ON THE INTELLECTUAL STRUCTURE
OF THE HUMAN COMMUNICATION
DISCIPLINE

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Responding to challenges by Wartella (1994) and Zarefsky (1993) to describe the underlying nature of the discipline we teach, this essay develops a detailed model of the intellectual structure of the human communication discipline. The model proposes that the discipline’s content is arranged into four tiers of research and pedagogical interest. Tier-1 work defines the distinctive nature of the discipline, exploring all aspects of the abstract concept of message. The second tier concentrates on the relationship of message analyses to communicators as individuals, as elements in social/interactional relationships, and as members of various cultural communities. Research in the third tier gathers our tier-1 and tier-2 interests into various clusters or levels, including public, small group and interpersonal communication. Work in the fourth tier explores human message behavior as it occurs in significant recurring situations such as health care, schools, business, and other areas.

Recently Ellen Wartella, the immediate past president of the International Communication Association, issued a challenge to the communication profession, making three criticisms about the discipline as it currently exists: “First, as communication researchers we lack a clear vision about who we are . . . Second, we have little visible presence as public intellectuals . . . Third, we offer an inchoate curriculum for communication study, particularly on the undergraduate level” (Wartella, 1994, p. 55).

In a similar vein, David Zarefsky, then the president of the Speech Communication Association, raised the perennial question of what unites the human communication discipline into a coherent field of study, phrasing the broader problem as three specific questions that might be asked by a sympathetic but confused outsider (Zarefsky, 1993):²

a. Can you tell me what holds this field together?
b. What is the central issue or organizing principle?
c. How can I make sense of what we are doing?

Wartella’s criticisms and Zarefsky’s questions indeed raise important issues, and they must be addressed clearly and coherently if we are to flourish as an intellectual subject matter that is parallel in significance to other humanities and social science disciplines.

Although Zarefsky (1993) offers only a very general description of our central disciplinary focus—“the relationship between messages and people” (p. 2)—he suggests a set of criteria that more specific answers would have to meet. They would need to:

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a. Specify what our "core concepts" are.
b. Articulate how those core concepts shape our discipline.
c. Include as many aspects of the current discipline's already manifest interests (both rhetorical and social scientific) as possible.
d. Reveal how those many parts relate systematically to one another—thereby demonstrating our underlying coherence in spite of our overt diversity.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the challenges posed by Wartella and Zarefsky by presenting a detailed model of the intellectual structure of the human communication discipline. The model identifies what our core defining concepts are and illustrates how they give shape to our discipline. It also encompasses the broad scope of our intellectual diversity and reveals how our various research interests relate to one another to form a coherent whole. In this way, it not only addresses Wartella's first criticism by offering a vision of who we are but also attempts to meet Zarefsky's four criteria. Furthermore, if the model accurately describes the intellectual structure of what we actually do, it would also have considerable implications for communication educators seeking to respond to Wartella's claim concerning the inchoate nature of contemporary communication curricula. For the more clearly we articulate the underlying intellectual structure of the discipline we are teaching, the easier it should be to construct our curricula on a principled rather than an ad hoc basis.

THE FOUR TIERS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

In spite of the wide variety of topics represented in major communication publications, the subject matter of human communication theory and research appears to be arranged in a four-tiered structure (see Figure 1). This tiered structure accounts for both the underlying unity of the discipline and the apparent diversity of topics that interest theorists.

In an important sense, Zarefsky is right that the focus of the human communication discipline is "the relation between messages and people." For the relatively abstract concept of MESSAGE is the single core concept that most clearly differentiates any communication-centered discipline from all other intellectual pursuits. However, Zarefsky does not attempt to unpack the complexity of the concept of message to explore how his formula for characterizing the discipline might operate in detail. And yet, if one believes that message provides the conceptual center for our discipline, then it is the concrete richness underlying the more abstract concept that can help us account for both the diversity of our many research interests and the underlying unity that binds those interests into a coherent intellectual discipline.

According to my overall model then, the first and most central tier of our research analyzes the inherent nature of messages themselves: in both their (a) form and (b) general content. The second tier assumes the types of message analysis conducted in tier-1 research and explores the implications of various tier-1 theories for understanding the communicator as (a) an individual, (b) a participant in various social/interactional relationships, and (c) an actor within a cultural community. Tier-3 research builds upon the theories and findings from tier-1 and tier-2 research, synthesizing them for the purpose of understanding three traditional and moderately concrete levels of communication behavior: (a) public, (b) small group, and (c) interpersonal communication. Finally, tier-4
research applies the concepts and principles from tier-1, -2, and -3 theory to the task of understanding the specific communication practices that occur within significant, recurring, and particularistic social or cultural contexts and situations: health care; the courts; complex organizations; religious practices; schools; courtship, marriage and the family; routine social interactions with distant acquaintances, and so forth. Thus, in saying that the concept of message is central to understanding the intellectual structure of the human communication discipline, I am imagining that our many interests fan out in an orderly way from that center—much like the intersecting and interlaced spokes of a bicycle wheel fan out systematically from the axle to hold the wheel together as a functional and coherent whole.

Because each of these tiers is itself complexly structured, and because higher level tiers build on (and frequently contribute reciprocally to) our understanding of the lower tiers, the rest of this paper explores in some detail what the research and theory within each tier fundamentally concerns.

**TIER-1 THEORY AND RESEARCH: THE STRUCTURAL PROPERTIES OF MESSAGES**

The most central tier of human communication theory and research—the tier from which all of our other interests appear to radiate—concerns the inherent nature of messages themselves. Tier-1 theory may be called the **MESSAGE-CENTERED** tier because it includes all analyses of the general characteristics of message structures and the general categories of content they can convey. Message analyses have commonly been divided into broad categories such as
verbal versus nonverbal message systems, signs versus symbols, and intentional versus nonintentional message behaviors.

Although such classifications suggest the breadth of tier-1 research, they do not reveal how the tier-1 interests may themselves be organized into a coherent structure. Short of developing a theoretically-based taxonomy of message forms (a separate project), one useful way to understand how messages have been studied is to arrange them along a continuum from the smallest and most independently interpretable message structures to the largest and most complex message structures we are able to identify as meaningful units of communication. Figure 2 suggests the general outline that tier-1 research seems to follow as conceived along such a continuum.

Relatively independent signs and symbols
At the smallest end of the tier-1 continuum would be message structures that depend upon the interpretation of relatively independent physical signs (e.g., spontaneous blushing, eye gaze, posture) and nonsyntactical symbols (e.g., the flag, religious icons) that are routinely used to express ideas and feelings. Much of what is included under the rubric of nonverbal communication would be placed here. But so, too, would be the symbols used in creating the various arts, advertising, cultural icons and artifacts, and the like.

