1 Theorizing as an Everyday Activity

Preview

This chapter will show that human interaction is driven by underlying theories. These are people's theories-in-use or implicit theories. Theories-in-use, or implicit theories, direct what we pay attention to, how we think about what we see, and routine choices of action. People, organizations, and societies often fail to manage problems and conflicts well when old implicit theories direct their thinking and choices in new circumstances. Even in repeated failure, people often do not make their implicit theories explicit, examine the assumptions on which they are based, and develop better ones. This is especially true of the most common communication theories-in-use. Thriving in our increasingly complex personal and social world will require more explicit attention to the theories through which we engage with the world and the people around us. We begin that here.

Implicit Theories and Window Bashing

Before getting into a lot of detail, we wish to build an intuitive understanding of how implicit, theories-in-use; work, and can fail. Imagine living in a glass house. Glass houses have an organic relation to the outside. The blurring of the interior and exterior feels like living in the natural world. But glass houses also confuse birds. Birds often think they can fly through them. If you lived in a glass house, you might be sitting there relaxing and suddenly a bird might hit the glass with a bang. This can be startling and sad. But most often the bird will fall to the ground, brush itself off, and then fly away. It is an occasional problem but probably not a big deal.

Communication Theory at the Crossroads, First Edition. Stanley Deetz, Gary P. Radford, and Michael Vicaro.

Imagine however that your bedroom had a glass wall with a tree outside. Every morning when the sun comes up, a cardinal flies to a branch, looks at your glass wall and flies headlong into it. But instead of brushing itself off and flying away, it flies back to the branch, looks out, and flies headlong into the window again and again for 20–30 minutes every single morning. This is a bigger problem and would probably get you thinking.

As you lie there in bed awake way too early, your immediate thoughts might be of the cardinal being "stupid." After all, can't this poor creature understand that glass is solid? Isn't this bird able to learn from experience and realize that the glass will continue to be there, no matter how many times it tries to fly through it? Doesn't the bird have the sense to know when to stop? While such thinking may provide some temporary satisfaction in terms of expressing frustration and superiority, it does not make any significant progress toward making the cardinal stop crashing into the window, and it does not result in more peaceful mornings. Screaming at it or throwing pillows probably does not help much either, nor would most of the other ways you have routinely used to get annoying things to stop.

But reflective time can lead to reconsideration and very different thoughts. This is the beginning of what we will refer to in this book as *explicit theorizing*. Imagine for a moment you considered the situation from the cardinal's perspective. You quickly google, "Why do cardinals attack windows?" After you scroll through a number of advertisements, from a respected ornithologist you learn that cardinals are very territorial birds. The survival of their species is dependent upon their careful protection of territory, and they will attack another cardinal if it enters the territory. For the 20 minutes as the sun rises, the cardinal sees its reflection in the glass and thinks that it is another bird from which it believes it must protect its territory.

Notice that from the cardinal's perspective, everything looks different. The bird is not stupid; it is doing something smart that has been required for the success of the species. It gets up in the morning, sees another bird in its territory, and attacks. The bird is doing something that makes perfect sense in its situation, and it is also willing to exert an incredible amount of energy to do it. From the cardinal's perspective, the window bashing is, at least initially, successful. The other bird goes away. Not only was the cardinal doing something that was requisite and difficult but also doing something that was successful. The difficulty from the cardinal's standpoint was not the shock of bashing into the solid object of the window but rather the tenacity of the other bird, who always came back when the cardinal returned to its branch.

Therefore, the cardinal's only solution to the tenacity of the other bird is to hit harder and faster. Rather than this behavior being regarded as

stupid, it can also be regarded as necessary, smart, difficult, and willful. The cardinal "window bashes" until the rising sun no longer creates the mirror effect, and the problem is resolved. If it were human, it might feel proud and relieved with its success.

We can see in the cardinal's behavior a typical kind of problem for human beings: employing a script or strategy that may have once been useful in a situation for which it is no longer appropriate or effective. People develop ways of dealing with recurring problems. From the perspective of the participant, these might be considered requisite, smart, desired, and at least temporarily successful. But in the longer term or from an outsider's perspective, these responses do not truly solve the problem. And often these temporary solutions create new problems that can be even harder to address. And as with the cardinal, when the participant is not successful with this strategy, the natural next move is often to do more of the same but harder. This would be the human equivalent of the cardinal's window bashing. Individuals, organizations, and entire communities often attempt to solve problems using strategies that might be described as "window bashing."

For example, the number of people who are unhoused is growing in many cities. Many people put pressure on the city to continue to "sweep" the camps of unhoused people. Often this strategy is very expensive; it disrupts community services for at-risk individuals; it disperses unhoused individuals to other parts of town where providing social services is more difficult; it disrupts whatever community and support the unhoused have; and it is often only a matter of time before the camps are set up again. These "sweeps" divert resources from programs that actually help get people off the streets. But sweeps are popular and continue; this is in part because they make the unhoused temporarily less visible. The tenacity of unhoused individuals is blamed.

We might consider the human equivalent of "window bashing" as simply a long version of the familiar claim that "insanity is doing the same thing again expecting different results." We believe that this is too simple an explanation and very misleading. Often when people do things that we don't understand, a larger unknown background story exists. One of the goals of this text is to show the background mechanism of how the repetition of ultimately failed strategies happens. The cardinal is not crazy when it attacks its reflection. Nor is the city when it tries to remove the unhoused. What is going on with the city and the cardinal is more complicated. Ways of perceiving, common scripts for response, and ways of learning are flawed in some way. As in the *Matrix* movies, we should probably see déjà vu as evidence of a system glitch, not an individual's insanity or stupidity.

Window bashing can happen at any level of human interaction. For example, you probably know people who find Tinder dates annoying

at best but can't resist swiping. Or friends who consistently enter the same bad romantic relationships. They break up with their latest partner and say "never again." But you might well smile. The next time they are out, they start flirting with a person just like the person they just broke up with. They tell themselves things like "this new person is not like the other people" and that this time "things will be different." They do not see themselves as recreating a problem but rather, like the cardinal, see themselves as engaging in behaviors, which appear to them to have marginal success in the short term (the other bird goes away/the flirting leads to some pleasant initial dates) but which, in the long run, leads to the same repetitive failures.

