

**From the Outside Looking In: Seeing Persuasion Research Problems Through the  
Tension Between Modernism and Postmodernism**

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## ABSTRACT

This essay gives a brief sociological and theological background on the emergence of modernism at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and postmodernism in the mid-1960s. Modernism rested on the assumption that science can encompass all of knowledge and can point the way to an ultimate truth, fact or morality. Postmodernism rejects the positivism of science and argues that reality is uncertain, open-ended, and contingent on the interpretation of the individual. The tension resulting from this shift in the way truth and reality are approached affected communication research by spawning research approaches that favor qualitative approaches or try to complement objective methods with subjective ones. The effect on health promotion involved emphasis on a holistic, social model of health but this model tended to result in less than optimum health standards. Lastly, the essay touched on the implications of a fragmented society and moral relativism on Language Expectancy Theory. The essay concludes that there is evidence to believe that there are foundations and commonalities for different segments of society to work from toward a common good.

## **Introduction**

Much of the research in communication was social psychological in nature and concerned primarily with intra-psychoic processes that mediated the construction and reception of messages (Burgoon, 1995a). In my younger years, I had hoped to get at the kernel of human nature through the internal processes of our minds and personalities just as molecular biologists delved into the mysteries of life by mapping the human genome. But I have not found in intra-psychoic processes the same joy of discovery and the expanse of possibilities as in the study of the determinants of our material constitution. What I see in psychological constructs, divorced from a social context, are traps and cages into which individuals are being smugly pushed for classification, identification, prediction and control. And I find this tendency to cram individuals into neat, little, predictable packages in a lot of the research in communication.

Rarely were the intra-psychoic variables studied in communication related to the social institutions that determine the fate and fortunes of individuals and societies. Burgoon (1995b) has commented on the encroachment of ideologically and politically biased social theories into communication studies but claims not to be overly concerned about the impact of these social abstractions on the creation of knowledge in his discipline. I find this attitude delusional and symptomatic of the tendency in some academics to content themselves criticizing from a reactive position thinking that their particular discipline remains the Avalon in a sea of degeneracy and mediocrity.

And yet, students come into the discipline and find themselves confronted with an array of false dichotomies and synergisms both in the research tradition and in the world out there. Quantitative, qualitative, top-down, bottom-up, forward-onward, backward-feedback, round and round? It is like facing a computer screen saver that diverges, converges, zooms in, zooms out, and morphs into psychedelic swirls and twirls. Soon they might find themselves, as Burgoon (1989) noted about the state of communication research, more interested in "faddish methodological techniques than in whether the data generated by those techniques had any isomorphism with theory, past research, or commonsense" (p.129).

I believe in guarding the integrity of a discipline by adhering to the basic principles and foundations that have built its store of knowledge and I also believe in discriminating authentic claims from opportunistic ones. But I also believe that one cannot do that by standing on a pedestal hoping against hope that one will remain pure and unsullied while all around are the fragments of society balkanized by the very social abstractions that one wishes not to be overly concerned about. The study of communication cannot afford to go on delving into intra-psychoic processes defined by

research tradition while ignoring the bigger, stronger social forces out there that have and are now defining the way people think and act.

In writing this paper, I tried to approach the problems in communication from the outside going in, from the social context to where it meets the intra-psychic processes in the individual. Notwithstanding the importance of mastering theory and past research, I believe that the greater challenge for the student of communication in these present times lies in grasping the tension in philosophical debates about the reality and construction of the social world to which research findings must return to be judged by their utility. The tension embodies the ambiguities and uncertainties that come from a shift in the way we look at truth and reality. At the end of this century, the shift can be exemplified by the emergence of post-modernism or any of the range of movements challenging the foundations of modern science. I believe that unless we understand that ontological and epistemological shift, we are forced to either hold on to tradition divorced from the social world or go with the flow of new paradigms ungrounded in any familiar reality.

