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AUTHORS

Birud Sindhav
Phani Tej Adidam

ARTICLE INFO

Birud Sindhav and Phani Tej Adidam (2005). Marketing Communication as Organizational Communication: Exploration and Synthesis of the underlying Theoretical Perspectives. *Innovative Marketing* , 1(2)

RELEASED ON

Tuesday, 01 November 2005

JOURNAL

"Innovative Marketing "

FOUNDER

LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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Marketing Communication as Organizational Communication: Exploration and Synthesis of the Underlying Theoretical Perspectives

Birud Sindhav, Phani Tej Adidam

Abstract

Scholars in the marketing communication area often use a particular theoretical perspective without explicitly recognizing it or fully grasping the implications thereof. Unless one is reasonably aware of the heritage of the underlying theoretical perspective, full justice to his or her research question is not rendered. A framework is highlighted to identify the various perspectives in marketing communication, namely *mechanistic*, *psychological*, *systems-interactions*, and *interpretive-symbolic* and the opportunities and limitations associated with them.

In the *mechanistic perspective*, communication becomes a transmission process. This perspective is suitable to capture a communication episode empirically because various elements of the communication process are identified and measured. The *psychological perspective* emphasizes how message *interpretation* processes affect communication. Specifically, the focus is on the psychological filters that influence message processing. The *systems-interactions* approach focuses on categories, forms, and sequential patterns of communication behavior as a whole, rather than cause and effect relations among variables, as is the case with the above two perspectives. Finally, in the *interpretive-symbolic* perspective, communication becomes a process of interpretation of symbols. The meanings of the symbols are derived through the mutuality of experience. Hence, the subjective view of the communicator becomes important in the communication process.

Under certain circumstances, reconciling various perspectives may be appropriate. Here, we initiate an effort aimed at reconciling mechanistic perspective with interpretive symbolic one, to illustrate how the richness of the given theoretical perspective could be enhanced within the confinement of their respective boundaries.

Key words: Marketing Communication, Symbolic Interactionism, Theory Building, Philosophy of Marketing Science.

Introduction

Communication is ubiquitous, and studied in various settings (e.g., interpersonal, intercultural, organizational, speech, rhetoric) and from wide ranging perspectives (e.g., information theory, semantics, neurophysiology, various subfields of social sciences such as psychology and sociology). Communication is one of the key constructs in organizational studies. In his classic work on organizations, Barnard (1938) linked communication with an organization's origin itself: "An organization comes into being when there are persons able to communicate with each other, who are willing to contribute actions to accomplish a common purpose" (p. 82). Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) bestowed similar importance to communication when they argued that organizations are accomplished communicatively. In the similar vein, Weick (1979) points out that organizing involves collectively reducing the number of different meanings of information, therefore, an organization is built around communicative processes.

Organizational communication focuses on communication in organizational setting, and therefore, mostly on communication between organization and employees. However, a broader conceptualization of organizational communication may bring other stakeholders such as suppliers, customers, government and various special interest groups within its scope. Marketing may be a key constituency in a given organization, therefore, scholars have acknowledged the critical role of communication in various facets of marketing. Indeed, a relatively recent article by Duncan and Moriarty (1998) draws an interesting parallel between marketing and communication elements.

While communication in marketing is often thought to be synonymous with advertising, promotions, and public relations, it is also discussed as "glue that holds marketing channels together" (Mohr and Nevin 1990). Recent managerial practices such as ECR (Efficient Consumer Response), and the increasing importance of electronic commerce especially enhances the place of communication in marketing. Here, we include all communication with various stakeholders of marketing, including customers, under the term *marketing communication*.

While marketing scholars have done an admirable job of building upon advances in communication-related fields to examine the issues of interest, often they are oblivious to which theoretical framework(s) is underlying their arguments. The difficulty in identifying a given theoretical framework is compounded due to ubiquity of communication and broad base nature of the related theories. However, it is important to recognize the theoretical underpinnings of one's approach for several reasons. First, it clarifies where a particular study stands vis-à-vis other studies in the field. Second, it often defines and even decides the focus of one's scholarly efforts. Third, it delineates the boundaries of a domain that can legitimately be explored. Fourth, in empirical studies, underlying theories often dictate the choice of data collection and analysis methods. Finally, by finding a legitimate way to integrate various perspectives, one may open new vistas in his or her scholarly efforts.