Guiding this level of message analysis are a number of fundamental theoretical questions such as:

a. What is the inherent nature of signs and symbols? Or how can terms like sign and symbol be most insightfully defined and distinguished from each other?
b. How do various classes of signs and symbols convey the meanings that constitute their messages?

c. What do we mean by the term *meaning* in the general context of sign and symbol theory?

d. How many different kinds of meaning are there? Do they all work on the same fundamental principles of signification, or do different kinds of meaning operate on their own distinctive sets of principles that require unique theoretical explanations to account for their operation?

e. What is a sign or symbol system? For example, architecture (Broadbent, Bunt, & Jencks, 1980), film (Bordwell, 1989), landscapes (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988), and political cartoons (Harrison, 1981) may all be seen as distinct semiotic systems. How many different *kinds* of sign and symbol systems are there? How does each system operate? How does each distinctive system use the more general principles of signification to develop its own characteristic mode of creating meaning and conveying messages?

A number of basic theories have contributed to our understanding of this level of message analysis. Especially fundamental have been C. S. Peirce’s (1955, 1966) distinction among *icons, indexes, and symbols*; Saussure’s (1916) distinctions between the *signification* and *value* of signs, and between *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic* relations among signs; Ogden and Richards’ (1923) triangle of meaning; Charles Morris’ (1938) distinction among the *semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic* analysis of signification; Susanne Langer’s (1942) distinction between *discursive* and *presentational symbolism*; and Claude Shannon’s distinction between analogic and digital codes (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). These fundamental theories have been further developed and adapted in such works as Barthes’s (1968) *Elements of Semiology*, Guiraud’s (1975) *Semiology*, Eco’s (1976) *Theory of Semiotics*, and Hodge and Kress’s (1988) *Social Semiotics*, and utilized by contemporary analysts of communication.6

Although human communication scholars have not written extensively on the semiotic foundations of tier-1 theory, several contributions are nevertheless available that provide a flavor of this level of our disciplinary research. Among the contributions to basic semiotic theory are the following: Aune’s (1983) analysis of the symbol and social reality, Buttny’s (1986) description of a Wittgensteinian perspective on meaning, Cherwitz’s (1981) application of Morris’s semiotic theory to rhetorical criticism, Corcoran’s (1981) critique of the use of linguistic models for the semiotic analysis of screen media, Cronkhite’s (1986) adaptation of Peircean concepts in preparation for arguing that the study of human symbolic activity characterizes the general focus, scope and source of coherence for our discipline, Glynn’s (1986) deconstructionist interpretation of the role of symbols in the construction of social reality, Harris’s (1984) analysis of language as a sign system, Hillbruner’s (1985) treatment of language as an icon in rhetorical criticism and theory, Liska’s (1993) adaptation of Peircean concepts to analyze the relation of non-human sign systems to human ones, Lyne’s (1980) interpretation of the place of rhetoric in C. S. Peirce’s semiotic theory, and Stewart’s (1972, 1986) critiques of various semiotic theories from a hermeneutic point of view.

More common in our literature, however, are articles utilizing various semiotic concepts to analyze some particular class of message phenomena. Represen-
tative of these tier-1 investigations are the following: Bruner's (1989) analysis of the symbolic uses of the Berlin Wall, Chesebro's (1982) study of illness as a rhetorical act, Ekman and Friesen's (1969) classic analysis of the categories, origins, usage, and coding of nonverbal behaviors as relatively independent signs, Fry and Fry's (1986) semiotic model for the study of mass communication, Hankiss's (1980) analysis of the signs and symbols used by con artists to deceive their target, Hattenhauer's (1984) semiotic analysis of the rhetoric of architecture, Knapp, Hart, Friedrich and Shulman's (1973) investigation of the nonverbal signs used during leave-taking, Lurie's (1981) work on the semiotics of clothing, and Medhurst's (1982) analysis of the rhetorical uses of iconography in film. In each case, the authors apply some aspect of the various fundamental theories of semiotics toward understanding a particular message system.

**Language as a formal code**

In the message analyses described above, signs and symbols are treated either as relatively independent units of meaning or as contributors to a loosely connected system of meaning; but such message systems are not imagined as being a true language, except in the most metaphoric sense.\(^7\) For there is no system of syntactic rules by which the various signs and symbols can be programmatically combined to produce phrase, clause, or sentence length messages.

Accordingly, the second aspect of tier-1 message analysis concerns those theories that contribute to our understanding of language as a formal code, especially at the sentence level and below. Here, the fundamental questions concern such issues as:

a. How is language best described as a code?
b. By what semantic principles do words and phrases operate that make verbal symbols distinctive among the various classes of human symbolism?
c. By what syntactic principles are words put together to form complex sentences capable of expressing our complex thoughts?
d. What is the relationship between language as a code and speaking as a human action?

Broadly, the linguistic code has been considered as consisting of four structural levels: (a) the phonological or sound system, (b) the morphological or word formation system, (c) the lexical or semantic meaning system, and (d) the syntactical or sentence formation system.\(^8\) Within linguistics each level has been given detailed analysis that has produced an extensive theoretical literature (see DeBeauprême, 1991, for a representative survey). Although linguistics is the discipline traditionally concerned with this aspect of message analysis, the human communication discipline has a strong investment in how the theoretical questions are answered because language, as a code, is the most distinctive instrument of human communication (Ellis, 1982; Jacobs, 1994). Within the human communication discipline, research on the lexical and syntactic choices used in creating message structures would seem to be the most frequently featured aspect of language analysis.

**Relatively interconnected discourse structures**

The third aspect of human message analysis concerns the properties of various types of discourse structures. While the unit of discursive utterance may be as
small as a single word or as large as an entire speech, the important features when we look at verbal messages as discourse are (a) the formal characteristics that distinguish various discourse types from one another, (b) the structural properties that hold various discourse types together as recognizable units of communication, and (c) the relationships those smaller discourse units may have as they combine to form larger discourse genres. Accordingly, some of the questions concerning messages as relatively interconnected discourse structures include the following:

a. What units of discourse structure exist and how are they best described? That is, on structural grounds, how many different types of discursive messages are there?

b. What structural relations hold each such unit together so that it is recognizable as a unit of discourse? That is, if discourse is not syntactically structured, how is it held together as a coherent message?

c. How many different levels of discourse structure are there?

d. How do smaller units fit together to form larger ones? That is, what are the possible relations of smaller units to one another that allow them to comprise larger units?

e. Based on the subject-matter content, rather than their relational structure, how many different types of messages are there and how can these different types best be distinguished from one another?

f. By what principles do each of the various kinds and levels of discourse operate?

Whereas human communication theorists have been relatively inactive in analyzing language as a grammatical system or code per se, they have invested considerable energy exploring the nature of message structures as interconnected discourse. The foundations for such analysis can be seen as early as Aristotle’s Rhetoric, with the identification of three types of persuasive messages: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. In the modern era, a number of macro-units or genres of rhetorical discourse have been further identified and explored. Among these are apocalyptic rhetoric (Brummett, 1984; O’Leary, 1993), apologia (King, 1985; Ware & Linkugel, 1973), Christian sermons (Clark, 1977), inaugurals (Campbell & Jamieson, 1985; Daughton, 1993), jeremiads (Ritter, 1980; Zulick, 1992), justifications for war (Ivie, 1980), keynote speeches (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978a), and the state-of-the-union (Jamieson, 1975). So important is the concept of the speech genre as a unit of rhetorical discourse that at least two collections of essays on such macro-message forms have been published (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978b; Simons & Aghazarian, 1986).