We can see similar window-bashing phenomena in businesses as well. For example, a company has an economic downturn owing to increased competition. One way the company's management can approach this problem is to perceive the downturn as a production cost problem. The recipe for solving the problem when it is viewed in this way calls for cost-cutting measures, which will improve the bottom line on the next quarterly report. However, the cost-cutting also reduces innovation and product quality, which causes the economic problem to deepen as they become less competitive; and this can subsequently trigger more cost-cutting in a vicious cycle that produces a downward spiral. The window bashing remains invisible because the conception of the problem and its solution is widely shared with peers and the measure of success (i.e. the improvement in the next quarterly report) is too narrow to enable the decision makers to see the wider picture. And, of course, dominant key players may gain while the company and others suffer.

Situations like these will be the most typical kind of communication difficulty we will address in this book. We want to explain how and why these happen, and how individuals, organizations, and communities can build better processes that more effectively and enduringly solve the problems they face. Everyday life is filled with endless attempts to solve problems and accomplish goals. For this, people borrow and create ways of perceiving the world. They apply concepts and recipes for acting in the world and use systems of evaluation to measure what they seek to accomplish.

We have called these implicit theories or theories-in-use to keep clear how "theory" will be thought about in this text. The more abstract concept you may have of a "theory" is simply a more formal version of this. Most of our theories are "implicit." They appear as ways of seeing and thinking that are carried out with little or no conscious reflection or testing. "Implicit theories" are ways of making perceptions and conceptualizing events. Implicit theories work like subtle scripts that encourage often repeated ways of responding to everyday life situations. Implicit theories enable a mostly thoughtless way of addressing the problems

and situations we face; they sometimes bring temporary success, but they are often the underlying cause of frustrating repetitive failures. Often, however, because everyday theorizing remains implicit, it cannot be examined, and success or failure is rarely attributed to these hidden, underlying scripts. Recall that the cardinal blamed the repetitive failure on the tenacity of the other bird and not the misperception of the situation. Much can be gained by considering the theorizing process – learning to make those underlying scripts more explicit and understanding what they enable and what they obscure. In these times of rapid social and technological change, examination of everyday theorizing is becoming increasingly important. Most repeated failures as with the cardinal occur because an older theory-in-use is used in a situation for which it was not designed.

If you remember when the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect everyday life in early 2020, a lot of assumptions about the way things work were challenged. Questions were raised about which people and sources of information should be trusted. The nature of education changed, challenging teachers and students to learn online systems and new ways of teaching and learning. Home life changed and as more of the family was often home, finding quiet work and study space was often challenged. Social "safe" pods were formed. All of this required to some extent giving up old ways, finding new ways of making things work, and a fair amount of invention with others.

We will focus on theories generally, and communication specifically, as being central to these kinds of difficulties described above. We will argue that "theory," unlike other ways in which the term is talked about, is not some abstract thing that exists only in books and academic journals, as if it is something created by specialists and apart from us. We take the position that everyone is a theorist. We are all theorists from the day that we are born. And we are all sophisticated theorists, sophisticated communication theorists. Most people, however, do not write down their theories. They use them and pass them on to others in subtle ways.

For example, when we are introduced to a stranger at a party, we look at nonverbal cues such as their facial expressions, their hair, their style of clothes, the way they talk, and so on. From these cues, we can make judgments about their background, age, education, or social circle, even without having any explicit information about these things. The other person is probably also aware of what we are likely to pay attention to and they make presentation choices with our attention in mind. In our initial interaction with this new person, we are inevitably making perceptions and forming judgments about deeper aspects of their personality. "Is this a serious person?" "A fun person to be around?" "Do we share interests?" "Is this a person who is honest and reliable or someone

we would like to interact with again outside of the context of this party?" In most situations, a job interview is much the same.

In this common scenario of meeting a new person for the first time, we are activating a set of terms we use to observe other people as are they. Let's start with an example that may be both challenging and show how deeply and unexamined our implicit theories often are. if we believe that people have things like "personalities," we "see" personality in them. In our society, most people take for granted that people have personalities. We do not think about the history of this concept or even if it is a good one. We do not think of personality as the outcome of a set of theories that have been passed across generations in linguistic distinctions, social institutions, and psychological diagnoses of dysfunctional behavior. "Personality," "character," and "intelligence" become common shared ways to observe and talk about people. These terms, and the beliefs associated with them, will then inform and direct how we choose to move forward with this new person. Are we happy to make their acquaintance and see them in other social situations? Or is this a person we would seek to avoid in the future?

We use the concept of personality and make choices based on it but does the concept suggest that a person is more "fixed" than people are? Do we describe their motive for action as based on personality rather than the situation or system they are in? What are the costs and benefits of doing that? Psychological and individualistic languages are so dominant in the United States that talking about communication without using this language is very difficult. And this theory-in-use works well in some cases and much less well when looking at large systems, things like systemic racism. And they don't help in looking at the ways personal experience are shaped and sponsored by dominant groups today. In fact, they may lead us to overlook that domination. All these are the kinds of questions that the attention to "theories" gives rise to that will be developed in the text.

From this very simple and commonplace scenario, we can see that our theories are not about abstract things. They are about figuring out how to make sense of the life situations in which we find ourselves and direct the future choices that we make. If we want to understand our theories, we must understand the relationship between a set of concepts that we have and the practical purposes that they serve. Our difficulties arise if we utilize theories developed in response to one life circumstance to understand and respond to other life circumstances that are unlike them.

These are historically invented ways of attending to people that remain mostly unnoticed. And they remain unnoticed as long as they work well enough in most cases. Generally, the theories will work if the world and practical problems stay the same or if innovation in them happens at the same rate as change. When situations in the social world change faster

than our theories or we are resistant to examining and changing our theories, we have recurring difficulties – window bashing.

