3 Practical Theory in Applied Communication Scholarship

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The relationship between theory and practice is viewed as an important feature of applied communication research. Grounded in Lewin’s (1951, p. 169) notion that there is “nothing so practical as a good theory,” applied communication scholars have been encouraged over the last 25 years to address practical problems in ways that simultaneously test or develop theoretically informed interventions and contribute to theory building. Accompanying this growing emphasis on the role of theory in applied communication research, however, has been the questioning of traditional concepts of social-scientific theory. Social-scientific theories traditionally have been designed to provide generalizable, empirically testable explanations that enable prediction and control of phenomena. Although many applied researchers still subscribe to this traditional ideal of theory, others have proposed various new forms of theory or theorizing practices intended to be more “useful” or “practical” than traditional theory; however, no consensus has emerged on how to make theories of communication more practical. This chapter traces the development of the idea of “practical theory” and shows how recent work on practical theory offers several alternative ways for applied communication scholars and practitioners to simultaneously address practical problems and build useful theory.

Practical theory is explicitly designed to address practical problems and generate new possibilities for action. Although there is a growing consensus among many communication scholars that “theory should improve the lives of people and have applicability for enhancing their capacities for action” (Barge, 2001b, p. 6), views about what counts as practical theory vary greatly among different approaches to practical theory. Practical theory, thus, is not a unitary concept with a singular fixed meaning; rather, what it means to do practical theorizing and the concepts and methods one employs in the process of being a practical theorist vary according to the approach one takes.

We open this chapter by tracing the evolution of views on the role of theory in applied communication research, showing both the growing role of theory in applied research and the emergence of practical theory as an alternative to traditional models of social-scientific theory. We then turn to the ways that practical theory has been practiced by applied communication scholars. Using Barge’s (2001b) distinctions among practical theory as mapping, engaged reflection, and transformative practice, we examine the concepts, assumptions, and methods of each approach as they are evidenced in the theory and research conducted by applied communication scholars. Although our review reveals that theory already is widely used for practical purposes in applied communication research, the contribution of explicit practical theory approaches, as we show, is to provide conceptual models and exemplary lines of work that can be used to articulate, critique, and further advance already existing practical tendencies in the use of theory by applied communication scholars. We conclude the chapter with a consideration of issues affecting the future development of practical theory in applied communication scholarship.
Evolving Views on Theory in Applied Communication Research

As context for the emergence of practical theory, we review explicit statements about theory by prominent applied communication scholars over the last 3 decades (see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume). An examination of several Journal of Applied Communication Research (JACR) editorial policy statements over the years gives a clear sense of evolving views on the role of theory in such research. Editorial statements in the 1970s (Hickson, 1973) and 1980s (Cissna, 1982b) contained no references at all to theory. As of 1990, however, when the Speech Communication Association (SCA, now the National Communication Association; NCA) started publishing this journal (see Cissna, Eadie, & Hickson, this volume), JACR’s editorial policy included the criterion that applied communication research “is securely based in theory but its purpose is not immediate theory building” (Eadie, 1990, p. 2). A 2004 policy statement asked, as the first of four editorial criteria for publishing research studies in JACR, “Is the research securely based in theory? Does the study build from or lead to theory?” (Keyton, 2004, p. 1). Finally, at the time of this writing, JACR’s policy states:

The Journal of Applied Communication Research publishes original scholarship that addresses or challenges the relation between theory and practice in understanding communication in applied contexts.... Original research studies should apply existing theory and research to practical solutions, problems, and practices; should illuminate how embodied activities inform and reform existing theory or should contribute to theory development. (Stafford, 2009, n.p.)

Obviously, the role of theory in applied communication scholarship has expanded significantly over time and the debate that produced this evolution of JACR editorial policies is worth a closer look.