In recent decades, however, smaller and smaller message forms have been identified and explored for their consequences for communicative interaction. While an exhaustive list of such forms would be impossible, representative examples may be mentioned. These would include such recurring message forms as the following: accounts (Harvey, Weber & Orbuch, 1990; McLaughlin, Cody & Read, 1992; Scott & Lyman, 1968), apologies (Owen, 1983), clichés (Wanta & Leggett, 1988), complaints (Alberts, 1989a; Cloven & Roloff, 1993), compliments (Knapp, Hopper & Bell, 1984), conversational turns (Duncan, 1972), curses and profanity (Hughes, 1991; Jay, 1992), devious messages (Bowers, Elliot &

Many dozens of other discursive message units have been identified and explored—so many, in fact, that any relatively comprehensive list looks almost like a random collection of items. It is possible, however, to see some organizational pattern within the message units when they are arrayed along a loose continuum ranging from the smallest to largest, as shown in Figure 3.

Although such a continuum is convenient as a preliminary way of organizing the complex world of message types, it does not specify in any theoretically coherent way the detailed relations that might exist between various message types or levels. Discovering the relationships among message types in order to create a more comprehensive taxonomy of the classes of messages that we investigate seems to be fertile ground for those pursuing tier-1 level research.10

![Representative Discourse Structures](image)

**FIGURE 3**

**REPRESENTATIVE DISCOURSE STRUCTURES ARRAYED ALONG A CONTINUUM FROM THE SMALLEST UNITS TO THE LARGEST.**
TIER-2 THEORY AND RESEARCH: INDIVIDUAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF MESSAGE ACTIVITY

Although the structural characteristics of messages can be studied relatively independently from the individuals who construct the messages, communication is an activity that people perform in order to accomplish particular goals in specific social and cultural situations. Accordingly, the second tier of human communication theory and research focuses on the communicator in relation to message structures and their meanings. Our interests in the COMMUNICATOR-CENTERED tier are distributed across three broad but relatively parallel sets of problems: (a) the nature of the communicator as an individual (whether as a sender or receiver of messages), (b) the nature of the social/interactional relationships that are created, sustained and sometimes destroyed through the mutual exchange of messages among communicators, and (c) the role that communication plays in creating a cultural community and transmitting its values and beliefs from generation to generation. In each case, the questions at tier-2 assume that some approach to the tier-1 concept of message has been selected. In fact, it is almost impossible for a truly communication-based study to be conducted in the absence of a choice regarding the type of tier-1 messages to be examined. For this reason, a communication-centered approach to the individual, social relationships, and to culture is always grounded on the concept of message.

TIER-2A: MESSAGES IN RELATION TO THE INDIVIDUAL

The first aspect of the communicator-centered tier of research focuses directly on the nature of the communicator as an individual—investigating both the covert mental processes that occur within the individual and the overt behaviors that result from the individual’s mental activity. The general goal of tier-2A research is to understand the individual’s private mental processes well enough to explain how his or her public communication behavior results from them. Broadly speaking, communication research at tier-2A focuses on five questions:

a. How can we most insightfully describe the personal characteristics of the communicating individuals?

b. What is the nature of the coding process—i.e., the covert mental process that creates the perceptible artifact (e.g., a sound wave, a body motion) that expresses the message?

c. How is the concept of “message” best imagined from a psychological (rather than a structural) point of view—i.e., how do the formal characteristics of messages relate to the personal characteristics of the individual who formulates that message?

d. How does the receiver decode and process the message once it arrives—i.e., is the decoding process simply the reciprocal of the encoding process, or is it a distinctive process with separate psychological characteristics?

e. How does the receiver subsequently respond in light of the message and why—i.e., what is the relationship between various features of the message and any changes in the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors observed after the message has been received?
In a sense, these questions reveal the intellectual structure of tier-2A research, so that investigations of the individual aspects of communication have five complementary facets: theories of the communicator’s personality, theories of the encoding and sending process, theories of the psychological nature of messages, theories of the decoding and processing of messages, and theories of the effects of messages on their recipients. These are outlined in Figure 4, along with representative examples of topics that might be considered within their purview.

**The nature of the individual communicator**

Because a communicator’s distinctive nature influences both the production and reception of messages, theorists from the time of classical antiquity have explored the characteristics of individual communicators, trying to explain how those characteristics influence the communication process. For example, Aristotle created both the first systematic treatise on persuasive communication (the *Rhetoric*) and the first systematic treatise on human psychology (*On the Soul*). Furthermore, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* contains an analysis of audience psychology and its relationship to the persuasion process. Similarly, in the 18th century, George Campbell developed his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* using the “faculty” psychology of his era as its theoretical foundation (Bator, 1982). And in the early part of this century, James Winans (1917) set the tone for modern studies of the psychology of human communication by applying William James’s theories of emotion and attention to the creation of a modern theory of public speaking practice. Moreover, as soon as J. B. Watson’s (1914, 1924) behaviorist approach to psychology was made widely available, Charles Woolbert (1920, 1930) began applying it to the principles of effective oral communication.

The goal of exploring the nature of the individual communicator continues, of course, today. Although there is currently no unified approach to imagining the communicator’s personality that organizes the research on this topic into anything remotely resembling a coherent intellectual structure, communicator traits, needs, motives, cognitive structures, intentions, plans and goals, and attitudes
have all been proposed as bases for understanding how the communicator’s individual nature accounts for particular message sending and receiving behaviors.

For example, trait approaches are exemplified by work on such communicator traits as apprehensiveness (Chesebro et al., 1992; Levine & McCrosky, 1990), argumentativeness (Kazoleas, 1993), machiavellianism (Williams, Hazelton & Renshaw, 1975), and verbal aggressiveness (Sabourin, Infante & Rudd, 1993). In addition to the uses made by researchers of such lists of human needs as Maslow’s (1954), more recent needs approaches have proposed such communicator needs as affinity-seeking (Bell & Daly, 1984) and uncertainty reduction (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984). In addition to work done under the guidance of Kenneth Burke’s (1945, 1950) grammar and rhetoric of motives, the concept of an individual’s motives as a force in the communication process can be seen in work by Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988). The individual’s cognitive structures (frequently called schema or schemata) have received widespread attention, as work by Meadowcroft and Reeves (1989), Planalp (1985), Smith (1982a, 1982b), and Sypher and Applegate (1984) all attest. The role of the individual’s intentions, goals and plans have been explored in work by Berger (1989) and his associates (Berger & Bell, 1988; Berger, Karol & Jordan, 1989), Kellerman (1992), Motley (1986), and Stamp and Knapp (1990). Finally, the concept of attitude as an influence on the individual’s message behavior, especially when considering persuasive messages, has been explored in studies too numerous to require exemplification.

The encoding and sending process
A second aspect of our disciplinary research on the communicator as an individual concerns how the communicator encodes and sends a message. Precursors of this cognitive aspect of the communication process can be traced back at least as far as Barker and Wiseman’s (1966) model of intrapersonal communication and Barnlund’s (1970) transactional model of communication. Since then a substantial number of contributors have investigated the general features of the encoding and sending process.