Our theories direct attention and responses in specific ways. Sometimes these are not very useful, for example, when we see a larger system problem as an individual problem. Consider the story below.

Legend has it that there was once a company founded by short people. To cut costs and increase efficiency, they built their offices with short doors. As they became more successful and expanded their operations, they found themselves hiring more and more tall people. While the tall people were good at what they did, they had difficulties fitting in. They bumped their heads on the door jams frequently. They were sometimes late for meetings as they encountered the various obstacles of the offices, and they felt conspicuous and less than welcome.

Being an enlightened company, the management team hired the best consultants, those most able to apply their theory to help. The scientific management consultants taught tall people the most efficient means of walking and ducking, how to pace themselves and measure their steps so that they planted the left foot at the perfect place to lower the head under the door to come up on the right foot without losing stride. Psychological consultants taught the short employees how to show respect and not comment on awkwardness and late arrival at meetings. Special praise was given to those who showed up on time. Several exercises were done to increase appreciation of diversity and improve the self-esteem of tall people. To some extent, intervention seemed to work. Retention of tall employees increased. Negative feelings decreased. And productivity was up. The theories were apparently good and the applications and interventions appropriate.

But, in the end, the company and consultants were engaged in the same behavior as the window-bashing cardinal. They were applying a theory in a situation that made sense to them in that context. The underlying problem, however, was unnoticed by their theories. What if the door height and not the people is the problem? Focusing on the larger system rather than the people might be more useful. This is not to say that the theories that were used were wrong. But different theories can direct attention in useful ways. Like the cardinal, the consultants perceived marginal success with their theories and their outcomes, even though the same problems will inevitably come back to haunt them again and again. From the standpoint of the consultants, their theories are requisite and important and if they just did more of the same thing, but harder, the problem would be solved. This is our notion of "window bashing."

While the story is simplified to make a point, everyday life is filled with similar examples often overlooked because of complexity. Achieving a work/family balance is a recurring topic of discussion and a significant

challenge for many people. This is often framed as an individual problem faced principally by women. Magazines and seminars are filled with good and helpful advice for women about how they can make personal changes to improve their work/life balance. But as developed in depth by Andrea Press and Francesca Tripodi (2021), this focus directs attention away from the larger systems and structural problems, which include "inadequate maternity leaves, the absence of regulation mandating paternity leaves, standard work hours incompatible with school hours, and the scarcity of quality daycare options" (p. 67). We can easily add to this many other problems including commuting time and distance and expected male and female roles in households.

Theories that focus only on personal choices and ignore structural and systemic elements of the problem will probably result in window bashing; there may be some temporary gains but the root of the problem will remain. Some of this has become evident with the growth of working at home around COVID-19. Managers and employees often differ about how much working at home should be continued and the various advantages and disadvantages of remote work. The very concept of what constitutes a workplace has changed. In an even larger way, we can see window bashing and inadequate implicit theories when we consider the problem of systemic racism and the disadvantages experienced by various ethnic groups and those with differing physical and mental characteristics. Our society has inherited old theories: systems, structures, and scripts that were constructed at a time and place by particular people to deal with the practical problems and needs of their time and place. Often those practical problems and needs change but we continue to use old theories; the result is a repeated failure to address the challenges of the moment.

Across many different contexts and situations, when we experience repetitive failures, the problem is typically not that we are dealing with bad, incompetent, or uncaring people but rather that we have good people trying their best but perceiving and responding to the world in less than useful ways. And the problem is not the theories themselves since each works fine in the appropriate context. For example, the cardinal's perceptions and responses worked in important ways for most contexts but failed when faced with reflective glass. The task before us is to develop a relationship between our ways of making observations and thinking about situations and the new kinds of situations in which we are placed. To do this, we must look at the kinds of implicit theories that people have and what they were designed to do, compare these implicit theories to the life circumstances that we confront today, and consider what kind of communication theories and practices we need to have to keep us from continuing to engage in window bashing.

This chapter so far has looked at the everyday, ordinary process of theorizing. First, we have shown that theorizing is an attempt to

accomplish practical goals and deal with routine choices and problems. As such, it is a practically guided manner of attending to, thinking, talking about, and responding to life events. Second, since everyday theorizing is practical, it is attached to the conditions in which it was formed. As a result, changing environments and circumstances can lead common sense approaches to become dysfunctional. In times of fundamental and/or rapid change, we would expect implicit theories to become increasingly dysfunctional. In that case, explicit reconsideration is important with focused attention to opportunities for addressing new circumstances and needs in practical ways.

As a reader, you may be surprised that we have talked a lot about theory but very little about communication theory. We will spend several chapters looking at implicit theories of communication and the places where they mismatch with the new problems and environments we face. We will show that many of the difficulties in the contemporary context are the result of inadequate communication theories-in-use. This is no surprise. Most of the native communication theories-in-use today and embedded in our democratic institutions are based on eighteenth-century concepts of psychology, personhood, and rights. They grew out of a fundamentally different world and understanding. Remember that this was a world that recommended blood-letting as a medical practice. No surprise that the native concepts underlying communication theories-in-use did not understand much about language and the construction of experience and the human interior. Our understanding of these things has evolved as much as medical science. Communication theories-in-use have not kept up.

We will take care in looking at how they fail to direct our attention, and responses in useful ways, in fact, create repetitive failures. In doing this, we will gradually develop a much more useful communication theory. But little of that will make much sense without a firm understanding of theory generally and the character of the new human environment in which our theories must work. Here we want to work more deeply with the nature of theory itself. In the next chapter, we will discuss why changing theories-in-use is difficult and the new circumstances and needs we face in contemporary society require a new communication theory.

Implicit Theorizing and *Phronesis*

The term "theory" is not usually associated with stories such as the window bashing cardinal or the company with short doors. "Theory" is most often associated with science and philosophy, which might posit an explicit "theory of the Big Bang" or a "theory of evolution" that is

discussed by scientists and published in monographs and textbooks. The distinction between everyday theory (theory motivated to achieve a specific purpose) and scientific theory (theory motivated to attain knowledge for its own sake) has a long tradition in Western philosophy.

