

Parables and Paradigms: An Introduction to Using Communication Theories in Outdoor Recreation Research

James Absher, Research Social Scientist, USDA–Forest Service, Riverside, CA

Abstract: Studies that employ communication theories are rare in recreation resource management. One reason may be unfamiliarity with communication theories and their potential to provide useful results. A two-dimensional metatheoretical plane is proposed, selected recreation and communication theories are located in it, and functional comparisons are made among eight disparate theories. Communication theories have much to offer scientists and managers, and both are encouraged to use them.

Introduction and background

Communication theories have much to offer those who are concerned with outdoor recreation management and research. Managers' experiences with (mis)communication, whether they are considered frustrations or successes, are commonplace. Nonetheless few research approaches to systematically investigate these experiences have been reported in either the leisure studies or recreation resource management literature. Why don't outdoor recreation researchers use communication theories more often? Clearly it is, in part, due to a lack of familiarity with communication theories. Yet communication theories have much in common with familiar and more often used social psychological theories. To bridge this gap a paradigmatic perspective that gives the reader a unifying view of the research process is presented, followed by examples of theories from the recreation and communication literature.

To begin, the research process itself needs to be viewed as if it were short narrative (story). These "stories" of the initial phases of a particular study when presented in a short, summary form can be analyzed as a text (data) from which the behavior (choices) of the controlling character (scientist) can be obtained. Such research narratives serve as more than an objective statement of the work done: they are like parables, providing a paradigmatic insight about the norms and conditions that define a particular research enterprise.

For instance, a recent communication focused article reported a study of low impact messages on wilderness trailside bulletin boards (Cole, Hammond & McCool, 1997). The study was concerned with communication effectiveness. The authors chose a persuasive communication theoretic approach to an information processing problem and used a quasi-experimental design method. The paradigmatic choices made by the authors are clear: their approach is individualistic and rationalist. Similar "parables" could easily be constructed from other studies with a communication or information flow

objective. If analyzed as a set they would empirically define the approach (paradigm) currently taken by scientists working at the interface between communication and recreation resource management.

The existing body of recreation resource management studies is ample evidence that there is a recognized need to better understand the ways in which recreationists learn, and decide, about when, where and how to do various activities. This logically includes the application of mass media effects, social network, information processing, and other useful communication theories. Nonetheless, as in the example above, most of the work currently being done in this literature conforms to paradigms rooted in a few social psychological theories, especially persuasion theory or other close variants of theories of reasoned action (e.g., Manfredo, 1992).

This is not an undesirable state of affairs, but there are many other potentially useful theories, especially among the relatively untapped work of mass communication theorists. To many recreation researchers these other theories may seem strange or not applicable. Knowing more about their strengths or weaknesses, and how or when to employ them, is a logical first step. This paper will not try to promote one theory over another. Instead the goal will be to reduce the uncertainty about communication theoretic approaches in order to make some of them more immediately useful to future research.

The Paradigm Plane

Metatheoretical concerns: A comparative framework. All science makes some philosophical assumptions: this is a problem of approach, or paradigm. There are unwritten rules or exemplars that quietly, and some might say insidiously, guide recreation researchers to choose one or another approach to a management "issue." For this paper, two distinct metatheoretical aspects are presented to reveal the underlying theory choices: these are normative utility and epistemological frame.

Utility is axiological: it is self-evident that a theory must be useful in explaining or understanding actual behavior(s) at some level. Sometimes a theory may encompass a close modeling of specific behavioral characteristics, or a strong and immediate link back to the "real world." At other times, research is focused at a more abstract level, or is general in scope, or even intentionally removed from the application of results. Thus theories exist in a range of types from those whose utility is relatively abstract, general or nomothetic (law-like) to theories whose utility is quite applied or aimed at site-level contexts. Consequently the theory "at risk" in any given study can be distinguished as to its immediacy or closeness to a particular recreational setting or decision context. This immediacy or utility delimits the study's generalizability. In practical terms, theories tailored in one setting may not be appropriate in others, and nomothetic theories may require additional effort to apply them to specific settings. It is a necessary tradeoff. In choosing a theory to apply to a problem, a researcher has acceded to a normative imperative to pick an approach and, *ipso facto*, it will have a utility level. Of course many times this may be done uncritically; i.e.,

merely assuming the approach previously taken by others is "good enough."

Second, the epistemological frame of a theory can yield useful distinctions as well. When a researcher follows a paradigm (e.g., picks a theory) the meaningful concepts of that theory also delimit discourse. This is another metatheoretical concern. By necessity each theory makes assumptions about how people come to know things and the categories of knowledge they employ. This is the purview of epistemology. In the context of devising a study, these assumptions reside in the tacit agreement scientists make on behavioral issues through the choice of a given theory or in the type of analysis needed. They are not always explicit nor obvious, and these distinctions too are often ignored.

