The Social Psychology of Communication

Edited by Derek Hook,
Bradley Franks & Martin W. Bauer

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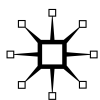*London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

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For Elliott, Dominic and Ana

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Introduction: Towards an 'Interfield' Approach

Derek Hook, Bradley Franks, and Helen Amelia Green

The perspectives on the social psychology of communication gathered in this book provide a distinctive vocabulary for conceptualising how and why communication takes place, ways in which it may succeed or fail, and how instances of communicative exchange relate to potential for change. The following chapters offer a series of interlinked concepts or tools for thinking about communication; and while they each propose a specific point of scrutiny onto varied aspects of the vast phenomenon of communication, they are all informed by three fundamental emphases in their approach.

Social psychological relations and intersubjectivity

We emphasise the importance of the intersubjective factor that makes effective communication possible and that necessarily underlies any prospect of meaningful communicative change. Much communication takes place via a social relationship between communicators; indeed communication may itself indicate and characterise this relationship. Communication may involve the exchange of meanings or information, but it always does so within a social relationship that has its own qualities and constraints that intertwine with those of communication. Our focus in this book differs from the prevailing orthodoxy of the public relations, cultural studies, and mass media-centred approaches to communication by virtue of its attention to the *social psychological* underpinnings of communication. Rather than prioritising new technology and novel mass media formats of communication, we focus on the psychology of communication itself.

Communication in social psychological context

In attempting to understand communication, we forego a primarily strategic approach that focuses on the isolated techniques and procedures of communicative control. Viewing communication as intertwined with the relations

between communicators, and as seeking to establish forms of understanding, leads to seeing communication as flexible and variable, and fundamentally related to the context in which the social relations function. The changes that communication can foster in both the sender and receiver of messages are modulated through their prior and unfolding relations which themselves depend on the cultural and practical context. Communication is as much a means of mutuality, joint understanding and dialogicality as it is medium of influence and control. A social psychological perspective emphasises that communication serves ends that are as multifarious as the diverse social relationships with which they are intertwined.

Communication as social psychological process

We avoid fixating on the semantic *contents* of what is communicated, on discursive or representational material alone, and consider the psychological dimensions or processes regarding how this material is *integrated*, made sense of, or, indeed, potentially resisted. This work is committed to the view that to cut off the study of mass communication from its social psychological dimensions will leave us with an instrumental rather than an adequately *social psychological* understanding of communication, one which loses sight both of how this material is processed and integrated, and of the agency that characterises individual social actors and the social groupings and communities of which they are a part.

An interfield theory approach

While these three principles hold fast throughout the chapters of this book, a distinctive quality of this collection is the premise that there is no overarching 'meta-narrative' or theoretical framework that underlies this undertaking. Readers will not emerge from this book with a single story about communication. Instead, we have proposed a number of routes of exploration that share the same object of study, each foregrounding differing points of scrutiny within the complex and varied phenomenon of communicative interaction. Such a multiplicity of viewpoints allows us to remain aware of the benefits and difficulties of different explanatory routes, and the potential contradictions between them. While there is a coalescence of themes, a set of recurring tensions – a 'family resemblance' of concerns – that unites the differing perspectives in this book, our aim has been to remain open to such divergences, to facilitate an eclectic and original variety of engagements with the social psychology of communication.

With this aim, we have not sought to impose a single explanatory structure between concepts and phenomena, which the area of research cannot support. Rather, we would conceive of this enterprise as part of the beginnings of something like an 'interfield theory' of the social psychology of

communication (on interfield theories in the natural and cognitive sciences, see e.g. Bechtel, 1986, 1988; Bechtel and Hamilton, 2007; Darden and Maull, 1977; Grantham, 2004). Darden and Maull (1977, p. 50) suggest that, 'an interfield theory is likely to be generated when background knowledge indicates that relations already exist between the fields, when the fields share an interest in explaining different aspects of the same phenomenon, and when questions arise about that phenomenon within a field which cannot be answered with the techniques and concepts of that field'. In such an interfield theory, each field or approach offers its own contribution, but does not aim to address the substance of the contributions of other approaches. Fields are characterised by a central problem, domain, technique, or method, and can be more or less inclusive in their range. At its most general, a field might be a discipline or subdiscipline; but more specific fields also indicate divisions within disciplines, and other fields still cross traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Within fields, there are likely to be competing explanations and theories. But in general, different fields do not compete with each other, and explanations from different fields do not usually compete, except when the fields overlap at their margins. Questions arise in one field, which cannot be addressed by the tools and techniques of that field. The gaps left by one, ideally, are filled by the contributions of another, and so on. As the contributions develop, the possible contradictions at the margins of the different fields can be debated so as to form the basis for mutual change on a case-by-case basis. Following Darden and Maull, we do not assume a single explanatory relation between fields, nor that one approach will simply 'ground' another. In this light, we do not consider that it is obvious that, when contradictions arise, one approach should concede to another.

