

## CHAPTER 3

# *WEIGHING THE WORDS*

### Outline

- I. Introduction
  - A. Not all theories are equally effective.
  - B. The utility of a theory may be judged by applying the appropriate criteria used by behavioral scientists and a wide range of interpretive scholars to weigh the theories of their colleagues.
- II. A test case: Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory.
  - A. Bormann maintains that the sharing of group fantasies creates symbolic convergence.
  - B. During symbolic convergence, fantasy chain reactions build community or group consciousness.
  - C. Fantasy themes voiced across many groups create a rhetorical vision.
- III. What makes an objective theory good?
  - A. Scientific standard 1: Explanation of the data.
    - 1. A good theory makes sense out of disturbing situations or draws order out of chaos.
    - 2. It focuses attention on crucial variables and away from irrelevant data.
    - 3. It explains what is happening and *why*.
    - 4. It explains both the process and the results.
  - B. Scientific standard 2: Prediction of future events. Prediction in physical science is more accurate than in social science, where it is based on probability.
  - C. Scientific standard 3: Relative simplicity. The rule of parsimony dictates that we accept the simpler explanation over the more complex.
  - D. Scientific standard 4: Hypotheses that can be tested. If there is no way to prove a theory false, then the assumption that it's true is mere guesswork.
  - E. Scientific standard 5: Practical utility.
    - 1. A good objective theory provides increased control.
    - 2. Don't consider a theory useless until you understand it.
- IV. What makes an interpretive theory good?
  - A. Interpretive standard 1: New understanding of people.
    - 1. Rhetorical theory elucidates texts.
    - 2. It helps critics clarify complex communication.
    - 3. It suggests universal patterns of symbol usage.
    - 4. Whereas science wants objective explanation, humanism desires subjective understanding.
    - 5. Klaus Krippendorff's Self-Referential Imperative: Include yourself as a constituent of your own construction.

- B. Interpretive standard 2: Clarification of values.
    - 1. Theorists acknowledge their own values.
    - 2. They seek to unmask the ideology behind messages.
    - 3. Many theorists value individual liberty and equality. Krippendorff's Ethical Imperative: Grant others that occur in your construction the same autonomy you practice constructing them.
  - C. Interpretive standard 3: Aesthetic appeal.
    - 1. A theory's form can be as captivating as its content.
    - 2. As an artist, the critic sparks appreciation.
  - D. Interpretive standard 4: A community of agreement. A theory must have widespread scrutiny and usage.
  - E. Interpretive standard 5: Reform of society.
    - 1. Theory challenges cultural assumptions.
    - 2. It generates alternatives for social action.
- V. Balancing the scale: similar weights and measures.
- A. An explanation creates understanding by answering, Why?
  - B. Both prediction and value clarification look to the future.
  - C. Simplicity has aesthetic appeal.
  - D. Hypothesis testing is a way of achieving a community of agreement.
  - E. Theories that reform are practical.
  - F. These parallels suggest important linkages between scientists and interpretive scholars. Many communication theorists are grounded somewhere between the two positions.
  - G. Although all theories featured in this book have merit, most have weaknesses elucidated by the standards set forth in this chapter.

## Key Names and Terms

### *Symbolic Convergence*

Developed by Ernest Bormann, this theory posits that through the process of sharing common fantasies, a collection of individuals is transformed into a cohesive group. This theory draws from both the scientific and humanistic traditions.

### *Fantasy Theme Analysis*

The study of the way in which groups use creative and imaginative interpretations of events to fulfill psychological and rhetorical needs. Fantasy theme analysis is the research method of Borman's symbolic convergence theory.

### *Rhetorical Vision*

According to symbolic convergence theory, a collective view of social reality that develops when the same set of fantasy themes is voiced across many group situations.

### *Falsifiability*

Karl Popper's requirement that a good scientific theory must be able to be proven false.

### *Karl Popper*

The British philosopher responsible for the concept of falsifiability. He suggested that theories are nets cast to catch what we call the world.

### *Rule of Parsimony*

Relative simplicity; given two plausible explanations for the same event, scientists favor the less complicated one.

### *Klaus Krippendorff*

A theorist from the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania who developed the Self-Referential Imperative and the Ethical Imperative for humanistic communication research.

### *Self-Referential Imperative*

The premise that theorists must include themselves as participants in their own constructions; they affect and are affected by their ideas.

### *Ethical Imperative*

The premise that theorists in their constructions must grant people they study the same autonomy they grant themselves.