The purpose behind this article, then, is to highlight the implicit assumptions underlying the communication-related theoretical perspectives used by marketing scholars, using a well-known typology used in organizational communication literature. It is not the intention of this article to argue that the typology suggested here is the only one that is appropriate, rather, to demonstrate how various studies in marketing communication can be categorized based on a given theoretical framework. Further, it is not our intention to provide a comprehensive meta-analysis of marketing communication articles, rather, to highlight how a given article fits into a particular theoretical framework. An awareness of how one's research study is positioned vis-à-vis other studies is very important for a coherent advancement of any scholarly field of inquiry and marketing communication is no exception. Finally, we attempt integration of two major theoretical schools in organizational communication to point towards a possibility of how one can attempt to reconcile theoretical perspectives which seem prima facie seem incommensurate.

The Major Theoretical Perspectives in Organizational Communication

Several typologies of communication exist in organizational communication. In an early attempt, Knapp (1969) proposes a simple taxonomy of organizational communication as it relates to *interpersonal*, *intergroup*, and *individual-organization*. Another way to classify organizational communication studies is to look at if they refer to "upward", "downward" or "horizontal" patterns of communication (e.g., Hirokawa, 1979). These early efforts were aimed at categorizing the growing literature base in organizational communication, hence, probably lack the rigor of more scholarly approaches that emerged later. More recently, Daniels and Spiker (1987) use *functionalism* and *interpretivism* as an organizing framework for their treatise on organizational communication. The defining feature of functionalism is "studying the concrete features of organizational communication" (p. 14), while interpretivism is concerned with "how organizational reality is socially constructed through communication" (p. 12). This is a fairly broad approach and may have limited use in delineating nuances of various communication schools.

In their efforts to organize the literature review of organizational communication, Krone, Jablin, and Putnam (1987) describe the following four approaches to organizational communication: mechanistic, psychological, systems-interactions, and interpretive-symbolic. All four perspectives have different assumptions about human communication, and are employed by scholars in organizational communication to various degrees. We choose to discuss this framework in detail for its conceptual superiority over the other frameworks mentioned above. It is worth noting that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and most researchers employ more than one perspective. Further, in many instances, it is appropriate to look at the problem through one, rather than the other theoretical perspective. Some examples of the use of multiple perspectives in marketing are provided later and the appropriateness of their use is discussed. In the following para-

graphs, we discuss this framework with relevant examples from marketing and their substantive, theoretical, and epistemological implications.

Mechanistic Perspective

In the mechanistic perspective, communication becomes a transmission process. This perspective is suitable to capture a communication episode empirically because various elements of the communication process are identified, and given a concrete substance so that they can be measured. It is rooted in information theory, the origin of which is attributed to Shannon and Weaver (1949). The theory originally dealt with the problem of transmitting signals from an origination to a destination with a minimum of "noise". The theory had a very narrow scope because it was not concerned with the issues such as meaning and interpretation of messages.

In mechanistic view of communication, a sender transmits a message through a medium to a receiver, who may provide a feedback. The original model proposed by Shannon and Weaver (1949) did not have the feedback component. However, Weiner (1954) proposed cybernetics perspective, where the key argument was that if one wants to know the effect of one's previous communication, feedback is a critical mechanism. While the mechanistic model is narrower in scope, as mentioned before, it is useful for empirical studies because it allows the measurement of communication elements. A comprehensive measurement of communication process should capture all the elements of communication, including sender, receiver, message, medium, and feedback.

The epistemological assumptions of some research methodologies overlap with that of the mechanistic perspective. For example, researchers using network analysis in consumer behavior (e.g., Reingen and Kernan, 1986) also endorse the mechanistic perspective because they focus on the referral flows in small social groups of consumers, where the message transmission process is emphasized. Similarly, content analysis is a method that includes classifying items, often from a recorded communication, within established categories. Here, the assumption is that messages can be counted and classified, as if they were tangible units.