The fields covered by the chapters in this book reflect the interfield nature of social psychology itself, concerning evolutionary, developmental, intra-psychological, interactional, intragroup, intergroup, societal and cultural phenomena, among others. It may be too early to list the essential constituents of an interfield theory of the social psychology of communication, as this would require an account of the explanatory coverage and gaps of each field, and their relations. Current practice can be likened to the localist, anthropologically inspired 'trading zone' concept of intertheoretic relations proposed by Galison (1998). Galison notes that two groups can establish rules of exchange or trade of an object, even if they disagree on the significance of that object or the exchange. Such exchanges are viewed as cultures in interaction, which can generate 'contact languages, systems of discourse that can vary from the most function-specific jargons, through semi-specific pidgins, to full-fledged creoles rich enough to support activities as complex as poetry and metalinguistic reflection' (Galison, 1998, p. 783). Galison cites the development of the radar to exemplify the emergence of a specialised theoretical vocabulary during interactions among physicists and engineers.

This vocabulary expressed a shared understanding of radar that crucially depended on different representations, with physicists drawing on field theory and engineers viewing radar as special variants on radio technology.

Such local coordinations of practical and symbolic activities in understanding the social psychology of communication mirror the overlaps and relations between the contributions in our chapters, suggesting a variety of trading zones at play. Candidates for concepts used in the contact languages for the trading zones in the social psychology of communication are compiled in the *Glossary of Keywords and Definitions* provided at the end of the book. We have explicitly not attempted to arrive at a single, overarching definition for concepts that are shared between fields, with differing degrees of significance for those fields. In this way, their status as coordinated, partly shared trading zone concepts – but not strict, agreed definitions – is preserved.

If it is too early to seek a single overarching interfield theory for the social psychology of communication, we can nonetheless take the important step of proposing a set of key trading zone concepts and an initial set of theoretical tensions that arise across the 15 chapters of this book. The contributions to the volume are organised into three parts. Part I introduces some of the key foundational theories in the study of communication from social psychological perspectives. Part II explores a series of special topics of particular contemporary relevance in the social psychology of communication. Part III presents a series of applied areas of practice, in which the theories and special topics discussed in Parts I and II are exemplified and developed in the context of pressing real-world concerns of religion, health, politics, and science.

Contributions to this volume

The first part opens with a discussion of developmental psychology and engages with Lev Vygotsky's approach to cognition, which emphasises an interpsychological to intrapsychological trajectory in learning. Communicative interchange is proposed as a 'basis for thinking' as higher cognitive functions – memory, reasoning, symbolic tool use – begin as communicative relations between people before being effectively internalised. Dialogical interaction is thus posited as a crucial means of cognitive and educational change. Dialogical communicative exchange, as developed in the Brazilian pedagogue Paolo Freire, is the focus of Chapter 2. Extension', a top-down imposition of technical knowledge, is contrasted with the cultivation of equal forms of dialogue, where all participants in communication, regardless of apparent technical knowledge or contextual cultural knowledge, can co-constitute a dialogue that transforms all participants. Freire thus leaves us with a challenge to everyday conceptions of communication and learning, prompting us to think about how the process of

communication involves more than the transmission of knowledge by one subject to another, but instead their coparticipation in the act of comprehending a mutual object.

Interplay among communicative actors is considered in a different light when we come to notions of impression management, highlighted in Chapter 3. The distinction between consciously controlled message-sending (typically symbolic or linguistic expressions) and the realm of expressivity (bodily signs we 'give off' that are less controlled and less controllable) sets up a view of communication as a constant tussle among communicators to project favourable, influential images of themselves and to 'see behind' others' projected images. One area that offers great scope for exploring this is non-verbal communication. Bodily signalling mechanisms are vast, ranging from facial expressions to eye contact and gazing, from voice tonality to gestures and demeanour, from the use of space and touch, to non-verbal customs of respect and reverence. The breadth of the possible interpretations of a person's multiple signals – verbal and non-verbal alike – always exceeds what the person had consciously intended to say.