In addition to studies of the role that such things as intentions, goals, plans, and cognitive structures (mentioned above) play in the general message output process, two detailed and sustained programs of model-building concerned with the process of message encoding have appeared in our disciplinary literature: (a) the action assembly theory of J. O. Greene and his associates (Greene, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1988, 1989; Greene & Geddes, 1988, 1993; Greene & Lindsey, 1989), and (b) the editing model of language encoding proposed by Michael Motley and his associates (Motley & Baars, 1978; Motley, Baars & Camden, 1983; Motley & Camden, 1985; Motley, Camden & Baars, 1979, 1981, 1983). Thus, while we do not have any broadly accepted approach to the phenomenon of message encoding, we do have a number of research programs focusing on this aspect of the communicator as an individual.

The psychological nature of messages
To consider messages psychologically is to inquire how the communicator’s covert mental processes express themselves in the overt structure of the messages created. Accordingly, when we are investigating messages psychologically,
we are no longer concerned with them as signs and symbols conveying intended meanings; rather, we are looking at them as artifacts produced by a person having certain psychological characteristics—characteristics whose features we assume are reflected in some identifiable manner by the artifact.

Theories of the psychology of messages, therefore, assume that the observable structure and content of messages are somehow a function of the cognitive structures and processes that produce them. In general, research questions concerning the psychology of messages may be worded as follows: If these are the messages produced by this individual (or this type of individual), what must be the psychological nature of the individual who produced them? However, based on the assumption that messages typically bear the imprint of the psychological processes that create them, researchers may work in either of two directions in developing psychological theories of messages.

First, investigators may begin with a theory of the psychological nature of the individual and make predictions concerning some aspect of the messages that will be produced. Here the characteristics of a particular message may be explained on the basis of the proposed psychological characteristics of the individual. For example, in constructivist research, a particular cognitive variable (say, the individual’s degree of COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY) is explored for its impact on a particular class of message variables (say, PERSON-CENTERED COMMUNICATION) (Burleson, 1987). The critical research question is: Do people who are more cognitively complex produce a higher percentage of person-centered messages than do people who are less cognitively complex? Summarizing this approach to the psychology of messages, Burleson (1987) says that the central question is “the extent to which individual differences in social cognitive skills are related to individual differences in a variety of communication skills (e.g., persuading others, comforting others, and regulating or disciplining others)” (p. 305). Clearly, this research begins with a theory of the cognitive capacities of message senders and explores the effects of those capacities on the characteristics and types of messages produced.

Working in the opposite direction, some theorists have treated the characteristics of a message (or set of messages) as a Rosetta Stone for gaining insights into the psychological character of the individual producing them. For example, beginning with a detailed description of the linguistic features of presidential speeches, Hart (1984) has offered psychological profiles of a number of presidents. Similarly, Kenneth Burke (1931) distinguishes messages upon whether they emphasize the “psychology of information” or the “psychology of form.” Messages emphasizing the psychology of information are organized so that they convey “news” that is unlikely to be repeated to the same person. Once the information is understood, repetition is unnecessary. In contrast, messages emphasizing the psychology of form are structured so as to enhance the receiver’s pleasure in the sheer unfolding of the message’s form (such as the form of a song or a film)—and so are likely to be repeated for the benefit of the same receiver. For both Hart and Burke, the details of the message are studied in order to say something about the psychology of the person. In Hart’s case it is about the psychology of the sender and in Burke’s the psychology of the receiver.
The decoding and processing of messages
Although theorists may assume that the decoding process is merely the converse of the encoding process and offer relatively mechanical models of the encoding process in reverse, in recent years theories of message decoding frequently assume that the decoding process involves some type of active interpretation of the message by the receiver. That is, the coded message is never mechanically or passively "received;" instead, it is filtered through the recipient's conceptual system—which may itself be understood in a variety of ways.

Theories which assume some sort of interpretive component to the decoding process have been called hermeneutic, constructivist, social constructionist, and deconstructionist, among others, depending upon their assumptions concerning how the interpretive process operates. Hewes' "second-guessing theory" provides an example of a research program specifically exploring the decoding and interpretation of messages distinctly separated from any corresponding theory of the encoding process (Doelger, Hewes & Graham, 1986; Hewes & Graham, 1989; Hewes, Graham, Doelger & Pavitt, 1985; and Hewes, Graham, Mansour, & Doelger, 1989).

The effects of messages on recipients
Closely related to questions concerning how a message is decoded and interpreted are those concerning how a message subsequently affects the receiver. One answer is to say that the only direct effect of a message is to provide grist for the interpretive process. The message, then, would have no causal effects beyond being the starting point for propositional or emotional interpretation. Subsequent "consequences" (such as a decision to act on the basis of the message's content) would be, in this view, related to the message itself in such an indirect way that to speak of subsequent action would go beyond the scope of human communication theory per se.

However, under the influence of the behaviorist image of the individual—where stimuli are seen as both direct and indirect causes of an organism's behavior—many communication researchers have sought a more direct causal link between the message as a type of stimulus and some subsequent behavior as a consequence. In general, this behaviorist approach to the consequences of messages as causal stimuli is called message effects research (Colbert, 1995; Jackson, 1992). In this research tradition, some stimulus (everything from the sex or age of the sender, to the language used, to the nonverbal attributes of how an utterance is said) is taken as a communicative message capable of stimulating some identifiable response. Variant versions of this message (male versus female communicators, credible versus non-credible sources, animated versus lethargic speaking style, and so forth) are then presented to receivers and the results of different versions of the message are identified and noted. In a related vein but on a more macro-level scale, media effects research seeks to discover the larger social consequences of a variety of mediated messages on selected aspects of a society or culture (Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1994; Chu, 1994; Lee, P.S.-n, 1994).

Tier-2B: Messages in Relation to Social Interaction
As important as the individual is to the human communication process, communication cannot be accomplished alone. Two or more individuals participating
in the same act are always required. Accordingly, the second component of tier-2 research focuses on aspects of communication that come into being only because two or more people are communicating together. Its focus concerns those aspects of human communication that can in no direct way be explained by the characteristics of the individual. They can only be explained by the interaction among individuals—that is, by the shared activity of two or more people.

When two or more people act together, they become elements of a larger system, one that is brought into being by the relationships made possible by those very elements. Without the two or more people, certain relationships among those elements would not exist and there would be nothing to explain. For example, one can study the role of communication in “friendship development” or the processes of “mutual interpersonal influence” that occur between two communicators only where there is a relationship between the two communicators. Mutual influence and friendship are inherently relational terms: A influences B, or A is friends with B. From this point of view, the person as a unique psychological individual recedes in importance and the relational aspects of communication come to the forefront.

