

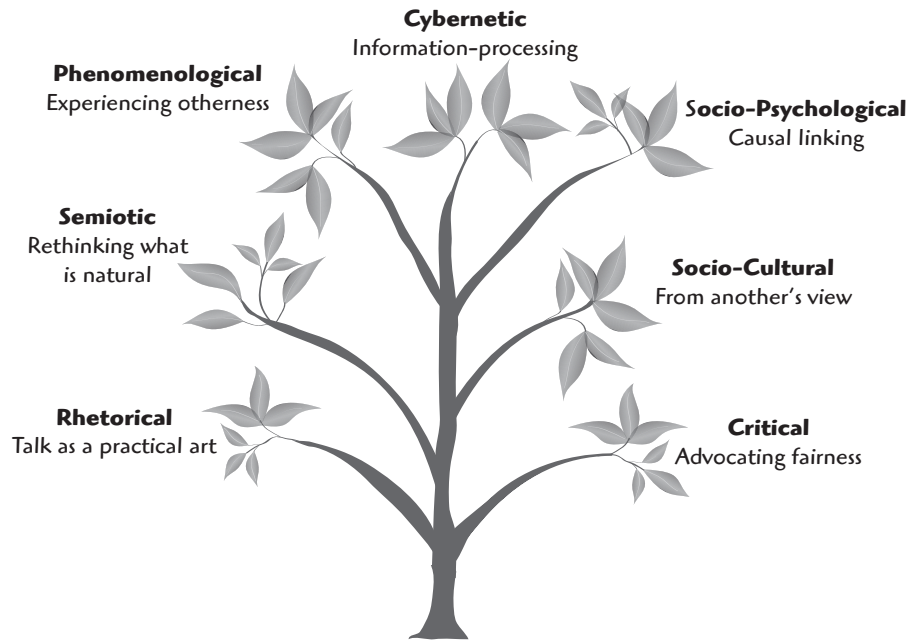
## Lecture 5&6: Seven Traditions in the Communication Field

Chapter 1 provided a foundation for conceptualizing what communication is and understanding the complexity of the communication process. In this chapter, we further unravel the meaning of communication by articulating two primary ways of looking at the field of communication.

The communication discipline is vast, and its depth is reflected in the lives of people across the United States, people like Lee and Jenny Yamato. Their relationship is obviously a close one, marked now by a common and often emotional point in a family's development: college. As the two begin to adapt to a new type of relationship characterized by distance, their communication will also take on new levels of importance. As Bethani Dobkin and Roger Pace (2006) state, "communication has the potential to shape identities, relationships, environments, and cultures" (p. 6). The Yamato family will likely communicate with an appreciation for the full impact that communication can have on their lives. Let's begin our discussion of the communication field by looking at seven traditions in communication. We will then examine various settings in which communication occurs. These two approaches guide this chapter. The first approach ("The Seven Traditions") is theoretical in nature; the second framework ("The Seven Contexts") is more practical in its approach. We describe each in the following pages.

### Seven Traditions in the Communication Field

Robert Craig (Craig, 1999; Craig & Muller, 2007) outlines communication theory in one of the more thoughtful, intellectually valuable ways. Craig believed that communication theory is a vast and often unwieldy area of study and, to this end, provided categories to aid over understanding of it. Craig and Muller note that trying to make sense of communication theory is often complicated because of different intellectual styles in the field. A classification system for understanding communication theory, then, helps us to break down the challenges associated with understanding theory.



**Figure 2.1**  
Traditions in  
Communication  
Theory

Craig terms the following framework as “traditions” to highlight the belief that theoretical development doesn’t just occur naturally. Indeed, theorizing in communication is a deliberative, engaging, and innovative experience that happens over time. As Craig and Muller (2007) point out, “theorists invent new ideas to solve problems they perceive in existing ideas in a particular tradition” (p. xiii). And, although traditions suggest adhering to a historical preference, Craig and Muller are quick to point out that traditions change frequently and, like communication, are dynamic. Further, they caution that many theories are not easily categorized: “Even a theory that rebels against its tradition and rejects major parts of it can still belong to the tradition in significant ways” (p. xiv). So let’s examine the seven traditions of communication theory as advanced by Craig (1999). To honor the integrity of each tradition yet avoid irrelevant detail for this section of the chapter, we will provide you an overview of each tradition. If you’d like additional details, you are encouraged to consult Craig’s research. See Figure 2.1 for an overview of the traditions.