Issues of intention, context, and how meanings beyond those conveyed via conventional words are interpreted are addressed by pragmatic theories, the focus of Chapter 5. Many pragmatic theories take it that interpretation is a process guided by the speaker offering evidence of their communicative intentions, which the hearer then infers, based on 'theory of mind' – the awareness of and capacity to infer others' states of mind. However, this process might be complicated by feelings, emotions, or egocentrism. Evidence suggests that current theories of pragmatics may not fully reflect the role of affect and emotion in interaction, and may overstate the extent to which people try to entertain others' mental states and intentions in communication, and overstate their success in doing so even when they try. These arguments suggest some significant challenges to pragmatic theories in light of broader understandings of social relations and interaction.

Communication, social relations, and interaction as they serve consensus-building processes and the negotiation of common understanding are the focus of Chapters 4 and 6. Social influence – the processes by which attitudes and beliefs of an individual or group can be affected or changed – is inherent to all communicative interaction, and is particularly important in the context of conflict between divergent perspectives on social issues. Chapter 4 describes the processes and modalities by which interlocutors seek to influence one another and to settle the emergent conflict by convincing the other to adopt one's own perspective. Ultimately, the manifestation of social influence occurs in the negotiation of common understandings in the public sphere; here innovations are proposed and jostle for ascendancy in their striving towards legitimation and normalisation.

Notions of dialogical communication (Chapter 2) and the performative dimension of speech-acts (Chapter 5) are developed further in Chapter 6's

discussion of Habermas's influential theory of communicative action, which distinguishes communicative action – whereby joint understandings are attained and through which consensus can be achieved – from the realm of strategic gain. This theory opposes the instrumental aims of any form of strategic action that seeks to influence others to act in accordance with the wishes of an individual or group, and is introduced via an account of the important philosophical concepts of the lifeworld, language games, the ideal speech situation, and the public sphere. Of considerable importance in Habermas's theory is the specification of validity conditions – truthfulness, rightness and sincerity – through which we may assess speech acts, a necessary process if the power of rational and non-strategic arguments is to prevail within the public sphere.

The second part of the book, *Special topics in communication*, begins with a focus on identity and representation. Notwithstanding the progressive properties of communication as a means of dialogue, cementing social bonds, and advancing mutual forms of understanding, we should not lose sight of the fact that communication can also function as a means of violence. In Chapter 7, the discussion of identity and resistance in communication draws attention to the symbolic violence of communicative exchanges that marginalise and stigmatise others – as in the case of cultural stereotypes and racism. Utilising concepts from both social representations theory and Stuart Hall's influential encoding-decoding model, communication is considered in terms of 'the ideological battle of representations'. Representations here are viewed both as potentially violent, as instruments of racism, and as a means of resistance, a valuable resource for threatened identities and communities alike. So, although communication is always ideological, potentially damaging, it is also collaborative, agentic and potentially transformative.

Rumour and gossip, key phenomena in informal communication and cultural transmission, are presented in Chapter 8. Gossip is understood as a specific genre of informal communication, governed by its own implicit conventions on bullshit – the lack of direct concern with the truth of the utterances – affective or moral judgement of a third party, and the resultant cementing of social identity. Gossip may form one link in a chain of rumour, which involves a group communicating in chains of transmission in order to make sense of some situation, event or issue, so as to help cope with anxieties. Rumours have been investigated both 'in the wild' (with a focus on their anxiety-reduction and other affective qualities), and in the laboratory (using, for example, serial reproduction techniques, where change or retention of important contents of beliefs is studied) to understand the factors of content, affect, and culture that make some rumours more prone to be spread than others.

Everyday communicative exchange can lead to stalemates and conflict in which the demands of recognition outweigh the prospect of hearing or

saying anything new. Chapter 9 focuses on an ever-present tendency within intersubjective communication – a defensive egocentrism that compromises the possibility for reaching truth or attaining subjective change. The chapter draws on psychoanalysis as a means of conceptualising two interlinked registers of communication. The first is the imaginary register; the domain of one-to-one intersubjectivity and behaviour that serves the ego and functions to consolidate the images subjects use to substantiate themselves. The second, symbolic register links the subject to a *trans-subjective* order of truth, provides a set of socio-symbolic coordinates, and ties the subject into a variety of roles and social contracts. This distinction is useful in pointing to the difference between 'empty' speech – idle chatter predominantly concerned with shoring up an ego, affirming images a subject has of themselves – and 'full' speech – the truth-potential of a form of speech that can challenge given forms of knowledge, upset subjective illusions, and induce change within the subject.