Marketing scholars have used the mechanistic perspective predominantly in the advertising and sales areas. These studies share a common characteristic of focusing on the source-, message-, medium-, or receiver-related characteristics as if they were concrete entities which can be manipulated to affect message transmission and interpretation favorably. The studies examining source effects focus on the characteristics of message sender. For example, Toncar, Munch, and Hu (1994) were interested in examining how salesperson characteristics affect the product evaluation during a telemarketing presentation. They found that even when the presentation was dominated by product information, subjects' perception of sales person attitude played a larger role in product evaluation. Similarly, studies examining the effects of source credibility (e.g., Harmon and Coney, 1982) and expertise of the source (Wilson and Sherrell, 1993) fall in this category.

The second element in the mechanistic perspective is the message itself. In advertising, message-related studies are very common. Bennett (1998) wanted to highlight the difference between guilt and shame appeals in marketing communications. He concluded that certain communications which intended to invoke guilt might in fact produce shameful responses, with the negative consequences for the message sender. Similarly, Hahn and Hwang (1999) studied the effects of tempo and familiarity of background music on message recall. They concluded that when familiar music is used, there existed a U-shaped relationship between tempo and message recall. In the similar tradition, advertising scholars have examined the effects of various other message characteristics such as humorous appeals (Duncan, 1979; Lammars, Leibowitz, Seymour, and Hennessey, 1983), fear appeals (Duke, Pickett, Carlson, and Grove, 1993), uniqueness of message (Boulding, Lee, and Staelin, 1994), nonverbal aspects of message content (Haley, Richardson, and Baldwin, 1984), pace of advertising (Bolls, Muehling, and Yoon, 2003), and readability (Tixier, 1992) on communication effectiveness.

The third element of mechanistic perspective is the medium used for message transmission and its effect on communication effectiveness and efficiency. Moenaert and Souder (1996) studied the antecedents of information utility at the marketing and R&D interface. One of the antecedents of how far the information is perceived useful was the type of communication channel

used, which reflects the concern with the medium characteristics. The medium characteristics are operationalized in various fashions, such as print vs. audio messages (Rao, Burnkrant, and Erev-elles, 1994), and commercial messages vs. word-of-mouth communication (Stern, 1994).

The studies focusing on a receiver take demographic characteristics into consideration such as being older liberals or old blue-collar blacks, and their effect on the influence brought about by the messages (e.g., Burnett and Oliver, 1979). In another study, Uray and Dedeoglu (1997) studied demographic and behavioral characteristics of consumers who can be identified as fashion innovators, since they can be a targeted audience for a firm's communication efforts as they are more likely to spread word about the new fashion trends. Relatively speaking, the receiver characteristics-related studies are sparse in marketing, as the major emphasis seems to be on studying the characteristics of source and message.

The final element of the mechanistic perspective is the effect of feedback on communication effectiveness. In marketing, communication feedback is studied most notably by scholars in the sales force management literature and those studying the interface of marketing with other departments. For example, Kohli and Jaworski (1994) examine how negative and positive feedback affect salespeople's role clarity, satisfaction, and performance. Similarly, Teas (1983) empirically demonstrated that the absence or presence of feedback from managers affects the stress experienced by salespeople. Gupta, Raj, and Wilemon (1985) examine the marketing-R&D interface and conclude that there seems a need for regular feedback from marketing to R&D about the product performance. DeCarlo and Leigh (1996) study feedback as a dependent variable, where they examine how a manager's liking for the sales person results in less coercive feedback to the later.

An example of a research study incorporating all the above elements would be the model of communication in marketing channels offered by Mohr (1989). She paved a theoretically sound way to measure communication strategy based on the mechanistic perspective. She suggested the following four facets of communication strategy: direct or indirect content (which corresponds to "message"), formal or informal communication medium (which corresponds to "communication channel"), uni- or bi-directional messages (which correspond to presence or absence of "feedback"), and frequency (which corresponds to how often communication happens). Of course, her operationalization of the facets is just one among many possible. For example, the message element can easily be depicted as accurate versus inaccurate, instead of direct versus indirect and so forth.