In writing this paper, I had hoped to understand the shift that has taken place in the way truth and reality were approached during the early and latter parts of this century and the parallel changes in the study of human communication. To do this, I found it necessary to look up sources in disciplines other than communication. Many of these are interpretive narratives on the contemporary social scene. I believe it is important to scientifically verify observations but I also believe that I can learn a lot about my social world based on the critical thinking of some men and women. Because human communication is always set within the larger social world, I looked into a collection of classic and multicultural readings in social theory. (Alas, I find that I am doomed to read the classics in anthologies and not in originals.) Because religion, whether one adheres to it or not, shapes the way many people see truth and reality, and because one can safely say that this country was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, I pored over a book on Christian apologetics (defense and communication of a theology).

Furthermore, I have looked into the implications of the tension between modernism and post-modernism on communication research in general and on Language Expectancy Theory in particular. Also, because a large portion of the application of research in persuasion had been and will be on health promotion, I have looked at how postmodern social forces have shaped and are shaping health promotion and public health policy.

## **Origins of the Tension Between Traditionalism, Modernism, and Post-Modernism**

### ***From a sociological point of view***

"The most creative moments in the modern history of social theories were those when fewer and fewer of the privileged could relax as more and more of the disadvantaged could speak." (Lemert, 1993 p.15) The foundations of modernity and postmodernity were a series of cultural, political, and economic revolutions that created conditions in which people cannot avoid saying something to make sense of the new order.

The late 19th century produced men like Weber, Durkheim and Marx who tried to make sense of the conflicts between modernism and traditionalism. Weber gave the ironic image of an iron cage in which modernism's rationality is trapped. Durkheim compared the moral order of modern and traditional societies and described the individual lost without the social controls of a traditional society. Marx wrote about the alienation of labor and the subtle assaults on the human spirit in a capitalist, modern society. These men did not accept modernism's promise of progress and prosperity uncritically. "They understood, if vaguely and uncertainly, that no single dream of progress for all humanity could soothe the just (if sometimes inarticulate) complaints of those living outside the security of bourgeois society" (Lemert, 1993 p. 13).

At the same time that Weber, Durkheim and Marx voiced their misgivings about the White, European, Western culture of which they were members, voices that were silenced by prejudice and oppression started to assert themselves. Du Bois wrote about the twoness, of constantly seeing one's self through the eyes of others, that defines and haunts the American Negro. Cooper wrote of a double, if not multiple, consciousness of American Black women. Gilman wrote of the oppressive attitudes of men toward women.

In the mid-1960s, the French philosophers Derrida and Foucault and the German philosopher Habermas complained about the limitations imposed by structuralism which revolved around a principle of a Center or origin or foundation. Their ideas are commonly referred to as the foundations of poststructuralism. These European philosophers called for a new way of thinking that rejects overarching, limiting principles in favor of one that embraces the world of differences. They argued that only a decentered social theory could make sense of a decentered world in which former colonial subjects, women, workers, and Blacks were asserting their differences. The mid-1960s was also a time when the movement of Blacks from the civil rights movement to black consciousness was at its height. Stokely Carmichael proclaimed Black Power in 1966. The mid-1960s was also the time for whites - including early feminists, students,

antiwar protestors, and gays and lesbians- to begin transforming the "ideas and political experiences of the civil rights movement into their own demands for change" (in Lemert, 1993, p.17).

While Derrida's lecture at John Hopkins University in 1966 marked the beginning of poststructuralism, Lyotard's 1979 book, *Postmodern Condition* is considered the beginning point of postmodernism. In it, he brought up the inadequacy of speculative statements to legitimate science since the statements themselves require presuppositions to legitimate themselves. In taking for granted that its presuppositions be accepted as formal and axiomatic, science opened itself to nihilism by itself. Because the discourse of science is revealed as a language game with its own rules, it has no right in legitimating other language games. The process of deligitimation, of science relinquishing its legitimation status as far as it could, according to Lyotard, is what the postmodern world is all about. Lyotard writes that what saves the postmodern is the knowledge that legitimation of knowledge and practice "can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communication interaction." (in Lemert, 1993 p. 513)

### ***From the point of view of Christian apologetics***

Francis Schaeffer (1968), a Christian theologian, tagged the years when thinking underwent a revolution in Europe (late 1890's) and in the U.S. (1913 to 1935). Before these dates, according to Schaeffer, everyone was thinking and communicating on an implicit acceptance of absolutes in the area of knowledge and in morals. So, even though people at that time disagreed as to the specific nature and manifestations of these absolutes, nevertheless they were able to reason together on the basis of antithesis. So, if anything was true, its opposite was false. Schaeffer argued that if we do not understand the extent to which the simple formula, "If you have A, it is not non-A," no longer holds sway in modern times, we will not be able to communicate effectively with modern man.

