Chapter Two: Understanding Small Group Communication Theory

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 asserts that the theory-building process is a fundamental aspect of all human communication. Through theories—both formal and informal—we explain our surroundings, predict probable outcomes of behavior, and control our actions accordingly. It is claimed that the explanatory and predictive functions of theories make them very practical, thus providing a rationale for the study of theory in small group communication.

Several theoretical perspectives for studying small group communication are discussed, including systems theory, social exchange theory, symbolic convergence theory, structuration theory, and functional theory. The impact of new technologies on the structuring of group communication is addressed in relationship to structuration theory.

Small groups are presented in this chapter as highly complex entities in which the interrelationships among a number of individual and group variables must be seen to obtain a thorough understanding. Some of the central variables are a rationale and a framework through which the content of the textbook may be viewed.

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, the students will be able to:

2.1 Explain how people use theory to make sense of themselves and the world

2.2 Create a systemic explanation using theory

2.3 Relate theory to the sense-making function of small group communication

2.4 Differentiate between major theories of group communication

2.5 Apply theory to group communication

Chapter Outline

2.1: The Nature of Theory and the Theory-Building Process

2.1.1: Theory and Self-Concept

2.1.2: Theory and Group Communication

2.2: Theory as a Practical Approach to Group Communication

2.2.1: Explanatory Function

2.2.2: Predictive Function

- Process Theories
- Method Theories

2.3: Communication as Sense-Making in Small Groups

2.3.1: The Complexity of Getting to Know Someone

2.3.2: The Complexity of Small Group Relationships

2.4: Theoretical Perspectives for the Study of Group Communication

2.4.1: Systems Theory

- Openness to Environment
- Interdependence
- Input Variables
- Process Variables
- Output Variables
- Synergy
- Entropy
- Equifinality

2.4.2: Social Exchange Theory

2.4.3: Symbolic Convergence Theory

- Fantasy
- Fantasy Theme
- Fantasy Chain

2.4.4: Structuration Theory

2.4.5: Functional Theory

2.5: A Model of Small Group Communication

2.5.1: Parts of a Descriptive Model

- Communication
- Leadership
- Goals
- Norms
- Roles
- Cohesiveness
- Situation

2.5.2: Tips for Using Theory

Discussion Questions

1. As a class, critique the theoretical model of group communication presented in the chapter. What does the model do for us? What does it fail to do?

2. In small groups, have students discuss the value of theories. What purpose do they serve? How might they be useful? Do we really need theories and why? If not, why?

3. Students should make a list of informal theories they have about an ordinary day. (e.g., Professor X is boring; I am afraid of speaking in class, etc.) They should then discuss on what basis they formulated these theories. How does this theory affect their behavior?

4. As a class or in small groups, have students share their attitudes toward committee work. How do these attitudes affect behavior in small groups?

5. How do each of the theories discussed in this chapter affect students' perception of small group communication?

   a. Systems theory
   b. Social exchange theory
   c. Symbolic convergence theory
   d. Structuration theory
   e. Functional theory

Study Guide Activities

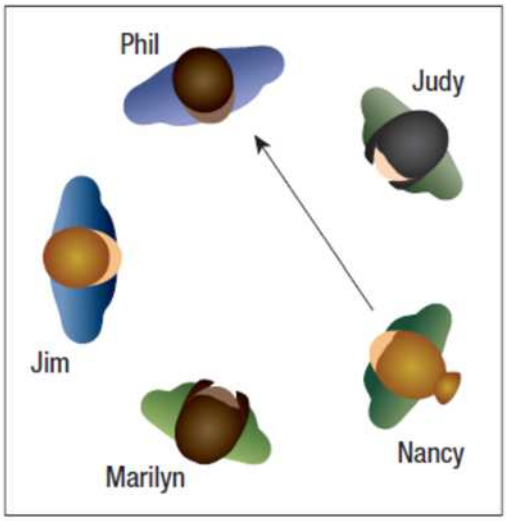
In this chapter, a visit to the grocery store was used to demonstrate both the ordinariness and the practicality of theories. Choose another everyday phenomenon—perhaps begin with an explanation of why you're enrolled in this course—and then build a systematic explanation. What predictions can you make based on your theory?

Review the section in this chapter on structuration theory. Then, take a few minutes to reflect on rules that govern your behavior in groups. Express four or five of these rules as if…then (condition/action) statements (e.g., "if someone in the group addresses me directly, then it is my responsibility to respond"). Share and discuss your rules with others in your group. See if others in your group agree with your list. How do these rules contribute or detract from effective group communication?