## Principal Changes

Most obviously, this chapter was originally Chapter Two. In addition, several examples have been updated.

## Suggestions for Discussion

In discussion, you may wish to complicate the scientific standard of relative simplicity a bit. Although the rule of parsimony (students may have also been introduced to this concept as “Occam’s razor”) dictates that we favor the simplest explanation of a given phenomenon (41-42), it is also the case that complex phenomena often require intricate theories. Therefore, expecting simplicity is not always useful (to invoke another scientific standard for good theory). An economics professor of mine once compared theory building to magic. Some magicians pull big rabbits out of small hats, and some produce small, refined rabbits from big hats. Bormann’s symbolic convergence—which provides a great deal of bang for the theoretical buck (even though its power to predict is limited)—fits the former category, it seems to us. Who would not be impressed by such necromancy? Sometimes, though, it’s the refined rabbits we want, and we’re willing to reach into big hats to produce them. And in fact, as theories build on one another, the move toward intricacy is inevitable. Anxiety-uncertainty management theory, which we’ll meet in Chapter 30, exemplifies this second category. Gudykunst strives for the fine distinctions and precision that may be missing from a construct such as symbolic convergence, and thus he must develop extensive theoretical machinery. His magic may not be bold, but it is useful, nonetheless. The key to evaluating the worth of a big hat theory is to determine whether or not the added explanatory and predictive potential merits the increased complexity. If it does not, then the theory is not valuable.

When we teach this chapter, we pause very carefully over the objective explanation/subjective understanding dichotomy that Griffin establishes between scientific and interpretive theory. (It is located in his discussion of “Interpretive Standard 1,” page 44.) We want students to understand that the “Self-Referential Imperative” does not exclude the importance of developing understandings of texts that ring true to other readers. In fact, we would go so far as to suggest that the most enduring rhetorical criticism has a tendency to blur

the line between explanation and understanding. Similarly, one can feel “the personal thrill of discovery and creation” (45) in the accounts of science given us by many of our colleagues in the sciences, including Watson and Raup, whose books we mention in the *Further Resources* section of our treatment of Chapter One. To continue this line of discussion, ask students for an objective definition of “utility,” which Griffin lists as a principal criterion of good scientific theory. What they’ll find is that you cannot talk about this standard without calling upon subjective values.

To help solidify the standards presented in the chapter, it may be useful to choose one or two well-known theoretical systems such as capitalism, Marxism, Darwinism, creationism, or Freudianism and run them through the twin criteria for scientific and interpretive theories. In particular, discuss falsifiability with respect to these theories; students may better understand Popper’s concept if they consider, for example, why Marxism and creationism are not falsifiable—yet Darwinism is. Discredited theories such as Lamarckian evolution, spontaneous generation, or Ptolemaic geocentrism may be particularly illuminating.

We can’t help but pause for a moment on interpretive standard #3, “aesthetic appeal,” which Griffin discusses on page 46. Although it’s true that many interpretive scholars view their work as art, or at least as artistic (and we applaud this belief), many do not. Unfortunately ponderous prose is prevalent in the theorizing of many of our best and brightest interpretive scholars. Postmodernism, with its disdain for clarity, simplicity, and directness and its skepticism about meaning and certain knowledge, may be partly to blame.

You may be interested to know that in *Understanding Communication Theory* (which we introduced in the Preface to this manual), Cragan and Shields present symbolic convergence theory as one of the six “general theories” of the discipline. Why is it that Griffin has demoted it to a sample theory for this introductory chapter?

## Sample Application Log

Robyn

I always wondered if the three of us were sort of sick. Whenever Jenn, Lynn and I would get together and hang out, we would always talk about the past. I don’t know why, but all the funny things we had shared in the past always seemed so much more exciting than anything we were doing in the present. When one of us would start to share a common yarn, the other two would immediately pick up the fantasy and create a chain reaction of energy. We had a million fantasy themes that we would re-create through time. I always thought that we were pretty weird, but Bormann declares that we are just natural symbol users and storytellers who voice fantasies and create cohesiveness.

## Exercises and Activities

If you want to explore further fantasy themes and symbolic convergence, you may wish to extend the example Griffin presents of the Montana ranchers (38-39). To do so, have your students imagine the conversation their counterparts, the federal agents, might have about

them. Picture Mr. Clayton Rogers having dinner with a group of his fellow federal agents in an upscale Washington restaurant. Taking advantage of a lull in the conversation, he begins to tell the story of his encounter with a fiercely independent Montana rancher. "As I introduced myself at his door," Rogers says, "I noticed a sign over his gun rack declaring, 'Shoot first, ask questions later.'" How might that line create a fantasy chain reaction and symbolic convergence? What sort of rhetorical vision could eventually emerge from such conversations?

