

Weighing the Words

of Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory

In Chapter 2 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 can'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 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 included 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

Fantasy

The creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need; depicts events outside of the group or in its past or future.

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.

For example, University of Kentucky communication professor Alan DeSantis asks us to picture a group of Kentucky-born, middle-aged white guys sitting around a cigar store smoking hand-rolled imported cigars. As the topic shifts from college basketball to the risk of smoking, the owner tells the story of a heart surgeon who came into the shop after having been on duty for 36 hours. After lighting up, the doctor blew out a big mouthful of smoke and said, "This is the most relaxed I have felt in days. Now how can that be bad for you?"⁴

Whether or not the doctor really said this isn't the issue. Symbolic convergence theory is concerned with the group's response to the tale. Does the account fall flat or do these regular patrons chuckle in appreciation, nod in agreement, or say "You've got it!" to punctuate the narrative? Do others lose their self-consciousness and vie to tell their own stories that dismiss the harm of cigar smoking, a pastime that they consider a benign hobby? Bormann says that we can spot a *fantasy chain reaction* by increased energy within the group, by 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 the imagination of members within the group, the same *fantasy theme* will run throughout multiple narratives—à la *Seinfeld*. Perhaps the hero of every man's account is a famous cigar smoker who lived into old age without ill effects—George Burns, Winston Churchill, Fidel Castro, or Milton Berle. Or maybe each

image reflects a meddling government bureaucrat who wants to limit their right to enjoy a cigar in a public place. 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*.

Symbolic convergence
The linguistic process by which group members develop a sense of community or closeness; cohesiveness, unity, solidarity.

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 members share a cluster of fantasy themes. Along with examples of octogenarian smokers, group stories might focus on the difference between cigars and cigarettes, safety in moderation, inconsistent scientific findings concerning cancer, the greater risks of everyday living, and the health benefit of relaxation that comes from smoking a good cigar. 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*.

Rhetorical vision
A composite drama that catches up multiple groups of people into a common symbolic reality.

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. This occurred in the United States soon after *Cigar Aficionado* magazine was launched in late 1992. The glossy periodical lauded the sophisticated pleasure of smoking premium tobacco, while repeatedly elaborating the cluster of fantasy themes mentioned above. The following year cigar smoking in the country increased 50 percent.⁵

The entire master script of a rhetorical vision can be triggered by a single code word, slogan, or nonverbal symbol. In the Kentucky smoke shop where these fantasy themes were voiced, any mention of criticism of cigar smoking from family or friends was enough to set off a new round of protest among store regulars. Their emotional reaction was captured on a T-shirt sold at the store that satirized the Surgeon General's cautionary statement: "Warning—Harassing me about my smoking can be hazardous to your health."⁶ Bormann is convinced that symbolic convergence explains the meeting-of-minds and sense of communion taking place among the men.

Now that you have a thumbnail sketch of fantasy themes, symbolic convergence, and rhetorical visions, 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. Social scientists of all kinds agree on three additional criteria a theory must meet to be good—*relative simplicity*, *testability*, and *usefulness*. As I discuss the standards, I will use the terms *objective* and *scientific* interchangeably.

Scientific Standard 1: Explanation of the Data

A good objective theory explains an event or human behavior. Philosopher of science Abraham Kaplan says that theory is a way of making sense out of a disturbing situation.⁷ A good objective theory brings clarity to an otherwise jumbled situation; it draws order out of chaos.

The idea of symbolic convergence helps researchers make sense of chaotic group discussion. 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."⁸

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 causal process as well as the result. Bormann suggests that group members often voice fantasies as a way to relieve tensions within the group.⁹ The atmosphere may be charged with interpersonal conflict, the group as a whole may 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.

Of course, most group 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* 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 we are dealing with things we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste over and over. As we repeatedly notice the same things happening in similar situations, we begin to speak of invariable patterns or universal laws. In the realm of the physical sciences, we are seldom embarrassed. Objects don't have a choice about how to respond to a stimulus.

