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Weighing the Words

of Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory

In Chapter 1 we looked at two distinct approaches to communication theory—objective and interpretive. Because the work of social scientists and interpreters is so different, they often have trouble understanding and valuing their counterparts' scholarship. This workplace tension parallels the struggle between ranchers and farmers in Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway musical *Oklahoma!* One song calls for understanding and cooperation:

The farmer and the cowman should be friends,
 Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends,
 One man likes to push a plough,
 The other likes to chase a cow,
 But that's no reason why they cain't be friends.¹

The problem, of course, is that farmers and ranchers want to push a plough or chase a cow over the same piece of land. Daily disputes over fences, water, and government grants make friendship tough. The same can be said of the turf wars that are common between objective and interpretive scholars. Differences in ways of knowing, views of human nature, values, goals of theory building, and methods of research seem to ensure tension and misunderstanding.

Friendly attitudes between empiricists and critical interpreters are particularly hard to come by when each group insists on applying its own standards of judgment to the work of the other group. As a first-time reader of communication theory, you could easily get sucked in to making the same mistake. If you've had training in the scientific method and judge the value of every communication theory by whether or not it predicts human behavior, you'll automatically reject 50 percent of the theories presented in this book. On the other hand, if you've been steeped in the humanities and expect every theory to help unmask the meaning of a text, you'll easily dismiss the other half.

Regardless of which approach you favor, not all objective or interpretive communication theories are equally good. For each type, some are better than others. Like moviegoers watching one of Clint Eastwood's early westerns, you'll want a way to separate the good, the bad, and the ugly. Since I've in-

cluded theories originating in both the social sciences and the humanities, you need to have two separate lenses through which to view their respective claims. This chapter offers that pair of bifocals. I hope by the time you finish you'll be on friendly terms with the separate criteria that behavioral scientists and a wide range of interpretive scholars use to weigh the works and words of their colleagues.

A TEST CASE: ERNEST BORMANN'S SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY

University of Minnesota professor Ernest Bormann developed a theory of communication that is unusual in that it has both interpretive and objective roots. The project started as a method of rhetorical criticism, a long-honored tradition in humanistic study. Bormann called his method *fantasy theme analysis*, and he used it to study a type of communication that takes place in small groups.

Bormann soon discovered a link between the dramatic imagery members use when they talk to each other and the degree of group consciousness and solidarity. In standard social science fashion, he defined his terms and then crafted a cause-and-effect hypothesis, which he now believes holds for all groups, regardless of where they meet, who they are, or why they get together. Simply stated, Bormann's symbolic convergence theory maintains that "the sharing of group fantasies creates symbolic convergence."²

Some people restrict the term *fantasy* to children's literature, sexual desire, or things "not true." Bormann, however, uses the word to refer to "the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need."³ In a small group setting, this definition includes any reference to events in the group's past, speculation about what might happen in the future, and any talk about the world outside the group. The term does not cover comments about actions taking place "here and now" within the group. Fantasies are expressed in the form of stories, jokes, metaphors, and other imaginative language that interprets or places a "spin" on familiar events. Voiced fantasies become vehicles to share common experiences and invest them with an emotional tone.

Picture a group of cattlemen having a regular Saturday morning breakfast in a Great Falls, Montana, cafe. One rancher tells a story about a man carrying a briefcase who knocked on his door: "Hello, Mr. Clayton Rogers," the stranger says. "I'm from the federal government and I'm here to help you."

Whether or not the event really happened is not the issue. Symbolic convergence theory is concerned with the group's response. Does the punch line fall flat, or is it greeted with a burst of derisive laughter? Do others lose their self-consciousness and vie to tell their own tales of bureaucratic interference? Bormann says that we can spot a *fantasy chain reaction* by increased energy within the group, an upbeat tempo in the conversation, and especially through a common response to the imagery.

Most fantasies don't chain out; they fall on deaf ears. But when one catches fire within the group, the same *fantasy theme* runs throughout the multiple

narratives—à la *Seinfeld*. Perhaps at the Saturday breakfast the hero of every man's account is a crafty rancher, while the villain of each story is a bumbling federal agent. Or maybe each image reflects a collective suspicion of a Washington conspiracy to take away grazing rights. Whatever the theme, Bormann believes that by sharing common fantasies, a collection of individuals is transformed into a cohesive group. He calls the process *symbolic convergence*.