Phronesis in Aristotle

Writing in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, around 350 BC, explicitly differentiates between "scientific knowledge" and "practical wisdom." Aristotle proposed that the rational part of the soul consists of two parts: "one with which we contemplate those things whose first principles are invariable, and one with which we contemplate things which are variable" (2004, p. 145). An example of something that Aristotle considers invariable are the principles of geometry. People may choose to contemplate the judgment that "the sum of the angles of a triangle is or is not equal to two right angles" (p. 151) all they want, but the principle that "the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles" is invariable. It does not change simply because people choose to think about it differently. So, it makes no sense to deliberate on the nature of a triangle because "nobody deliberates about things that are invariable" (p. 145). Knowledge about things that are invariable is considered by Aristotle to be scientific.

Of interest in this book is Aristotle's alternative mode of wisdom known as *phronesis*, which is defined as knowledge based on prudence, practical wisdom, or common sense. Unlike scientific knowledge, *phronesis* involves and demands active deliberation and the practical knowledge acquired as a result can always change and grow. *Phronesis* is not invariable and eternal. It is related to specific circumstances and actions. As Aristotle writes, *phronesis* "is not concerned with universals only; it must also take cognizance of particulars because it is concerned with particulars, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances" (p. 154).

In the story of the window-bashing cardinal, the homeowner is faced with a particular problem and a particular set of circumstances. Through a process of active and informed deliberation, the practical knowledge that is derived becomes useful for achieving a practical end. What is important to the homeowner in this process is not that the knowledge so produced is "true" or "correct," but rather that the process of deliberation leads to both a desired and mutually beneficial result (i.e. the outcome was beneficial to both the homeowner and the cardinal).

As Aristotle writes, the mark of a person with practical wisdom is "to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous" (p. 150). Unlike in the demonstration of eternal scientific principles, temperance is crucial to the act of deliberation. Aristotle notes that

phronesis can be "destroyed or perverted by pleasant and painful experiences" (2004, p. 151). So, it is important that the process of deliberation be carried out correctly and that the outcome is positive for all. *Phronesis* is related to "what is conducive to the good life generally" (p. 150). Aristotle writes that a person with *phronesis* "can envisage what is good for themselves and for people in general" and that "we consider that this quality belongs to those who understand the management of households or states" (p. 150).

For Aristotle, practical common-sense knowledge is much more useful than scientific knowledge for dealing with real problems in the day-to-day world. Knowing that "the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles" may get a student a good grade on a math test, but only helps in a small set of everyday life problems. Having a working knowledge of the territorial habits of cardinals will be of much more value given the appropriate circumstances. Aristotle writes, "That is why some people who do not possess theoretical knowledge are more effective in action (especially if they are experienced) than others who do possess it" (p. 154). *Phronesis* is acquired over time, through trial and error, and through experience. As such, it is not gained easily:

> *Although the young develop abilities in geometry and mathematics and become wise in such matters, they are not thought to develop prudence. The reason for this is that prudence also involves knowledge of particular facts, which become known from experience; and [the young are] not experienced, because experience takes some time to acquire (pp. 155–156).*

Phronesis for Aristotle is gained from life experience rather than formal instruction or education. People learn what works and what doesn't, and the results of these lessons can be carried over into future life experiences. Of course, conceptions of *phronesis* today are far more complex and varied than those provided by Aristotle, but the beginning distinction is a useful point of departure. For further reading, see, for example, Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) development of how to make science matter. Next, we will both explain the importance of *phronesis* and its necessary complementary relation to scientific knowledge.

John Dewey and Theory-in-Use

The story of the window-bashing cardinal is instructive about the nature of everyday theorizing because it also demonstrates that theorizing is a part of nature. It is a crucial biological mechanism required for survival. The cardinal's theory of the "other bird" and its need to attack that bird

to drive it away demonstrates this role of theory in survival. Species with good theories tend to survive. Species with poor theories tend to disappear. Some may find it odd to talk about the cardinal's instinctive behavior as a theory since it is not in the cardinal's "thought." But the human difference may be overestimated. Our theories are most often institutionalized and rarely thought of. Our institutionalizations look and operate much like cultural instincts.

The relationship between theorizing and biology is a central theme of John Dewey's (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. For Dewey, all aspects of theorizing, regardless of whether a theory is scientific or practical in nature, are ultimately based on the biological necessity for adaptation and survival. Dewey would no doubt approve of our selection of the cardinal's theorizing as an example of the role of theory, since the cardinal's theory of "the other bird" demonstrates the intimate relationship between theorizing and an organism's ability to survive in an everyday changing environment.

The story of the cardinal also captures a key difference between the theorizing of the cardinal and the theorizing of the homeowner. Whereas the cardinal lives in and responds to a purely physical environment, the homeowner also lives in a cultural environment. The homeowner's physical conditions are modified by the complexities of customs, traditions, and interests that envelop them. Dewey refers to the cultural environment of signs as the commonsense environment, or the "world." Inquiries that take place in making required adjustments in this "world" are "common sense adjustments" (Dewey 1938, p. 60).

Dewey's use of the term "common sense" deliberately follows the standard definition of the term such as this one offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED): "good sound practical sense in everyday matters" (Bron 1994, p. 454). However, a second definition of the term "common sense" is equally important to Dewey and to the consideration of theory in this book. This second sense is defined by the OED as, "the collective sense or judgment of humankind or of a community" (Bron 1994, p. 454). In this second definition, "common" means "general," a sense a group of people share. "Common sense" designates the conceptions and beliefs that are currently accepted without question by a given group or community. Communities thus share implicit theories both enabling people to have more wisdom than they could acquire through their own personal experiences and making the possibilities of "window bashing" common to entire communities and highly resistant to transformation.

