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Rethinking Our Rethinking Retrospectively: A Rejoinder to Spano

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After reading Spano's (1996) essay several times, I was struck by the title of the work in opposition to its substance. When I read "practical" approach in the title, I first thought that the discussion would progress (or regress) into the work of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) and their "pragmatics," or perhaps even further back to the pragmatic philosophy of Peirce (Houser & Kloesel, 1992). However, nowhere in the paper did I find these works mentioned. As I reread the paper, I detected a vocabulary that was more reminiscent of phenomenology than pragmatism: "here-and-now," "situated communication action," "embodied persons," and "situated performance," among others. Obviously, there is nothing inherently "wrong" or "disparate" about phenomenological language, but pragmatic (praxis; practical) constructs are different.

The opening of the paper provides a targeted attack on the work of "positivists" in our discipline (though none is identified), an attack not far removed from similar phenomenological assaults on positivism found in the works of Denzin & Lincoln (1994), Bruyn (1966), or Lincoln & Guba (1985). The differences, however, are that the above listed writers have provided examples of the problems with logical positivistic approaches to human studies. In addition, none of them focused on communication studies.

Certainly I do not disagree, in part, with Delia's (1985) notion that "positivism" in our discipline was utilized in an
attempt to emulate seemingly more credible, scientific disciplines to raise our own credibility. I disagree, however, that credibility raising was the sole or central concern. In fact, our discipline was going nowhere; thus, I believe that it was an attempt to find direction. Of course, the emulation was NOT a scientific surrogate resembling physics or mathematics or chemistry. Instead, it was a modest attempt to adopt the views of what many considered a similar humanistic study, the discipline of psychology. Of course one can argue that behavioral, Skinnerian psychology may have been a poor substitute. Clinical psychology may have been a more effective choice. And certainly the sub-discipline of interpersonal communication has, at various times, incorporated both psychologies, as well as anthropology and sociology. But the empirical, "laboratory" studies of the late 1940s, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, grew to fill a void, not to generate communication laws. In fact, the very notion of level of significance is much more supportive of a Protagorian construct based on probabilities than either an intuitive, idealistic view of Plato or any view portrayed by Aristotle. It would seem that such a probabilistic account would be consistent with, rather than inconsistent with, a practical view.

Overall, I have found a disagreement with the assumption of some theory/praxis dichotomy, which supposedly exists in our literature. Second, I believe that the approach espoused by Spano (1996) is in fact "trial-and-error theory." Third, I agree with some contentions of the previous paper, but I use different terminology to explain what I mean.

**THE THEORY-PRACTICE DICHOTOMY**

What I have described as a "filling of the void," the so-called logical positivistic view, in the discipline of communication studies was neither theory- nor practice-driven in its early days. While there is little doubt that theory was the
basis of the empirical studies, in many cases, the theory was approximately 2000 years old. There is little difference between ethos being described as character, intelligence, and goodwill or ethos as trustworthiness and competence. In some ways, the difference is similar to that found between a witch doctor saying one's illness is caused by the devil and a contemporary physician calling it a virus. The difference is that character, intelligence, and good will were not measurable. Trustworthiness and competence were.

Let us take these simple notions to alleviate the supposed discrepancy between theory and practice. First of all, some authors (Stacks, Hickson, & Hill, 1991) describe the interaction of teaching, practice, observation, research, and theory as a web (p. 289). That is, no one is relegated to being first, or second, or third. They interact with one another. Nevertheless, one would not want to teach students something that was contrary to the other four. That is, we would not want to teach public speaking students that being trustworthy is unimportant.

Perhaps Spano's (1996) criticism is directed more toward Burgoon's (1989) attempt to divorce communication theory from speech practice. Burgoon's notion, however, was directed more toward attempting to enhance the credibility of a department at a particular university more so than it was a theoretical-practice dichotomy. He was concerned that the discipline was achieving a bad reputation as a result of teaching performance courses as core courses. Such a position as Burgoon's (1989), however, is not related to the historical role of positivism in research.