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 be able to talk about people in general, rather than about specific individuals, and these only 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 propel true believers to act out a fantasy. When ethnographer Alan DeSantis first describes the core group of cigar shop patrons, they were experiencing

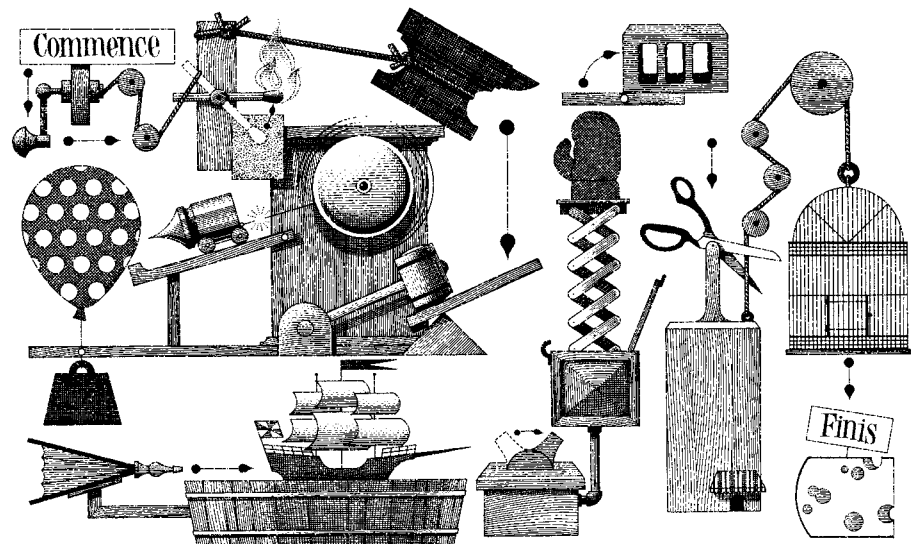
angst at the premature death of their friend Greg. Like the rest of the regulars who sat around the store smoking, Greg had scoffed at the health risks of their practice. Now they were confronted with the sobering fact of his heart attack. Within a week of the funeral, however, his smoking buddies had constructed a verbal collage of images depicting Greg’s stressful lifestyle. The store owner voiced their consensus: “Smoking had nothing to do with his death. He lived, drank and played hard and it took a toll on him at the end.”¹⁰

Bormann has had little success predicting when a fantasy will ignite and trigger a chain reaction. 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 image-maker 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. Yet once a fantasy chain catches fire, the theory predicts that the group will become more cohesive and of one mind, which is exactly what happened in the cigar shop.

Scientific Standard 3: Relative Simplicity

A good objective theory is as simple as possible—no more complex than it has to be. 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 15 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 convoluted. They violated the scientific principle called Occam’s razor, so named because philosopher William of Occam implored theorists to “shave off” any assumptions, variables, or concepts that aren’t really necessary to explain what’s



**Rule of parsimony
(Occam's razor)**

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

going on.¹¹ When you've concentrated on a subject for a long time, 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*—another label for the same principle—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."¹² Simplicity is a virtue of his theory.

Scientific Standard 4: Hypotheses That Can Be Tested

Falsifiability

The requirement that a scientific theory must be stated in a way that it can be tested and disproved if it is indeed wrong.

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.¹³ Some theories are so loosely 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 layup, we'd open the doors during play. But since the doors would only swing through a 90-degree arc, they extended about 4 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 school 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 ballyhooed 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 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."¹⁴ 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 an oft-cited goal of social science is to help people have more control over their daily lives, objective theories should offer practical advice for those facing thorny social situations. 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 (University of Missouri–St. Louis) 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.¹⁵ 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 view 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 are looking for a marketable degree that will help them get a good job. (What was your vision when you entered college?) 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 Chapter 1, I cited Lewin's claim that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. This final standard—one of utility—suggests that social science theories that aren't helpful 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 practical 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 short-sighted. 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, interpretive scholars 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, rhetoricians, critical theorists, 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 often-mentioned ideals.

Interpretive Standard 1: New Understanding of People

Interpretive scholarship is good when it offers fresh insight into the human condition. Rhetorical critics, ethnographers, and other humanistic researchers seek to gain new understanding by analyzing the activity that they regard as uniquely human—symbolic interaction. As opposed to social science theories that attempt to identify communication patterns common to all people, an interpretive scholar typically examines a one-of-a-kind speech community that exhibits a specific language style. By analyzing this group's communication practice, the researcher hopes to develop an understanding of local knowledge or members' unique rules for interaction. Interpretive theories are tools to aid this search for situated meaning. DeSantis' use of Bormann's symbolic convergence theory to understand what's going on among a core group of cigar store regulars is a good example.

Suppose that an interpretive scholar wanted to study the public communication of politicians whose reputations are on the line. He or she would start by selecting one or more texts—George W. Bush's announcement of a troop surge as a last-ditch attempt to quell violence in Iraq, Dick Cheney's belated explanation of shooting a friend on a quail hunt, Bill Clinton's presidential news conferences and White House communiqués on the Monica Lewinsky affair, or any other text that could shed light on political crisis communication.