### *The Rhetorical Tradition*

At the heart of the rhetorical tradition is what Craig notes as the “practical art” (p. 73) of talk. This tradition suggests that we are interested in public address and public speaking and their functions in a society. Rhetorical theory is especially valued in many Western societies because it helps us understand the influence of speech and how we can cultivate our public speaking effectiveness. This tradition also includes the ability to reflect on different viewpoints before arriving at a personal view. It is the usefulness of the rhetorical tradition that remains attractive to researchers, theorists, and practitioners.

The rhetorical tradition necessarily involves elements pertaining to language and the audience. It also includes a discussion pertaining to audience appeals; how do audience members respond to emotions, for example? To what extent does the power of language move people to emotional and decisive action? How are we influenced or swayed by the appeals by mass media? What role does personal example play in having others accept our point of view? What effect does speaking to a large group of people have on the perceptions or actions of that group? Or, to what extent does the rhetorical tradition challenge the common belief that “telling the plain truth is something other than the strategic adaptation of a message to an audience” (Craig, 2007, p. 73)? Answering such questions is not easy and yet needs to be considered as we reflect on the value and historical importance of looking at communication theory using a rhetorical lens.

### *The Semiotic Tradition*

Simply put, **semiotics** is the study of signs. Signs are part of a social life and *signs* stand for something else. Children laughing and running around is a *sign* of play. A ring on the ring finger of the left hand is a *sign* of a married individual. An adult crying in a funeral home is a *sign* of sadness. Most common among these signs are “words” or what we generally consider as language usage. According to the semiotic tradition, meaning is achieved when we share a common language. As noted in Chapter 1, people arrive at a communication exchange with various fields of experience and values placed on these experiences. Pioneer linguist I. A. Richards (1936) observed that words are arbitrary and have no intrinsic meaning. Consequently, achieving commonality in meaning is more difficult than first imagined—particularly if one is using language that is not recognized nor valued by another.

Semiotics suggests that what we think of as “natural” or “obvious” in public discourse needs to be considered in context. That is, our values and belief structures are often a result of what has been passed down from one generation to another (a tradition). What was considered to be a “given” years ago may simply not be that way today. Semiotics challenges the notion that words have appropriate meanings; indeed, words change as the people using those words change. Consider, for example, the use of the words “war” and “peace” in the 1940s (World War II), the 1960s/70s (Vietnam War), the 1990s (Gulf War), and today (Iraq War). There are also likely to be multiple meanings of these two words if, for example, someone lost a family member in one of these wars and if another person protests war on a regular basis. Consider the phrase “single parent.” In the 1950s, it did not resonate deeply in society. However, as time evolved, the divorce rate soared and marriage was not a “default” choice; being a single mom (like Jenny Yamato) or single dad is now commonplace.

### *The Phenomenological Tradition*

Let’s explore the term *phenomenology*, a concept derived from the field of philosophy. **Phenomenology** is a personal interpretation of everyday life and

**semiotics**  
the study of signs

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activities. Often, phenomenology is intuitive and involves looking at things and events through a personal lens.

Craig (2007) believes that the phenomenological tradition is marked by communication that he contends is an “experience of otherness” (p. 79). What this means is that a person tries to attain authenticity by eliminating biases in a conversation. Many phenomenologists believe that an individual’s system of beliefs should not influence the dialogue taking place. As you’re probably figuring out, this is quite challenging, or, as Craig points out, is a “practical impossibility” (p. 80). Consider, for example, the challenge many people have communicating with other people who have different points of view or are from different backgrounds. Craig notes that many phenomenological ideas are especially applicable to issues pertaining to diversity, identity, class, and religion.