In fact, the history is that there was a dichotomy between research and theory. The term, "variable testing," was assigned to such works which essentially randomly pitted one variable against another, with little or no theoretical insight. It was not until almost 15 years after the publication of Kuhn's (1962) book that Jesse Delia and James C. McCroskey posed the arguments for deontology and empiricism in the
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discipline at a Speech Communication Association Convention in Houston, Texas. Delia suggested that McCroskey would really like to put all of the variables in a pot to see what would result. McCroskey, not denying the allegation, said that Delia would prefer to sit on a pot and "think about it."

The results over the past few years, however, have been somewhere in between. Theory, contemporary theory, has become much more prominent in the discipline. Simple variable testing, without underlying theory, is less likely to be published today than it was 15 years ago.

Thus, Spano's (1996) statements: "Clearly, the separation of theory and practice is one of those effects left us by positivism. In the positivist approach, theory is a set of abstract principles expressed in the form of propositions" (p.75) cause some problems. Other than those relatively few studies (research, not theory) which re-tested Aristotle and Cicero's works, there never was a theoretical connection prior to the "positivists." In fact, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero theorized based on observation and intuition. Clearly, there may have been a division between research and theory — but not theory and practice.

Pedagogically what happened was that many teachers simply took the results of the theories and re-taught the intuitions. Which brings us back to trustworthiness. A recent political poll indicated that most voters do not "trust" President Clinton, but they intend to vote for him anyway. Now this sounds like something that needs retesting. Or, maybe we never have trusted politicians.

Looking at the web of instruction, practice, observation, theory, and research, it would appear that we need to have some bases for what we say to students in our classes. If we leave theory out of the web, it appears that we move back to where the positivists were 20 years ago — variable testing. I do not believe that Spano (1996) can simply say that theory, especially something resembling law-like theory, can be thrown out; we need to look further.
TRIAL-AND-ERROR

Taking the position that empirical research and theory are to be separated from practice may take us even further — backwards. Looking at another area of communication, nonverbal communication, Birdwhistell (1970) has emphasized the very point that Spano (1996) appears to be trying to make. That is, nonverbal communication is contextual. Birdwhistell emphasizes that interpreting a nonverbal message must involve seeking out the norms of cultures, subcultures, and micro-cultures. It is also important to have a baseline. For example, is one's excessive leg and foot movement an indicator of deception, or is it simply the normal nervous gesture of the observed?

Rules theory is inherently practical, but even among the rules theorists, there is no attempt to "start from scratch" every time a new communication situation approaches. Reading Birdwhistell's (1970) "cigarette scene" (pp. 227-250) can be an invaluable exercise for students. Similar invaluable learning can come from reading Goffman's (1971) "remedial interchanges" (pp. 95-187).

Spano (1996), however, appears to suggest that the students can learn such information only from experiencing it. Once again, however, there is nothing new about this pedagogical approach. When Spano (1996) writes that "it is the educator's/researcher's responsibility to bring theory down from its lofty perch of abstraction to meet the concrete needs of communication practice" (p. 80), he seems to be asking the student to start all over again.

If we take this approach to everything, then we would have to pull out a map each time we drive to work. We would have to go to the Library of Congress to re-investigate what we already know about history. We would have to re-test each scientific theory. Reasoned skepticism is all right, but would it not be a better method to "test" some of those studies
("theories") which have not been replicated? Perhaps, too, it would be advantageous to investigate a few of the dialectical formats below.

RETHINKING OUR RETHINKING

Some of the notions mentioned by Spano (1996) make a great deal of sense. However, I believe that there is a hodgepodge of notions in this work. Pedagogically, Spano seems to oppose "top-down, monologue" from the instructor. Philosophically, he seems to believe that reflexivity is a better "measure" of validity and reliability than are statistical norms. Theoretically, he seems to be disgusted with a law-like approach.

In the pedagogical approach, we are essentially talking about monologue versus dialogue. This issue is as new as Plato. Where the issue evolves, however, is how much do students "know" about the communication process before they enter the communication classroom? They certainly know what they have said and what the practical consequences have been, in a number of contexts. So, they do not know about theory. They do not know the terms, the researchers, the propositions. Why would they need to know these things? Primarily, they would need to know so that every communication experience for them is not a trial-and-error event. Knowledge is cumulative. The student experiences can be useful as a "jumping off" point, but to change, to observe others requires education.