Calls for more attention to theory in applied communication research clearly were rising by the early 1980s. A series of research editorials in SCA’s newsletter, Spectra, attacked what were perceived to be intellectually shallow applied concerns as being “The Shame of Speech Communication” (Ellis, 1982), defended the traditional distinction between applied and theoretical scholarship but noted that the former “is always informed by theory” (Eadie, 1982, p. 4), and advocated a turn to practical theory in the tradition of Lewin (Gordon, 1982). The first issue of JACR under Kenneth N. Cissna’s editorship contained a seven-article symposium on “Application of Communication Theory to Communication Practice” (Cissna, 1982a), in which prominent communication theorists suggested how their theories could be practically applied. Most of the suggested applications were rather sketchy, but Bormann (1982) reported an extensive program of applied communication research based on his symbolic convergence theory (e.g., Cragan & Shields, 1981). Although one could infer from Bormann’s article that this applied research program may have contributed to the development of symbolic convergence theory, neither his nor any of the other symposium articles explicitly mentioned the possibility that applied communication research could not only use theory but also elaborate theory.

G. R. Miller and Sunnafrank (1984) argued influentially that “applied research, when properly conceived and conducted, can contribute to the development and understanding of communication theory,” and that such theoretically oriented applied research was beneficial “both in its practical and social value to the sponsor and its intellectual interest to the scholarly community” (p. 255). Using G. R. Miller’s program of research on videotaped trial testimony (e.g., G. R. Miller & Fontes, 1979) as an exemplar, G. R. Miller and Sunnafrank advocated research that tested social-scientific theory and, at the same time, addressed applied issues of concern to the research sponsor.
Eadie (1990, p. 5), although agreeing that “theory-building research can be done in applied settings,” maintained that theory building per se should not be a necessary criterion for applied communication research. Ellis (1991), however, in Eadie’s (1991) inaugural special issue of JACR on “The Agenda for Applied Communication Research,” argued that JACR’s new editorial policy about theory-based applied research actually was consistent with G. R. Miller and Sunnafrank’s (1984) position. In that same special issue, Weick and Browning (1991, citing Thomas & Tymon, 1982) presented five characteristics of “useful ideas” (descriptive relevance, focus on outcomes, operational validity, nonobviousness, and timeliness) that could be regarded as criteria for employing theory in applied communication scholarship. Kreps, Frey, and O’Hair (1991, p. 80, citing Snizek & Furhman, 1980; see also O’Hair, Kreps, & Frey, 1990) argued that applied communication research should be guided by theory that is “practically relevant” rather than “academically elegant,” and that such research can test the predictive validity of theory. In various ways, these scholars suggested that applied communication research should test the usefulness of theoretical ideas, which themselves should be explicitly designed to be useful in practice—a central goal of practical theory.

The role of theory—as seen from remarkably diverse epistemological perspectives—also was a prominent theme of the 1991 Tampa Conference on Applied Communication, a key moment in the institutionalization of applied communication research (Cissna, 1995b; see also Cissna et al., this volume). Recommendation 8 (of 21 recommendations formally adopted by the conference) stated that “applied communication researchers, like all scholars, should strive to develop and refine theory so that insights gained are useful in situations beyond the specific ones studied” (Cissna, 1995a, p. 197). Most chapters in the text that Cissna (1995b) edited from that conference spoke directly to the role of theory in applied communication research. G. R. Miller (1995) defended the position argued earlier by G. R. Miller and Sunnafrank (1984), and Seibold (1995), although basically agreeing with G. R. Miller’s concept of theory, argued for the value of a broader range of theory-applying, as well as theory-building, applied communication research. Other contributors offered radical alternatives for applied research, challenging the traditional concept of explanatory scientific theory that had dominated the communication field and had been applied whole cloth to applied communication scholarship. Argyris (1995) distinguished between knowledge that merely is applicable (relevant) and knowledge that actually is usable (by describing a sequence of actions that leads to specified consequences), and advocated an approach to applied communication research based on theories of practice, such as action-science models, rather than traditional social-scientific theories based on a hypothetico-deductive model. In Conquergood’s (1995, p. 85) view, applied communication researchers should be “engaged intellectuals” who use theory for purposes of critical reflection and ideological critique. Craig (1995) and Wood (1995) also argued, in different ways, that theory should be understood and employed as a form of critical reflection on communicative practices. Although only Craig (1995) explicitly used the term practical theory, each of these essays expressed impulses that converged toward one or another of the approaches to practical theory that we examine in the following sections.