Dewey recognized that genuine differences exist between these two conceptions of common sense. But both are concerned with the regulation of life in relation to an existing social environment or, as Dewey (1938) writes, "both are concerned, one directly and the other indirectly,

with the 'ordinary affairs of life'" (p. 63). The emphasis on the role of theorizing in the "ordinary affairs of life" that connects the tradition of practical wisdom in the writings of Aristotle and Dewey is a central concern of this book. Common sense and everyday theorizing are concerned with situations that continuously arise in the conduct of life and the ordering of day-by-day behavior.

Phronesis, Preunderstanding and the Possibility of Productive Communication

In the twentieth century, the concept of *phronesis* was greatly enriched and philosophers worked to show its central importance in human existence. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) provided the most complete conception in his development of a theory of human understanding. His careful descriptions of human experience, interpretation, and understanding will be explored in later chapters. Here we are interested in the connection between *phronesis* and everyday theorizing. Gadamer begins by showing that all perceiving of the world involves interpretation – all seeing is a *seeing as*. The material "stuff" external to us becomes *real* as a direct outcome of our attending to certain characteristics and relations and excluding other ways of understanding. We will develop this later as relational constructionism.

For Gadamer, this is as true of science as everyday life. The scientist uses instruments and conceptions like we do to attend in specific ways to the world and hence "sees" certain types of objects in certain ways. This does not make science untrue or all ways of seeing the world equal. To say that we can produce many different kinds of truths does not exclude other things from being clearly false. But it does raise questions of relevancy, values, and practical interests as a part of all-knowing processes including science. *Phronesis* is not about one kind of knowledge but all knowledge in relation to human problems, tasks, and production of a future.

All looking at the world entails a kind of preunderstanding or set of assumptions – an already given way to attend to the world, to pay attention to some things and not others. This preunderstanding is what enables us to bring the wisdom of the past as embedded in our language and instruments of observation to bear in the current context. Looking at and living in the world is not abstract. We see in an interesting and relevant way – we see the world in terms of what it means to what we are trying to do. The point of communication is not to get rid of preunderstandings, for then the world would be meaningless, but through our relation to the world and others to keep our preunderstanding endlessly evolving.

Gadamer distinguishes between productive and reproductive forms of interaction. In productive interaction, our preunderstandings are

challenged and reformed. In the dynamic relation between what is brought to the encounter and what is encountered, our perceiving and understanding of others and the world remain open and transforming. In reproductive interactions, we categorize and classify the world and people according to the preunderstandings that we have and do not open them to reformation. In these kinds of reproductive situations, window-bashing can arise when we use old theories in new situations for which they are not well suited.

In our terms here, implicit theories enable us to attend to the world in specific ways. To the extent that we reproduce the world in our own terms, we are subject to the possibility of window bashing as the world and people change. But we have the possibility to stay connected in a productive way to the world and others and this can result in the development of practical wisdom, fully using what has been learned in the past and open in transforming ways to the present circumstances.

Assumptive Preunderstandings

The concept of *phronesis* suggests that we carry both productive and unproductive preunderstandings into interaction and that we can interact with others in ways that either challenge preunderstandings or in ways that protect them from scrutiny and transformation. As we will detail later, these preunderstandings are not just conceptional. They are carried in our sensory equipment, language, social institutions, instruments of investigation, assessment tools, and so forth. Here we wish to simplify a bit and refer to them in a perhaps overly mentalistic way as *assumptions*. Assumptions are descriptions of the very foundations of our various theories. When we make assumptions explicit, they can be examined and challenged, and different views of communication can be articulated. We will discuss three types of assumptions: assumptions about the nature of things, assumptions about the methods to determine what is true, assumptions about the just, good, and beautiful. And here we will focus most often on the individual level, even though as we develop in detail later, these must be worked out jointly in order to make productive decisions together.

Assumptions About the Nature of Things

In philosophy courses, discussions about the nature of things are referred to as ontology. Ontological assumptions are the most basic assumptions about the fundamental nature of the world and people. We all hold many deep-seated ontological assumptions about the nature of people. For example, some of us may believe that people, by their nature, are

self-interested and that, if left to their own devices, would ultimately revert to some underlying primeval state of a dog-eat-dog struggle to establish superiority, leadership, and mating privileges. Perhaps they have a "selfish" gene. From such a view, underneath all the trappings and appearances of modern, civilized, and socialized humanity, we are all ultimately part of the animal kingdom and are governed by the same laws of nature and survival of the fittest. This view of human nature is expressed in novels like Golding's (1954) *The Lord of the Flies* in which he described the plight of a group of young boys stranded on an island and the violent behavior that followed. With a different set of assumptions, we may see *Lord of the Flies* as contrived and unreal, more writing to fit the author's political agenda than a description of adolescence.

The Lord of the Flies was, to a previous generation, what many people would know today as the TV show *Survivor*. Again, a group of people are stranded in some deserted location and are supposedly left entirely to their own devices to survive. But the behavior of the people in *Survivor* is very different from the behavior of the boys in *Lord of the Flies*. The *Survivor* castaways do not always fight and wish to kill each other. Rather, we see a group of people who, when left to their own devices, sometimes build a community based on cooperation and respect. Perhaps it is better to think of people as fundamentally altruistic and community builders.

Certain ontological assumptions about the nature of people are written into the show by the producers in the way they set tasks, make the rules, and edit the content for viewing. They also make assumptions about the viewing audience in terms of what is believable and of interest. Sometimes we cringe at what they must think of us, and what they subtly make us. And our own ontological assumptions concerning the self-interested and primeval nature of human beings provide frames for interpreting the behavior of the *Survivor* contestants.

Some of our basic ontological assumptions concern gender. Are men and women by their very nature different? Do men and women respond and think through things differently? And if so, in what ways are they different? Answers to such questions make a difference in how we build policies in the workplace, what we expect in child-rearing, and so on. And the very binary distinction of male and female is an assumption about the nature of the world of people. As an assumption, it can be contested by others.