In short, each theory contains epistemological assumptions about the nature of a subject's action, thought, and reality. Although this area is extremely complex, the approach here is to make it manageable by crudely modeling this domain through a tripartite typification of theories that distinguishes idiosyncratic, sociological, and highly individualistic types of explanations. The differences among these categories mirror important differences in approach to recreational behavior(s) that the researcher subsumes in the theory (either because they are felt to have been established by other scientific work or because it is a pure and arguably logical assumption).

At one end is the idiosyncratic approach: few, if any, assumptions are made to group respondents and the subject is often investigated with a strong emic (roughly, from the subject's own viewpoint) stance. The uniqueness of individuals and setting dynamics, e.g., culture or power relationships, play a strong role. Typical theories of this sort in communication research are those that focus on symbolic content or latent values.

On the other hand, a theory might make substantial assumptions that allows the grouping of individuals or eases variable measurement. Some theories that focus on, say, choice behavior may wish to assume a rational thought process or that setting differences do not substantially affect the behavior in question. Finally, a third group of theories may investigate a person's actions in support of, or in relation to, a social role or status. Again some assumptions will be made about the actor's view of the world and the focus is largely on sociological behaviors. In order, constructivist theories, rational exchange theories, and symbolic interactionist theories may serve as familiar examples of these three types of epistemological assumptions.

Therefore, in this paper the epistemological dimension is grouped into three "camps," which reflect (1) strongly rationalist and individualistic theories, (2) a middle ground in which relations, roles, and group processes are the focus, and (3) a broadly open intellectual tradition that makes few assumptions about the thoughts and commonalities of the subjects and focuses on symbolic, meaning and valuation processes in various contexts.

Taken together the utilitarian and epistemological dimensions of paradigm type define a plane of choice that will co-locate the many useful and distinct communication theories (see figure 1). The next step is to place familiar or potentially useful theories in this space. For clarity, two theories commonly applied to recreation behaviors are presented. These would be placed along the left edge of the plane (rational column). Following that, selected communication theories are presented that could be, or currently are, used in studies of outdoor recreation settings.

Recreation-related theories: Persuasion theory is typical of theories that occupy the upper left portion of the paradigm plane. It is relatively abstract, and meant to apply to a broad range of settings and people, and is therefore a general theory. Moreover it is clearly rationalist in its approach to the behavior studied. People are hypothesized to have measurable responses to inputs, which are in the form of information, usually by either central or peripheral routes. The assumptions of broad scale utility and reasoned behavior make it both general and rational.

At the lower left corner of the plane one might find recreational crowding theories. The actor is usually seen as a rational processor of stimuli, and the clear level of application is meant to be activity, if not site, specific. Numerous studies have been done along this line of inquiry to the point where summary papers listing dozens of individual studies are now in print with an eye toward generalizing more broadly to the behaviors in question. These studies are not fully representative of all recreation or visitor studies and are not presented as a characterization of the entire field, but they are examples that illustrate two long standing research traditions in resource recreation research.

Communication theories: One objective of this paper is to provide an overview of communication theories with reference to the paradigmatic plane presented above. The two rational mass communication theories, one general and one specific, occupy much the same position as the two recreation theories previously presented (see figure 1). These are reviewed first.

Figure 1. Paradigm plane with selected communication theories

Gen'l	Information exchange	Uncertainty reduction	Fantasy theme
		Role emergence	Motive-embedded
Utility			
Site	Compliance gaining	Functional group decision making	Value-laden story
	Rational	Relational	Symbolic
			Epistemology

Rational theories. Information Exchange Theory is a general theory meant to apply to most, if not all, communication settings. In this theory, messages are considered objectively describable and exist independent of the receiver. The receiver in turn is affected by these messages (persuaded, informed, etc.) in a linear process of response. Berelson and Lazarfeld (1948) defined its essence nearly 50 years ago as “objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.”

A more applied or setting dependent version of this perspective is Compliance Gaining Theory, where specific behavioral outcomes are desired from the communication events that are being measured. In this theory, the actor is rational and the communication events are still largely objective facts. That is, they do not depend largely upon specific individuals or social requirements, and the specific behavior of interest, such as rule compliance, is explicitly included in the theory (Krippendorff, 1993). A recreation example might be a prohibited behavior such as having a campfire in certain areas. A researcher would measure which “rules” campers know about, where they obtained site use information, and whether they saw signs, notices, or written prohibitions.