Through symbolic convergence, individuals build a sense of community or a group consciousness. References to *I*, *me*, and *mine* give way to pronouns that assume a joint venture—*we*, *us*, and *ours*. Groups draw even closer when they share a cluster of fantasy themes. Along with a distrust of Washington, the Saturday morning breakfast group might express disdain for "interfering gun-control lobbyists" and "tree-hugging environmentalists." They may also talk nostalgically about the "Old West," where rugged individuals took care of their own problems. When the same set of integrated fantasy themes is voiced repeatedly across many groups, Bormann describes people's view of social reality as a *rhetorical vision*.

The concept of rhetorical vision moves symbolic convergence theory beyond its original small group context. A coherent rhetorical vision can be spread and reinforced through recurring media messages. Often an entire master script is triggered by a single code word, slogan, or nonverbal symbol. For example, the mere mention of "Waco," "Ruby Ridge," or the "Endangered Species Act" may evoke the ranchers' collective hostility toward the federal government on any Saturday morning. Bormann is convinced that symbolic convergence explains the meeting-of-minds and sense of communion taking place among the men at that breakfast table in a Montana cafe.

Now that you have a thumbnail sketch of fantasy themes and symbolic convergence, let's take a look at the distinct criteria that objective or interpretive scholars use to judge the quality of Bormann's theory. We'll start with the wisdom of science.

WHAT MAKES AN OBJECTIVE THEORY GOOD?

Symbolic convergence theory is credible because it fulfills what a leading text on social research methods calls the "twin objectives of scientific knowledge." The theory explains the past and present, and it predicts the future. Scientists of all kinds agree on three other criteria for a good theory as well—simplicity, testability, and usefulness. The rest of this section takes a closer look at these five requirements.

Scientific Standard 1: Explanation of the Data

A good objective theory explains an event or behavior. British philosopher Karl Popper writes that "Theories are nets cast to catch what we call the world."⁴ Scientific philosopher Abraham Kaplan says that theory is a way of making sense out of a disturbing situation.⁵ A good objective theory brings clarity to an otherwise jumbled situation; it draws order out of chaos.

Group discussions are often chaotic. Even though a leader urges members to "speak one at a time" and "stick to the point," participants will often interrupt each other and go off on verbal tangents. According to symbolic convergence theory, graphic digressions and boisterous talk aren't signs of a flawed process. Rather, they are evidence that the group is coming together. As Bormann says, "The explanatory power of the fantasy chain analysis lies in its ability to account for the development, evolution, and decay of dramas that catch up groups of people and change behavior."⁶

A good theory synthesizes the data, focuses our attention on what's crucial, and helps us ignore that which makes little difference. Bormann's theory organizes these verbal inputs into a coherent whole. His focus on the cohesive effect of chained fantasy goes beyond the raw data. It explains what's happening.

A good theory also explains *why*. When Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, the Depression-era bandit replied, "'Cuz that's where they keep the money." It's a great line, but as a theory of motivation, it lacks explanatory power. There's nothing in the words that casts light on the internal processes or environmental forces that led Sutton to crack a safe while others tried to crack the stock market.

Symbolic convergence explains the process as well as the result. Bormann suggests that group members often voice fantasies as a way to relieve tensions within the group.⁷ The atmosphere may be charged with interpersonal conflict, the group as a whole might be frustrated by its inability to come up with a good solution, or perhaps individuals import their own brand of stress as each walks in the door. Whatever the reason, a joke, story, or vivid analogy provides welcome relief. Most members really don't care how fantasy chains work; they're just thankful to have a pleasant diversion. In like manner, you can be a skillful public speaker without understanding why the audience likes what you say. But when you take a course in communication *theory*, you've lost your amateur status. The reason *why* something happens becomes as important as the fact that it does.