In summary, the studies endorsing mechanistic perspective in communication share an assumption that communication process can be understood in elements such as source, message content, medium, receiver, and feedback. Further, these elements have inherent characteristics that affect the message effectiveness. This perspective assumes divisibility and measurability of communication process, therefore, most empirical marketing communication studies draw upon this perspective.

Psychological Perspective

There is some similarity between mechanistic and psychological perspective: the mechanistic perspective focuses on various elements of communication, and the psychological perspective also focuses on one of the elements in that model, namely the receiver. However, the psychological perspective – unlike mechanistic perspective, which focuses on message *transmission* – emphasizes how message *interpretation* processes affect communication. The focus of this perspective is understanding perception and cognition of communicators in terms of how they affect the communication process and its outcomes.

The studies embracing the psychological perspective focus on the psychological filters that influence message processing, and ultimately, communication outcomes. For example, Schoenbachler and Whittler (1996) argued and empirically demonstrated that a response to communication may be due to factors other than communication itself, such as sensation seeking by the receiver. Wright (1975) studied how a receiver's general social confidence and information processing confidence affects the number of counterarguments to communication messages produced by him or her. Other psychological filters studied include involvement (Mano, 1997; Pratkanis and Greenwald, 1993), and mood (Aylesworth and MacKenzie, 1998).

It could readily be seen that the psychological perspective is very narrow in scope, and may not be relevant in many studies on its own. However, its sharp focus makes it very useful in studies related to examining the effects of psychological filters on communication outcomes. Further, though its focus is a little different from that of the mechanistic perspective, it complements the latter. In fact, the majority of the studies in marketing communication may belong to mechanistic perspective, psychological perspective, or the combination thereof. Since this perspective is about psychological filters, self-reporting and physiological methods such as the use of pupilometer may be a prominent method to detect the state of various psychological filters.

Systems-Interactions Perspective

The systems-interactions approach focuses on categories, forms, and sequential patterns of communication behavior as a whole, rather than cause and effect relations among variables, as is the case with the above two perspectives. Consistent with the system's approach, the communication process is considered greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, the pattern of sequential messages characterizes the communication process more potently than any one message. The changing pattern in communication over time is emphasized, rather than focusing on the antecedents or consequences of communication.

While useful as a philosophical approach, this perspective is difficult to operationalize, hence the systems-interactions perspective is used by the organization scholars mostly in theoretical rather than empirical writings. Though marketing scholars have been shy in employing this perspective, there are some scattered examples of its use. Hutt, Reingen, and Ronchetto (1988) traced the communication patterns that emerged in formation of marketing strategy for new product development. Combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, they identified key milestones in the process to identify a pattern in communication among key players in the organization. Belk and Costa (1995) study of tourism marketing shows how the relative power imbalance between the developed core countries and less-developed periphery countries brings about the dependence and de facto exploitation of the later. Though communication is not the focus of the study, the pattern of emergent communication-based relations between countries over time is emphasized.

Interpretive-Symbolic Perspective

Finally, in the interpretive-symbolic perspective, communication becomes a process of interpretation of symbols. The meanings of the symbols are derived through the mutuality of experience. Hence, the subjective view of the communicator becomes important in the communication process. In mechanistic and psychological perspectives, organizational properties affect communication more than they being shaped by communication. Thus, communication is often a passive variable in studies following these perspectives. However, in interpretive-symbolic approach, communication assumes an active role.

The lineage of this perspective can be traced to the theoretical approach known as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). When symbolic-interactionism is applied to communication studies, the approach is known as interpretive-symbolic perspective. However, it must be understood that the scope of symbolic interactionism is wider than the scope of communication. Symbolic interactionism is relevant where any social action takes place, i.e., whenever an individual takes others in consideration, while in most marketing studies, communication is conceptualized as conscious and overt acts of interactions with others. Therefore, even when social action happens, strictly speaking, communication may not take place. For example, if one is studying quietly in a library room so as not to disturb others, it is a social action and a candidate for scrutiny under symbolic interactionism. However, that act is not communication as defined earlier, therefore, an interpretive-symbolic perspective could not be employed. Further, since symbolic interactionism is discussed in the context of communication here, it will be used interchangeably with the phrase interpretive-symbolic perspective. A detailed description of the perspective follows later.