Some transgender activists argue that cisgender actors should not play transgender people on stage and screen. Part of the argument is about securing acting jobs for transgender people and allowing them to tell their own stories. But the argument goes further and touches on ontology: when cisgender people play trans folks, it reinforces the idea that transgender people are just "wearing a costume," that there really are only two mutually exclusive genders, and that a transwoman, for instance, is

ontologically a man dressing as a woman. This notion works against the alternative theory supported by most transgender people that a nonbinary or trans-oriented gender is ontologically real.

The process of studying biology is itself directed by ontological assumptions. Most people have implicit assumptions about the basic reproductive process. Most people were taught that the reproductive process consists of an egg that just sits there, passively waiting to be fertilized by the sperm provided by the male. The male sperm, millions, and millions of them, are, unlike the passive female egg, extremely active. One can see them rushing and competing to get to the egg. The story goes that the more tenacious, fastest, and strongest sperm will get to the egg first and initiate the process of fertilization.

Emily Martin (1991) in contrast writes the story in a very different way reflecting different assumptions, and in doing so, calls to attention what many assume without thought. In her writing, these millions of sperm randomly wiggling about are essentially clueless. The only way the sperm finds the egg at all is because the female leaves a trail of "breadcrumbs" and the sperm, in a literal sense, eat their way to the egg. Without the trail, the sperm would float around aimlessly. A few of the sperm finally get close enough to the egg at which point the egg "decides" which sperm, reaches out, and grabs it. Only then does fertilization happen. Those are two very different world views. Both views are filled with assumptions in terms of what it is a biologist even looks for and how one interprets the activities that are occurring there. A very different view of the world gets embedded and one's sense of what is happening is based heavily on certain types of assumptions that intersect with and support and challenge other assumptions.

To take another biological example, often the clashes between abortion rights advocates and pro-life folks hinge on a question of ontology. Activists on both sides of the debate hold different assumptions about when the rights and responsibilities of personhood begin. Pro-life advocates affirm the ontological independence of the unborn, while pro-choice advocates consider the fetus to be a component of the body of the mother.

Let's consider an example from communication. If you observe that women tend to nod their heads in agreement much more than men when they are talking, what does this mean? And how do your assumptions about men and women enter that determination? And further, you observe that whenever there is disagreement, women will tend to break eye contact and look down and away more than men. Does this mean that women are more passive and subordinate? If you think so, the nod of the head in agreement might mean that they are more willing to accept and agree with whatever is being presented to them. When conflict arises, looking down and away represents a concession.

But assuming that women are very active and in control provides a different understanding. What if the women's goal is not about agreeing or disagreeing but the desire to actively express affiliation? Rather than agreement, they might be saying "I like you," or "It is good talking with you." That is quite an assertive act. When a conflict exists, the looking away says "I really don't want you to lose face in this," and "the relationship is more important to me than winning." That is a very different read of the same data that is based very heavily on what we presume to be the case about men and women Assumptions guide what we think the people are doing and what they are not doing in these contexts.

Assumptions About Determining What is True

Not only do we have basic assumptions about what exists in the world and the nature of people but we also have basic assumptions about how to find out what is true. Philosophically, this is called epistemology. It is concerned with the questions, "how do we know?" and "what would be the process of determining or discovering?" Epistemology concerns questions of method and of preferred ways of knowing. Frequently, ontological and epistemological assumptions are intertwined. What we think exists and how it exists influences how we will investigate it. And reciprocally, how we prefer to investigate can influence what we see and what we think exists and its nature. Like our ontological preunderstandings, our epistemological ones are not inherently good or bad, right or wrong, but lead us to engage the world in some ways and not others. As we will detail later, our methods of determination can suffer from conformation bias or can open us to transformation in relation to the world and others. The interaction that differing assumptions initiate, rather than their content, is of most concern.

We all use epistemological assumptions when we make choices and decisions. For example, TikTok and YouTube are filled with "influencers" giving medical advice, and these sometimes clash with the guidance we can find from WebMd, the CDC, and our own doctors. Where do you go to adjudicate differences and make your choices? When they differ, what would you accept as the best way to determine which to believe? To take another example, the nature of and potential responses to climate change for years was made controversial by active attempts to question science and scientists. How do you decide whose views about the climate are credible and whose are ill-informed, or which are shaped by financial interests? Often in community decision making around controversial issues, citizen groups are asked to participate in "joint fact-finding." The first question there is hard for people: "What would it take for you to believe that something is true?" In this people must make clear basic assumptions. Questions like this are made even more difficult in the

contemporary situation where groups (and their bots) actively promote disinformation and falsehoods. Should you believe the output of an artificial intelligence (AI) system if you have no idea of the assumptions built into its program around information gathering?

Complex decisions with large amounts of information often put us in difficult places. What do you do when you are overwhelmed with information, or if you don't have enough information, but still must make a decision? You are not alone. Businesses and governments are in these situations all the time. How we respond and choose says much about our assumptions. For example, when a business needs to make a choice about a new product, such as how much to invest in electric car production or how to reduce plastics in products, how do they choose? Frequently, they are overwhelmed with some types of data and yet still cannot determine many aspects of consumer choice and future conditions. Often in these contexts, despite the massive amounts of data, in the decision meeting, the choice is made because of a story or hunch. They have all this data that says this should work and somebody will say, "we tried that a few years back and remember what happened?" The response will be, "Oh, right, I remember that" and they will seek to do something else. The story of the past event may be considered more informative than the most carefully collected data. The group demonstrated an epistemological preference for the personal narrative over data.

The question of "how do you know?" is indicative of the kind of direction we take. What would we have to do to figure something out together? For example, epistemological assumptions play a role in our choice of relationships. Various online dating systems have developed explicit algorithms presuming to predict a perfect match. Measuring success is difficult. Every one of us has implicit assumptions also. How do we know that we should continue to go out with this person and not somebody else? How do we know whether to continue this relationship after the first date, or first week, or first month? Should we marry this person? What kind of data do we collect to make these decisions? Do we collect data? When do we trust the head and when the gut?