1. Build a Simple Interaction Diagram

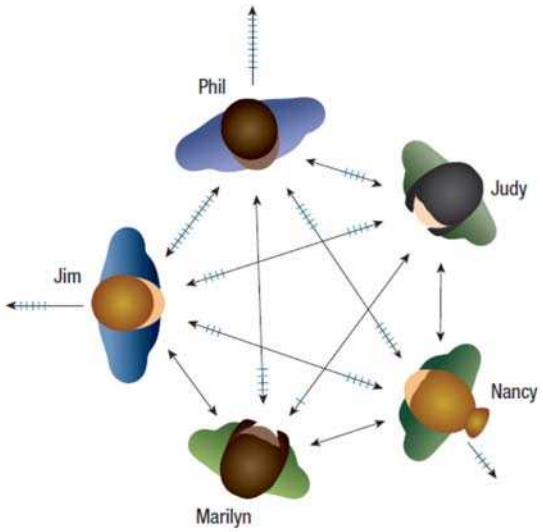
Figure 2.1 presented a descriptive model that graphically depicts the interrelationships of various group communication concepts. The authors selected this particular graphic format because it is in the form of an observation tool known as an interaction diagram, which is a means of identifying and recording the frequency and direction of group interactions—observing communication networks in groups. An interaction diagram can reveal who is talking to whom and how often. You can identify the most active and the most reticent group members. You can discover patterns in the relationships that form among group members. This is how to make one:

1. Draw a circle for each member of the group, arranging your circles in the same relative positions as those in which group members are seated (see the interaction diagram below).
2. Refer to the interaction diagram. If Nancy were to open the meeting by asking Phil for the minutes from the last meeting, you would draw an arrow from Nancy's circle to Phil's, indicating the direction and destination of Nancy's communication. Each subsequent remark Nancy makes to Phil would then be indicated by a short crossmark at the base of the arrow.
3. Repeat this process each time someone in the group addresses someone else. If Phil were to direct his reading of the minutes to Nancy, you would put an arrowhead at the other end of the line that connects the two.



4. Indicate communication addressed to the group as a whole with a line pointing away from the center of the group. Again, note subsequent remarks with crossmarks.

Below is an example of how a completed interaction diagram might look. If you take a few moments to examine the diagram, which incorporates a category system, you will see some patterns. For example, Phil seems to be the most vocal member of the group. Furthermore, most members address their remarks to Phil, which suggests that they perceive Phil to be the group's leader. The frequency with which Phil addresses the group as a whole supports this observation. The amount of communication between Phil and Jim indicates a strong relationship there, perhaps that of a leader and his "lieutenant."



The interaction diagram is an easy way to describe graphically the interaction patterns in a group. Also, this method of observation can be used without seriously disrupting the regular workings of the group. By updating the interaction diagram during several

meetings, you can observe changes in group interaction.

Experiential Exercises

1. Create Your Own Group Communication Model!

Goals

To familiarize students with the five group communication theories discussed in the text.

To help students understand the practical application of the theory.

To aid students in their understanding of the function of communication models.

Group Size

Divide class into five groups

Time Required

Sixty minutes

Materials Needed

Distribute a copy of each of the theories from the text book, pencils, colored markers, and poster board.

Procedure

Have the class count from one to five. Group 1 should be assigned the systems theory; group 2— the social exchange theory; group 3—the symbolic convergence theory; group 4—the structuration theory; group 5—the functional theory.

1. Students will then construct a model to illustrate the theory. It is important that students incorporate the variables of small group communication outlined in the model of group communication discussed in Chapter 2. Students may also add any other variables that they deem important. Allow thirty minutes for this portion of the exercise. Allow twenty minutes to create model.
2. After all groups have completed their models, post the models in front of the classroom. Each group will explain the model to the rest of the class. Allow class members to ask questions about each model. This phase should last about thirty minutes for all groups. The professor can give input about each theory.
3. After all groups have finished presenting their models, conduct a general discussion concerning the five different theories of communication and how they will directly apply to their small group experience both in the class and outside of the class.

2. Theories Are Relative

Goals

The purpose of small group communication theory is to explain and predict small group phenomena. This exercise attempts to relate the theories discussed in this chapter (i.e., systems theory, social exchange theory, symbolic convergence theory, structuration

theory, and functional theory) to specific group communication situations so that students may more clearly understand how theory explains everyday communication.

Procedures

1. Break the class into groups of five members.
2. Have each group discuss the theories identified in this chapter until all feel that they understand the central ideas in each.
3. Then, consider the following five situations:
   - An engineering research and development team for an automobile manufacturer
   - A jury
   - A group of students working on a class project
   - A family
   - The case study in the chapter

   What characteristics make each situation unique?
4. Relate the theories to the five situations. Do certain theories seem better suited to one than another? Why or why not? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each theory?
5. Relate your findings to the group communication model shown in Figure 2.1, the constellation of variables in small group communication. What aspects of the model relate most clearly each situation and theory you have discussed?
6. What conclusions can you derive from these analyses? Report these conclusions to the class.

3. Understanding Systems Theory Through Metaphors

Goal

To have groups generate their own metaphor to better understand systems theory.

Time Required

Thirty to Forty minutes

Procedure

Similar to how the book illustrates systems theory using the human body, each group will generate their own metaphor for the theory. Students will complete the phrase "Systems Theory is…" with a new analogy that, not only gives the theory a comparison, but also explains each component as well. Encourage students to be sure that, whatever metaphor they choose (car, plant, etc.), that they can explain how each component of systems theory fits into their example as well. One representative from each group will explain their new metaphor to the class so that all groups may hear memorable examples.