Scientific Standard 2: Prediction of Future Events

A good objective theory predicts what will happen. Prediction is possible only when dealing with things we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste again and again. As we notice things happening over and over in the same way, we begin to speak of universal laws. In the realm of the physical sciences, we are seldom embarrassed. Objects don't have a choice about how to behave.

The social sciences are another matter. While theories about human behavior often cast their predictions in cause-and-effect terms, a certain humility on the part of the theorist is advisable. Even the best theory may only be able to talk in terms of probability and tendencies—not absolute certainty. That's the kind of soft predictive power Bormann claims for symbolic convergence theory.

Bormann believes that rhetorical visions contain motives that prompt or impel true believers to act out a fantasy. Consider what we now know about Timothy McVeigh, the man who was convicted of bombing the federal building in

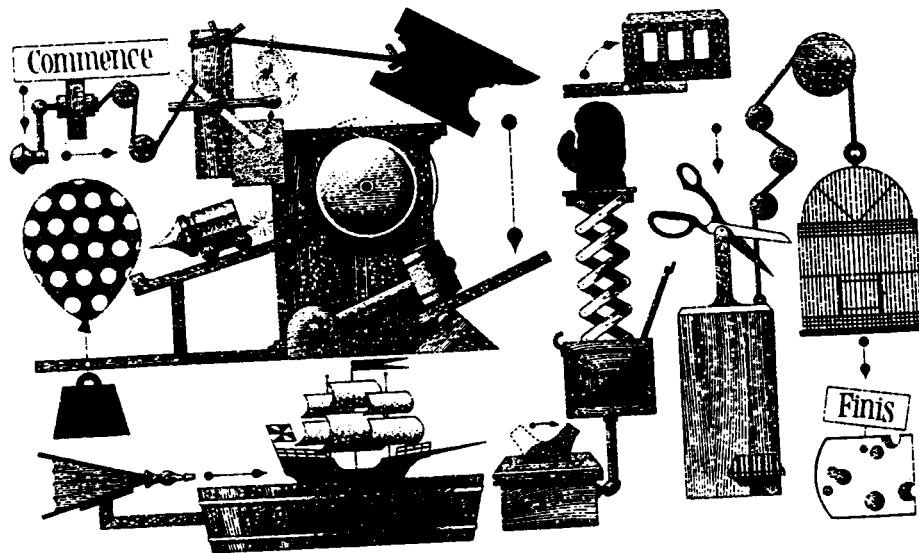
Oklahoma City. McVeigh's antigovernment passions were reinforced by militia group members convinced that they must prepare for inevitable armed conflict with federal agents. McVeigh was also an avid reader of *The Turner Diaries*,⁸ a hate novel that glorifies white supremacist violence against minority groups and the federal government. According to symbolic convergence theory, when we spot people who are steeped in fantasies that exalt violence, we can anticipate the act itself.⁹ Knowing who, when, and where is much less certain.

Bormann has had little success predicting when a fantasy will capture a group's imagination. Members with rhetorical skill seem to have a better chance of providing the spark, but there's no guarantee that their words will ignite others. Even when a skillful imagemaker sparks a fantasy chain, he or she has little control over where the conversation will go. Fantasy chains seem to have a life of their own. You can see why most social scientists want more predictive power than Bormann's theory offers.

Scientific Standard 3: Relative Simplicity

A good objective theory is as simple as possible. A few decades ago a cartoonist named Rube Goldberg made people laugh by sketching plans for complicated machines that performed simple tasks. His "better mousetrap" went through a sequence of fifteen mechanical steps that were triggered by turning a crank and ended with a bird cage dropping over a cheese-eating mouse.

Goldberg's designs were funny because the machines were so needlessly complex. That can happen with scientific explanations as well; it's easy to get caught up in the grandeur of a theoretical construction. "Why say it simply when you can say it elaborately?" Yet the rule of parsimony states that given



two plausible explanations for the same event, we should accept the simpler version.

College professors often criticize others for offering simple solutions to complex questions. It's a jungle out there, and we're quick to pounce on those who reduce the world's complexity to a simplistic "me Tarzan, you Jane." But every so often a few explorers will cut through the underbrush and clear a straight path to a truth, which they announce in simple, direct, concise terms. Consider Bormann's summary statement, cited earlier: "The sharing of group fantasies creates symbolic convergence."¹⁰ Simplicity is a virtue of his theory.