Three special issues or sections of JACR published between 1998 and 2000 (Frey, 1998a; O’Hair, 2000a; Petronio, 1999a) reflected the growing influence of practical theory as a concept in applied communication scholarship, although these works did not use that term explicitly. Introducing a special issue on “Communication and Social Justice Research,” Frey (1998b), citing several of the essays in Cissna (1995b) and related writings, claimed that most communication scholars no longer recognized a categorical distinction between theory and application. Moreover, as Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and
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Murphy (1996) previously had noted, applied communication scholarship from a social justice perspective requires that “the very form of theory envisioned as guiding research must shift” (p. 115, see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume). Proposing yet another way of merging theory and practice in her introduction to a special issue on “Translating Scholarship into Practice,” Petronio (1999b) defined translation as “using the ‘science of interpretation’ to translate theoretical orientations and research findings into usable information in the everyday world” at the same time that scholars “preserve the integrity of the research and theory” (pp. 87, 88). Finally, introducing a special forum in which several prominent scholars offered definitions of applied communication scholarship, O’Hair (2000b, pp. 164–165) found one of three “harmonious themes” running through the forum to be “the recursive nature of theory and practice—one informs and improves the other,” but he questioned how practice actually had informed theory.

Our review of the evolving role of theory in applied communication scholarship over the last 3 decades warrants several conclusions. First, although the role of theory has expanded steadily and a consensus has emerged that applied communication research should be grounded in theory, the diversity of epistemological approaches to grounding applied research in theory has increased apace. Second, a growing consensus exists that applied communication research can contribute to theory development, although there is continuing disagreement as to how and how much it should do so. Third, discussions of theory increasingly have emphasized the need for some distinct type of “usable” or “practical” theory in applied research, but “practical theory” per se has not yet become a common term for describing the work done by applied communication researchers. Many applied communication scholars, thus, seem to be groping implicitly toward some type of practical theory, but without the guidance of an explicit model or set of principles. A barrier to articulating an explicit model is that the implicit impulses toward practical theory seem to be pushing in several different directions, leading to the need to distinguish different approaches to practical theory. Consequently, we turn to three approaches to practical theorizing.

The Practice of Practical Theorizing: Three Approaches

A special issue of the journal Communication Theory on “Practical Theory,” edited by Barge (2001a), provided a welcome opportunity to crystallize and reflect on some creative alternatives that have emerged in the theory and practice of applied communication scholarship. It quickly became apparent to Barge, as the editor, that practical theory meant different things to the scholars who submitted essays to the special issue. Some submitters adopted a more Lewinian position that viewed practical theory as a high-quality description of (1) the problems, puzzles, dilemmas, or challenges constituting a practice; (2) the particular communicative strategies, moves, and structures that manage those problems; and (3) the consequences of performing particular communicative strategies. By offering high-quality descriptions using a variety of scientific, interpretive, and critical modes of inquiry, these submitters developed theories that have practical implications for solving important problems and addressing salient issues. Other submitters grounded their work in Craig’s (1989) view of practical theory as a normative reconstruction of practice. Still other submitters based their approach in Cronen’s (1995, 2001) articulation of practical theory as a tool for informing a grammar of practice that facilitates joining with the grammars of others to explore their unique patterns of situated action. Hence, although every submitter was concerned with articulating the theory–practice relationship from a practical theory perspective, they did so in different ways.