### *The Cybernetic Tradition*

Communication as information science was first introduced by Shannon and Weaver, two scholars associated with the linear model we discussed in Chapter 1. Recall that this model’s fundamental shortcoming pertained to the fact that human communication is not as simplistic as linearity suggests. Nonetheless, what Shannon and Weaver did advance was the belief that communication involves noise. Cybernetics in particular looks at problems such as noise in the communication process. But it goes further. Cybernetics tries to unravel the complexities of message meaning by underscoring the unpredictability of the feedback we receive.

By advocating a cybernetic approach, communication theorists are embracing an expansive view of communication. As Craig (2007) states: “[I]t is important for us as communicators to transcend our individual perspectives, to look at the communication process from a broader, systemic viewpoint, and not to hold individuals responsible for systemic outcomes that no individual can control” (p. 82). In other words, the cybernetic tradition asks us to understand that communication is not only information processing, but also that individuals enter into communication settings with different abilities in that information processing.

### *The Socio-Psychological Tradition*

Those who adhere to the socio-psychological tradition uphold a cause-effect model. That is, communication theory is examined from a view that holds that someone’s behavior is influenced by something else—something social psychologists call a “variable” (we return to the issue of quantitative research in Chapter 3). Craig (2007) believes that underlying this tradition is the assumption that our own communication patterns and the patterns of others vary from one person to another. It is up to the social psychologist to unravel the relationship among these patterns.

An early advocate of the socio-psychological tradition was Carl Hovland. Hovland, a Yale psychologist, examined attitude change and investigated the extent to which long- and short-term recall influences an individual’s attitudes

and beliefs. In the 1950s—long before personal computers came into existence—Hovland also was the first to experiment with computer simulations and the learning process. His work and the work of other social psychologists underscored the importance of experimental research and trying to understand causal links. It is this scientific evidence for human behavior that continues to pervade much communication theorizing from this tradition.

### *The Socio-Cultural Tradition*

The essence of the socio-cultural tradition can be summed up this way: “Our everyday interactions with others depend heavily on preexisting, shared cultural patterns and social structures” (Craig, 2007, p. 84). The core of the socio-cultural tradition suggests that individuals are parts of larger groups who have unique rules and patterns of interaction. To theorize from this tradition means to acknowledge and become sensitive to the many kinds of people who occupy this planet. Theorists should not instinctively nor strategically “group” people without concern for individual identity.

Socio-cultural theorists advocate that we abandon the binary “you/me” or “us/them” approach to understanding people. Instead, appealing to the *co-creation* of social order/reality is a worthier goal for consideration. As people communicate, they produce, maintain, repair, and transform (Carey, 1989). Dialogue and interaction must be characterized by an understanding of what Craig (2007) calls “voice,” (p. 84) an individual point of view that inevitably finds its way into everyday conversation.

### *The Critical Tradition*

Individuals who are concerned with injustice, oppression, power, and linguistic dominance are those who would likely identify themselves as critical theorists. Critiquing the social order and imposing structures or individuals on that order are at the heart of critical theory. Among the critical theorists most known for protesting social order is philosopher and political economist/revolutionary, Karl Marx. Marx believed that power in society has been hijacked by institutions that have no real concern for the working class. In his book, *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels (1848) contended that the history of a society is best understood by looking at the class struggles in that society. We explore more of Marx’s influence in Chapter 21.

Critical theorists find that openly questioning the assumptions that guide a society is legitimate. In doing so, communicators expose the beliefs and values that guide their decision making and actions. As is suggested in our opening story of Jenny and Lee Yamato, Jenny felt that as a single mom, she could never achieve the level of respect afforded to other family types. Critical theorists would attempt to unravel how a society defines freedom, equality, and reason, three qualities identified by Craig (2007), in order to understand Jenny’s experiences. Who or what are the principle forces on social order? How does one achieve the freedom to express one’s will? These and a host of other questions are at the core of the critical tradition.

### *Putting It All Together*

This discussion provides you one way of looking at the texture of the communication field. Communication theory, as you will discover, is not created in a vacuum. Scholars enter into the theory-building process with particular positions, some of which influence the direction of the theories they construct and refine.

With this backdrop, we now wish to explore a more practical framework from which to view communication theory. We turn our attention to the various contexts, or environments, of communication from which research and theory develop.