Philosophically, there is nothing impertinent or irrelevant about investigating reflexively. Perhaps we can make this point through another notion of theory. Psychologist Frans de Waal (1996) has suggested that there are a number of universals among humans. Many of these universals involve humans in the process of communication. These elements include sympathy, rank and order, and quid pro quo.
While sympathy is not an element of communication that has been studied often by communication researchers, certainly it can be associated with empathy, audience analysis, definition of the situation, and the like. As one of the primary constructs that we study, this sympathy-empathy-audience analysis-definition of the situation construct should be an important aspect of any communication course. In essence, how do we "get into" the mind of the other? Why do we need to "get into" the mind of the other? How do we adapt to others when we are trying to communicate? When are we trying to persuade? When we are using catharsis?

Rank and order provide a basis for the previous construct. For example, do I change the nature of my message when I am upset depending upon whether the other is a superior or a subordinate? The rank and order construct is found in such diverse theoretical works as Burke (1966) and Mehrabian (1972). Unfortunately, this is an area where little research is found across contexts in the communication discipline. Therefore, it may be exactly the kind of construct that one may wish to "experiment" or "experience" in a basic course. What is the role of rank-and-order in the college classroom? How does this differ from the high school classroom? How does it affect marital interaction? How does rank-and-order affect personality (Schutz, 1966)? Then, students could investigate how Schutz' notions of abdicrat, democrat, autocrat relate to Mehrabian's or Burke's concepts. The point is that virtually every theory of communication includes some aspect of rank-and-order (power, status). Again the point may be to find such universal constructs.

A third such construct is quid pro quo. Such reciprocity is essential to uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) as well as exchange theory (Homans, 1961). Such reciprocal altruism is also a major ingredient of Aristotle's good will component of ethos. Once again, students may read about each of these theoretical components and compare and contrast them. Berger and Calabrese's (1975)
uncertainty reduction also discusses nonverbal affiliative expressive — in essence, the liking-disliking dimension of Mehrabian's (1972) approach.

Such universals should then be discussed and experienced utilizing the dialectic of cultural:acultural That is, which of these constructs are truly universal? How are they implemented differently in different cultures? What is the language (Spano's "grammar") of each of these constructs? How do we let the other know that we sympathize/empathize? How do we let the other know that we understand the rank-and-order hierarchy within that particular context? How do we develop and maintain quid pro quo relationships of an altruistic nature?

Law-like theories are virtually non-existent in communication theory. Syntactical generality is low in almost every theory that we have available. As Spano (1996) suggests, communication is highly context-bound. Thus, we must have "if" this and "if" that. The lack of law-like theory is perhaps a result of some of the variable testing in the past. The direction in which we have gone filled a void but created a new void. That is, what is the communication paradigm (if there is one)? Without such a paradigm, the discipline persists in having a relatively disorganized approach to whatever problem one is attempting to resolve. Is the paradigm, "it depends," sufficient? I wonder, is "it depends" a virus?

**SUMMARY**

In brief, I certainly believe that Spano's (1996) essay arouses a renewed interest in the philosophical aspects of the basic course. However, it is an important consideration to engage in the exact reflexivity that Spano has recommended. First, it is important to understand the history of the discipline. Second, it is important to sift through various philosophical foundations to determine how they "fit" with one
another. Third, a practical approach involves being specific. Practical approaches typically do not involve phenomenological language, which certainly is more obtuse if not more abstract than positivism. A practical approach means utilizing available information, regardless of the philosophical system under which the results were found. A practical approach means utilizing a language that students understand. A practical approach means defining terms and relating terms to one another. Fourth, a practical approach does mean researching audiences and contexts, but it also means that there may be universals which are adapted rather than dismissed. Hopefully, Spano and I have provided a format under which teachers of the basic course can gain some reflection about the interrelationships among theory, research, observation, practice, and instruction.

Perhaps most importantly, we must address some of these concerns of Spano's and mine. For if we do not, we are recommending to non-majors taking a basic course (public speaking, fundamentals, interpersonal, theory) to continue taking other courses invoking "it depends" as an always, very obtuse, very abstract, very ambiguous, very mundane, very anti-intellectual answer to all communication problems.

REFERENCES


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