To make sense of the variety of studies submitted for that special issue, Barge (2001b)
distinguished three broad approaches to practical theory that took different perspectives to the theory–practice relationship: (1) mapping, (2) engaged reflection, and (3) transformative practice. First, practical theory as mapping begins by creating a high-quality map of reality through scientific, interpretive, or critical methods that subsequently can be used to inform practice. The idea that the maps of reality created by scholars can inform practice is present in Lewin’s (1951) oft-quoted dictum that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169; see also Gordon, 1982), as well as G. R. Miller and Sunnafrank’s (1984) merger of theoretical and applied research, and Petronio’s (1999b) translation concept. Each of these theorists embraced a mapping approach to the development of practical theory.

Second, practical theory as engaged reflection explicitly addresses the reflexive relationship between theory and practice—how each can inform the other—and, therefore, reflects an integration of practical and theoretical discourses. From this perspective, theory emerges from a systematic reflection on communicative practice in terms of the kinds of problems, dilemmas, and sites that people engage in the conduct of their lives and how they manage them. Conquergood (1995), Craig (1995), Frey et al. (1996), and Wood (1995) all expressed impulses that converge toward the idea of engaged reflection.

Third, practical theory as transformative practice emphasizes “the immediate transformation of the practice and the abilities of both the members of a community and the practical theorist” (Barge, 2001b, p. 9). Practical theory from this perspective is viewed as a useful resource for theorists and practitioners to help them make sense of situations and take action that is intended to improve those situations. Developed by Shotter (1984) and Cronen (1995, 2001), among other scholars, this approach is less clearly represented than the other two approaches in the literature reviewed to this point, although it resonates in certain ways with the various impulses toward direct and immediate intervention in practical situations expressed by scholars such as Hickson (1973), Argyris (1995), and Frey et al. (1996).

Our contention is that these three approaches, although by no means exhausting all possibilities or encompassing all existing views, offer a useful framework for reflecting on the goals of practical theory in applied communication scholarship and provide clear alternatives to facilitate the creative and systematic development of practical theory in the future. The following sections examine these three approaches, and variations within each, in more detail, summarizing their main concepts and methods, reviewing illustrative applied communication studies (based on a search of 5 recent years of JACR), and identifying and assessing assumptions and issues of each approach.

**Practical Theorizing as Mapping**

This approach toward practical theory highlights the importance of theory in creating a map of the communicative territory of people’s experience and identifying the important landmarks and pathways that distinguish that landscape. Within this broad approach, different perspectives toward viewing practical theory as mapping have emerged in applied communication scholarship. Specifically, a scientific approach based on traditional hypothetico-deductive models of social-scientific theory can be distinguished from interpretive and critical approaches that have embraced social constructionist assumptions.

**Scientific Approach to Mapping**

Some applied communication scholarship aspires to a scientific ideal in theory building. Anderson and Baym (2004) referred to such scholarship as “foundational/empirical”
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because it emphasizes a foundational epistemology that views knowledge as the correspondence between the mental images that people have of a phenomenon and an independent, stable material reality, and privileges empiricism, the systematic observational experience of human communication. Scientific theory reflects the assumptions and values typically associated with theory in the natural sciences, in that “the archetypal character of theory is ... axiomatic and causal; its method, objective, and metric, its arguments generalized and syllogistic deductions that make claims about prediction and control of a stable, determined, and material reality” (Anderson & Baym, 1995, p. 593). In this view, high-quality scientific theory typically is evaluated according to the criteria of explanation, prediction, control, and heuristic value.

There are several implications that flow from this view of theory for the theory–practice relationship. First, theorizing is viewed as a distinct activity from practice; it is a context-independent activity that generates generalizable explanations of human behavior. Applied communication scholarship, however, typically focuses on a problem or issue involving practice (e.g., Cisna, 2000; Keyton, 2000); the term practice in that context refers to different types of communicative conduct, such as sexual harassment, supervisor communication, and emotion management, or to communication in various institutional scenes, such as health-care teams, public meetings, and classrooms (Craig & Tracy, 1995). Practices are situated in time and space in a way that theory is not; a particular theory, therefore, can be applied to a specific communication problem or issue and its fit with the material reality of that problem or issue assessed.