Scientific Standard 4: Hypotheses That Can Be Tested

A good objective theory is testable. If a prediction is wrong, there ought to be a way to demonstrate the error. Karl Popper called this requirement "falsifiability" and saw it as the defining feature of scientific theory.¹¹ Some theories are so broad or sloppily stated that it's impossible to imagine empirical results that could disprove their hypotheses. But if there is no way to prove a theory false, then the claim that it's true seems hollow. A boyhood example may help illustrate this point.

When I was 12 years old, I had a friend named Mike. We spent many hours shooting baskets in his driveway. The backboard was mounted on an old-fashioned, single-car garage whose double doors opened outward like the doors on a cabinet. In order to avoid crashing into them on a drive for a lay-up, we'd open the doors during play. But since the doors would only swing through a 90-degree arc, they extended about four feet onto the court along the baseline.

One day Mike announced that he'd developed a "never-miss" shot. He took the ball at the top of the free-throw circle, drove toward the basket, then cut to the right corner. When he got to the baseline, he took a fade-away jump shot, blindly arching the ball over the top of the big door. I was greatly impressed as the ball swished through the net. When he boasted that he never missed, I challenged him to do it again—which he did. But a third attempt was an air ball—it completely missed the rim.

Before I could make the kind of bratty comment junior high boys make, he quickly told me that the attempt had not been his never-miss shot. He claimed to have slipped as he cut to the right, and therefore jumped from the wrong place. Grabbing the ball, he drove behind the door and again launched a blind arching shot. Swish. *That*, he assured me, was his never-miss shot.

I knew something was wrong. I soon figured out that any missed attempt was, by definition, not the fabled never-miss shot. When the ball went in, however, Mike heralded the success as added evidence of 100 percent accuracy. I now know that I could have called his bluff by removing the net from the basket so that he couldn't hear whether the shot went through. This would have forced him to declare from behind the door whether or not the attempt was of the never-miss variety. But as long as I played by his rules, there was no way to

disprove his claim. Unfortunately, some theories are stated in a similar fashion. They are presented in a way that makes it impossible to prove them false. They shy away from the put-up-or-shut-up standard—they aren't testable.

Symbolic convergence theory is vulnerable at this point. Since Bormann claims that shared fantasies create cohesive groups, an empirical researcher's first task is to measure these variables separately. This is not as easy as it sounds. Because most groups already have a history, it's difficult to know whether a fantasy chain is a trigger for new solidarity among members or merely a reflection of a group consciousness that's already in place. Indeed, leading advocates of the theory seem to confound the two variables, often treating the presence of a fantasy chain as proof of group cohesiveness. Note, for example, how the two concepts merge in the following passage: "For a fantasy theme to chain out, a saga to exist, a symbolic cue to convey meaning, or a rhetorical vision to evolve, there must be a shared group consciousness within a rhetorical community."¹² You can see why many outside observers consider symbolic convergence theory a never-miss shot—it's not falsifiable.

Scientific Standard 5: Practical Utility

A good objective theory is useful. Since a fundamental goal of any science is increased control, scientific theories should offer practical help. Symbolic convergence theory does this well. Bormann and his followers have used fantasy theme analysis to advise small groups, improve organizational communication, conduct market research, and assess public opinion. To illustrate the pragmatic value of the methodology, John Cragan (Illinois State University) and Donald Shields (Indiana State University) require students in their applied research classes to analyze the way that high school seniors talk about college.

Symbolic convergence theory claims that most rhetorical visions employ one of three competing master analogues—a righteous vision, a social vision, or a pragmatic vision. That's what Cragan's and Shields' students typically find.¹³ Potential applicants who embrace a *righteous* vision are interested in a school's academic excellence, the reputation of its faculty, and special programs that it offers. Those who adopt a *social* vision see college as a way to get away from home, meet new friends, and join others in a variety of social activities. High school seniors who buy into a *pragmatic* vision want a marketable degree that will help them get a good job. Knowledge of these distinct visions could help admissions officers develop a strategy to appeal to graduates who would most appreciate the character of their campus.

