Developments in Constructivist Work in Communication Studies, Psychology, and Education: Introduction to the Special Section on Constructivism

Michael S. Waltman
Associate Professor of Communication Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
waltmanm@email.unc.edu

Printer-friendly PDF version

Constructivism (as described by Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982) is a cognitive theory of human communication that describes how human perception--the encoding, retrieval, and use of social information--influences the skillful production and interpretation of a variety of social influence messages (e.g., persuasive [e.g., Coopman & Applegate, 2000], comforting [e.g., Kunkel, 2002; MacGeorge, Clark, & Gillihan, 2002; Samter, 2002], and discipline messages [e.g., Applegate, Burleson, & Delia, 1992]). Constructivists explain how people produce and perceive communication through a marriage of Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs (see Raskin this issue) with Werner's (1957) comparative-organismic theory of development (Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982).

Kelly (1955) defines personal constructs as bipolar dimensions of judgment (e.g., polite-impolite) through which individuals construe other people and their behavior. The bipolar nature of interpersonal constructs allows the individual to understand how two people might be similar (e.g., thoughtful) and yet different from a third (e.g., glib). Thus, functioning as a cognitive lens (Delia et al., 1982) through which people view their social worlds, interpersonal constructs are useful for carrying out a variety of social-cognitive activities (e.g., perspective-taking and the development of interpersonal impressions). Interpersonal constructs arise from varied forms of socialization that come from interactions with parents, peers, and teachers. However, everyone does not acquire these constructs as quickly, or as extensively. Individual differences in development leave some individuals with systems of interpersonal constructs that are more developed than others. The nature and process of this development is understood to proceed from a state of relative simplicity to a state of increasing differentiation, articulation, and hierarchic integration (Werner, 1957).

Briefly, individuals' interpersonal construct systems develop along three fundamental dimensions and result in stable individual differences in cognitive development (Crockett, 1965). Construct systems develop from: (a) relatively undifferentiated structures to more differentiated structures, (b) concrete to abstract structures useful for representing the thoughts and inner states of others, and (c) diffuse elements to increasingly interrelated and hierarchically organized sets of interpretive structures that may be coordinated to accomplish specific tasks in evolving social contexts (see O'Keefe, 1984). Individuals possessing interpersonal construct systems that are more differentiated, abstract and organized are said to be "cognitively complex."

Constructivism in the communication discipline developed through the efforts of a relatively small group of scholars committed to a common definition of communication and coherent theoretical and methodological commitments (see, e.g., Burleson, 1989; Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982) that resulted in an impressive and sustained program of empirical research. Perhaps the most recognizable of these methodological commitments include: (a) the use of hypothetical situations with directions that ask individuals to construct

messages in response to those situations, (b) the identification of message strategies in those responses (as a unit of analysis), (c) the subsequent coding of message strategies for their degree of person-centeredness within hierarchically ordered sets of categories, (d) the study of developmental and individual differences that give rise to differences in the ability to construct person-centered social influence messages, and (e) a commitment to study research participants' unique constructions of their phenomenal world by employing free-response data collection techniques to assess relevant individual difference variables thought to influence person-centered communicative skills (e.g., cognitive complexity, perspective-taking ability, impression formation abilities). Burleson (1989) provides a more detailed discussion of the value of these commitments and their fit with the long-standing values and rhetorical traditions of the communication discipline. He also credits Clark and Delia's (1977) exemplary study with laying the groundwork for these coherent theoretical and methodological commitments because it provided a template for the bulk of constructivist research that would follow in the, now, 25 years since their original publication.

As Leichty, Willinghanz, and Hart note, this does not mean that constructivists have always been of one mind about the conceptual underpinnings of their hierarchical coding schemes. The simple listener-adaptation model gave way to the person-centered model of message production. Constructivists also argued that the production of social influence messages that were adapted to the identity needs of a listener arose from the more complex goal structures that came from the application of complex social schemata to communicative situations that had the potential to be understood in complex ways (e.g., O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). But it should be noted that these discussions did not represent shifts in core constructivist assumptions and commitments but were consonant with changing views among social influence scholars of the cognitive activities underlying the message production process (O'Keefe & Delia, 1982; see also Wilson, Green, & Dillard, 2002).