Schaeffer (1968) illustrated the shift with an imaginary line he called the line of despair. Above the line are men living with their romantic notions of absolutes (though with no sufficient, logical basis) and below the line are men with only the particulars, no purpose, no meaning, man is a machine. The unity below the line of despair is rationalism, or humanism in the inclusive sense which is "the system whereby man, beginning absolutely by himself, tries rationally to build out from himself, having only man as his integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value" (p.17). Schaeffer, however, emphasized that the word *rationalism*, or *humanism*, in the wider sense, should not be confused with the word *rational*. "Rational means that the things which are about us are not contrary to reason, or,

to put it another way, man's aspiration of reason is valid. And so, the Judaistic-Christian position is rational, but it is the very anti-thesis of rationalism" (p.17).

Schaeffer illustrated the plight of men operating on their romantic notions of absolutes or any foundation that has no sufficient, logical basis :

Above the line were rationalistic optimists. They believed they could begin with themselves and draw a circle, which would encompass all thoughts of life, and life itself, without having to depart from the logic of antithesis. They thought that on their own, rationalistically, finite men could find a unity in the total diversity. The only real argument between these rationalistic optimists was over the circle that should be drawn. One man would draw a circle and say, 'You can live within this circle'. The next man would cross it out and would draw a different circle. The next man would come along and, crossing out the previous circle, draw his own- *ad infinitum*.

But at a certain point, this attempt to spin out a unified optimistic humanism ceased. At this point the philosophers came to the conclusion that they were not going to find a unified rationalistic circle that would contain all thought, and in which they could live. *In the end, the philosophers came to the realisation that they could not find this unified rationalistic circle and so, departing from the classical methodology of antithesis, they shifted the concept of truth and modern man was born. (p. 17-18, emphasis in the original)*

### ***Parallel events in the study of communication***

The creation of departments of speech from English departments in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reflected the tension between a study of rhetoric that was seen as too preoccupied with matters of style and manners of speaking and the emerging emphasis on written argument and the study of literature. While holding on to traditional studies in rhetoric and contrasting these with literary criticism, many scholars who sought to define a new discipline of communication turned to scientific research as the path to attaining the same status as the natural sciences (Bormann, 1980).

The study of human behavior in terms of stimuli and responses based on the learning theory of Skinner influenced much of the study of human communication from the 1920s to the 1950s. Many psychologists believed that they could formulate general theories of learning by manipulating a stimulus, observing the response to the stimulus and the responses to subsequent reinforcements and the effects of all these manipulations on animal and human behavior.

In the mid-1960's, a growing dissatisfaction with communication theory and research was felt by many communication scholars. Some expressed dissatisfaction with the sterility of laboratory research and called for real-life field experiments. Those who favored laboratory experiments denigrated field studies as unscientific. The disappointment with the state of communications theory and research continued on to the 1970s when the debate wasn't so much about methodology but on basic philosophical questions. Is there a single reality out there with several variables that can be studied independently of each other? Or, is reality a creation of our minds, therefore each person having their own definition of reality? About this time the question of will or will not communication research generate universal laws of human communication hung in the air. There was no definite answer to the question; only an increasing acceptance of the creation and existence of multiple realities on the part of some and a dogged resistance to subjective approaches on the part of others.

## **Effects of the Tension Between Modernism and Post-Modernism**

### ***On communication research***

Almost two decades since Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, just what post-modernity means is still not clearly defined. Some regard it as just the late phase of modernity or radicalised modernity (Giddens, 1990). Some regard it as nothing more than pragmatism (Rorty, 1989). However, it can be said that the range of movements described as post-modernism is characterized by their common rejection of the foundationalism and objectivism of modern science and their common embrace of differences, subjectivity and open experimentation.