In the case of applied communication scholarship, a wide variety of scientific theories have been used to explore communication problems and issues, such as Witte's (1992, 1994) extended parallel processing model (EPPM; Morman, 2000; Slater, Karan, Rouner, & Walthers, 2002; see also Witte & Roberto, this volume), Petronio's (1991) communication boundary management theory (Golish & Caughlin, 2002), Burgoon's (1995; Burgoon & Hale, 1988) nonverbal expectancy violation theory (McPherson, Kearney, & Plax, 2003), Sunnafrank’s (1986) predicted outcome value theory (Bippus, Kearney, Plax, & Brooks, 2003), and inoculation theory (Compton & Pfau, 2004). In each of these studies, a particular communication problem or issue was identified and a relevant causal theory was selected as a way to engage the problem and determine how it might best be addressed. For example, Morman (2000) focused on how persuasive messages can be structured to motivate men to perform testicular self-examinations on a regular basis. Using the EPPM, Morman's experimental study found that high-threat/high-efficacy messages motivated men to perform testicular self-exams to a larger degree than did high-threat/low-efficacy messages.

Second, from the perspective of practical theory as mapping, theory building is viewed as a more important activity than practical application. In her discussion of scholarship as translation, Petronio (1999b) suggested that theory and application are distinct activities:

Through translation, we are able to preserve the integrity of the research and theory because it bridges knowledge production with knowledge utilization. Translating means that we take the knowledge discovered through research or theory and interpret it for everyday use. Translators develop pathways for converting research knowledge into practice. (p. 88)

The metaphor of translation, thus, privileges theory over application, because application or knowledge utilization is not possible without the knowledge initially generated by theory.
A cursory examination of discussion sections of applied communication research articles within the foundational/empirical tradition emphasizes the importance of theory over practice. Although it is rare for the practical implications of theory and research not to be explicitly stated in applied communication scholarship, typically, a discussion of the theoretical implications of the research initially is offered followed by an examination of the practical implications. Carson and Cupach (2000), for instance, began the discussion section of their article (which received the 2001 Distinguished Article Award from NCA’s Applied Communication Division), by highlighting how their study of workplace reproaches validates the importance of using perceived face threat to explain relational outcomes, such as interactional fairness, anger, and communication competence, in theories of facework. This discussion of theory was followed by some implications of the research study for managers, which included recommendations such as using facework strategies during face-threatening situations. As another example, Feeley (2000) initially suggested in the discussion section of the article that, based on his study of communication and employee turnover, the erosion model needs reconceptualization and then followed up with a series of practical suggestions for managers who wish to retain employees, such as integrating employees into the social network of the organization as soon as possible. The sequencing of these topics within the discussion sections of these JACR articles strongly suggests that theory and theory development are more important than applications, because they are the foundation on which applications may be built.

The scholarship of translation also emphasizes a unidirectional flow of communication from theorists and researchers to practitioners once a research study has been completed. The scholarship of translation focuses on ways that knowledge can be brought to an audience that preserves the nuance and integrity of the theory and research but also connects with particular communities of practice. The issue becomes how scholars can transmit information in ways that are most beneficial for the target population or populations (Petronio, 1999b). Activities such as interventions, training, and instructional programs (see Frey & SunWolf, this volume) can be designed once a study has been conducted, as the practical implications of research become possible only after its completion.