In the introduction to this book I cited Lewin's claim that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. This final standard of utility suggests that scientific theories that aren't practical aren't good. As you read about theorists who work from an objective perspective, let usefulness be a crucial test of each theory. If a theory offers helpful advice, act on it; if it offers no pragmatic insight for your life, discard it. There is one caution, however. Most of us can be a bit lazy or shortsighted. We have a tendency to consider as unimportant anything

that's hard to grasp or can't be applied to our lives right now. Before dismissing a theory as irrelevant, make certain you understand it and consider how others have made use of its advice. I'll try to do my part by presenting each theory as clearly as possible and suggesting possible applications.

WHAT MAKES AN INTERPRETIVE THEORY GOOD?

Unlike scientists, humanists don't have an agreed-on five-point set of criteria for evaluating their theories. But even though there is no universally approved model for interpretive theories, humanists and other interpreters repeatedly urge that theories should accomplish some or all of the following functions: create understanding, identify values, inspire aesthetic appreciation, stimulate agreement, and reform society. The rest of this chapter examines these oft-mentioned ideals.

Interpretive Standard 1: New Understanding of People

Interpretive scholarship is good when it offers fresh insight into the human condition. Working out of a humanistic tradition, rhetorical critics seek to gain new understanding by analyzing the activity that they regard as uniquely human—symbolic interaction. Suppose that an interpretive scholar wanted to study communication of politicians whose reputations are on the line. He or she would start by selecting one or more texts—Richard Nixon's "Checkers" speech, Ted Kennedy's explanation of the Chappiquiddick tragedy, transcripts of presidential news conferences and White House communiqués on the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, or any other text that could shed light on political crisis communication.

After verifying that the electronic or print record was accurate, the critic would do a "close reading" of the text. This is a fine-tooth-comb analysis of words, images, and ideas. The critic would also examine the historical *context* that influenced the creation of the message and the way the audience interpreted it.

When rhetorical theory is good, it helps the critic understand the text. For example, the neo-Aristotelian classification of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals might help the critic account for the dramatic political impact of Nixon's last-ditch television address. A Burkean analysis of Kennedy's account of Mary Jo Kopechne's drowning offers insight as to why the Senator placed so much emphasis on the scene of the accident. Or Michael Pacanowsky's cultural approach to organizations could suggest that Clinton's responses to the press are a product of a White House culture that has its own rites, rituals, and myths. You'll read about these theories in the pages to come. If they help you make sense out of complex communication, then they fulfill the first interpretive standard for a good theory.

Some critics fear that by relying on rhetorical theory, we will read our preconceived ideas into the text rather than letting the words speak for themselves.

They suggest there are times when we should "just say no" to theory. But Bormann notes that rhetorical theory works best when it suggests universal patterns of symbol-using: "A powerful explanatory structure is what makes a work of humanistic scholarship live on through time."¹⁴

Bormann's call for a powerful explanatory structure in humanistic theory is akin to the behavioral scientist's insistence that theory explains why people do what they do. But the two notions are slightly different. Science wants an objective explanation; humanism desires subjective understanding. Klaus Krippendorff of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania urges us to recognize that we are both the cause and the consequence of what we observe. His *self-referential imperative* for building theory states: "Include yourself as a constituent of your own construction."¹⁵

To the extent that Krippendorff's imperative means abandoning a detached and dispassionate stance, Bormann's fantasy theme analysis is self-referential. In his preface to *The Force of Fantasy*, the theorist describes the personal thrill of discovery and creation:

Mulling over the materials for my book in the history of religious and reform speaking at the same time as I was caught up in these exciting new developments in small group communication resulted in one of those exhilarating moments of illumination when it seemed clear to me that the force of fantasy is just as strong in mass communication as it is in small group interaction. Merging the discoveries in group fantasies with recent developments in rhetorical criticism provided me with my critical method—the fantasy theme analysis of rhetorical visions.¹⁶

This is not the account of a detached observer. However, inasmuch as the self-referential imperative calls for explicit recognition that scholars affect and are affected by the communication they study, fantasy theme analysis remains a spectator sport.