What this all means to communication research has been reflected in new approaches that are collectively described as qualitative as opposed to quantitative approaches. The qualitative approaches are supposedly in favor of humanistic tradition and are subjective while the quantitative ones follow science and are objective. However, Potter (1996) commented that this distinction is too simple and ignores the complexity of the qualitative approach. He described two types of qualitative scholars. One type rejects the scientific approach as a useful guide to studying human behavior and follows the traditions of humanism instead. The other type still accepts the basic goals of science but rejects some of the procedure of science, believing that it is "possible to be scientific without being quantitative" (p.35).

The latter type's circumspection is seen in Anderson's (1998) "hermeneutic empiricism" whose phenomenal world "incorporates the material, independent, determined, and unified products of the "big bang" with the significant,

complicitous, improvisational, and localized products of collective human accomplishment. It is a world of material facts and interpretive achievements made meaningful in human action. Claim is a truth-making performance, and science is part of the action" (p. 208).

While Anderson (1998) endorses the belief that there is no common foundation encompassing multiple domains, Berger and Burgoon (1995) still believed in a catholic view of the linkages in processes. Berger and Burgoon (1995), however, denounced the abusive and indiscriminate use of the standard experimental paradigm and called for acknowledgement of the reciprocal nature of human interaction in research designs.

Some scholars like Toulmin (1983) have debunked the sharp distinctions made between scientific explanation and hermeneutic interpretation. He noted that there have been significant changes in scientific thinking since the time when scientists acted like spectators looking into the world as if from the outside to the time when "the scope of investigation was extended to include systems and subjects whose behavior may be changed by the very fact that they are being investigated" (p.102).

The artificial distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is being emphasized in relatively new areas of communication study such as intercultural and development communication. Researchers in these areas recognize that there are culture-specific as well as culture-general approaches to research (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989). In media research, Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988) noted that mass media effects research had been overdone and overly simplified. They called for media research that takes into consideration the context and phenomenological nature of the communication.

### ***On the promotion of health and public health policy***

Postmodernism's central idea of the abandonment of science in favor of experimentation in culture, art and life (Lyotard, 1984; Bauman, 1992; Featherstone, 1988) is reflected in the rejection of medical science as a basis of health promotion in favor of a social model of health that emphasizes notions of holism and complete social and physical well-being (Kelly & Charlton, 1995). The concept of 'lifestyle' has invaded the concept of health (O'Brien, 1995). The themes of differences and empowerment are replete in international health policy documents such as the Alma Ata Declaration (WHO, 1978) and the Lalonde Report (Lalonde, 1974). Health communication campaigns became a concerted effort of multiple agencies - mass media, voluntary groups, advertising agencies, advocacy and community organizations, universities, and federal agencies (Backer & Rogers, 1993).

Several critics have tried to expose the dangers of this intrusion of postmodernism into the health care arena. O'Brien (1995) wrote, "Lifestyle, referring to nothing but itself, has emerged as a vehicle for differentiating a population, for breaking it apart, fragmenting its interest and distancing its members from forms of collective, social action" (p.193). Walzer (1983) and Beauchamp (1988) noted the tendency for the market and moralism to invade all other spheres of private and public life when the distribution of goods is based on differences rather than on the common good. Featherstone (1991) wrote of the 'transvaluing' of commodities from their original health use to a wider social and cultural meaning. Kelly and Charlton (1995) suggested that "mixing the modern and postmodern in health promotion has produced a politics and ideology of health, that veers incoherently between the scientific and the chiliastic" (p.83). Douglas (1995) noted the irony in the tendency of multicultural approaches to minority health promotion to gloss over, rather than delineate, the material causes of ill health in black and minority ethnic communities.

Recommendations for the resolution of the tension between modernism and postmodernism in the area of health emphasize the interaction between free will and determinism (Kelly & Charlton, 1995), between the concept of individual autonomy and the common good (Walzer, 1983; Beauchamp, 1988), rationality and irrationality (Thorogood, 1995) and, essence and appearance (Glassner, 1989).

