difference in the occupants and their activities? Ethnographers often follow a similar process of examining artifacts.

Qualitative and quantitative methods represent a continuum, which means that in practice, the methods researchers use often involve varying degrees of both. In the examples just discussed you can see how qualitative methods might be used to identify themes based on interpreting artifacts or narratives and then quantitative methods used to survey larger samples about the relative application of those themes. Similarly, sometimes a quantitatively based generalization doesn’t actually fit a specific situation, in which case, a more qualitative method might be applied to determine what is unique about the exception or anomaly.

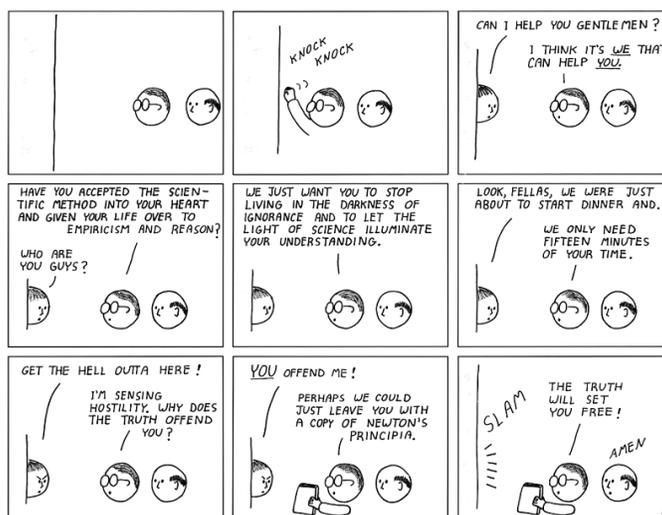
The underlying contention between rationalists and empiricists and their corresponding quantitative and qualitative methods involves which method is better at getting to the “truth.” Do experiments get at truth better than analyses of narratives? The scientific method is held as an approach that produces “objective or universal truth,” while the interpretive tends more toward “subjective or situated truth,” which means that something might be true for a particular person on a particular day (situated truth), but not be true for all people for all days (universal truth).

Rather than thinking of these two approaches as either/or, we’re better off thinking of them as endpoints on an epistemological continuum. A given theorist or researcher is unlikely to be purely a rationalist or empiricist but rather be some blend of the two such as a rational empiricist or an empirical rationalist. A rational empiricist might start to develop a theory in her or his mind and then create an empirical study to validate it. An empirical rationalist might collect data and then develop a theory that goes beyond what was actually observed. Discussion sections at the end of research reports often include conjectures by researchers that go beyond the data. Figure 1.1 provides a quick overview of the major qualities that are associated with rationalism and empiricism. Each quality reflects a continuum with any given approach to understanding knowledge falling somewhere between the two poles.



The history, debate, and evolution of these perspectives is complex and daunting, and (you can breathe a sigh of relief) won't be covered in this text. But, what you should take from the above discussion is that theorists' epistemological perspectives impact the way they look at the world and thus affects their theories and their choice of methods to validate those theories.

At this point you should have a good idea of what we mean by theory and why it's important to study. But, we haven't covered everything you should know about theory yet (sorry☹). In the next chapter, we discuss how theories are developed, including your own personal theories. To help you understand how theories differ in their value and strength, we cover eleven qualities that are associated with theories such as the qualities of standing the test of time and accuracy of predictions.



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Chapter Summary

Defining Theory: “So, what is a theory anyway?”

- A theory is an abstract, symbolic representation of reality that strives to identify and specify the relationships among the assorted elements that make up the theory.
- Theories that specify observable, measurable, and manipulatable variables and their relationships are called structural or objective theories.
- Interpretive or subjective theories focus on interpretation of the world.

Goals of Theory: “What is the point of a theory?”

- The goals of theories are to help us explain and understand the world, provide a basis for predicting and controlling our world, and to initiate or facilitate social change.

Types of Theories

- Theories fall into two categories: structural/objective and interpretive/subjective.
- Structural theories are grounded in observable, measurable, and manipulatable variables.
- Interpretive theories are drawn more from how people see and experience the world; their interpretation of the world.

Construction and Presentation of Theories: “What role does language play in theory?”

- While some theories are expressed as mathematical equations or logical models, most use everyday language to describe concepts and principles, which leaves them open to ambiguity and disagreement.

Benefits of Studying Human Communication Theory: “How will learning about this benefit me?”

- Studying theories increases your understanding of the communication world around you, saves you time and energy because you don’t have to develop your own personal theories, increases your awareness of variables affecting a given communication situation, provides a foundation for your further study of communication, and enhances your higher order thinking by forcing you to grapple with abstract concepts.

Epistemology: “How do we know what we know?”

- Epistemology deals with issues related to how we know what we know.

Empiricism and Rationalism: “What do your senses tell you?” “What does your mind tell you?”

- Empiricists see knowledge as something outside of the human mind waiting to be discovered through observation, measurement, and experience. They rely on objective quantitative methods (ones that use statistical analysis of measured data in an experimental situation where variables are controlled and manipulated) to provide concrete, generalizable predictions.
- Rationalists see knowledge as generated within people’s own minds through intuition and inductive reasoning. They rely on subjective qualitative methods to provide explanation and interpretation of the world. They use such methods as collection and analysis of narratives or artifacts used as the foundation for ethnographic study.

Key Terms and Concepts

Theory

Structural or objective theories

Interpretive or subjective theories

Goals of a theory: explain, understand, predict, control, social change, critique

Domain

Objectivity

Subjectivity

Empiricists

Rationalists

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