Perhaps people do not formally and consciously gather data of any kind and feel that "gathering data" about a potential romantic partner is inappropriate. One might say that romantic decisions are made based on "personal chemistry." This represents a different epistemological assumption that suggests it is what we "feel" about the other person that matters. In this case, we are drawing upon an intuitive kind of knowledge that is different from data. This is not at all unusual. Many people make decisions about courtship at a highly intuitive level. Our response is like that of the businesspeople who make their decisions based on good stories. However, even though the decision was made on a largely

intuitive basis, the decision maker will often then look for data after the fact to justify that decision.

Assumptions about the Just, Good, and Beautiful

Implicit in all our choices are assumptions about what is just, good, and beautiful. These kinds of implicit theories are called *axiological assumptions*. Axiological assumptions include assumptions about being fair, and about the nature of justice. Most of our implicit and explicit theories of communication have commitments to certain kinds of ideas about what is good. Basically, we all carry around with us some notion about what makes a "good world." In the same way, we cannot talk about communication without implicitly talking about what makes for "good" communication or worthwhile communication. We cannot talk about relationships without somehow implicitly reflecting on what makes for "good" and "bad" relationships. The very way in which people define what are good and bad makes a difference in how we attend to the world, and the ways in which we think through problems and situations.

For example, interpersonal relationships are rarely undertaken without considering the question of what makes a "good" relationship. Such elements might include such things as trust, openness, and honesty, and these appear regularly in the research that is done on the quality of interpersonal relationships. Many studies of interpersonal relationships consider the degree to which the partners display intimacy. But does a high level of intimacy mean that a relationship is a "good" one? Intimacy as well as other characteristics are only appropriate to certain types of relationships. Other kinds of relationships will have different positive qualities, and in those cases, intimacy might not be a good or valued trait.

Studies of the quality of marital relationships often measure longevity as an indicator of the relationship's value. The longer the couple has been together, the better the quality of their relationship is presumed to be. However, it is quite plausible to suggest that a married couple who has been together for many years may nevertheless hate each other. Longevity may be part of a measure of relationship quality, but it certainly is not the whole story. Another way to look at the question of longevity and quality is to reverse the equation. Suppose relational quality was related to the shortness and/or intensity of a relationship, or the way each member of the relationship grows as a person.

Is length good if a couple stays together due to commitments to children, mortgage payments, and other such things? What would you think of relational quality if we held the assumption that a good relationship was defined as one in which a partner can break off the relationship without doing harm to the other person? Or what if the quality of a

relationship might be measured in terms of how people are able to grow and change in productive ways, which includes an implicit sense of permission to break off the relationship if such growth is not possible within it? This would be a different way of judging the quality of relationships, reliant on a different set of values.

Axiological questions about goodness and value are not limited to intimate relationships. For example, where and when are authority relationships appropriate or fair? In a democratic society, where and how are citizens rightfully involved in decisions? If economic differences impact a citizen's capacity and opportunity to participate in democratic processes, should that be judged as wrong or even immoral? Which individual and group characteristics should impact hiring decisions? Should we expect people to give up democratic rights when they take a job or enter private property?

We engaged in questions of axiology when we sought to define and determine what counts as a "good" life. Value choices are present in every decision, every technology, every language, and every life pursuit. Most often these assumptions remain implicit and are rarely discussed. In this text, we will be explicit about our own axiological choices; we are fully committed to democratic communication and decision making. We will make clear the places where these values are violated in hidden ways. We do not expect that you will always agree with us or that you necessarily share the same axiological values that we hold. But we hope that by being open, we provide a space for a more open discussion about these commitments, a place to make assumptions and choices clearer.

Communication Theorizing as a Form of *Phronesis*

Interest in implicit everyday theorizing or *phronesis* in the writings of Aristotle, Dewey and Gadamer provides dilemmas for professional writing about communication. Many theories of communication exist, and many books and journal articles talk about them. Most books about communication theory operate in a "soft" scientific mode. Typically, theory is presented as something that is distinct from the world that is theorized about. In this intellectual conception, the notion of theory is always to say something *about* the world. It is not about how theory works *in* the world. Most often we have theories of communication rather than communication theories. While they may be less grand than Aristotle's sense of universality and immutability, they nonetheless are abstracted from life and hope for generality. Examples most often illustrate concepts rather than new ways of thinking and talking used to respond to life contexts.

Here we are taking a very different look at the relationship between theory and practice using the tradition of *phronesis*. In this tradition, theory is an integral part of living. From the viewpoint of *phronesis*, theory is that through which participants take the indeterminant "stuff" of life and come to see that "stuff" as specific objects, events, and everyday problems. In this book, we, in fact, will be drawing on the concept of *phronesis* to build a "metatheory" – that is, a higher order theory about how theories are themselves formed, sustained, repaired, and transformed. The complex processes through which this occurs will be the subject of the next several chapters.

As *phronesis*, theories are seen as continually mediating the relationship between people and their worlds. Therefore, this book is guided by questions such as: "What are the consequences of having this theory as opposed to having some other theory? What are the practical historical situations in which contemporary theories were developed? How well do they satisfy needs in the contemporary historical situation?" Knowledge of communication theory should be able to provide a means of understanding how to live and act *in the world*. As Aristotle, Dewey and Gadamer have demonstrated, openly constructed and shared theory is necessary to inform and guide everyday behavior and choices.

Explicit Reflection on Theories

Everyone engages, at times, in their own version of the cardinal's window bashing. Everyone has the potential to act like the failed shopkeeper in the old joke, who was losing money on every sale and tried to make up for it in volume. More of the same, harder, and louder, is a common human response to a failed strategy.

Like the cardinal, an individual or social group historically produces its implicit theories to accomplish practical ends and they usually work well for the purposes for which they were intended. But not all intentions are positive and, even if they were, environments change, situations change, and implicit theories spread into inappropriate contexts. The homeowner's immediate response to the cardinal bashing into the window was to draw upon some ancient implicit theories – wanting to kill it, to yell at it, to run after it.