Third, as previously stated, scientific theory is evaluated according to a correspondence criterion that emphasizes the importance of there being a clear correspondence between the mental images of the phenomena created in theories and the material world. This criterion leads theorists to employ the language of validation when assessing theory. Consider the following phrases (with italics added) from foundational/empirical applied communication scholarship:

- “These findings validate POV theory.” (Bippus et al., 2003, p. 260)
- “These effects are consistent with the EPPM-based proposition.” (Slater et al., 2002, p. 45)
- “The findings demonstrated that variation in perceptions of intergroup contact is related to perceptions of experiences of outgroup variability in the predicted fashion.” (Soliz & Harwood, 2003, p. 337)

The italicized phrases highlight that good theory should be validated by data that are consistent with the predictions offered by the deduced hypotheses. When data do not comport with a priori predictions, the theory often needs to be revised to reflect more accurately the material reality. For example, Feeley (2000) revised his erosion model of employee turnover and Eastman, Schwartz, and Cai (2005) revised their general salience model of the impact of on-air promotions on televised movie ratings in light of the data they obtained.
Interpretive and Critical Approaches to Mapping

Interpretive and critical approaches to theory building entail mapping problems, puzzles, dilemmas, or challenges constituting a practice; describing particular communicative strategies, moves, and structures to manage those problems; articulating consequences of performing particular communicative strategies; and (in critically oriented studies) critiquing existing practices and sometimes proposing alternative practices to promote positive social change. Like a scientific approach to mapping, interpretive and critical approaches also view theory as a resource that can be used to analyze and make sense of data. As a result, such theoretical perspectives embrace reflexivity, adopting a social constructionist epistemology that acknowledges knowledge production as a social accomplishment that occurs through language (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Anderson & Baym, 2004). This approach to mapping entails three important ideas.

First, theory is a reflexive resource for describing and critiquing practice. A theory becomes a lens or prism through which to view, analyze, and critique a practice, and it is selected because it enables the theorist to consider questions that have not been addressed in previous research (Huspek, 2000). For example, Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, and Olsen (2002) used dialectical theory to illuminate complex contradictions in support groups and to suggest useful communicative strategies for managing these contradictions; Dougherty and Smythe’s (2004, p. 312) study of sexual harassment used “sense making as a theoretical lens”; and Harter’s (2004) study of cooperatives highlighted “the dialectic of independence and solidarity [as] a revealing prism through which to make sense of how members enact cooperative life” (p. 99).

A theoretical analysis and description of a practice is not the same as developing a theory of that practice, although the results from the inquiry are reflexively turned back on the preexisting theory to rethink and reconceptualize it. For instance, applied communication research based on interpretive mapping has led to a rethinking of Jablin’s (1987) socialization model (Gibson & Papa, 2000), role development theory and strategic ambiguity (K. Miller, Joseph, & Apker, 2000), Weick’s (1995) sense-making theory (Murphy, 2001), and dialectical theory (Baxter et al., 2002; Medved et al., 2001). This form of theorizing does not diminish the importance of theoretically reflecting on or conceptualizing a practice but the theoretical description of the practice does not itself constitute a theory.

Second, theorizing a practice is viewed as a distinct activity from intervention. Similar to scientific mapping, intervention is something that typically happens after, not during, the research act. For example, Baxter et al. (2002) clearly separated theorizing dialectical tensions that women experience when their husbands suffer from adult dementia from conducting intervention activities, concluding their essay by translating their findings into a suggested intervention activity where support groups for these women could make dialectical tensions a focus for discussion. One possible exception is Sherblom, Keränen, and Withers’s (2002) use of structuration theory to study tensions that game wardens face during an organizational transition. They collected data as part of a larger consultation process with game wardens and developed specific training to aid them during an organizational transition. However, it is unclear whether the analysis presented in their research report actually was used during the consultation to inform training of the game wardens.

Given the reflexive nature of interpretive and critical mapping approaches, it is surprising that relevant research reports do not indicate how participants were influenced by the research process. In the studies we examined, member checks typically were conducted to verify theorists’ analyses, especially if a particular organization or organizational
unit served as the research site (e.g., Ellingson, 2003; Harter & Krone, 2001; Morgan & Krone, 2001; Ruud, 2000). These member checks involved the researchers conducting individual interviews or focus groups to have participants reflect on the researchers’ findings. Although we suspect that these conversations directly influenced participants’ understanding of the research and their subsequent activity in that site, there were no explicit references in these reports regarding whether and how participants subsequently used this knowledge.