Among the things that cannot be explained on the basis of the characteristics of the individual communicator alone (because they are inherently relational phenomena) are: (a) the structure of macro and micro interactional events such as compliment-response sequences (Sims, 1989), face-to-face (Kellerman, 1991) and telephone conversations (Hopper, 1989a, 1989b, 1992), demand tickets (Nofinger, 1975), employment interviews (Tengler & Jablin, 1983), greetings (Douglas, 1984), group decision-making phases (Hirokawa, 1983), interacts (Fisher & Hewes, 1971), negotiation and bargaining sessions (Donohue, 1981; Donohue, Diez & Hamilton, 1984), persuasive requests (Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984), repairs (Morris, G. H., 1985), silences (Cappella, 1979; Dindia, 1986), turn-taking (DeLong, 1977), and unwanted repetitive patterns (Cronen, Pearce & Snaveley, 1979) as they unfold in time; (b) the mutual effects of each individual communicator’s behavior on the other(s), such as aligning actions (Hall, 1991; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976), discrepancy-arousal (Cappella & Greene, 1982); rhythmic entrainment (Condon, 1982); speech accommodation (Buller & Aune, 1988; Street, 1984; Street & Giles, 1982), and symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1985); (c) the social relationships that emerge through the communication process, such as attraction (Broome, 1983; Sunnafrank & Miller, 1981), conversational involvement (Coker & Burgoon, 1987; Tannen, 1989), interpersonal solidarity (Bell & Healey, 1992), liking (Berg & Archer, 1983), and power and dominance relationships (Berger, 1994); (d) the social goals a communicator might try to accomplish relative to another person with whom they are interacting, such as boastful self-disclosure (Miller, Cooke, Tsang, & Morgan, 1992), comforting communication (Burleson, 1983; Samter, Burleson, & Murphy, 1989); compliance-gaining attempts (Hirokawa, Mickey, & Miura, 1991; Marwell & Schmitt, 1967), conversational complaints (Alberts, 1988, 1989a, 1989b), conversational retreat (Kellerman, Reynolds, & Chen, 1991), and guilt-producing techniques (Vangelisti, Daly, & Rudnick, 1991); and (e) the recurring social situations within which social interaction occurs.

Figure 5 displays the above five aspects of the social/interactional foundations of the human communication discipline and identifies some representative
FIGURE 5
A model of the social foundations of the human communication discipline.

topics that have been explored within each aspect. The figure also suggests that the five topics appear to cluster into three fairly distinct areas of theoretical inquiry: (a) investigations focused directly on the nature and consequences of the interaction process itself (including interaction structures, mutual effects, and social relationships), (b) research concerned with the communicators' goals and strategies within the interaction, and (c) investigations accounting for the situational influences that help determine the structures and outcomes of various communicative interactions.

TIER-2C: MESSAGES IN RELATION TO CULTURAL PHENOMENA
An increasingly important concept in recent human communication theory is the notion of culture. Arising in anthropology as a way to describe the distinctive folkways and world views of different “exotic” groups, the concept of culture is now routinely extended to apply to any relatively coherent and distinctive group of people who share a common world view. Thus, we may read of women's culture and understand that it differs from that of men; or we may read of the distinctive corporate cultures of such organizations as General Motors, IBM, Lockheed, Microsoft, and McDonald's and expect them to differ significantly from one another. Furthermore, we might see descriptions of the culture of the criminal underworld, lawyers, physicians, professional athletes, public school teachers, university professors—and any other socially identifiable group.

Accordingly, the final tier-2 topic concerns the role that message activity plays in a large array of cultural phenomena. In the communication context, a CULTURE may be defined as a particular world view—the cultural group's lexicon, overtly expressed propositional beliefs and covert assumptions about all aspects
The role communication plays in creating, maintaining, disseminating, and changing a culture's understanding of reality

CULTURE

The effect cultural commitments have on the communicative behaviors of the individuals who adopt them

Communication within the culture

Communication across cultural boundaries

Concepts that guide particular communication practices

General communication practices that are handled in a distinctive manner within a particular culture

FIGURE 6

SOME RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE ROLE COMMUNICATION PLAYS IN CREATING AND TRANSMITTING A CULTURE AND THE EFFECTS THAT AN EXISTING CULTURE HAS ON THOSE WHO COMMUNICATE FROM WITHIN AND ACROSS ITS BOUNDARIES.

of its shared experience. What makes the notion of culture relevant to the human communication discipline is the fact that the world view is reflected in all of the expressive resources (signs, symbols, language, and discourse) that the cultural group creates, including the material artifacts group members make and/or use, their routine activities and behaviors, and their ways of interacting with one another and with persons of other cultures.

Within the discipline, two broad questions have been raised in relation to the concept of culture—questions that appear to provide a rather clear structure to this aspect of our tier-2 research. First, scholars have asked what role does communication play in creating, maintaining, disseminating, and changing a culture's understanding of reality? Second, once a culture is in existence, how is communication affected by the various cultural commitments of the people participating in the interaction? The relation between these two questions and to the concept of culture may be illustrated as in Figure 6.

Communication and the creation of culture

A growing general consensus among communication scholars concludes that communication plays a central role in both the creation and the dissemination of a group's culture. The communicative foundations for this point of view were firmly established in Berger and Luckman's (1967) theory of The Social Construction of Reality and have been developed in detail by a broad spectrum of scholarship ever since. As a tier-2 concern, this line of scholarship may readily be organized based on how a particular type of message contributes to the construction and propagation of a particular aspect of a group's cultural beliefs and activities.

As the left side of Figure 6 displays, the communicative resources for the construction of a cultural reality may range from some of the smallest units of discourse to the largest. Thus, for example, Brown (1970) has explored how children learn to classify and label the elements of their world. Furthermore, learning to define a term provides the user with a category for understanding
how aspects of the world are related to one another by the culture. Brown and Gilman (1970) and Wiener and Mehrarian (1968) have explored the role that pronouns play in structuring some aspects of our cultural understanding of interpersonal relationships. More broadly, Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of the metaphorical structuring of reality has opened up many new approaches to understanding the cultural consequences of communicative phenomena (Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, 1993). Clichés, euphemisms, slogans and other verbal formulae are popular precisely because they conveniently express culturally significant truths and observations. Probably the most widely studied aspect of the communicative construction of reality is the narrative (Katriel & Shenkar, 1990; Kelley, 1985; Rosenfeld, 1993). Booth (1974) has explored the cultural functions of irony, puns, and other word play, and others have done so for jokes. Finally, a major form of communicative construction occurs through the use of argument structures, as the arguer puts together a “case” in support of a particular way of viewing things.

The communicative consequences of culture

As different cultures come into being, their belief structures and associated cultural practices begin to constrain not only how people communicate within the culture, but also how they attempt to communicate across the boundaries between cultures. Thus, the final aspect of Tier-2C research concerns what is traditionally called intercultural communication, especially as the concept of culture has been extended to include the multiple co-cultures typically present within a dominant culture.

As the right side of Figure 6 suggests, this aspect of tier-2C research may be divided into those studies focusing on the communication practices occurring within a culturally identifiable group and those that explore what happens when messages are exchanged across cultural boundaries. In both cases, any aspect of message analysis that can be identified in tier-1 research (signs, symbols, language and discourse) can be explored for its use or non-use within or across a cultural boundary.

