

Module 2 Unit 4

This is a **REQUIRED READING**.

WikiBooks (2009). Introduction to Communication Theory/Evaluating Theory (web page). Retrieved from http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Introduction_to_Communication_Theory/Evaluating_Theory. [3 p.]

Introduction to Communication Theory/Evaluating Theory

What makes a theory "good"? Six criteria might be said to be properties of a strong theory. (The terminology presented here is drawn from Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, but a similar set of criteria are widely accepted both within and outside the field of communication.)

Theoretical Scope

How general is the theory? That is, how widely applicable is it? In most cases, a theory that may only be applied within a fairly narrow set of circumstances is not considered as useful as a theory that encompasses a very wide range of communicative interactions. The ideal, of course, is a theory that succinctly explains the nature of human communication as a whole.

Appropriateness

Theories are often evaluated based upon how well their epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions relate to the issue or question being explained. If a theory recapitulates its assumptions (if it is tautological), it is not an effective theory.

Heuristic value

Some theories suggest the ways in which further research may be conducted. By presenting an explanatory model, the theory generates questions or hypotheses that can be operationalized relatively easily. In practical terms, the success of a theory may rest on how readily other researchers may continue to do fruitful work in reaction or support.

Validity

It may seem obvious that for a theory to be good, it must also be valid. Validity refers to the degree to which the theory accurately represents the true state of the world. Are the arguments internally consistent and are its predictions and claims derived logically from its assumptions? Many also require that theories be falsifiable; that is, theories that present predictions that--if they prove to be incorrect--invalidate the theory. The absence of such questions significantly reduces the value of the theory, since a theory that cannot be proven false (perhaps) cannot be shown to be accurate, either.

Parsimony

The law of parsimony (Occam's razor) dictates that a theory should provide the simplest possible (viable) explanation for a phenomenon. Others suggest that good theory exhibits an aesthetic quality, that a good theory is beautiful or natural. That it leads to an "Aha!" moment in which an explanation feels as if it fits.

Openness

Theories, perhaps paradoxically, should not exist to the absolute exclusion of other theories. Theory should not be dogma: it should encourage and provide both for skepticism and should--to whatever degree possible--be compatible with other accepted theory.

It is important to note that a theory is not "true," or "false" (despite the above discussion of falsifiability), but rather better or worse at explaining the causes of a particular event. Especially within the social sciences, we may find several different theories that each explain a phenomenon in useful ways. There is value in being able to use theories as "lenses" through which you can understand communication, and through which you can understand the world *together* with other scholars.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Research goals will differ between individual scientists and project demands. There are many studies based on research is accomplished through interviews and social participation with members of cultural groups (see: Ethnomethodology). This type of research is known as qualitative research.. It is the task of the author to convey the connection between their research subjects and thesis. Their goal is to describe a phenomenon, to portray a situation so as to enlighten the readers of their work. They stand in stark contrast to quantitative researchers.

The quantitative researcher may eschew the lax methodology of qualitative research. Where qualitative research often demands emotional significance and an engaging rhetorical style, quantitative research is often sterile and to the point. The quantitative researcher may also participate within the speech community of their subject, but they will do so in a very disciplined fashion. They will be on the look for data with which they can record. They may for instance, interview a person, taking note of personal affects and vocalizations. A sociolinguist for example, will record every utterance of the vowel "r". They'll compile the data and compare it with data from a distinct economic class or a similar group. By keeping a count of every "r" spoken with an accent, for instance, the sociolinguist is able to write a quantitative analysis. They are able to identify patterns that may suggest a useful correlation. Accents for instance will often identify which members of a larger speech community a person identifies with. Predictability is a strong criteria for a quantitative researcher. Thus this type of research is often used in marketing studies. Marketing companies want to know how to effect their audience, and to what degree. Though it is futile to predict marketing effects on a single individual, it is quite possible to predict an overall effect within a large group. Marketers will use various post-positivist studies to enhance the effects of marketing exposure. "Sex sells" can be proven and studied through quantitative means.

These two methods are by no means mutually exclusive. Though they are two different routes they can both be used to further a hypothesis or field of inquiry. Media studies and Semiotics are two strong implimentations of both techniques. They may demand a researcher to wade through thousands of pieces of media to develop a cogent thesis. The researcher may take note of every sexually suggestive image broadcast within Primetime television viewing hours for a given month. This could be compared against other markets to develop a claim. But the researcher could also view single popular series, and again develop a claim as to the motivation for such content. The field of news-entertainment is often criticized for its choice of scare-stories (see: Cultivation Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory). Only after a series of strong studies, both qualitative and quantitative, can a researcher authoritatively claim that news-entertainment does indeed market trauma, by egregious coverage of violence and catastrophe (if it bleeds it leads). Only then can a researcher credibly claim that such coverage has an effect on television consumers. Only at that point can a study be carried out to identify what that effect is.

Griffin in his textbook, "A First Look at Communication Theory", provides a small chart meant to aid in the evaluation of quantitative and qualitative theory.

Scientific (Quantitative) Theory	Interpretive (Qualitative) 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

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