Third, practical theory from this perspective is judged according to its heuristic value. When practical theory is conceived as a lens or prism for viewing a practice, the primary issue is whether this particular lens provides a useful way of viewing the phenomenon. One way this issue is determined is when practical theorists employ a particular theory because it opens up a set of questions that previously have not been addressed. For example, Dougherty (2001) used feminist standpoint theory to gain new insights about male and female perspectives on sexual harassment, and Zoller (2003) employed critical theory to examine the material implications of ideological discourse associated with occupational health and safety. A second way to determine the usefulness of a particular theoretical lens is when the theoretical description of a practice generates new insights regarding key ideas and concepts of the theory and their potential use (see, e.g., Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004; Martin, 2004). Both approaches emphasize the heuristic aspects of theory construction.

Practical Theory as Engaged Reflection

A second broad approach to practical theorizing works to sustain a productive reflexivity between theory and practice such that each informs the other. From this perspective, theory emerges out of a systematic reflection on communication problems and practices and, in that sense, is grounded in practice. Theories also potentially contribute to the ongoing social construction of the practices they conceptualize insofar as they actually are incorporated into practical discourse among ordinary members of communities of practice as ways of understanding, guiding, and critiquing their practices. The metaphors of “maps” and “lens” used by scientific and interpretive and critical practical theorists become problematic for theory from this perspective, because the theoretical “map” not only describes but also potentially shapes the territory, and the theoretical “lens” is scrutinized and shaped from the standpoint of the scene in which it is used to observe. Applied communication research has a necessary role in this process of engaged reflection, not only as a means by which practical theory can be tested in use but also as a means by which communication problems and practices can be conceptualized and, thereby, contribute to the construction of practical theory.

Two distinct approaches to practical theory as engaged reflection have been explicitly formulated and currently contribute to applied communication research: grounded practical theory and design theory. Each is introduced along with applied research examples.

Grounded Practical Theory

Grounded practical theory (GPT; Craig & Tracy, 1995) was developed within a general framework of communication studies as a “practical discipline.” Craig (1983) began this line of inquiry into what he called practical theory (theory adapted to values and concerns intrinsic to social practices other than those of pure science) and practical discipline (an academic discipline with rigorous methods for developing practical theory). These concepts subsequently were elaborated with regard to the role of various social-scientific
methods (Craig, 1984), how the discipline as a whole can be designed to cultivate communication as a practical art (Craig, 1989), the role of applied communication research (Craig, 1995), the underlying process of practical reflection (Craig, 2001), and how meta-discourse (practical discourse about discourse) mediates the dialectic of theory and practice (Craig, 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2006).

GPT incorporates some elements of traditional grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but with the goal of constructing practical theory rather than traditional social-scientific theory. The GPT method moves back and forth between interpretive empirical studies of particular communicative practices and an evolving normative model or “rational reconstruction” that conceptualizes values and principles (or “situated ideals”) already partly implicit in those practices. Studies of practices can be conducted through various ethnographic (see Ellingson, this volume) and discourse-analytic methods (see Tracy and Mirivel, this volume). Especially useful is action-implicative discourse analysis (AIDA), a method explicitly oriented toward creating GPT (K. Tracy, 1995, 2005).

When creating GPT, practices can be rationally reconstructed at three interrelated levels of description:

- **Problem level**: dilemmas that are commonly experienced.
- **Technical level**: communication strategies available for managing problems.
- **Philosophical level**: reasoned principles, grounded in the situated ideals of ordinary participants, that can inform reflective thinking and discourse about problems and strategies. (Craig & Tracy, 1995)

Existing theories of communication, regardless of whether they were intentionally constructed according to this model, also can be grounded in practice by assessing their usefulness as resources for engaged reflection on problems, strategies, and principles in applied situations.