Studies of communication occurring within a particular culture may themselves be divided into at least two prominent types. In the first, a distinctive and significant concept within the culture is explored for its consequences on the communication practices of the culture’s members. Thus, for example, concepts such as amae (Doi, 1973), ma (Di Mare, 1990), tateme and honne (Mitsubishi Corporation, 1988) and yuben (Okabe, R., 1979) from the Japanese, kuan-hsi (Chang & Holt, 1991) among the Chinese, and uye-ri for Koreans (Yum, 1987b) have received this kind of attention. Similarly, but more broadly, some scholars have focused on the entire conceptual structure of an ethnic group to determine how these broad philosophical commitments influence communication (Chang, H.-C., 1992; Cheng, 1987; Cushman, 1987; Lee, S.-H., 1987; Lik, 1976; Oliver, 1959, 1961, 1969; Reynolds, 1969; Xiao, 1995; Yum, 1987a, 1988). Studies such as Hofstede’s (1980) work on collectivism versus individualism in various cultures would also fit here since it is possible to explore the communicative consequences of such global characterizations (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

More prominently, perhaps, is the second approach to studying communication occurring within a culture. In this approach a commonly recognized message
form is identified and the investigator explores the distinctive manner in which a particular culture handles that form. For example, there have been studies of the absence of argumentation and debate in the Far East (Becker, 1983), the communication styles of Japanese and Americans (Barnlund, 1989), compliments and compliment-responses among the Chinese (Chang, S.-J., 1991), conflict resolution in low- and high-context cultures (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987), Chinese discontented responses (Ma, 1990), indirect speech acts in Japan (Okabe, K., 1987), the Chinese use of narrative (Fu, 1987), the quantity of talk (in the Gricean sense) employed by Americans (Althen, 1992), requests and apologies in a variety of cultures (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kaspar, 1989), and others. More general comparative studies have also been conducted concerning aggressive messages (Suzuki & Rancer, 1994), directive sequences (Fitch, 1994), and requests (Kim & Wilson, 1994).

While it is possible to study communication across cultural boundaries where no difficulties seem to exist, this aspect of our disciplinary research typically focuses most heavily on just those situations where communication is problematical. Structurally, cross cultural communication problems may be caused by any aspect of messages associated with the tier-1 level of analysis—sign and symbol behavior, language in all of its aspects, and discourse. In addition to the previously cited literature, which discusses topics with cross cultural implications, other publications that have considered the role message behavior plays in cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflict include Kitao’s (1980) research on the sources of difficulty in communication between Japanese and Americans, Kuniharo’s (1973) attempt to identify indigenous barriers in Japanese-American communication, and Martin, Hecht and Larkey’s (1994) work on conversational improvement strategies during interethnic communication between African-Americans and European-Americans. The international list could be extended prodigiously based on the contacts between any two cultures; and when we open the concept of culture to include co-cultures within a dominant culture—such as between the cultures of men and women or between those of separate regions of a country—the number of examples of this aspect of our disciplinary structure seems infinitely large.

TIER-3 THEORY AND RESEARCH: INTERPERSONAL, SMALL-GROUP, AND PUBLIC LEVELS OF MESSAGE ACTIVITY

The third tier of our disciplinary structure may best be identified as the LEVEL-CENTERED tier because it divides human communication phenomena into a number of levels based upon one or more distinguishing criteria. The motivating concept underlying levels approaches in any domain may be stated as follows: there are thresholds of some variable criterion where one level of analysis gives way to the next because beyond that threshold new phenomena begin to appear, and there are qualitative differences to account for even within whatever lower level phenomena that continue to remain theoretically relevant. As we move from level to level then, concepts and principles used to describe phenomena at one level typically seem less relevant to understanding phenomena at the next level. In fact, as we move from one level to the next, phenomena at the lower levels are frequently assumed rather than treated as problematical in their own right. These principles of levels are seen in biology, for instance, where one can distinguish such
levels of analysis as cells, tissues, organs, bodily systems, the organism as a whole, and ecosystems.

Traditionally, human communication phenomena have been divided into three levels: public, small-group, and interpersonal communication. As Figure 7 illustrates, these three levels may be distinguished from one another based upon a number of criteria.

Among the criteria used for dividing communication levels from one another are (a) the number of people involved, (b) the agent controlling the communication event, (c) the degree of formality expected during the event, and (d) the degree of personal information exchanged between the communicators.15 Regardless of the criteria used, the motivation for distinguishing various levels is the sense that there is something qualitatively different going on within each level. Once the critical threshold of whatever variable criterion is reached, something new and different begins to appear that cannot be explained solely on the basis of principles available at the lower level.

Although the traditional levels of communication inquiry blend into one another at their boundaries—no matter which criteria are used to distinguish them from one another—there appears to be a general consensus that levels do exist and do make a difference when we explore the implications of various tier-1 and tier-2 theories for understanding specific communication events. Accordingly, they remain a popular and relevant way of structuring our research interests, our bodies of knowledge, and our pedagogy into convenient domains.16

The goal of tier-3 research, then, is both to understand what happens to tier-1 and tier-2 phenomena once critical thresholds are reached and to investigate whatever newly emerging phenomena appear only (or primarily) within a particular level. Furthermore, tier-3 research explores the connections between
a particular level of communication activity and other types of social phenomena that are not directly communicative. Thus, for example, in identifying interpersonal communication as a distinct level of communication it becomes appropriate to explore a topic such as the relationship between interpersonal communication and marriage (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). Accordingly, research focused around the tier-3 levels examines whatever is distinctive about the level as a whole, synthesizing data and theories related to the level without direct regard to phenomena and concepts that are related to other levels. That is, tier-3 research explores commonalities that occur broadly within the level but which do not necessarily distinguish the various situations comprising the level. Accordingly, some of the many questions that are raised here include the following that relate tier-3 research to concerns arising in tiers 1 and 2:

a. Which genres of message phenomena are most likely to be found within the interpersonal, small-group and public communication levels?
b. Which individual considerations play the greatest role in each level?
c. Which interactional and relational factors are most important in each level and how do they manifest themselves differently within each level?
d. What is the role of cultural phenomena within each level?

In a sense, then, while tier-1 and tier-2 research is abstracted from the situations in which the communication actually occurs, tier-3 research gathers those more specific situations together into three broad clusters. In doing so, it focuses on those message, individual, social/interactive, and cultural variables that are most relevant to understanding a particular cluster. So a levels approach within our disciplinary structure allows for the possibility of a broader synthesis across situations that have certain attributes in common (viz., the number of people involved, the controlling agent, the degree of formality, the amount of personal information exchanged, or other such criteria). It does not, however, possess the situational specificity achieved in tier-4 research.

**TIER-4 THEORY AND RESEARCH: MESSAGE ACTIVITY IN RECURRENT SOCIAL SITUATIONS**

The fourth tier of our discipline's intellectual structure may be called the SITUATION-CENTERED tier because research at tier-4 is readily identifiable by the recurrent social situations in which various tier-1, -2, and -3 considerations are studied: education and the schools, the family, medical consultations and health care campaigns, legal settings, mediated communication, profit and non-profit organizations, religious settings, and sports teams, to name but a few. Because tier-1, -2, and -3 processes can be studied in so many different socially significant situations, it is with tier-4 research that our manifest diversity most obviously obscures our natural sources of coherence.