However, the homeowner can also engage in a more reflective, active, and explicit theorizing process. The cardinal lacked the ability to reflect on the situation, understand the historical development of territoriality or seriously consider other ways of seeing the situation or ways of behaving. But people can do this, though this may not be easy. Unlike the cardinal, the homeowner was able to step out of the event, reflect on it, and consider alternative conceptions. This contemplative, spectator-like stance is the root of explicit theoretical thinking and offers human

beings a unique advantage in dealing with their environments. Explicit theorizing is the act of bringing implicit theories to awareness. It allows the critical assessment of those theories and the opportunity to avoid repetitive failures.

Explicit theorizing becomes more important in rapidly changing environments. A reflective stance allows the investigation of the social/historical conditions that gave rise to specific ways of perceiving and talking about the world. It enables discussion about "common sense" and its relation to contemporary contexts. And, most importantly, it enables reasoned choice rather than the reproduction of unwitting consent.

Normalization of Failure

We have begun the text with examples of the repetition of failures of different kinds. Most are easy to notice. But we want to emphasize how repetitive failures can be found in most aspects of life. People complain about meetings but do little to change them; they perhaps have little idea of how to change them, feel powerless to change them, and spend more time complaining than considering how to organize their work in a way that requires fewer unpleasant meetings. Many relationships carry unresolved conflicts that drain them of energy and closeness – often old theories about how to become involved in a relationship keep us from experiencing all that the new relationship might have to offer. Likewise, communities may suffer from the same kinds of repetitive failures; they become trapped in vicious cycles that deepen rather than resolve conflicts and injustices. And, political processes are often filled with divisiveness and gridlock, but little is done to overcome these problems, perhaps because some benefit from maintaining the dysfunction.

In many ways, these sources of repetitive failure have become so commonplace that they are treated as merely normal and with some degree of passive acceptance. Many people have become increasingly cynical, separating themselves ever further from productive engagement. Plenty of people seem more to survive than to thrive. But we know that successful processes exist to overcome many of these recurring difficulties and the feelings of resignation surrounding them. We wish to understand how these difficulties are sustained and show how new ways of thinking about communication can lead to healthier people, relationships, and communities.

Changing Problems, Changing Theories

Everyday implicit theories of communication never arise in a vacuum. They arise out of and are used as responses to real problems. Therefore, a communication theory should not be evaluated in terms of its truth

or correctness alone, but rather in terms of its *utility* to the person or society holding and using it. The cardinal's theory should not be considered right or wrong. The theory was tested and, from the cardinal's perspective, was effective since the other bird did seem to go away. The only problem, from the cardinal's point of view, was the tenacity of the other bird who returned each time she returned to the branch, thus requiring a harder attack.

Similarly, the sometime problem with the implicit theories drawn upon by new students navigating the unfamiliar terrain of college life is not that the students' theories are wrong or lacking in confirming instances. Rather, the problem is that their theories can misdirect observation; that is, they do not help the students make the observations and choices that are important to meeting critical goals and needs.

An inadequate theory of communication can be always revised and replaced by a theory that is more adequate. Theory is not eternal or constant. It is not a reflection of some unchanging and universal truth. Theory is a dynamic entity that can change as life circumstances change. In the next chapter, we will discuss three issues: (i) Why people frequently do not change their theories even in the face of problems, (ii) The significant challenges to current everyday communication theories based on the rapidity of contemporary life changes, the growth of interdependence and pluralism, and the rapid increase of mediation in communication and experience formation, and (iii) How theories might guide the design of interactions to help people thrive in these new circumstances.

We will throughout the text develop where the most common communication theories-in-use lead us astray, especially in the contemporary context. We will gradually develop a very different communication theory and show how it helps overcome these difficulties. The theory we develop provides new insights and interaction practices. The theory itself is not so much new as not commonly known and put to use. We will pay much attention to the theory's historical development as a response to social difficulties. Understanding this development helps put it into use, which is lost when simply presented as one academic theory amongst others.

Review

Theorizing is a part of our everyday lives. Implicit theories enable people to make sense of the world and to respond to it in systematic and coherent ways. Everyday theorizing is tied to the problems people and societies face, whether that be a cardinal crashing into a window every morning in the hope of protecting a territory or the consequences of

a world increasingly providing new challenges. As circumstances and social contexts shift, theorizing needs to shift with them.

However, the majority of everyday theorizing is historically derived, developed in response to different circumstances and problems and remains implicit, invisible, and common-sensical. Making those theories explicit and, more importantly, understanding the communication processes by which those theories are created and sustained is critical for human choice. This will require the articulation of a higher-order theory of communication, one that can describe how our implicit theories come to be formed, agreed upon, and changed. As this book unfolds, we will show the politics of theory construction and reproduction, the manner in which some theories help people meet their needs better than others, and how and why common sense is sometimes dysfunctional yet perseveres. Finally, we will see that theorizing in a "scientific" mode can be seen as complementary to *phronesis* rather than oppositional.

Discussion Questions

1.1 Describe a situation where you, someone else, or an organization engaged in window bashing. In the discussion, consider the following questions. What theory-in-use was in play? For example, what was being observed and attended to? What responses seemed to be expected or required? How was temporary success being measured? How did doing more of the same become an assumed reasonable strategy? What was the glitch? For example, were participants attending to the wrong things? Was there a dysfunctional expected response script? Did people simply not know what else could be done? Did they know how to measure success?

1.2 Form a small group at home or in class and discuss common basic ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. You might start with questions such as: Do you think people are basically altruistic or selfish? Do you think most of a person's character is fixed at birth or developed? What are your basic concepts of justice and fairness? What are the basic principles that you think should guide the development of a "good" society? What assumptions are shared among the group and where is there disagreement? What difference does the difference make? Note that we often talk *from* these assumptions without much reflection. What is gained by talking *about* them?

Exercise

1.1 Imagine you are going to a job interview. Describe your theories-in-use, including: How should you dress and why? What information should you share and what not, and why? How should you talk

and why? What difficulties do you expect and why? Do you think that you will get the job, and why or why not? What assumptions about communication were built into the interview as designed? What might you do to design a better interaction, and why?

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