Constructivist research documents that interpersonal cognitive complexity is positively associated with advanced social-cognitive functioning. Specifically, such "cognitively complex" individuals are better social and affective perspective-takers (e.g., Hale & Delia, 1976), form more sophisticated and elaborate impressions of others (e.g., Delia, Clark, & Switzer, 1974), are better able to integrate and reconcile inconsistencies in social information about others (Mayo & Crockett, 1964), are less likely to rely on simplifying social schemes as heuristics in understanding patterns of interpersonal relationships (Delia & Crockett, 1973), possess more differentiated conceptions of the causes and consequences of social actions (Wilson, Cruz, & Kang, 1992), demonstrate greater variability in the formation of behavioral intentions toward others (O'Keefe, 1980), and possess a finer appreciation of messages that pursue multiple communicative goals in a variety of interpersonal settings (e.g., Samter, Burleson, & Basden, 1989).

Furthermore, constructivist research documents that interpersonal construct system development is positively associated with person-centered communicative skills, the ability to adapt messages to the social and personal needs of the listener (e.g., Burleson, 1989). Specifically, cognitively complex individuals are better able to adapt persuasive appeals to the unique perspective of a listener (e.g., Clark & Delia, 1977; Coopman & Applegate, 2000), salve the distressed feelings of another (e.g., Burleson, 1994; Samter & Burleson, 1984), discipline their children by encouraging the child to reflect on the causes and consequences of their behavior (e.g., Applegate, Burke, Burleson, Delia, & Kline, 1985; Applegate, Burleson, & Delia, 1992), manage conflict by proposing solutions that accommodate the interests of both parties (e.g., Samter, 1994; Samter & Ely, 1985), present new information to a listener while encouraging the listener to reason through how the new information is similar or dissimilar with his/her present knowledge (e.g., Kline & Ceropski, 1984), resist compliance with a persuasive request while minimizing the threat to the identity needs of the speaker (e.g., Kline & Floyd, 1990), change the behavior of another while simultaneously protecting the identity needs of the other (e.g., Leichty & Applegate, 1991), and produce regulative messages that pursue more complicated sets of communicative goals (e.g., O'Keefe, 1988).

In sum, constructivist research in communication documents that sophisticated forms of social thought and human communication are most likely when the individual possesses cognitive structures that make sophisticated social thought and action a possibility. Attention to the thoughts, feelings, and needs of another is possible to the extent a communicator possesses cognitive structures that allow him/her to recognize the thoughts, feelings, and needs of another as a relevant obstacle to the accomplishment of her or his own communicative goals.

Later work by constructivists (Applegate, et al., 1985; Applegate et al., 1992) demonstrated that parents' person-centered discipline skills were positively associated with their children's advanced social cognitive functioning. Constructivists concluded that, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism (see Jones & Brader-Araje in this issue), the linguistic environment of the child serves to shape the child's cognitive development.

Leichty, Willinghanz, and Hart's work in this issue springs, in part, from the assumption that the child's linguistic environment may mediate higher order development. Readers will find this work to be an interesting discussion of the ways that environments, such as those developed through the language patterns within a family, may create communicative ideologies that sustain very different life-worlds for communicators. The authors pursue this notion through a "social pragmatics" construct. Leichty et al. elaborate this construct and describe the benefits it offers constructivist researchers.

Sypher, Russo, and Hane, too, ground their study of a program intended to train listener-adaptive persuasive skills on the assumption that such skills arise from a social environment that make them socially and ideologically useful. Sypher et al. manipulated class assignments to reflect organizational environments that reward such skills (e.g., Haas & Sypher, 1991; Sypher & Zorn, 1986). They report students' persuasive abilities did improve to reflect the social environment of this class.