Relational theories. The second column of figure 1 locates communication theories that differ from the first by relaxing the strongly individualistic assumptions of the rational approach. Instead the actor is set in a role-bound context where relational features interact with the communication elements to give rise to meanings, interpretations, and ultimately behaviors. All relational theories assume an epistemological need for social structure, but emphasize different aspects of the communication process. Some are more client-centered than others. Each in its own way contributes to a particular place in the paradigmatic plane.

A general relational theory is Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). It too focuses on the relational aspects of communication as a means to define and uphold societal structures or symbols. Many of the key social facts for this theory are roles or authorities. For example URT might be useful to understand how communication can reduce uncertainty and lead to efficiency as district rangers do their job in communicating with the public.

A fairly general theory in this vein is Role Emergence Theory (Bormann, 1990). The objective is to understand decisionmaking in small groups by classifying the utterances of actors according to the role they have in a group process, such as a jury deliberation, and how these are used to signify status, provide leadership, etc. Both utility and assumptions about the actors are in the middle range of the paradigm plane. By restricting the concern for a particular task group, such as a quality assurance committee, a more specific theory such as Hirokawa’s (1985) Functional Theory of Group Decision Making may be a good choice. This approach would be especially useful when the focus is on communications in groups trained to decide relatively specific issues and the goal is to

understand how better decisions might be engendered. The paradigmatic focus is still relational but the utility level is more specific and would not be generalized to other small groups that don’t share decision making roles and characteristics. For the prohibited campfires example a scientist might investigate how or why a given campfire regulation achieves compliance or non-compliance within certain user groups by investigating who says what to whom, who are the group decisionmakers, etc.

Symbolic theories. Finally there are numerous communication theories that seem to have more in common with the humanities than social science. They make no claim to provide behavioral predictions and favor situated understanding and explanation as the primary goal. This sort of intellectual tradition is typical among social scientists and educators from constructivist, feminist, and post modern approaches to science. In communication there are general theories that provide a means to assess the meaning of communication events to particular groups especially on their own terms (emic) or as embedded regularities not previously recognized. A well-known one is Fantasy Theme Analysis (Bormann, 1982) wherein communication is analyzed to pull out the themes and symbols that are operative in that setting. For instance, consider the slogan “Only you can prevent forest fires.” Who promotes this idea and how is it received and transmitted through society? What is the symbolic reality that Smokey Bear embodies for a given group, and how different might it be for a mountain community surrounded by National Forest lands than one in an urbanized area? According to FTA, people who share a way of communicating about an issue are termed a rhetorical community, and their symbolic use of language and media can be studied theoretically to arrive at an understanding of the entire community.

A more focused or middle level utility theory might be Motive-Embedded Analysis. It is essentially a particularized form of dramaturgical analysis where the symbols used in conversations, writings, ads, or speeches are analyzed to uncover the motives that underlie them (Bullis & Tompkins, 1989). Although this study focused on communication among forest rangers, MEA might have particular usefulness to resource managers who are faced with conflicting demands from stakeholder groups in a planning context or discussions with a particularly important customer group. The theory allows a trained analyst to attribute motives to a person or group based on a study of behaviors, anecdotes, and discourse.

Finally, figure 1 presents a theory that relies heavily on symbolic analysis but is more specific in its utility: Value-Laden Story, which is a form of Narrative Paradigm Theory. The researcher preselects a particular class of events (e.g., health care workers servicing HIV patients). The core idea is to “unpack” the values, both instrumental and terminal, found in the narratives (stories) of individuals in a particular circumstance. For instance, by evaluating closely the value-laden components of subjects’ stories, a strong sense of the differences in goals and values between HIV patients and their doctors was accomplished

(Vanderford, Smith, & Harris, 1992). Similar approaches would be useful in selected recreation resource decision making contexts. For instance in the campfire issue from above a researcher might interview managers and selected user groups to uncover substantive differences in their values, needs, and preferences. Both groups are treated equally; i.e., the researcher's task is to understand the issue from each group's own perspective and make comparisons or conclusions afterward. Their subjective values and evaluative statements are the data that emerges from interviews and drives the analysis.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the broader picture, thoughtful application of communication theories will assist the larger enterprise of multimethod social science (e.g., triangulation) applied to resource recreation management. No argument is made that communication theories are meant to supplant existing recreation behavior theories. Increased use of communication theories is far from antithetical to current practice in the leisure paradigm. In many instances it is complementary and occupies the same metatheoretical place as existing outdoor recreation research. This paper has only scratched the surface and planted a few selected seeds. Scientists are encouraged to attend to the concepts and models of the broad field of communication so that these theories can be applied beyond the arenas of product marketing and mass media studies and, thereby, be brought fruitfully into the outdoors.

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