Fortunately, our discipline is not defined by the wide variety of social situations within which it explores communication phenomena. It is defined by its emphasis on the tier-1 analysis of messages, the tier-2 investigation of the communicator, and the tier-3 study of the levels of communication that occur within those situations. From a disciplinary point of view, we don't study "health care" in the abstract; we study message-related activity in health care situations. We don't study "organizational behavior" in general; we study the role of
message behaviors within various organizational situations. If the research is communication research, it will necessarily focus on some class or aspect of messages and explore how the message interacts with the defining details of the situation being explored.\(^{17}\)

Research at the fourth tier typically assumes that each of the identified situations and settings entails its own distinctive sub-repertoire of message behaviors to describe, its own characteristic pattern of individual, social and cultural features to explore, and its own distinctive adaptations of one or more of the communication levels to examine. The motivation for situation-specific research is both understanding communication within some important social context and contributing to a richer foundation for developing more abstract and powerful theories at tiers 1, 2, and 3. In this way, tier-4 research is not only dependent upon concepts and theories derived from lower tiers but is also able to motivate profound reassessments of those theories—when those concepts and theories are shown to be inadequate in accounting for elements examined in tier-4 contexts.

Because tier-4 research assumes that the concepts and principles characterizing tiers 1, 2 and 3 may be profitably studied in relation to the contextual features characteristically defining some specific situation, the research questions raised in tier-4 concern issues such as:

a. How is the general concept of a communication situation best understood?
   That is, what are the general characteristics of situations?
b. Which characteristics of situations are likely to have the greatest impact on the communication that occurs within them?
c. How are specific categories of situation best described and differentiated from one another?
d. Which classes of message structures are prominent within particular types of settings?
e. How do various classes of message structures operate within a particular setting?
f. How are the individual, social group, and cultural aspects of our message behavior modified from setting to setting to create the complex communicative displays people routinely perform?
g. How are public, group or interpersonal communication behaviors adapted in order to create the distinctive communication patterns that characterize various recurring social situations?

In summary, tier-4 theory and research focus on message activity in particular settings. Broadly speaking, tier-4 research gathers together the concepts and interests generated at the three lower tiers and explores how they function in specific, recurring social situations that have relatively high salience within the communication culture being investigated. Nearly all of the articles cited earlier in this paper provide examples that illustrate that researchers explore how a particular class of messages is played out within a particular setting.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay was to address the recent challenges proposed by Wartella (1994) and Zarefsky (1993) of describing a clear vision of who we are
and of identifying the central organizing principle that holds our discipline together as an intellectual structure. In doing so, the essay presented a detailed model of the human communication discipline that can clarify what it is we do and reveal how the many types of research we conduct form an intellectually coherent complex of interests. It recommended organizing the discipline into four tiers, each with its own intellectual structure to guide research conducted at that tier.

The four-tiered structure has several benefits. First, it establishes a hierarchy of ideas for understanding the discipline as a whole. The concepts and principles developed in tier-1 theories are the most basic and central to defining what we mean by a communication perspective on a topic. Even when theorists disagree over what constitutes a "message," over how messages are structured, or over which approaches to analyzing message structure and function are most theoretically productive, communication as a discipline (and as an activity) seems to be distinguished by some concept of message. Furthermore, without such tier-1 concepts as signs and symbols, language, meaning, discourse, and information, it is hard to imagine how the human communication discipline would be distinct from general psychology, sociology, or anthropology.¹⁸

Second, the tier structure provides a systematic way to explain, without apology, the manifest diversity found in our professional literature. This is possible because the tier-structured hierarchy of ideas reflects our professional literature as it actually exists. It is not arbitrarily imposed "for the sake of" greater coherence. The variety we frequently feel obligated to justify arises naturally from the attempt to explore some tier-1 aspect of message activity (a) as it relates to the individual, the social interaction, or the culture within which it occurs; (b) as it occurs within a public, small group, or interpersonal level of observation; and (c) as it is influenced in fine detail by the particular recurring social situations within which it takes place. Although the research interests which the four tiers identify may seem many, the variety does not mean that we lack significant conceptual threads that can be followed systematically from one interest to another. There are such threads, and the tier structure provides a preliminary map for sorting out their paths.

Third, the four-tier model of our intellectual structure suggests an agenda for future detailed work within human communication theory because each tier centers around a set of fundamental questions. Some of these have been outlined above, and some will only be articulated as others are answered. Certainly, one of the most important tasks on the agenda for theorists investigating aspects of any particular tier will be to outline in greater detail the intellectual structure of that portion of the tier which interests them. Is there, for example, a taxonomy of message forms that can systematically reveal how various message types relate to one another? What is the finer structure of cognitive approaches to human message behavior? This paper has been concerned only with identifying and illustrating broad outlines of the discipline as a whole.

Fourth, the tier structure model presents an opportunity for conceptual progress within the discipline. The humanities and social sciences are frequently accused of not making the kind of intellectual progress in understanding their subject matter that is now routinely expected in the natural sciences. Because
each tier has its own set of guiding questions to pursue, however, the way basic questions are answered guides how we pursue subsequent ones (if we want to achieve coherence). The tier structure provides a model for which questions are basic and suggests a criterion for assessing intellectual progress: concepts and principles that lead to greater intellectual coherence across tiers represent progress in our overall understanding. This does not mean that ideas generated to understand a single case study or to investigate a particular type of communication situation are to be disdained. It only means that there will always be a need for formulating our ideas so that they can build systematically upon, or be derived from, concepts that are seen to be more fundamental in the tier-structure hierarchy. Whenever proposed concepts and ideas come into conflict, those capable of promoting greater coherence in our overall understanding of communication phenomena are usually evaluated more highly.

Finally, the tier structure suggests a pedagogical approach to introducing the discipline in a systematic manner. There has long been a need to arrange our research interests and findings into teachable curricula. At the undergraduate level in particular, this has been accomplished using a hit or miss approach. Some courses are arranged around levels (interpersonal communication, public speaking, small group decision-making), others around message types (nonverbal communication) or social interaction (conversation analysis), and still others around situation (health communication, family communication). Such courses are clearly legitimate and reflect selected aspects of our overall intellectual structure. But as presently placed in the curriculum, they do not appear to reflect a systematic plan for introducing the content so as to create a sense of intellectual progression for the students—especially since most of the course titles may be placed at nearly any level in the curriculum and typically require few, if any, prerequisites. Although this article does not intend to propose a tier-based curriculum for human communication education, it is suggested that the tier concepts would encourage curriculum builders at various institutions to develop coherent approaches to introducing the content of the discipline following a sequential progression—as in the natural sciences, where there is no apologizing for considering some topics to be more fundamental than others.