When an interpretive theory is good, it helps the critic understand the text. For example, a Burkean analysis of Bush's plan to send more troops to Iraq would offer insight as to why he emphasized that he was the sole agent responsible for the decision—"I am the decider." Fisher's narrative paradigm might help the critic understand why Cheney's account of the hunting accident didn't hang together or ring true for most Americans. Or Pacanowsky's cultural approach to organizations could suggest that Clinton's responses to the press revealed a White House culture that had its own rites, rituals, and myths. You'll read about these theories in the pages to come. To the extent that they help you make sense out of complex communication, 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 that 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."¹⁶

Bormann's claim is akin to the behavioral scientist's insistence that theory explains why people do what they do. But the two notions are somewhat different. Science wants an objective explanation; humanism desires subjective under-

Self-referential imperative

Include yourself as a constituent of your own construction.

standing. Klaus Krippendorff of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania urges us to recognize that we, as theorists, 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.”¹⁷

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*, Bormann 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.¹⁸

This is not the account of a detached observer. However, inasmuch as the self-referential imperative implies that scholars can and should affect the communication they study, fantasy theme analysis seems to remain a spectator sport.

Interpretive Standard 2: Clarification of Values

A good interpretive theory brings people’s values into the open. The theorist actively seeks to acknowledge, identify, or 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.

Interpretive theorists should also be willing to reveal their own ethical commitments. As Texas A&M University communication professor Eric Rothenbuhler notes, “Theoretical positions have moral implications, and when we teach them, advocate their use by others, or promote policies based upon them they have moral consequences.”¹⁹ Of course, not all interpretive scholars occupy the same moral ground, but there are core values most of them share. For example, humanists usually place a 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.”²⁰ When theorists follow this rule, scholarly monologue gives way to collegial dialogue, wherein people have a say in what’s said about them. This kind of communal assessment requires reporting multiple voices rather than relying on one or two informants.

Ethical imperative

Grant others that occur in your construction the same autonomy you practice constructing them.

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.”²¹

As for symbolic convergence theory, Bormann's method of analyzing group fantasies seems to be ethically neutral. On the other hand, 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.²² I get the impression 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 ideology of the cigar shop that DeSantis describes as a unique form of civil libertarianism—"Keep your government off my liquor, pornography, guns, and cigars."²³ But in symbolic convergence theory, Bormann isn't explicit about where he stands.

Interpretive Standard 3: Aesthetic Appeal

The way a theorist presents ideas can capture the imagination of a reader just as much as the wisdom and originality of the theory he or she has created. As with any type of communication, both content and style make a difference. Objective theorists are constrained by the standard format for acceptable scientific writing—propositions, hypotheses, operationalized constructs, and the like. But interpretive theorists have more room for creativity, so aesthetic appeal becomes an issue. Although the elegance of a theory is in the eye of the beholder, clarity and artistry seem to be the two qualities necessary to satisfy this aesthetic requirement.

No matter how great the insights the theory contains, if the essay describing them is disorganized, overwritten, or opaque, the theorist's ideas will come across as murky rather than clear. One student of mine who fought through a theorist's monograph filled with esoteric jargon likened the experience to "scuba diving in fudge." Bormann writes better than this. Readers can easily grasp his key concepts of fantasy chains, rhetorical visions, and group cohesiveness. Bormann and his followers may not write with the lucidity or wit of an essayist for *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*, but 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."²⁴

According to University of Washington professor Barbara Warnick, a rhetorical critic can fill one or more of four roles—artist, analyst, audience, and advocate.²⁵ As an artist, the critic's job is to spark appreciation. Along with clarity, it's another way to construct an interpretive theory with aesthetic appeal. By artfully incorporating imagery, metaphor, illustration, and story into the core of the theory, the theorist can make his or her creation come alive for others.

I'm intrigued by Bormann's descriptions of fantasy themes that emerge from Harley-Davidson bikers, unwed mothers, and *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. His analysis of AA literature reveals a rhetorical vision that is best characterized as "Fetching Good Out of Evil," a felicitous expression introduced by Bormann.²⁶ It takes only 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 scholars who are interested and knowledgeable about the same type of communication. Interpretation of meaning is subjective, but

whether 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 a theorist's ideas.

Sometimes interpretive theorists present a controversial thesis to an audience restricted to true believers—those who already agree with the author's position. But an interpretive theory can't meet the community of agreement standard unless it becomes the subject of widespread analysis. For example, former National Communication Association president David Zarefsky warns that rhetorical validity can be established only when a work is debated in the broad marketplace of ideas. For this Northwestern University rhetorical critic, 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.²⁷

John Stewart is the editor of *Bridges, Not Walls*—a collection of humanistic articles on interpersonal communication. As the book has progressed through 10 editions, Stewart's judgment to keep, drop, or add a theoretical work has been made possible by the fact that interpretive 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."²⁸

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—*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.²⁹

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.³⁰ 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 calls for social justice or emancipation 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.³¹

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 prefer to investigate rather than instigate.