Rhetoric, for some, is an art of deception used to manipulate the public. For others it represents a form of public reasoning, a heuristic for finding the best means of persuasion in a given situation; for others still, it is simply the art of speaking well, a discipline of eloquence, a literary concern of cultivating expression. Chapter 10 provides a novel perspective on rhetoric, the negotiation of difference between individuals on a given question. Of course the centuries-old debate rages on as to whether rhetoric represents a valid means of persuasion or merely a strategic means of forwarding unsubstantiated claims in the garb of truth. Nonetheless, the vocabulary of rhetoric provides us with a valuable set of tools to analyse and critique the persuasive means of communication, particularly in terms of the 'three musketeers' of logos (the soundness of the argument presented), ethos (the credibility of the speaker) and pathos (the emotive dimension of the argument).

Chapter 11 discusses evolutionary aspects of communication and how they contribute to understanding the role of communication in cultural transmission. An evolutionary approach suggests that much every day communication is strategic, in that it is geared towards persuading others to act in specific ways and towards achieving adaptive goals, even when it does not appear so to the parties to that communication. A close link between affect, emotion, and mind is advocated by views of evolved, 'embodied' cognition. On this view, cognition is simultaneously 'extended' beyond the skin into the environment, and 'grounded' by intrinsic connections to action, emotion, and bodily experience. The argument is that much interaction and communication involves coordinated intentions and beliefs, rather than shared intentions and beliefs. The appearance that we share intentions and beliefs is partly a function of culture and, in particular, what is referred to as an External Theory of Mind.

The chapters in Part III seek to apply the communication theories and topics presented in Parts I and II, in effect 'putting them to work' in the

real world context of pressing societal, political and community chal-
lenges. Extending the insights of the discussion of communicative action in
Chapter 6 into the realm of religion, Chapter 12 reminds us that the success
of communication is not always about forms of cognitive gain or consensus
established through deliberation. The importance of religious communica-
tion is thus not to be measured in terms of new learning or gains by way of
rational argument; but in its ability to disclose and name a shared reality,
thus consolidating a community. Such communities exist outside of the
hierarchically arranged system of fixed positions apparent in a given social
structure; they provide a communion of equals – an egalitarian community.
Communicative-religious speech and action have creative, innovative, and
anamnestic potential to substantiate and potentially extend the community
via: collective forms of memory; capacity to bring about change; or ongoing
joint work of interpreting, understanding, and engaging everyday reality.

Chapter 13 on media health campaigns confronts a longstanding dilemma
in the social psychology of communication, the fact that information is a
necessary but insufficient condition for behaviour change. For instance,
awareness of the detrimental health effects of smoking in no way guarantees
that a person will stop smoking or never start. This chapter sees beyond the
simple dissemination of information to explore and explain the importance
of community strengthening and social participation approaches to health.
Communication is seen not merely as a means of extending information,
but as a means of establishing a wider set of ties and associations (family,
neighbourhood. and community networks) that encourage participation
of such individuals and that empower them to resist unhealthy influences.
'Transformative social spaces' are those domains in which people are able to
engage in just such dialogue, critical reflection, and social capital construc-
tion. Communication in these forms of dialogue and networking enable
people to make actionable insights into the links between social inequali-
ties and ill-health, develop an increased sense of agency, and build strong
networks to facilitate action at the individual, community, and even macro-
social levels.

Political communication can be defined as the exchange of informa-
tion, messages, and symbols between institutions, elected officials, social
groups, the media, and citizens with implications for the balance of power
in society. As discussed in Chapter 14, the social psychology of political
communication is informed by contributions from a variety of intellectual
traditions. An important sociological tradition concerns how interpersonal
conversations and community contexts shape individual news choices,
opinions, political decisions, and participation. A more philosophical tradi-
tion questions how such processes of influence might be evaluated in the
context of an idealised vision of public deliberation and participation, while
nonetheless drawing attention to important power imbalances. A third
influential tradition focuses on how political language and symbols lead to

the selective definition and interpretation of policy issues and social problems. Yet another major strand of research derives from the cognitive revolution in social psychology, with general theories of information processing and persuasion applied to the study of political communication. This chapter reviews and integrates strands from each of these scholarly traditions to present a tentative set of guidelines for communicating complex problems and issues; structuring media presentations; strategically designing messages; and effectively reaching and empowering citizens.