In closing, the four-tier model proposed in this essay not only reflects the intellectual structure of the discipline as it currently exists, but it can also serve as a guide for our intellectual progress and our future pedagogical planning. In accomplishing these, it fulfills the four criteria proposed by Zarefsky (1993) and meets two of the three criticisms of Wartella (1994). Hopefully, it can also aid anyone who seeks answers to What holds the field together, What is the central organizing principle of the discipline, or simply, How can one make sense of what we are doing?

NOTES

1While there is always some discussion about the matter, I have chosen to use the term discipline in this paper to identify the community of scholars who study various aspects of the human communication process. Supporting this choice, Cohen (1994) reports that the preponderance of communication professionals he surveyed believe that we are already a discipline, and even more believe that we should be considered one.
2Although such questions are frequently asked (Berger, 1991, 1992; Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, & Wartella, 1989a, 1989b; Rogers & Chaffee, 1983; Miller, 1985), they are far more rarely taken up as a problem in their own right (Cronkhite, 1986).
Each major discipline appears to arise from a single abstract concept that energizes its imagination and provides its central focus. For biology, the concept is LIFE and its derivatives. For psychology, it was first MIND, then BEHAVIOR and currently COGNITION. For sociology, the generative concept is SOCIETY; and for anthropology it is CULTURE. While the discipline’s practitioners may fight bitterly over what the concept “properly” means, the concept itself is always seen as the energizing center for the discipline. For the human communication discipline, that energizing concept appears to be MESSAGE.

As a concept, message is more abstract than any of the other possible competing foundational terms (speech, discourse, conversation, proposition, utterance, speech act, essay, gesture, film, narrative, information, and so forth), which may all be included as distinct forms of “messages,” and therefore subtypes deserving their own specific theoretical analyses. Furthermore, MESSAGE also encompasses such notions as meaning, signs and symbols, which have been offered by some as the defining characteristics of the field (Pearce, 1989; Cronkhite, 1986).

See, for example, Washell (1973), Benjamin (1975), and Liska (1993) for examples of this type of project.

As this discussion will suggest, our tier-1 interests overlap and blend with the interests of philosophers of language, semioticians, descriptive and generative linguists, discourse analysts, pragmatics theorists, art critics, and so forth. It is our message-centeredness, however, that provides our distinctiveness as we interact at our boundaries with these closely related disciplines.

See Lurie (1981), however, for an example of a self-conscious attempt to use the vocabulary of traditional linguistics as a direct model for interpreting the “language” of clothes.

The pragmatic or language-in-use system has been variously treated—sometimes as an inherent part of the language code itself and sometimes as a social application of the four primary levels of the language code. For the purposes of my model of the intellectual structure of the human communication discipline, I prefer to treat pragmatics as an element of general discourse analysis and consider it in the next section of the paper.

An entire journal, Metaphor and Symbolic Activity, is now dedicated to this particular unit of message analysis.

Searle’s (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts represents a fairly global approach to developing a taxonomy of message forms while Camden, Motley and Wilson’s (1984) taxonomy of white lies illustrates the taxonomic process for a specific class of messages. Obviously, a comprehensive analysis of message types will be capable of moving in a principled and systematic fashion from the most global to the most specific taxonomic distinctions it makes. The significance of careful and detailed tier-1 analysis of message types for the rest of our intellectual enterprise can be clearly seen in Kellerman and Cole’s (1994) analysis of competing taxonomies of compliance-gaining message strategies, where the authors detail how inadequate taxonomic attention to message analysis limits what can be supported at other levels of theoretical interpretation.

I am ignoring the thorny question of whether or not verbal thinking should be labeled as “intrapersonal communication” (Vocate, 1994).

The contrast between individually-oriented and interactionally-oriented communication theories may be compared with the difference between atomic and molecular theories in physics. Atomic theory concentrates on deeper and deeper analyses of the individual elemental atoms (carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and so forth), while molecular theory focuses on the complex interactions among atoms treated as relatively unitary wholes. The two levels diverge at the point where the atomic nature of elements cannot directly explain the interactional results among atoms. Thus, atomic theory can explain why gases such as oxygen and hydrogen are able to combine to form a molecule of water (H₂O). But it cannot explain, based on the atomic structure of either of the elements, why it is water that is produced. Nor can it explain the molecular properties of water once it is produced. The further one gets away from simple atomic interactions and the closer one moves toward complex organic molecules, the less directly relevant the atomic explanations become. Similarly, the psychological nature of individual communicators as encoders and decoders, while never completely irrelevant, becomes less and less prominent as one moves to higher levels of social-interactional phenomena. These phenomena are always grounded in our psychological (atomic) nature, but they are not usually explained by them. New principles take over as the level of observations changes from microscopic to macroscopic to telescopic.

The same sort of shift of attention occurs in physics when one turns from the atomic natures of the elements and focuses primarily on the relationships that arise as the elements interact to form molecular combinations. Thus, the atomic natures of hydrogen and oxygen recede in importance as we look at the relationships they form in producing water. And as the focus on water’s relationally produced characteristics becomes even more central to understanding some phenomenon, the atomic characteristics of the elements recede even further into the theoretical background.

Communication situations play such a prominent role in contemporary communication theories that both tiers 3 and 4 focus on the concept of the social context in which communication occurs. They differ, however, in their approach to defining situations and in the degree of specificity about what constitutes a particular type of situation.

See Miller (1978) and Bochner (1978) for examples of other possible level-defining continua.

Many theorists would treat organizational communication as a fourth level because, they might argue, there are both new phenomena to explore and qualitative differences in the operation of lower-level phenomena when communication occurs within a relatively structured pre-existing network of organizational roles and relationships. Others see organizational communication as merely a separate context wherein interpersonal, small-group and public communication processes are adapted to a particular set of situational rules, norms, and patterns. I have modeled communication in organizations as a tier-4 context rather than a tier-3 level for two reasons. First, I am not sure what continuum or continua it represents a threshold level of, or which of the other
three levels it represents a continuation of. Second, on the basis of the principle that whatever is included in tier-3 must be potentially applicable to all tier-4 contexts, I find it more difficult to consider organizational communication to be parallel to the other three levels. In spite of these considerations, a case could perhaps be made for treating organizational communication as a tier-3 level, at least on some grounds other than those which I am using.

Although they are situation-specific, theories generated within a single situation may subsequently be generalized to cover additional situations under proper theory-building conditions. This is possible because contextually specific studies can shed light on more general theories developed at lower tiers—causing them to be either revised or replaced, depending upon how well they account for the details discovered during tier-4 research.

For example, whether theorists study communication from a particular focus of observation (individual, social, or cultural), or in a particular level and setting—say, interpersonal conflict talk among female adolescents (Eder, 1990)—some particular approach to the nature of messages will either be specified or assumed. Furthermore, it is always possible to relate message-oriented considerations to tier-2 topics (the nature of the communicator as an individual, as a participant in a social interaction, and as a member of a cultural community) without specifying either a general situational level (public, small-group, or interpersonal), or a more specific recurrent social context in which the communication occurs. This suggests that tier-2 theories are more central than tier-3 or tier-4 theories. The four-tier structure suggests a relatively natural hierarchy of ideas that systematically interrelates the major concepts and theories developed within the human communication discipline.

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