

Introduction

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INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES TO RESEARCH are not new to the field of human communication studies. The study of rhetoric in the United States, dating from its beginnings in the first decade of this century, can be considered a rich history of one kind of interpretive scholarship. However, two recent developments indicate that a new direction of interpretive research in communication studies is underway. First, interpretive research is increasingly being articulated as a third perspective that links the humanities and social sciences, rather than identifying itself as a humanist opposition to scientific investigation. The field of communication experienced lively debates between the so-called Cornell and Midwest schools of speech in the discipline's formative years, representing, respectively, humanistic and scientific approaches to speech (Leff & Procario, 1985, pp. 8–12). The themes of these debates were revisited during the 1970s and early 1980s, a period of intense reflection on the basic theories and paradigms vying for dominance of the field.

No such hegemonic influence emerged. The late 1980s and early 1990s present us with a plurality of approaches to communication, and scholars debate over the advisability of even searching for a unifying perspective. Generally, the focus has shifted to exploring possible links between research interests rather than searching for a universal theoretical model or paradigm. Contemporary interpretive research represents a shift from its early identification with humanistic approaches to an acceptance of methodological and theoretical pluralism. It emphasizes a broader understanding of research as discourse, that is, research as a coordinated process of socially constructed meaning.

A second development that indicates a new direction is the expansion of interpretive research beyond the discipline of rhetoric to include

many areas of communication studies, including mass communication, organizational communication, and most important for this volume, interpersonal communication. Many contemporary fields of study are experiencing what has been called an "interpretive turn" in their scholarship (Hiley, Bohman, & Shusterman, 1991). Interpretive approaches are being developed by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and critics and theorists of the arts, as well as communication researchers.

Bochner (1985) describes three general approaches to interpersonal communication and categorizes research according to general goals rather than methods. According to Bochner, social scientific approaches seek to predict and control, critical perspectives seek to change social conditions, and interpretive approaches seek to enrich understanding. Each paradigm may require different methods or a combination of methods to meet its research goals. Thus, the qualitative and quantitative distinction of years past no longer serves to effectively describe the categories of possibilities for research design. Methods are no longer automatically associated with a single paradigm, and a variety of paradigms inhabit the field of communication studies, differentiated more by goals than by strategies of data collection. The interpretive paradigm can link the social scientific and critical paradigms, if understanding communication events and relationships is held to be prior to the prediction, control, or change of communication. Whether our understanding is implicit or explicit, we begin with an understanding of communication and then attempt to build causal models, develop strategies for uncovering ideologies, or promote the interests of oppressed groups. Interpretive research seeks to explore this prior understanding, and may employ a variety of methods to do so.

Even though interpretive research may be thought of as a means of investigating the discursive underpinnings of all research strategies and paradigms, it does not follow that the goals of interpretive research must be accomplished before other research goals can be fruitfully pursued. In fact, most interpretive researchers argue that understanding is an incommensurable process, although we are capable of distinguishing between more or less adequate interpretations. Thus, interpretive research is not reducible to either scientific or humanistic research, but constitutes a distinct problematic (a context that frames what questions are asked and what problems are considered pertinent).¹

FROM RHETORIC THROUGH SCIENCE TO INTERPRETATION

The study of interpersonal communication has a diverse history regarding its content, methods, and theories. Interpersonal communication

first became the theme of investigation for the communication discipline in the 1930s. The General Semantics of Alfred Korzybski promoted the therapeutic benefits of changing everyday language to reflect the dynamic and noncategorical nature of reality asserted by the new physics. Business schools were exploring gains in productivity that improvements in human relations could bring (Rawlins, 1985, p. 109). These research efforts shifted investigation of communication from public speaking grounded in rhetoric to the study of face-to-face interactions grounded in the social sciences.²

Inquiry into ordinary or everyday conversation began to blossom during the early 1950s. Elwood Murray coined the term *interpersonal communication* in 1953 (Pearce & Foss, 1986, p. 11). According to Murray, "speech should serve as a social integrator; as the tools which enable attention to be obtained, comprehending and understanding to result, [and] experience to be shared . . ." (quoted in Rawlins, 1985, p. 113). Interpersonal communication, according to Rawlins, was seen as a way to support the social order: "health was the stamp of the able communicator . . . but it was a normative, social conception" (p. 114).