The book's closing chapter is an overview of science communication. For many years the prevailing conceptualisation of science communication was a vertical and linear schema that viewed scientists as 'gods on high' sending information to the public either directly or via mediators such as journalists. Although this model remains deeply entrenched in scientific culture, the last decade has seen the emergence of more lateral and dialogical forms. Scientists have begun to enter into discussion with the public, especially on policy issues of economic significance, often using corporate-style communications strategies. Science communication has thus diversified: it is not only about the transfer of the facts of science from scientist to laypeople; it is also about direct approaches to the social relations of science via the affective content of messages about the value, promises, and uses of science. Science communication serves not only the traditional interests of science, but now crosses once clear boundaries to incorporate the interests of governments, businesses and media institutions. Importantly, it also now serves the interest of a public who, as subjects, customers, and citizens of a scientific society, continue to defy, exploit, and enjoy the scientists' epistemological and ideological hegemony over the natural world.

Key tensions in the social psychology of communication

In viewing the possibility of an interfield account of communication, the three key social psychological concerns flagged earlier – *the intersubjectivity of social psychological relations, communication in a social psychological context, and communication as a social psychological process* – underpin a range of *key tensions* in how aspects of communication are conceptualised. These tensions (see Figure I.1) are reflected in the chapters, in different fields. Thus, they reveal the possibility of different conceptual trading zones between those fields, regarding the aspect of communication in which the tension arises.

Communication is hypothesised to create change – incidentally or necessarily in the communicated content, in the speaker, the hearer, in their actions, and in the wider cultural context. The key tensions that emerge in this work revolve around this question of change. Some, but not all, of these tensions are between an ideal type or normative model on the one hand, and actual instances of practice on the other. The extent to which the contributions to this book prioritise, assume, or develop a position that

reflects either side a particular tension differentiates the ways in which these tensions can be interpreted and exploited in developing trading zones.

Unavoidability-improbability

Perhaps the nearest to an overarching tension that is shared by all contributions, is a tension of the *perfectibility of communication*. All contributions directly or indirectly subscribe to the view that communication is, in some sense, unavoidable as a practical and social necessity. In a sense, it is impossible for social beings *not* to communicate, whether intentionally or not. But this unavoidability of communication is opposed by the apparent improbability of successful communication; 'perfect' communication – the uncorrupted, felicitous transmission of information from sender to receiver – is at best an ideal type that regulates aspects of interaction, but which in every instance of application is always marked to some degree by failure, error, and compromise.

In exploring the perfectability of communication in these terms, we may consider the ambitious notion of communicative action discussed in Chapters 6 and 12, Vygotsky's conceptualisation of notions of mediation and the zone of proximal development (Chapter 1), and Freire's hopes for truly dialogical interaction (Chapter 2). The participatory goals of dialogue, critical reflection, and the construction of social capital discussed in Chapter 13 clearly pivot on ideals of what improved models of communicability can achieve. Here the progressive refinement of communicative efficacy and hopes for social change go hand in hand. Discussions of this perfectibility tension lead directly into the question of how exactly to frame and assess *successful* communication.

Controlled-unintended

A related tension – indeed, perhaps a specific instantiation of the first tension – concerns *controllability*. This starts with an ideal of deliberate, intentional communicative design or control, where not only is communication successful but it is also controlled and intentionally circumscribed in its content and effects. This is in direct contrast with the practical sense that instances of communication are fraught with unintended and uncontrollable meanings. The latter involves both aspects of communication that seem intrinsic to linguistic channels of communication (such as ambiguity, vagueness, mis-hearing, entropy, noise), as well as aspects that relate more generally to social interaction and relations (such as attempts at social and political influence, Chapters 4 and 14; deception, Chapter 11; or the generation of rumour and gossip, Chapter 8).