Interpretive Standard 2: Clarification of Values

A good interpretive theory brings people's values into the open. The theorist readily acknowledges his or her own ethical stance and actively seeks to unmask the ideology behind the message under scrutiny. Since fantasy theme analysis is based on the assumption that meaning, emotion, and motive for action are manifest in the content of a message, value clarification is a particular strength of symbolic convergence theory.

Not all interpretivists occupy the same moral ground, but there are core values most of them share. For example, humanists usually place a high premium on individual liberty. Krippendorff wants to make sure that scholars' drive for personal freedom extends to the people they study. His *ethical imperative* directs the theorist to "Grant others that occur in your construction the same autonomy you practice constructing them."¹⁷ When theorists follow this rule, monologue gives way to dialogue.

Many interpretive scholars value equality as highly as they do freedom.

This commitment leads to a continual examination of the power relationships inherent in all communication. Critical theorists, in particular, insist that scholars can no longer remain ethically detached from the people they are studying or from the political and economic implications of their work. "There is no safe harbor in which researchers can avoid the power structure."¹⁸

As for symbolic convergence theory, Bormann's method of analyzing group fantasies seems to be ethically neutral. However, his commentary on nineteenth-century romantic pragmatism suggests that he is a man who applauds restoring the American dream of freedom, equal opportunity, hard work, and moral decency.¹⁹ His readers would probably conclude that he'd be more in sympathy with the rhetorical vision of the African-American Million Man March on Washington to pledge self-reliance than with the Rambo fantasies of the white Montana militia.

Interpretive Standard 3: Aesthetic Appeal

Good interpretive scholarship doesn't just consider issues of artistry and aesthetics—it embodies them. Art looks at old material in a new way. The *form* of a communication theory can capture the imagination of a reader just as much as the content. According to University of Washington professor Barbara Warnick, a rhetorical critic can fill one or more of four roles—artist, analyst, audience, and advocate.²⁰ As an artist, the critic's job is to spark appreciation.

Symbolic convergence writing sometimes fails the test of artistry. Readers of one journal article have to plough through a ponderous sentence that runs over two hundred words!²¹ Yet if Bormann and his followers don't write with the lucidity or wit of an essayist for the *Atlantic* or the *New Yorker*, they aren't afraid to support their key ideas with the words of people who do. For example, Bormann underscores the importance of fantasy with Robert Frost's observation that "society can never think things out; it has to see them acted out by actors."²²

Even when symbolic convergence prose seems heavy going, I'm intrigued by the descriptions of fantasy themes that emerge from Harley-Davidson bikers, unwed mothers, and from *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. An analysis of AA literature reveals a rhetorical vision that is best characterized as "Fetching Good Out of Evil," a felicitous expression introduced by Bormann.²³ It only takes a few such apt turns of phrase to heighten the aesthetic appeal of the theory.

Interpretive Standard 4: A Community of Agreement

We can identify a good interpretive theory by the amount of support it generates within a community of like-minded scholars. Interpretation of meaning is subjective, but whether or not the interpreter's case is reasonable is decided ultimately by others in the field. Their acceptance or rejection is an objective fact that helps verify or vilify the theorists' judgment.

John Stewart is the editor of *Bridges, Not Walls*—a collection of humanistic articles on interpersonal communication. As the book has progressed through seven editions, Stewart's judgment to keep, drop, or add each new theoretical work was made possible by the fact that humanistic scholarship is "not a solitary enterprise carried out in a vacuum." It is instead, he says, "the effort of a community of scholars who routinely subject their findings to the scrutiny of editors, referees, and readers."²⁴

A rhetorical theory can't meet the community of agreement standard unless it becomes the subject of widespread analysis. Sometimes rhetoricians address their critical arguments only to an audience of "true believers" who are already committed to the author's approach. Former NCA president David Zarefsky warns that rhetorical validity can be established only when a work is debated in the broad marketplace of ideas. For this rhetorical critic from Northwestern University, sound arguments differ from unsound ones in that

sound arguments are addressed to the general audience of critical readers, not just to the adherents of a particular "school" or perspective. . . . They open their own reasoning process to scrutiny.²⁵