Constructivists in communication have a history of sharing their own work with, and engaging the work of, constructivists in psychology (e.g., Waltman & Sypher, 1987; Coopman, 1999). This cross-fertilizing of ideas has proven to be productive while also enriching and enlivening the work of both groups of constructivists. Consistent with this tradition, two contributions are made to this special section from constructivists in other disciplines. Raskin offers a summary of the state of constructivist research in psychology. Jones and Brader-Araje describe the contributions of constructivist thought in education. A summary of their thoughts will not be attempted here. It is worth noting, however, that the development of constructivist thought in psychology and education is markedly different from the development of constructivist thought in communication studies. While constructivism in communication is characterized by a coherent and unified set of theoretical and methodological assumptions, facilitated by a research exemplar (Burleson, 1989), constructivism in psychology and education appears to be more characterized by controversy over important theoretical assumptions.

The presence of multiple schools of constructivist thought certainly represent legitimate and real differences of opinion about the nature of the knower and the known. However, the controversies discussed in Raskin and Jones and Brader-Araje promote the discussion and debate that informs productive research and practice in their respective disciplines. These contributions may also provide communication scholars with new insights to their own commitments as constructivists.

References

Applegate, J. L., Burke, J. A., Burleson, B. R., Delia, J. G., & Kline, S. L. (1985). Reflection-enhancing parental communication. In I. E. Sigel (Ed.), Parental belief systems: The psychological consequences for children (pp. 107-142). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Applegate, J. L., Burleson, B. R., & Delia, J. G. (1992). Reflection-enhancing parenting as antecedent to children's social-cognitive and communicative development. In I. E. Sigel, A. V. McGillicuddy-Delisi, & J. J. Goodnow (Eds.), Parental belief systems: The psychological consequences for children (2nd ed., pp. 3-39). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Burleson, B. R. (1989). The constructivist approach to person-centered communication: Analysis of a research exemplar. In B. A. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. J. O'Keefe, and E. Wartella (Eds.), Rethinking communication vol. 2: Paradigm Exemplars. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Burleson, B. R. (1994). Comforting messages: Features, functions, and outcomes. In J. A. Daly & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), Strategic interpersonal communication (pp. 135-162). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Clark, R. A., & Delia, J. G. (1977). Cognitive complexity, social perspective-taking and functional persuasive skills in second- to ninth-grade children. Human Communication Research, 3, 128-134.

Coopman, S. Z. (1999). Personal constructs and communication in interpersonal and organizational contexts. In G. Neimyer and R. Neimeyer (Eds.), Advances in personal construct psychology (Vol. 4). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Coopman, S. Z., & Applegate, J. L. (2000). Social-cognitive influences on the use of persuasive message strategies among health care team members. American Communication Journal, 3, Available online at http://.acjournal.org.

Crockett, W. H. (1965). Cognitive complexity and impression formation. In B. A. Maher (Ed.), Progress in experimental personality research (vol. 2, pp. 47-90). New York: Academic Press.

Delia, J. G., Clark, R. A., & Switzer, D. E. (1974). Cognitive complexity and impression formation in informal social interaction. Speech Monographs, 41, 299-308.

Delia, J. G., & Crockett, W. H. (1973). Social schemas, cognitive complexity, and the learning of social structures. Journal of Personality, 41, 413-429.

Delia, J. G., O'Keefe, B. J., & O'Keefe, D. J. (1982). The constructivist approach to communication. In F. E. X. Dance (Ed.), Human communication theory (pp. 147-191). New York: Harper & Row.

Haas, J. W., & Sypher, B. D. (1991, November). The impact of communication abilities on individual success in organizational settings. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta, GA.

Hale, C. L., & Delia, J. G. (1976). Cognitive complexity and social perspective-taking. Communication Monographs, 43, 195-203

Kelly, G. A. (1955). The psychology of personal constructs (2 vols.). New York: Norton.