Like systems-interactions perspective, the interpretive-symbolic perspective is not used much by the marketing scholars, however, a few examples could be found. Lumilla (1994) analyzed audiotaped interviews with various Russian publics about their perceptions of Russian ad-

vertising and argued that imposing western concept on Russian advertising is problematic. Her use of the interpretive-symbolic perspective is apparent in the fact that she wanted to know how the Russian public interpreted their advertisement versus what is implied by the western models.

Similarly, Solomon (1983) draws our attention to a specific sphere of symbolic behavior, namely the use of products as symbols by consumers, and how they are used in enacting social roles versus products as post hoc responses to underlying needs. Leigh and Gabel (1992) endorse the similar view and argue for the critical role of marketing communication in ensuring a proper symbolic representation of a product. Since this perspective is derived from symbolic-interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), it is discussed in greater detail in the following section. Indeed, without understanding the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism, the nuances of interactive-symbolic perspective may not be grasped fully. Some degree of familiarity with this perspective is called for to appreciate a later attempt of integrating this perspective with the mechanistic one.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is one of the most widely studied theoretical perspectives in social sciences. While the scholars from social psychology have been at the forefront, those from other disciplines such as communication and anthropology have also recognized its value. What follows is, then, a very brief introduction to a prominent version of this perspective.

Mead (1934) was the chief architect of what is now known as *the Chicago School* of symbolic interactionism. According to Mead, the term *symbolic interaction* refers to a unique characteristic of human communication. Humans interpret or define each other's actions, rather than merely reacting to them. This response is not made directly to the actions, but is guided by the meaning they attach to these actions. Thus, human communication is mediated by the use of symbols and their interpretations.

Symbols are defined as social objects (i.e., objects used in social actions), used to represent whatever people agree they shall represent. An obvious example of a symbol would be a flower presented to express love for someone. But symbolic interactionism adopts a much broader view in defining symbols. For example, Blumer argued that all social objects are symbols, because they represent a line of action we may take towards them. "To take a line of action" is to make self-indication about the social object in question, which is explained later.

Symbols, such as written and spoken words, are not just used for representing something, but also for communication. Therefore, human communication is symbolic. During communication, humans interpret the symbols together. Therefore, in this view, the communication outcomes do not depend upon internal or external forces, but rather the outcome of a process of interpretation of what we note and define. Blumer (1969) credited himself for using the term *symbolic interactionism* for the first time in 1937 in an article he wrote.

Another important feature of Mead's analysis is a presumption that humans have *self*, therefore, they can be an object of their own actions. This ability to act towards themselves (i.e., *self-indication*) is the central mechanism by which humans deal with the world around them. As individual A interprets the actions of individual B, he or she points out to oneself what meaning those actions have. Mead (1934) argues that "We are calling out in the other person something we are calling out in ourselves, so that unconsciously we takeover these attitudes" (p. 68-69).

The importance of making indication to oneself is twofold. One, to indicate something is to make it an *object*. Unlike a stimulus, which comes with an intrinsic meaning as advocated in the mechanistic perspective above, the meaning to *object* is conferred by an individual. Thus, individuals are not passive beings subject to stimuli, rather they *construct* the object by ascribing it a meaning. Thus, individuals *act* rather than taking stimuli as passive beings during communication. The proactive nature of the proposed model is congruent with this ability of individuals to take charge during communication process.

Second, by making indication to oneself, humans anchor themselves to the symbol they are dealing with. Since communication is a joint process of ascribing a meaning to a symbol, the overlapping meanings have profound implications for how humans relate. To the extent these meanings overlap, both individuals make similar kinds of self-indications about what they are

dealing with. Therefore, they find common grounds for relating themselves. Hence, the ability to self-indicate enables individuals to respond in the same way to the same gestures, sharing one another's experiences.

Moreover, during communication, "we are unconsciously putting ourselves in the place of others and acting as others act" (Mead, 1934, p. 69). This phenomenon is called *role-taking*, and is an essential part of the communication process. Through role-taking, individuals try to reach out to others, and see the world from the perspective of others (i.e., *assume other's attitudes*). Thus, communication provides opportunities to relate through self-indication and role-taking.