The potential controllability of communication can be explored in Goffman's impression management (Chapter 3), pragmatic theories' emphasis on the perlocutionary dimension of speech-acts (Chapter 5), and the psychoanalytic interest in unintended meanings (Chapter 9). These perspectives
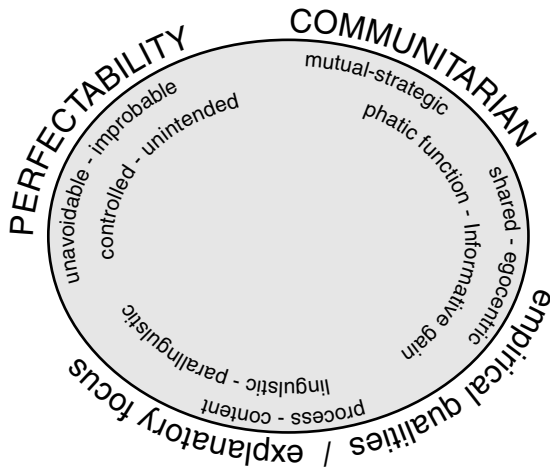
Figure I.1 Key tensions in the social psychology of communication

share the view that the breadth of possible interpretations for a given utterance necessarily exceeds the more delimited range of its underlying intention. Communication is necessarily ambiguous and error-prone; and for some, indeed, the degree to which communication cannot be entirely controlled and the fact that one cannot but say more than one means, are what make communication work to any degree at all. Discussions of this controllability tension lead into the question of how to frame and explain intended communication and how to differentiate it from the unintended.

Mutual-strategic

The *communitarian* tension is also often expressed as another ideal-versus-actual polarisation. This starts from the ideal of a true dialogue between communicators in which the aim and the outcome are concerned with advancing joint understanding, mutual transformation, and consensus through rational argumentation. On such a view, communication is a vehicle for enabling community-building and delivering democratic forms of agreement. Its antipode is communication that necessarily involves strategy or instrumental action, in which one party seeks to gain some advantage over the other via communication, perhaps by deception or persuasion. Communication here is taken to be a vehicle for asserting and maintaining power relations between communicators. One variation on the mutual-strategic tension is thus the distinction between shared, participatory, or 'bottom-up' forms of communication and more hierarchical 'top-down' or vertical structures. This will be an oft-revisited theme in what follows,

a crucial tension not only in understanding community development (Chapter 2) and social influence (Chapter 4) but also in grappling with the practical challenges underwriting religious, health, political, and science communication (e.g. civic journalism in Chapter 13, citizen empowerment in Chapter 14).

The mutual-strategic tension can be viewed also in terms of an opposition between conflict and the measures taken to establish workable parameters of sociality. On the one hand we have an emphasis on modes of partnership, dialogical interaction, the forging of types of mutuality (Chapters 2, 6, 9, 12, and 13). On the other hand, communication is viewed as a mode of contestation and struggle that is far less concerned with establishing collaborative forms than it is a 'war by other means', a vehicle for advancing multiple instrumental ends including those of aggressive gain (Chapters 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 14). If aggressive strategic gain appears to be an irreducible aspect of communicative practice, we must also recognise the utility of certain forms of argumentation and resistance that communication makes possible. *Argumentative* rationality for a theorist like Habermas (Chapters 6 and 11) is not simply about a surrendering to social consensus; rather it entails an awareness that debate and dialogical contestation are necessary in the attainment of a deliberated consensus. Thus, despite the apparently clear opposition of the mutual-strategic tension, an important question arises: to what extent is either extreme of this tension achievable without involving at least some aspect of the other?

Shared-egocentric

A fourth, *egocentrism* tension relates to the communitarian tension, though it is concerned less with posing an ideal-versus-actual contrast and more with an empirical question of the range of qualities of communication. On the one hand, an egocentric approach suggests that communication is governed by principles and processes that make the sharing of meaning between communicators rare, difficult, or even impossible; this might be the case either as a result of the basic 'design' of the faculties of communicators (see Chapter 11 on evolutionary theory), or of intent on the part of the communicators (Chapter 5 on pragmatics). These principles would suggest that the idea of sharing information about one's mental states, for example, is one that informs or regulates our behaviour but does not determine it. By contrast, a non-egocentric approach would take communication as governed by principles and processes that are derived from the intention to share one's mental states, and success in doing so. Such an approach – epitomised in Habermas's theory of communicative action (Chapter 6) – would suggest that the idea of sharing meanings drives the process of communication.