Bormann is trying to achieve a more modest change. As was stressed in Chapter 2, social scientists and interpreters in our discipline have typically gone their separate ways. Bormann would like it otherwise. He's crafted a theory that considers fantasy theme analysis "a liberal and humanizing art, a scholarly endeavor which aims to illuminate the human condition."³² Definitely interpretive. On the other hand, his claim that a chain of fantasies (whatever they might be) draws together people (whoever they might be) is a universal prediction. Definitely scientific. Inasmuch as Bormann's joint venture between interpretive and objective approaches to communication is a model that encourages rhetoricians and empiricists to work in harmony, it may occasion a modest reform among the society of scholars who have difficulty appreciating the value of the other group's work.

COMMON GROUND AMONG OBJECTIVE AND INTERPRETIVE CRITERIA

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 3-1 suggests that the standards set by scientists and the evaluative criteria used by interpretive theorists may not be as different as first thought. Work down through the chart line by line and note the conceptual overlap between each pair of terms on the same line. Here are the commonalities that I see:

1. An *explanation* of communication behavior can lead to further *understanding* of people's motivation.
2. Both *prediction* and *value clarification* look to the future. The first suggests what *will* happen; the second, what *ought* to happen.
3. For many students of theory, *simplicity* has an *aesthetic appeal*.
4. *Testing hypotheses* is a way of achieving a *community of agreement*.
5. What could be more *practical* than a theory that *reforms* unjust practices?

For teachers and students of communication, the parallels I've cited suggest that social scientists and interpreters could be friends. At the very least, they should have a familiarity with each other's work. That's one reason I've elected to discuss both objective and interpretive theories in this book.

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 3-1 Summary of Criteria for Evaluating Communication Theory

You'll find that I often refer to these requirements for good theory in the critique sections at the end of each chapter. As you might expect, the 32 theories stack up rather well—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 readily admit a need for fine-tuning their work, and some even call for major overhauls. I encourage you to weigh their words by the standards you think are important before reading my critique at the end of each chapter.

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. All theories involve trade-offs; no theory can meet every standard of quality equally well. Of the 10 criteria discussed, which two or three are most important to you? Which one is least important?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Ernest Bormann, John Cragan, and Donald Shields, "Three Decades of Developing, Grounding, and Using Symbolic Convergence Theory," in *Communication Yearbook 25*, William Gudykunst (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2001, pp. 271–313.

Scientific evaluation: Steven Chaffee, "Thinking About Theory" and Michael Beatty, "Thinking Quantitatively," in *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Michael Salwen and Don Stacks (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1996, pp. 15–32, 33–43.

Interpretive evaluation: Klaus Krippendorff, "On the Ethics of Constructing Communication," in *Rethinking Communication*, Vol. 1, Brenda Dervin, Lawrence Grossberg, Barbara O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella (eds.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1989, pp. 66–96.

Interpretive analysis: Ernest Bormann, "Fantasy Theme Analysis and Rhetorical Theory," in *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 5th ed., James Golden, Goodwin Berquist, and William Coleman (eds.), Kendall/Hunt, Dubuque, IA, 1992, pp. 365–384.

Empirical research: Ernest Bormann, Roxann Knutson, and Karen Musolf, "Why Do People Share Fantasies? An Empirical Investigation of a Basic Tenet of the Symbolic Convergence Communication Theory," *Communication Studies*, Vol. 48, 1997, pp. 254–276.

Applied research: John Cragan and Donald Shields, *Symbolic Theories in Applied Communication Research: Bormann, Burke, and Fisher*, Hampton, Cresskill, NJ, 1995, chapters 2 and 6.

Progress in scientific research: Franklin Boster, "On Making Progress in Communication Science," *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 28, 2002, pp. 473–490.

Validity in interpretive research: David Altheide and John Johnson, "Criteria for Assessing Interpretive Validity in Qualitative Research," in *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998, pp. 283–312.

Cigar shop ethnography: Alan D. DeSantis, "Smoke Screen: An Ethnographic Study of a Cigar Shop's Collective Rationalization," *Health Communication*, Vol. 14, 2002, pp. 167-198.

Critique and response: Ernest Bormann, John Cragan, and Donald Shields, "Defending Symbolic Convergence Theory from an Imaginary Gunn," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 89, 2003, pp. 366–372.

For more discussion of these standards,
go to www.afirstlook.com,
choose the Instructor's Manual link,
then click on "Weighing the Words."