The explanatory power of symbolic interactionism is not limited to individual-to-individual interactions. Mead argues that groups can be conceptualized as *generalized others*, and hence, the theoretical explications of his approach can be extended into group situations as well. For example, the McDonald's as a franchiser organization is comprised of all the systems, assets, and people working for it. On the other hand, the McDonald's franchisees are united under various coalitions such as American Franchisee Association. These collectives (franchisers and franchisees) regularly "negotiate" and "engage in conflict", as if they were persons. Social scientists (e.g., Blumer, 1969) assert that the same processes that characterize individual interactions are also present in interactions among the collectives. Indeed, marketing scholars have successfully demonstrated the relevance of constructs such as trust and commitment in the collective setting on the basis of individual level-theories (e.g., Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Therefore, applying symbolic interactionism in the organization-to-organization context is also appropriate.

In summary, the interpretive-symbolic perspective, which is based on symbolic interactionism, is very comprehensive in its scope. In fact, it can provide unique insights in explaining the role of communication in relationship marketing. Indeed, the concept of *symbolic interaction* is more generic than other relevant concepts in marketing such as exchange or information, therefore, it can be used to explain the full range of relationships such as conflict, cooperation, and domination (cf. Turner, 1974) among marketing entities. An advantage of using symbolic interactionism for studying communication is that it treats communication as a transaction process, and comes closest to capturing the complexities of communication compared to any other theoretical approaches (Myers and Myers, 1982). However, the advantage of comprehensiveness comes at the cost of difficulty in operationalizing its core concepts. Table 1 summarizes the four major theoretical perspectives and their implications for marketing scholars.

Table 1

A Summary of Various Communication Perspectives, their Key Assumptions, Methodological Implications, and Relevant Examples

Mechanistic	Communication is a <i>transmission</i> process that can be broken down into various elements	The elements of communication are concrete, and can be measured empirically. For example, <i>content analysis</i> can be used to count frequency of a particular type of message	Toncar, Munch, and Hu (1994); Wilson and Sherrell (1993)
Psychological	It is important to understand communication from not only a transmission, but also an interpretation perspective. Psychological filters within an individual affect the message interpretation process	<i>Self-reporting</i> or <i>physiological methods</i> such as pupilometer can be used for detecting the status of psychological filters	Mano (1997); Aylesworth and MacKenzie (1998)
Systems- Interac- tive	Communication is most readily understood holistically as a sequential pattern over time rather than a relationship among variables	Implies the use of <i>longitudinal studies</i> , <i>event analysis</i> , or <i>network analysis</i>	Hutt, Reingen, and Ronchetto (1988)
Interpretive- Symbolic	Communication is accomplished through interpretation of symbols	Most readily suitable method is <i>naturalistic inquiry</i> , since the subjective view of the communicators is critical. However, surveys and experiments can also be used	Leigh and Gable (1992)

One way to overcome the limitations of a given perspective is to complement it with another perspective, within the conceptual boundaries dictated by their theoretical assumptions and assertions. The above four perspectives may or may not be used in a single study. However, most studies include more than one perspective without implicitly recognizing them. Here, for the sake of illustration, an attempt is made to integrate two perspectives, namely mechanistic and interpretive-symbolic, to describe an interorganizational communication situation.

Reconciling the Mechanistic and Interpretive-Symbolic Perspectives

As mentioned above, the four theoretical perspectives may be necessary to address the problems of different nature in organizational communication, therefore, looking to reconcile them under all circumstances may be an exercise in vain. For example, when the focus of the study is how people in elated (versus depressed) mood evaluate an advertising campaign, by default the use of psychological perspective is included and the use of systems-interactins perspective is precluded. In other situation, though more than one perspective could be used, theoretically it may not be a sound practice. For example, in a study where the goal is to find out how a system wide communication pattern has changed in a reorganized marketing department, conducting naturalistic, in-depth interviews of respondents to capture their subjective views of the situation may be inappropriate as the individual-level analysis may mismatch with the system-level pattern recognition.

