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Special Issue: Hidden Gems in Communication Studies

Why Can't We Appreciate Each Other? Ramblings After Four Decades in the Discipline

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In this essay I will be focusing on an article that Dr. Gary Cronkhite (1986) published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* entitled "On the Focus, Scope, and Coherence of the Study of Human Symbolic Activity." I would note that Dr. Cronkhite published this paper while I was in graduate school. We spent a long time discussing this paper in class and in his office both before and after he published it. Part of the reason this is such an important article to me involves memories of intellectual discussions with Dr. Cronkhite. Unfortunately, even though the paper was published almost 40 years ago, I think it still has a lot to offer our discipline.

My selection needs to be contextualized for it to make sense. I have a joint Ph.D. in psychology and speech communication which means I did everything for a Ph.D. in each discipline except I did one dissertation that was at the intersection of the two disciplines. For most of my career, I have had dual appoints in psychology and communication and at various points in my career my primary appointment was in psychology and at other points in my career it was in communication. But I always come back to communication and this essay provides the basis for that decision on my part.

Cronkhite's (1986) paper was a response to the oft made criticism of our discipline's fragmentary nature. The department where I was a Ph.D. student was composed of rhetoricians, critical scholars, argumentation scholars, scholars of public address, and communication scientists who were interested in all manner of topics including interpersonal, group, and organizational communication as well as persuasion and social influence, and nonverbal communication. Across these myriad areas there were a variety of epistemologies and research methodologies that were frequently see as conflicting. This was often interpreted as a major issue for the discipline when I was in graduate school. How could a functioning academic unit have such a divergence in methodological

approaches and epistemological assumptions? I remember a dean arguing that if we could not agree on what constituted knowledge, how could we agree on how to run a graduate program? Certainly, psychology departments represent a diversity of interests in human behavior, but there are shared values across these areas and, perhaps critically, the methodological and epistemological assumptions are consistent across subareas within psychology, with minor exceptions. A common set of methodological and epistemological assumptions is frequently not the case in communication departments—particularly when I was in graduate school. Indeed, the argument can be made that we are in an even a more fragmented situation today (Waisbord, 2019). I think the fact that this continues to be an issue for our discipline would sadden Gary.

In this essay, Cronkhite (1986) addresses this diversity by arguing that across these different topical foci and epistemological assumptions, our discipline is, at its core, concerned with the study of human symbolic activity. Obviously, all the social sciences and humanities deal with symbolic activity at one level or another. But our discipline's central focus is studying how people use symbols (broadly construed) to transmit information (either intentionally or unintentionally) to each other and how the use of these symbols impacts the individual and the broader culture. Much of the early part of Cronkhite's essay then focuses on exactly what he means by "symbolic" because that can be a loaded term. But that is not what I took from this essay as a graduate student. Rather, what I took from the essay is that at its core, our discipline is concerned with language pragmatics. As Gary put it: "My own preference would be to define the domain as including primarily *pragmatic* functions of symbolic activity, the effects of symbol systems upon those who use them" (p. 236; emphasis in original). How do we do things with "symbols" and how does what we do with symbols allow us to cooperate with other people or influence other people or comfort other people. But perhaps more important, how does what we do with symbols shape the nature of our reality. In other words, what are the processes that are engaged when people are persuaded or entertained or comfort or cooperate?

A common critique of my research career is that it is scattered and that I do not have an underlining theme to my research. A critical lesson I took from Cronkhite's (1986) paper was that communication scholars did not have to be indentured to a particular area of scholarship. Communication scholars typically identify themselves as a scholar of a particular domain. You studied health communication or rhetoric or interpersonal communication and so on. But I took from Cronkhite's missive that we did not have to be beholden to an area of scholarship because our discipline dealt with symbolic *processes*. There was an alternative approach to a scholarly career where the scholar's research program could focus on various processes that are intertwined with these symbolic processes and explore these processes across the typical domains that define our discipline. I do not want to be interpreted as dismissing or in some way attacking scholars who are "health communication scholars" or "interpersonal scholars" or "media effects scholars"—that is the last thing that I intend to do. But I felt this article empowered me to study cognitive processes related to and impacted by symbolic processes. This focus on cognitive processes is, at least to me, the unifying theme across my "disparate" programs of research.

By understanding the processes involved with symbolic behavior, we provide a foundation for understanding commonality and differences across areas. Perhaps more importantly, we also provide opportunities to understand the boundary conditions on different processes and, as I argued recently in this journal, we develop more falsifiable theories because we increase the specificity of the conditions under which one process operates and conditions where other processes operate (Ewoldsen, 2022). For

example, understanding the processes underlying the attitude-behavior relationship has wide ranging implications for understanding how human symbolic behavior impacts behavior more broadly construed. Consequently, many scholars in our discipline utilize the Reasoned Action Approach (RAA; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) to understand very divergent behaviors, ranging from the sharing of online news stories (Kim et al., 2020) to teen alcohol consumption (Sciglimpaglia et al., 2020) to attitudes toward mobile fitness apps (Wang & Collins, 2021). This allows us to understand of how attitudes impact behavior across domains ranging from computer mediated communication to political communication to health communication.