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he works through the ten standards of objective and interpretative theory building (explanation of data or understanding of people, prediction of future or clarification of values, and so forth) systematically with his students, making sure that they understand both five-part sets and the relationship between them. Then he asks each student to indicate which of the ten standards is *indispensable* to good theory building. Next, if they could add a second essential standard, which would it be? Are the first and second essential standards they chose from the same tradition, or have the students drawn one standard from each set? As the students indicate their choices, Griffin tallies the cumulative results on the board so that the students can visualize the class trend.

To help explicate Bormann's theory of symbolic convergence, Griffin asks his students to discuss examples of group fantasies that they have helped create or perhaps witnessed. To what extent did the fantasies chain out? Was symbolic convergence attained or perhaps even a rhetorical vision? Such discussion helps to clarify and vivify what might otherwise be fairly abstract concepts.

When Ed McDaniel teaches this chapter, he employs the following exercise to apply the criteria for evaluating theories:

To supplement information in the text, I bring in news articles relating to the never-ending debate on teaching evolution and creationism in the public schools. I then engage the class in a discussion and ask them to determine what evolution and creation are based on. This helps demonstrate that a good theory must meet a number of empirical criteria, unlike a strictly faith-based concept.

The film *Moonlight and Valentino*, which centers on a tight circle of women whose fantasy chains feature a hunksome house painter, cleverly exemplifies symbolic convergence.

## Further Resources

For state-of-the-art symbolic convergence theory, see Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "An Expansion of the Rhetorical Vision Component of the Symbolic Convergence Theory: The Cold War Paradigm Case," *Communication Monographs* 63 (1996): 1-28. For further discussion of Bormann's work, see Sonja Foss's fifth chapter on "fantasy-theme criticism" in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1996). In the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, see Bormann, "Fantasy Theme Analysis," 258-60; and Gary Layne Hatch, "Bormann," 82-83. For a provocative book-length application of Bormann's notion of symbolic convergence to the culture of a small group, see Moya Ann Ball, *Vietnam-on-the-Potomac* (Westport: Praeger,

1992). A condensed version of this study is "Vacillating About Vietnam: Secrecy, Duplicity, and Confusion in the Communication of President Kennedy and His Advisors," *Group Communication in Context: Studies of Natural Groups*, ed. Lawrence R. Frey (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 181-98. We say more about Ball's work in our treatment of Griffin's introduction to group decision making. For further application of Bormann's theory, see Susan Schultz, "Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, and Angelina Grimké: Symbolic Convergence and a Nascent Rhetorical Vision," *Communication Quarterly* 44 (Winter 1996): 14-28; Thomas G. Endres, "Father-Daughter Dramas: A Q-Investigation of Rhetorical Visions," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 25 (November 1997): 317-40; Margaret Duffy, "High Stakes: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Selling of Riverboat Gambling in Iowa," *Southern Communication Journal* 62 (Winter 1997): 117-32; Linda Putnam, Shirley A. Van Hoeven, and Connie A. Bullis, "The Role of Rituals and Fantasy Themes in Teachers' Bargaining," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 55 (1991): 85-103; Christee Lucas Lesch, "Observing Theory in Practice: Sustaining Consciousness in a Coven," *Group Communication in Context: Studies of Natural Groups*, 57-82; Mara B. Adelman and Lawrence Frey, *The Fragile Community: Living Together with AIDS* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997), 41; Ernest Bormann, Ellen Bormann, and Kathleen C. Harty, "Using Symbolic Convergence Theory and Focus Group Interviews to Develop Communication Designed to Stop Teenage Use of Tobacco," *Innovations in Group Facilitation: Applications in Natural Settings*, ed. Lawrence Frey (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1995), 200-32; John Cragan and Donald Shields, "Using SCT-Based Focus Group Interviews to Do Applied Communication Research," *Innovations in Group Facilitation: Applications in Natural Settings*, 233-56. Donald Shields marshals symbolic convergence theory to attack a recent form of communication scholarship in "Symbolic Convergence and Special Communication Theories: Sensing and Examining Dis/Enchantment with the Theoretical Robustness of Critical Autoethnography," *Communication Monographs* 67 (March 2000): 392-421.

## Sample Examination Questions

These are not included in the online version of the Instructor's Manual.