However, under certain circumstances, reconciling various perspectives may be appropriate. Here, we initiate an effort aimed at reconciling mechanistic perspective with interpretive symbolic one. We choose mechanistic perspective as it is probably the most common one used by scholars in marketing communication (Grayson, 1998), while the interpretive symbolic perspective has radically different view on how to go about studying a phenomenon. An added advantage is that since these two perspectives belong to two different sides of the positivistic versus interpretive debate, an attempt to reconcile them may mean an attempt to bridge the gap between different stance at how to go about scholarly investigation that is valid. Indeed, in marketing in general, scholars have called for *critical pluralism* (e.g., Hunt, 1991), as studies making sincere efforts towards rapprochement have emerged (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1992). However, the rapprochement has focused on multi-method triangulation (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; 1999), rather than reconciling the perspectives at a conceptual level.

At the first glance, the theoretical assumptions of these two perspectives seem to be tangential to each other, reminding one of the *paradigm incommensurability* (Jackson and Carter, 1991). For example, the mechanistic perspective assumes the receiver as a passive being while the interpretive-symbolic approach assumes him or her as an active being participating the process of interpretation of the symbols. However, a closer look reveals that the two perspectives address different issues at the different levels of abstraction, and therefore, can provide a complementary view of a communication event.

However, broadening the traditional view of the mechanistic perspective is in order before attempting its integration with the symbolic interactionism. A strict mechanistic view of parceling out meanings to the other party must give way to a broader one that holds that under this view, only messages are exchanged, not the meanings. The resultant process of meaning construction may not be within the scope of this view. With this proposition, a complementary view of the two perspectives is argued in the following section.

The mechanistic perspective describes the “logistics of communication” in that it provides a list of critical elements in the communication process, and assumes them coming together in the message transmission process. Therefore, this perspective may serve as an audit tool for describing communication process in all its elements.

A comprehensive description of a communication episode should encompass all the critical elements of the communication process (see Mohr (1989) as an example). In addition, the mechanistic perspective would also underlie the epistemology of the a typical “box and arrow” research study. For example, suppose a research study posits B’s increased trust in A as a consequence of communication from A to B. Here, the message transmission process elicits response

among the receivers (e.g., a heightened state of trust in the communicator), which is again an implicit endorsement of the way communication process is illustrated in the mechanistic perspective. In contrast, the symbolic-interactive perspective is not concerned with the measurability of communication elements, as the focus is on the subjective point of view of an individual.

Though the mechanistic perspective outlines the major elements of the communication process and suggests a flow of messages and response thereof, barring a general notion of feedback, it is mute on the specific *consequences* of communication. The interpretive-symbolic perspective provides theoretical guidelines as to what these consequences could be. Like mechanistic perspective, interpretive-symbolic perspective highlights the *interaction* of the participants. However, unlike the traditional mechanistic perspective, it does not conclude that a meaning is transferred from the sender to the receiver, rather, it is co-created during a communication episode. Indeed, the process-orientation of the symbolic-interactive perspective bestows a greater theoretical depth to the understanding of the human communication process compared to the other three perspectives.

However, the increased explanatory power is coupled with some serious definitional and operationalization-related problems. To start with, despite a rich history of scholarly work in various disciplines, there is still a considerable disagreement among the scholars as to how to define the core concepts of symbolic interactionism. For example, the concept of role-taking has been used to mean several different terms such as role-playing, empathy, and identification (Lauer and Handel, 1977).

Further, operationalization of the concepts becomes much difficult, because as Zeitlin (1973) charged, "Society, from this standpoint, becomes a plurality of disembodied, unconstrained selves floating about in amorphous situations" (p. 218). While most studies harping on symbolic interactionism use naturalistic inquiry as a preferred methodology, scholars have also generated testable hypotheses and used a variety of research methods, including, survey (e.g., Lauer and Handel, 1977) and experiments (e.g., O'Tool and Dubin, 1968). These studies have validated many of the theoretical insights of this perspective, which are used here to compensate for the lack of the theoretical depth of the mechanistic perspective. Conversely, when symbolic interactionism is integrated with the mechanistic perspective, the efforts to analyze and measure various elements and processes of communication, rather than simply focusing on the interaction as something that could be understood subjectively only, gain more credibility.