During the 1960s scholars in interpersonal communication began to suggest that "good" communication involved something other than adaptation to social goals; instead interpersonal communication should be seen as the path to self-actualization. Pearce and Foss (1986) label this period of interpersonal communication scholarship, "humanistic celebration," stating that the goals of communication were to "improve human existence by reducing the effects of alienation, low self-esteem, competition, and manipulation" (p. 14).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s interpersonal communication shifted its focus again. Humanistic approaches were viewed by some communication scholars as too subjective and individualistic. Therefore, communication scholars began to investigate relational communication, grounding their inquiries within the pragmatic approach inspired by Gregory Bateson and a group of psychotherapists and family therapists known as the Palo Alto Group. This version of a pragmatic approach in interpersonal communication research relied heavily on systems theory and traditional social science methodologies. Social science approaches were evoked as a supposed cure for subjectivist approaches. Interpersonal communication research became dominated by social science methodologies, although interpersonal textbooks continued to reflect a humanist emphasis on experience, the self, alienation, and personal growth.

In 1975, during the Speech Communication Association Convention, the discipline engaged in the "great metatheoretical debate" (Pearce & Foss, 1986, p. 15) and began to discuss and critically evaluate research done within the discipline. Many communication scholars began

to question the feasibility of using physical science methodologies to analyze human behavior. Scholars representing the humanistic tradition continued to draw distinctions between persons and objects and maintained the presence of fundamental differences between the two (Stewart, 1973). Humanists argued that human agents, unlike physical matter, are volitional, reflective, choice-making beings. The result of the paradigm debates of the 1960s and 1970s is a deeply entrenched pluralism of research approaches across the various content areas of communication studies. Some areas of study, like interpersonal communication, remained more methodologically homogenous than others. In the late 1980s and early 1990s scholars are looking for ways to integrate research findings and interests while generally accepting that the various paradigms each have something to offer.

Although humanist theorizing was becoming more sophisticated and increasing its impact on communication research in general, interpersonal communication research was less influenced by these developments than other areas of communication studies. One reason for this may be the association of humanist research with some of its more superficial applications during the 1960s and early 1970s. Interpersonal communication textbooks continued to use some of the exercises and rhetoric of humanist psychology. These techniques and views enliven the classroom experience but tend to reinforce the stereotype of humanist approaches as "touchy-feely," reflecting the worst examples of subjectivism and impressionism that social scientists sought to counter. However, the continued development of humanist research not only became more subtle and articulate in its own right, but eventually was able to contribute to the emerging interpretive paradigm.

The main source of inspiration for humanist and interpretive research in their continued development has been continental European philosophy. The impact of phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, existentialism, hermeneutics, and deconstruction has been felt in a wide range of disciplines in the United States, including departments of communication and rhetoric. As the individualistic emphasis of existentialism waned in its influence after being introduced in the 1950s and 1960s, attention turned to philosophies that addressed the language and social underpinnings of experience. Subjectivist versions of phenomenology gave way to a focus on intersubjectivity, glorification of impressionistic interpretations were abandoned in favor of textual hermeneutics, and the phrase "meaning is in people, not in words" was rejected by structuralists, semioticians, and other social constructionists that saw the link between person and community as much more complex. Poststructuralists examined the nature of language and discourse, exposing theoretical contradictions and ironies in traditional conceptions of human communication.