Beauchamp (1988), most notably, outlined his concept of 'republican equality' in seeking to "translate the public health viewpoint into the language of social justice and equality, suggesting that 'public health' and not 'health care,' should be the primary or basic good- to put the idea of community at the center rather than at the periphery of a scheme of distributive justice" (p. ix). Beauchamp (1988) tackled the problem of being seen as paternalistic, when putting restrictions on personal behavior that puts a heavy toll on the public's health, by arguing that there is a need for communal definitions of public health problems, even those that result largely from voluntary personal actions, because the point of restrictions was to promote a common good, not a private good. Beauchamp (1988) argued that Americans can find an older but still fresh justification for a concept of a common good in their republican tradition as embodied in constitutional law and the development of police power in the American tradition. He argued for the adoption of a common health care system in the U.S.: "The solidarity embodied in a common health care system in the face of our common death can be an enormous resource for renewing the trust of the citizenry in the decent purposes of government, helping reverse the drift toward mutual suspicion and radical self-interest in our society" (p. 236).

## *On Language Expectancy Theory*

While Language Expectancy Theory was in no way formulated with the tension between modernity and post-modernity in mind, I am taking the liberty here to explore possible implications on the theory wrought about by the tension between modernity and postmodernity. As have been explained in the previous sections of this paper, the shifts in the concept of truth and reality, although mere abstractions and largely confined to academics, scientists, and philosophers, have influenced the concepts governing the distribution of goods (e.g. health care, education, employment) leading to a fragmentation of society into segments that are fiercely and adversarially competing for the goods. And while most people take their thinking for granted, the gradual erosion of the acceptance of common beliefs, if not absolutes, can be seen in attitudes and behavior that are highly relativistic among many people today. I will explore the implications of the relativism in beliefs, morals and opinions and the balkanization of society on Language Expectancy Theory.

Contemporary social commentators such as Bloom (1987), Lasch (1979; 1984), Bork (1996) and recently, Gelertner (1997) have lamented over the rampant relativism of accepted attitudes and behavior in contemporary American society and the tendency to regard making judgments as being opprobriously judgmental. What does this mean in terms of specifying, a priori, the expectations people bring into a communication context? In a fragmented society, shall we expect a movement toward more authoritarian persuasion methods by a dominant group or by the state as more and more people in minority groups regard with contempt what they perceive as the dominant group's narrow and conventional bandwidths into which they are being expected to conform? What does it mean to compliance-gaining efforts when more and more people become suspicious of condescension by the dominant group? These are crucial questions to answer if Language Expectancy Theory will have any meaning in a multi-cultural and pluralistic society as the U.S.

As was shown in the previous sections of this paper, language was the most potent tool with which both the privileged and the oppressed made sense of the changes in the world around them. Language became the tool by which the presuppositions of the past were ripped apart and language is the same tool by which the postmodernists are trying to forge the present and the future. Derrida described the moment when the Center, a world unified around the original Western ideas, would give way as "the moment when language invaded the universal problematic"(in Lemert, 1993 p. 449).

In putting message variables back at the center of persuasion theory and research, Burgoon et al. (1975; 1989) are at the point of tension between the weight of past research and the uncertainty of future research. Language becomes the fulcrum about which the tensions both in individuals and in society are balanced and understood. Being so at this point of tension, Language Expectancy Theory has the potential not only to explain and predict phenomena within static, conventional frames of reference, but also to account for frames of reference that are either completely outside of, or, in opposition to, the conventional reference.

Du Bois (1903) expressed the anguish of the Negro and of those others who have to see themselves often through the eyes of the privileged, of the majority, so profoundly in the following words:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (in Lemert, 1993 p. 179)

Not many in the majority could understand this kind of anguish in minority populations. Not because the majority or dominant group are racists or unconcerned, but because they are oblivious to such consciousness. They simply do not have to deal with it. What many in the majority do not understand is that the underprivileged, the disadvantaged have to state *who they are not* before they can state *who they are*. The privileged only has to say *I am* and it's understood and accepted. The inequality is not so much in terms of resources but more in terms of the burden of proof to be.