Critically, a process orientation also allows us to understand when processes operate and when they do not operate. For example, the processes outlined by the RAA do an excellent job of explaining the attitude-behavior relationship in some instances, but there are other circumstances when these processes do not (Rhodes & Ewoldsen, 2009). We have argued that the RAA has not done as good of a job explaining certain categories of behavior because of boundary conditions on the theory. The RAA is more appropriate for explaining deliberative behaviors (e.g., the *reason* in the RAA) than for explaining spontaneous behaviors. Spontaneous behaviors occur when there is little motivation or opportunity to engage in deliberation. The RAA was clearly designed to explain deliberative behaviors. But that was not acknowledged as a boundary condition for the RAA until years later (Ewoldsen et al., 2015; Fazio, 1990; Rhodes & Ewoldsen, 2013). Based on the identified boundary conditions for the RAA, the theory will not do a good job of predicting spontaneous behavior. However, if the focus is on predicting deliberative behaviors, the RAA should do an excellent job predicting and explaining the behavior.

Beyond a more general focus on process, a very concrete influence of Cronkhite's article on my research was my prolonged interest on comprehension and related processes. One of the topics that I was introduced to in my psychology coursework that seemed central to understanding symbolic activities is comprehension. However, I never had any introduction to comprehension in any of my communication classes. This baffled me. Comprehension of symbolic messages should be a cornerstone of our discipline. An initial step to understanding the pragmatic effects of a message should involve understanding how people comprehended that message. What are framing effects other than different messages about a topic activating different concepts during the process of comprehension (Kim et al., 2016)? As another example, could theories of comprehension help us understand when product placements were likely to be encoded in memory? The answer is a clear yes, theories of comprehension can help us understand when product placements are stored in memory as well as what information is likely to be recalled from any narrative (Anderegg et al., 2017; Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007). As a confused and mystified graduate student, the failure to consider comprehension and its role in human symbolic action seemed paramount to assuming that all people interpreted a message in the same way – one of Stuart Hall's (1980) criticisms of media effects research. If people did interpret messages differently, wouldn't we want to understand how these different interpretations arise and what impact they have on behaviors? I was told that was why people did pilot studies—to demonstrate that everyone interprets the message in the same way. I was not satisfied with that answer. Consistent with my failure to be introduced to any work on comprehension by communication scientists, I was discouraged from pursuing my interest in comprehension. It was not until I was promoted to full professor that I felt comfortable finally pursuing my interests in comprehension and the broader implications of comprehension processes for our understanding of media psychology (Anderegg et al., 2017;

Lee et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2008). I hope that this program of research has demonstrated that comprehension can be studied by media scholars and that we can learn important insights into the impact of human symbolic activity by studying comprehension.

While the focus on process has been important to my career, the critical influence this article had on my career and my desire to have my primary affiliation with communication as opposed to psychology was Cronkhite's emphasis that we should learn from scholarship conducted across the different methodologies and epistemologies represented in our discipline. In the last half of the essay, Cronkhite (1986) systematically dismantles all the chasms that separate scholars in our discipline. Again, to quote Cronkhite: "Many of us have been trained exclusively in one or the other of these methodologies, and … [to] disparage the other, but our misfortune is no justification to inflict the same sorry state of affairs on our students …" (p. 239). Along with many students in our discipline, I was socialized to disregard scholarship by scholars who did not share my methodologies and epistemological assumptions. Fortunately, Cronkhite's essay provided a different way to understand this diversity within our discipline. We should embrace it as a blessing because it provides us with broader perspectives for understanding human symbolic processes.

I remember presenting a paper at ICA that summarized some of my work on comprehension. The respondent to the panel literally yelled at me because I had the audacity to cite Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. Of course, Stuart Hall was a leading cultural scholar. According to this respondent, communication scientists should not be citing cultural scholarship because it is too humanistic. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is an attempt to explain the polysemic nature of media texts and both how message producers try to constrain how a message is interpreted and how message recipients bring to bear their own understandings of the world to interpret the text. How heretical to argue that a text can be interpreted in multiple ways and that we should study the underlying processes that help us understand how people interpret messages in different ways!

I feel fortunate that Cronkhite's (1986) essay dispelled the simplistic divide between "humanistic" and "scientific" studies of communication as just that–simplistic. I make no apologies for citing Stuart Hall (1980) or David Morley's (1992, 1999) work testing the encoding/decoding model. Likewise, a recent line of research I am conducting focuses on people's reflective imaginative involvement (RII) with a narrative text (Ewoldsen et al., 2021; Sethi et al., 2022; Sherrick et al., 2021; Ulusoy et al., 2022). RII involves people's asynchronous engagement with narratives. RII can range from simply recalling a favorite scene in a movie to actively changing an event within a story and imagining how the story would change. Our work on RII draws heavily from cultural scholars such as Jenkins (1992), Brooker (2001), and Proctor (2013). Cultural scholars have been very interested in how people reflect upon and change the narratives they have engaged with. This scholarship has laid a solid foundation for our work, and we have hope we have built upon this work by demonstrating variables that predict the likelihood of engaging in RII and what are the impacts of RII. For example, we have demonstrated that engaging in RII greatly aided in people's psychological need fulfillment during the pandemic (Sherrick et al., 2021). In other words, my own work is augmented by paying attention to work by scholars who *occupy other camps* from my own.

In my experience, there is quality work done across the discipline. Unfortunately, there is also awful work done across the discipline. But I find that I can potentially learn valuable lessons from any of this work—whether it is theoretical insights that spur my own thinking or methodological lessons on how not to conduct

research. But to me, Dr. Cronkhite's article and the many discussions we had in his office or during seminars have taught me that whether I learn or not rest on my shoulders. Not exposing myself to different ways of thinking because the scholars do not share my epistemological or methodological assumptions limits my ability to develop my research programs.

I would like to close with this missive from Chronkhite (1986): "*... the most powerful methodology that can be brought to bear on a research problem is human intelligence*" (p. 238; emphasis in original).

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