Kline, S. L. & Ceropski, J. M. (1984). Decision making in the doctor-patient relationship: Interactive dimensions of the process. In G. M. Phillips & J. T. Wood (Eds.), Emergent issues in human decision making. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Kline, S. L., & Floyd, C. H. (1990). On the art of saying no: The influence of social cognitive development on messages of refusal. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 54, 454-472.

Kunkel, A. (2002). Explaining sex differences in the evaluation of comforting messages: The mediating role of interaction goals. Communication Reports, 15, 29-42.

Leichty, G., & Applegate, J. (1991). Social cognitive and situational influences on the use of face-saving persuasive strategies. Human Communication Research, 17, 451-484.

MacGeorge, E. L., Clark, R. A., & Gillihan, S. J. (2002). Sex differences in the provision of skillful emotional support: The mediating role of self-efficacy. Communication Reports, 15, 17-28.

Mayo, C. W., & Crockett, W. H. (1964). Cognitive complexity and primacy-recency effects in impression formation. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 68, 335-338.

O'Keefe, B. J. (1988). The logic of message design: Individual differences in reasoning about communication. Communication Monographs, 55, 80-103.

O'Keefe, B. J. (1983). The evolution of impressions in small working groups: Effects of construct differentiation. In H. E. Sypher & J. L. Applegate (Eds.), Communication by children and adults: Social cognitive and strategic processes. (pp. 262-291). Beverly Hills, CA. Sage.

O'Keefe, B. J., & Delia, J. G. (1982). Impression formation and message production. In M. E. Roloff & C. R. Berger (Eds.), Social cognition and communication (pp. 33-72). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

O'Keefe, B. J., & Shepherd, G. J. (1987). The pursuit of multiple objectives in face-to-face persuasive interactions: Effects of construct differentiation on message organization. Communication Monographs, 54, 396-419.

O'Keefe, D. J. (1980). The relationship of attitudes and behavior: A constructivist analysis. In D. P. Cushman & R. D. McPhee (Eds.), The message-attitude-behavior relationship: Theory, methodology, and application. (pp. 117-148). New York: Academic Press.

Samter, W. (2002). How gender and cognitive complexity influence the provision of emotional support: A study of indirect effects. Communication Reports, 15, 5-16.

Samter, W. (1994). Unsupportive relationships: Deficiencies in the support-giving skills of the lonely person's friends. In B. R. Burleson, T. L. Albrecht, & I. G. Sarason (Eds.), Communication of social support: Messages, interactions, relationships, and community (pp. 195-214). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Samter, W., & Burleson, B. R. (1984). Cognitive and motivational influences on spontaneous comforting behavior. Human Communication Research, 11, 231-260.

Samter, W., Burleson, B. R., & Basden, L. (1989). Behavioral complexity is in the eye of the beholder: Effects of cognitive complexity and message complexity on impressions of the source of comforting messages. Human Communication Research, 15, 612-629.

Samter, W., & Ely, T. (1985, April). Children's conflict management strategies: Assessments of individual and situational differences. Paper presented at the meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Indianapolis, IN.

Sypher, B. D., & Zorn, T. E. (1986). Communication-related abilities and upward mobility: A longitudinal investigation. Human Communication Research, 12, 420-431.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman (Eds.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Waltman, M. S., & Sypher, H. E. (1987, August). Cognitive differentiation in the perception of older persons: Vigilance or frequency of interaction? Paper presented at the Seventh International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, Memphis.

Werner, H. (1957). The concept of development from a comparative and organismic point of view. In D. B. Harris (Ed.), The concept of development (pp. 125-146). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wilson, S. R., Cruz, M. G., & Kang, K. H. (1992). Is it always a matter of perspective? Construct differentiation and variability in attributions about compliance gaining. Communication Monographs, 59, 350-367.

Wilson, S. R., Green, J. O., & Dillard, J. P. (2000). Introduction to the special issue on message production: Progress, challenges, and prospects. <u>Communication Theory, 10</u>, 135-138.