Chapter Two: Small Group Communication Theory

The Nature of Theory and the Theory-Building Process
- Theories are very practical.
- Theory building is a common, natural process of human communication.
- Theory is crucial to the study of small group communication.
- Two basic functions of theory: to explain AND to predict.
- Theories are built when we observe a phenomenon and witness a repeated pattern of events for which warrant explanation.
- Theory is simply "the organization of information to explain and ultimately predict a phenomenon."
- A scientific theory allows us to make reasonably precise predictions.

Theory: A Practical Approach to Group Communication
- Theory helps us recognize the presence of conditions that call for certain actions.
  - **Explanatory Function**
    - helps to understand a process and the ways in which different facets of it are related. (diagnosis)
    - helps make sense of the processes involved when people interact with others in a group.
  - **Predictive Function**
    - informs communicative behavior (methods of treatment- what to do with what you know).
    - "How-to" theories.
    - Establish formats for solving problems and resolving group conflicts.
    - Allows people to anticipate probable outcomes of various types of communicative behavior in groups.
    - understanding and being aware of possible alternative behaviors allows us to use theory to select behaviors that will help in the achievement of goals.

Specific Group Theories
- **Descriptive Theories** - PROCESS theories
  - leadership theories
  - theories of group growth and development
  - problem-solving theories
  - theories of interpersonal interaction
- **Prescriptive Theories** - METHOD theories
  - allow us to reasonably predict that certain outcomes will follow certain types of communication.
  - allow us to regulate behavior to achieve desirable results

The Purpose of Communication in Small Groups: Reducing Uncertainty
- Communication is the vehicle that allows a group to move towards its goals.
  - purpose of group communication is to reduce uncertainty.
  - communication occurs any time meaning is assigned to an internal or external stimulus.
- Uncertainty and complexity are pervasive characteristics of small groups.
- Communication is the driving force that moves groups toward their goals.

Theoretical Perspectives for the Study of Small Group Communication
- Small group theory attempts to explain and predict small group phenomena.
  - Social Exchange Theory
    - Groups remain attractive to their members as long as the rewards of group membership exceed the costs.
    - Rewards include fellowship, job satisfaction, achievement, status, goal achievement, personal need fulfillment.
    - Costs include frustration, mental effort, anxiety, embarrassment.
    - Cohesiveness and Productivity are directly related to how rewarding the group experience is to its members.
Rules Theory

- For successful communication to take place, group members must share followable, prescriptive rules that structure their interaction.
- Rules can be understood as if-then statements.
- Underlying principle is a condition-action structure of rules.
- A Rule is a "followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts."
- Group theory and research refers to rules as norms.
- Once established, group norms direct the group's activities.
- Understanding rules theory and its application to small groups can help you to encourage norms which are productive and avoid those that are dysfunctional.

Systems Theory

- The small group is an open system composed of interdependent elements that receive input, process the input, and yield an output.
- Systems theory provides the most prevalent approach to the study of small groups. It represents the most promising perspective on small group communication (flexible, large # of variables that influence small group interaction).

Symbolic Convergence Theory

- Group members develop a group consciousness and identity through the sharing of fantasies or stories which are often chained together and have a common theme.
- Explains how certain types of communication shape a group's identity and culture, which in turn influence other dynamics such as norms, roles, and decision making.
- Over time groups develop a collective consciousness with shared emotions, motives, and meanings.
- A fantasy theme consists of the common or related content of the stories the group tells.
- A fantasy chain is a string of connected stories that revolve around a common theme.

Structuration Theory

- People use rules and resources in interaction to structure social systems.
- Helps explain why and how groups develop the rules and behavior patterns they adopt.
- Especially useful in helping understand group communication within broader organizational cultures.

New Technologies and Small Group Communication Theory

- New information technologies are restructuring how we communicate.
- Group Decision Support System (GDSS) - any computer-based information system used to support intellectual collaborative work.
- GDSSs include technological support for agenda setting, rules for discussion (parliamentary procedure), and communication technologies that allow multiple users to interact simultaneously.
- New technologies will increasingly reshape how groups make decisions and solve problems.
- Technology does not necessarily result in any particular group outcome; it is how the group works technology into its interaction that has the impact.

A Descriptive Approach to Small Group Communication

- The constellation model is a comprehensive framework that suggests features and relationships critical to an understanding of small group communication.
- The framework depicts small group communication as a constellation of variables, each related to every other.
- Communication establishes and maintains the relationships among these essential variables.
- The seven essential variables are communication, leadership, goals, norms, roles, cohesiveness, and situation.
- Small group communication theory seeks to explain the relationships among these and other variables and to make predictions based on such explanations.

Putting Principles into Practice

- Scientific theories explain consistencies in communicative behavior that researchers have observed within small groups.
- Theories allow us to predict the probable consequences of various actions.
- Observe groups of which you are a member. As you do apply the following theories:
  - Social exchange theory - to describe satisfaction levels.
  - Systems theory - to organize interpretations of group actions.
- Symbolic convergence theory - to understand the group personality (rules, roles, decision making).
- Structuration theory - to increase your influence in any group.
  o The practicality of our theories is measured only by how we can use them to be more effective group leaders, members, and scholars.