When it comes to widespread scrutiny, Bormann has done it right. He's published his ideas in major journals that are open to rhetorical scholarship—the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Communication Theory*, and *Journal of Communication* among them. While not all communication scholars find value in his theory, the majority do. When confronted by critics, Bormann has responded publicly and convincingly.²⁶

Fantasy theme analysis has become a standard method of symbolic study. Based on the human nature assumption that people are symbol-users in general and storytellers in particular, the approach squares neatly with several other theories in this book.²⁷ As you can see, the community of agreement that supports Bormann's theory is both wide and articulate.

Interpretive Standard 5: Reform of Society

A good interpretive theory often generates change. Contrary to the notion that we can dismiss social philosophy as "mere rhetoric," the critical interpreter is a reformer who can have an impact on society. Kenneth Gergen, a Swarthmore College social psychologist, states that theory has

the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted," and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action.²⁸

Fantasy theme analysis reliably documents rhetorical visions that contain motives to go public, gain converts, and use the mass media to spread their truth. Yet symbolic convergence theory itself has no reform agenda for society. Scholars trying to identify fantasy chains would rather probe than preach.

Bormann is trying to achieve a more modest change. As I stressed in Chapter 1, social scientists and humanists in our discipline have typically gone their separate ways. Bormann would like it otherwise. He's crafted a theory that understands fantasy theme analysis as "a liberal and humanizing art, a scholarly endeavor which aims to illuminate the human condition."²⁹ Definitely humanistic. But his claim that sharing fantasies (whatever they are) tends to draw people together (whoever they are) makes symbolic convergence theory a general theory of communication. Definitely scientific. Inasmuch as Bormann's joint venture between interpretive and objective study is a model that encourages rhetoricians and empiricists to work in harmony, it meets the reform agenda criterion.

BALANCING THE SCALE: SIMILAR WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Figure 2.1 summarizes the standards that I suggest you use as you evaluate a communication theory. You'll find that I often refer to these requirements in the critique sections at the end of each chapter. As you might expect, the thirty-two theories presented in this book stack up rather well against these criteria (otherwise I wouldn't have picked them in the first place). But constructing theory is difficult, and most theories have an Achilles' heel that makes them vulnerable to criticism. All of the theorists you'll read about readily admit a need for fine tuning, and some even call for major overhauls.

Throughout this chapter I have urged using separate measures for weighing the merits of objective and interpretive theories. Yet a side-by-side comparison of the two lists in Figure 2.1 suggests that the standards used by scientists and interpretive scholars may not be as different as first thought. Consider the parallels at each of the five points:

1. *Explanation* tries to answer the question, Why? So does *understanding*.
2. *Prediction* and *value clarification* both look to the future. The first suggests what *will* happen; the second, what *ought* to happen.
3. For many students of theory, *simplicity* has *aesthetic appeal*.

Scientific Theory	Interpretive Theory
Explanation of Data	Understanding of People
Prediction of Future	Clarification of Values
Relative Simplicity	Aesthetic Appeal
Testable Hypotheses	Community of Agreement
Practical Utility	Reform of Society

FIGURE 2.1 Summary of Criteria for Evaluating Communication Theory

4. *Testing hypotheses* is a way of achieving a *community of agreement*.
5. A theory that actually *reforms* part of the world is certainly *practical*.

For teachers and students of communication, the parallels cited above suggest that scientists and interpreters should be friends. In fact, many communication theorists are grounded somewhere in between these two positions. So in Chapter 3, "Mapping the Territory," I describe and locate seven traditions that make up the field of communication theory and plot their relative affinity for objective or interpretive thinking.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Ernest Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory* has both *objective* and *interpretive* features. Does it seem to be a better scientific or interpretive theory? Why?
2. How can we call a scientific theory good if it is *capable of being proved wrong*?
3. How can we decide when a *rhetorical critic* provides a *reasonable interpretation*?
4. Any theory involves some trade-offs; no theory can meet every standard of quality equally well. Of the ten criteria discussed, which is most important to you? Which one is least important?

A SECOND LOOK

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