To recoup, the mechanistic perspective and the interpretive-symbolic perspective deal with communication at the different levels of abstractions. The mechanistic perspective is concerned with the elements of communication and the message transmission process, while the interpretive-symbolic approach is concerned with the micro-processes that take place when individuals communicate. These processes can be analyzed in their elements, which is congruent with the tenets of mechanistic perspective. Therefore, at the most basic level, these two perspectives are not necessarily at odds. Indeed, it is suggested here that the message transmission process between the individuals, as depicted in the mechanistic perspective, needs to be understood from the interpretive-symbolic perspective at the finer level to understand the consequences of communication.

Figure 1 portrays the integrated view of the two perspectives. The mechanistic model is simplified to show the apparent exchange of messages between two parties, including the feedback. An elaborated view of this interaction is provided by the symbolic-interactionism perspective at the right-hand side, where these parties engage in the interpretation of the symbols represented in the messages. Their interpretations do not coincide fully, as complete understanding is deemed impossible in communication. Further, in the interpretation process, the parties make indications to each other, and to themselves. Thus, in a seemingly simple *message exchange process* depicted in the mechanistic view is put under microscope when looked through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism. It is argued that the symbols contained within messages are interpreted jointly by the communicators.

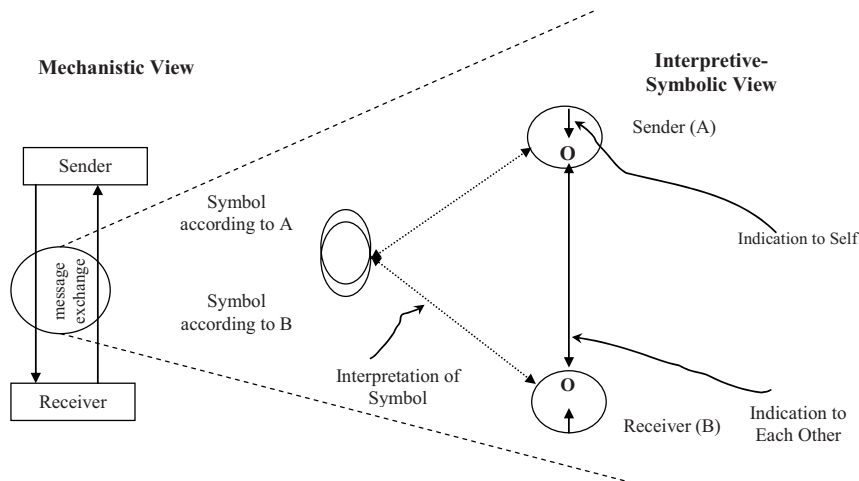


Fig. 1. An Integration of the Mechanistic and Symbolic Interpretive View

The obvious question at this juncture is what are the implications for the researchers for adopting the integrated view versus the single-perspective view? One advantage of the integrated view is that unlike the “pure” symbolic interactionism, it does recognize the role of factors other than the interaction itself (e.g., personality traits) in final outcome of communication. These factors are not incorporated in the current model, but they could be, if the scope of a particular study demands so. Further, methodologically, symbolic interactionism may call for in-depth interviews of, say recipients of the message to decode the meanings they ascribe. However, the integrative view calls for responses from both the sender and receiver, not just from the enhanced-validity-due-to-multi-respondent-perspective, but to recognize that though the sender and the receiver are two separate entities exchanging messages, they co-create meanings in the context created by the presence of both the actors and the milieu in which the communication episode takes place. Therefore, data collection that is true to the theoretical underpinnings of integrated view must inquire from the both parties involved in a communication episode.

Conclusion

The scholars active in the field of marketing communication often overlook the implicit theoretical background of their arguments. This omission may make the researcher oblivious to how his or her scholarly efforts sit in a larger pool of accumulated research. In addition, it may also lead to the proliferation of the plurality of theoretical perspectives without adequate understanding of the suitability and/or compatibility among the studies based on various perspectives or appreciation of their conceptual boundaries. A clear understanding of one’s theoretical heritage may aid in expanding or limiting one’s theoretical assertion. Further, one way to expand the theoretical richness in one’s study is to combine various perspective, albeit, as permitted by the original theories themselves. One such example is provided here, with the separate discussion of the four major theoretical perspectives in communication.

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