If it is the case then that much communication is continually conditioned by the tendency (on the part of speaker and listener alike) to affirm images

they have of themselves, to protect and insulate given 'presentations of self' (Chapter 3) – and indeed, to mobilise defences against hearing anything too disruptive (Chapter 9) – then such defences would seem necessarily to involve an epistemological dimension. On this basis, we could consider the shared-egocentric tension in terms of the potential for communication to enable learning something new. This opposition – a theme evoked in the discussion of developmental cognitive processes in Chapter 1 – takes us to a crucial distinction in assessing communicative change, namely the distinction between assimilation and accommodation. These longstanding concepts – typically used to distinguish between the cognitive operations of fitting of new experiences into existing schemas (assimilation) and the construction of altogether new structures of understanding (accommodation) – might be recast as a means of separating instances of communication that result in no effective change from those that do. In this respect, assimilation would refer to a mode of reception in which new information is simply coopted into existing structures and strategies of understanding. No significant advance is made is made in this way; the receiver of the communication is not changed by what has been assumed. In accommodation, by contrast, the subject *is* necessarily changed: the failure to adequately grasp what they receive within their existing structures of comprehension means that the development of new cognitive schemas is necessary if adequate understanding is to occur at all (Chapter 13 on health communication, and Chapter 11 on social influence).

Phatic-informative

A fifth tension of *gain* thus revolves around the question of what, if anything, is gained via a communicative exchange. This is another tension concerning the degree to which all or most of everyday communication possesses a given range of qualities. One extreme considers that for an exchange to qualify as communicative it must involve some form of change or gain – perhaps in the form of acquiring new information or knowledge, or increased understanding of a topic. A presupposition here is that the *content* exchanged is essential to that exchange. At the opposite extreme, communication may be broadly seen as 'phatic', involving no ostensible gain in information itself, beyond the apparent indication that a social bond is being maintained, that channels of communication are being kept open, or that community is being consolidated. Here, any specific content exchanged is largely redundant.

Important then as the above-mentioned assimilation/accommodation distinction might be in assessing communicative change, it would be an error to view successful communications as necessarily entailing cognitive gain. As crucial as learning and behavioural change are as indications of the impact of public communications strategies, it is nonetheless true that some of the most important forms of communication lead to no new information

being absorbed, nothing new being learned. Aside then from any question of strategic or information gain, one might opt to analyse communicative exchanges simply on the basis that they support and strengthen relationships, communal ties, reiterating – even in seemingly inessential moments of exchange – that further communicative support is possible. The relationship-substantiating role of communication can in some instances outweigh the aim of establishing truth or accuracy, as is evidenced in the functioning of rumour and gossip (Chapter 8). The phatic dimension of communication concerns the strengthening of roles, identities (Chapter 7), community belonging and understanding (Chapters 2, 6, 12) and a reinstantiation of a society (Chapter 9). Even empty gestures (making an offer that one clearly expects will be denied) like meaningless everyday greetings play their part in installing a rudimentary social bond, a 'kinship of communication' that ties both participants into their shared socio-symbolic world. Communication is thus involved in the constant renewal – the reinstantiation – of the social contract itself.

Process-content

A *process-content* tension concerns the explanatory focus of theoretical accounts in their attempt to pinpoint the key functional dimension of communicative behaviour. Some models are primarily concerned with explicating the nature and patterns of meaning of the contents of communicated material. These views take it that the process of communication in itself has little to add to the understanding of what is communicated. A case in point would be the code models discussed in Chapters 3 and 7, a focus on representations above and beyond what is *done with* representations, and, historically, the tradition of semiotics that places considerable emphasis on a culturally located reading of the various significations and associations (denotation and connotations) of texts and images.

By contrast, other models place greater emphasis on the processes of communication, in the terms both of the activities and components that underpin the exchange of meanings, and, second, via the performative dimension of communicative acts. In terms of activity and components of the communicative process, attention has been focused on the sequence of communicative mechanisms, and has generated an analytical language that compartmentalises the trajectory of message-sending (information source, transmitter, signal, channel, receiver) and its potential impediments (probability of error, noise, information destination, channel capacity) (Weaver and Shannon, 1963). In a different vein, an awareness of communicative processes can also prioritise communication as an act, a 'form of doing', as action comparable with other actions. In this line of thinking – discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 – communication is best understood not simply in terms of its representational or descriptive capacities, but rather by means of how it effects changes in the world (e.g. the declarative act of a police officer