Early contributors to the introduction of European approaches to the communication research community include Richard L. Lanigan (1979, 1982, 1988), John Stewart (1978, 1983), Joseph J. Pilotta (1982), Stanley A. Deetz (1973, 1977, 1978, 1992), Stanley Deetz and A. Kersten (1983), Leonard Hawes (1977, 1978), Michael Hyde (1980), and Michael Hyde and C. R. Smith (1979). Joint teaching efforts with philosophy programs have drawn communication and philosophy together in their exploration of language and discourse. Algis Mickunas at Ohio University and Calvin Schrag at Purdue are two philosophers who have had a particularly significant influence on the importation of these continental influences (Mickunas, 1982; Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990; Schrag, 1985). Some communication scholars have pursued postdoctorate education in philosophy or completed second Ph.D.s in philosophy, such as Lanigan, Pilotta, and the influential teacher and long-time director of graduate studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Thomas Pace. The philosopher Richard Rorty, a contemporary pragmatist, has contributed to the development of the rhetoric of inquiry, a project that has inspired many conference papers, articles, and several books regarding the rhetorical construction of knowledge (Nelson & Megill, 1986; Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987; Simons, 1989). *Recovering Pragmatism's Voice* takes up issues of contemporary pragmatic philosophy and their relation to communication (Smith & Langsdorf, in press). The collection of essays by communication scholars appearing in *Rhetoric and Philosophy* presents a range of philosophical perspectives that have influenced communication research (Cherwitz, 1990). The Foreword is by Henry W. Johnstone, founding editor of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, which began publication in 1968. The International Communication Association's Philosophy of Communication Division also supplies an outlet for interpretive scholarship. A recent publication, *The Critical Turn: Rhetoric and Philosophy in Postmodern Discourse*, is a collection of essays by some of the more influential interpretive researchers in communication studies (Angus & Langsdorf, 1993).

One major contributor to contemporary interpretive research that is predominantly indigenous to the United States is feminism (see, for example, Bowen & Wyatt, 1993; Foss & Foss, 1983; Carter & Spitzack, 1989). Although American feminists often rely upon various continental philosophies, women writers in the United States are the major source of feminist thought. Feminism contributes an appreciation of diversity, everyday examples of how meaning and perception are deeply shaped by social and cultural processes, and the vision of how enriched understanding can empower those who are excluded from mainstream discourses.

Another influence on interpretive approaches to other areas of communication that is beginning to be felt in the study of interpersonal communication is ideology criticism. Ideology criticism developed out

of neo-Marxist thought and now enjoys a sizable audience through its influence on rhetorical and cultural criticism (see, for example, Burleson & Kline, 1979; Grossberg, 1979; Wander, 1983). The recent work of John Lannamann (1991), which calls for an investigation of the ideological dimensions of interpersonal communication theory, indicates a relatively new direction for inquiry. It is ironic that just as the long-held feminist tenet of "the personal is political" is being questioned as itself potentially oppressive to women (see, for instance, Baker and Benton, Chapter 9 in this volume), the field of interpersonal communication is beginning to raise the question of the political dimensions of how we understand face-to-face interaction. It remains to be seen how this promising area of research unfolds.

The essays in this volume provide the reader with a range of approaches to interpersonal communication that exemplify "interpretive research." Not all perspectives that can be considered interpretive are found in this volume, but most of the major interpretive approaches to interpersonal communication are treated in some fashion in the following pages. These perspectives include phenomenology, semiotics, hermeneutics, postmodern ethnography, deconstruction, social interactionism, feminism, and existentialism. Many of the essays include reflections on the ideological implications of interpersonal theory or research.

A number of the following essays develop or explore definitions of what constitutes interpretive research and apply these to interpersonal communication research issues. Some essays provide important contributions to forming a definition of interpretive research. Others are more concerned with working out particular problems within this paradigm. The purpose of this volume is not to specify what interpretive research *should* be, but rather to explore the diversity and richness of what interpretive research *can* be.

NOTES

1. One of the unique characteristics of the interpretive paradigm is its ability to investigate the grounding of both its own and other paradigmatic assumptions. *Grounding* here means "sufficiently clarified regarding the discursive underpinnings of what is studied and why" rather than "definitively founded in a priori principles or empirical realities."

2. For critical evaluations of interpersonal communication research, see Bochner, 1984; Rawlins, 1985; Hewes, Roloff, Planalp, & Siebold, 1990; and Wood, 1993.

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