Applied to persuasion, consider the anti-smoking TV commercial wherein the minority-looking girl *has to* state who she is not (not a smoking, irresponsible teenager) in order to tell us who she really is (she runs; she's just the way she is; no big deal). For many stereotyped groups of people, the first move in their communication to members of perceived stereotyping groups is, *I am not who you think I am*. This defense does not only apply to minority groups but to any group that is stereotyped. Consider for example the stereotype of the White, middle-class male. More and more of this group are coming out to say *I am neither racist nor a bigot nor am I paternalistic*.

We can see here that stereotypes, in themselves, are pretreatment messages inducing stereotyped people to make counterarguments and become resistant to persuasive messages by the perceived stereotyper. I suggest that sources who want to persuade stereotyped people can have better success if the message negates negative stereotypes.

*You are not not.* Self-persuasion occurs when the stereotyped person negates negative stereotypes. We can therefore state the case that:

*Because most stereotyped people become acutely sensitive to others' negative stereotype of him/her, positive violation of expectations can occur by negating a negative stereotype, either by the stereotyped or the perceived stereotyper.*

As more and more minority ethnic, cultural, political and religious groups find ways to assert their claims and therefore their identities through the language of rhetoric, the more antagonistic they will become to what they consider the dominant group's normative language rules. Alvaro and Burgoon (1995) found that ethnic minorities appear to be disproportionately misanthropic. Perhaps, in addition to understanding why this is so in terms of personality variables involving hostility and mistrust, future study of misanthropy among minority populations can take into consideration sociological factors that push some groups of people to a position opposite to what society normally thinks is good for all. This doesn't have to take on ideological biases. Perhaps motivational theories of resistance to persuasion that explain people's reaction to a perceived loss of autonomy or freedom (Brehm, 1966, 1968, 1972; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985) can be incorporated into Language Expectancy Theory by defining the expectations of people under conditions of threatened freedom.

## **Conclusions**

There is power in abstractions of truth and reality to break down distinctions, boundaries and barriers through the use of language but in the end, we are still faced with the stark realities of our material world. Kelly and Charlton (1995) have noted the contradiction between the rhetoric of community involvement and the imprint, writ large, of scientific and medical expertise in WHO documents. The experts dominate and community involvement remain a rhetoric. Burgoon (1995) noted that a privileged set will always prevail. Yet while expertise and privilege must be acknowledged, the marginalisation of certain segments of society cannot be denied. Though the glorification of the identities of such groups through language appears hollow and divisive, the responsibility of the privileged to recognise the need for such groups *to be* becomes more apparent.

Beneath the loud, angry voices of the emerging minorities is the anguish of not being able *to be*. The choice between hostility and obsequiousness is a choice that guts the soul and the spirit. Graciousness is a damning choice for the disadvantaged. Unless the privileged stop using his expertise to judge the disadvantaged as merely rationalizing,

overjustifying, overreacting, blah and blah and blah and more blah, he will never understand, and societies will continue to convulse, time and again, with the unspoken lives of disadvantaged peoples.

Perhaps the challenge for persuasion research would be to contribute in defining common grounds for different segments of society to work in and in which individuals can maintain their autonomy. Beauchamp (1988) has suggested a return to a republican tradition rooted in constitutional law. It is worthy to note here Wober's & Gunter's (1988) comment that some expert grand theories (e.g. Gerbner's cultivation theory) claiming to have the pulse on the American scene actually go against the "grain of much that is fine and direct rather than devious in American ideology. Thus a view derived from Thomas Paine, Jefferson, de Tocqueville, Thoreau, and a long and sturdy pedigree of others sees the citizen as a competent, resilient, basically trustworthy and righteous creature who, with access to valid information about society, can and must be trusted to act as he or she sees fit in his or her own interest" (p.230).

Persuasion theories that appeal to the irrational aspects of people, though people might be persuaded through them, may only reflect what worse things men can become. The greater challenge for persuasion research is to find those things that will bring out the best in individuals and not to play with their idiosyncracies. This is possible because, despite what postmodernism might claim, there are foundations, there are origins and there are commonalities for rational and objective thought.

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