Examples of applied communication research taking an explicitly GPT approach include studies of practical dilemmas in conducting academic colloquia (K. Tracy, 1997a) and classroom discussions (Craig & Tracy, 2005; Muller, 2002), interaction problems between callers and call-takers at a 911 emergency service (K. Tracy, 1997b; K. Tracy & Tracy, 1998), constructing community in a women’s safe house (Ashcraft, 2001), negotiations between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and David Koresh during the 1993 Waco siege (Agne & Tracy, 2001), and managing conflict in a local school board (Craig & Tracy, 2005; K. Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001; K. Tracy & Muller, 2001).

We expand on a few of these examples to illustrate some different options when constructing GPT. K. Tracy and Ashcraft’s (2001) study of disputes over the wording of a school district’s diversity goals illustrates inductive theory building at the technical, problem, and philosophical levels. Their discourse analysis of school board meetings identified three strategies for framing wording changes in a proposed policy, and found that each frame sometimes was challenged. The group’s struggles over wording reflected members’ efforts to manage a dilemma between crafting a policy that was committed to clear values but divisive versus a policy that was ambiguous but more widely acceptable.

On the philosophical level, K. Tracy and Ashcraft (p. 312) argued in the conclusion to the article that framing a value conflict as “a mere wording difference” can be a good way for a group to engage in value-based conflict and keep the group together.

A study of a women’s safe house by Ashcraft (2001) shows how GPT can be pursued through ethnographic methods. A key problem faced by nonbureaucratic organizations grounded in feminist principles, such as safe houses, is “a persistent pull between the
ideals of feminist empowerment ideology and the practical demands of organizing” (Ashcraft, p. 81). Ashcraft’s ethnographic analysis identified strategies used by safe-house members attempting to implement the organization’s formal communication principles, revealed tensions and problematic assumptions within those principles, and proposed a normative model of empowering community.

K. Tracy and Muller’s (2001) study of how school boards formulate problems illustrates the reflexive grounding of existing theories by engaging critically both with a group’s practices and with the theories themselves. Theories of argumentation, rhetorical fact construction, and moral conflict each led to a different diagnosis of the school board’s communication problems. After showing how each theory illuminated certain group practices, but fell short in some ways, the authors concluded with reflections on the importance of a group’s choices about how to formulate its problems and on issues that need to be addressed by a practical theory of problem formulation.

Finally, Craig and Tracy’s (2005) study of pragmatic uses of “the issue” in classroom group discussions and school board meetings illustrates how a comparison of two applied situations can contribute to GPT. In student classroom discussions, references to “the issue” generally were used to raise and clarify points of controversy in ways compatible with normative argumentation theory, whereas participants in school board meetings actively avoided framing problems as controversial issues. The authors argued that the comparison suggested normative criteria for selecting an argument or problem-solving frame for conducting a group discussion.

Although GPT has not yet been widely used as an explicit theoretical approach in applied communication scholarship, it is not uncommon for applied researchers to propose theoretical conceptualizations of practices that are discovered empirically in actual use. Williams and Olaniran (2002), in an analysis of how organizations respond to a public controversy involving race, identified a previously untheorized strategy of “limited apology” (p. 310). Similarly, Seeger and Ulmer (2002) conceptualized an alternative rhetorical approach to crisis communication. S. J. Tracy (2004), in an ethnographic study that applied theories of dialectics, dilemmas, and pragmatic paradoxes to the interpretation of organizational tensions, proposed a grounded theoretical model that conceptualized alternative strategies for framing such tensions. Lucas and Buzzanell (2004), studying occupational narratives of blue-collar workers, found discursive practices that could be theorized to provide alternatives to white-collar conceptions of career and success. The central contribution of these studies was to conceptualize one or more communication techniques that had been used implicitly in practice and to assess those practices in terms of a theoretically informed interpretation of the problematic situation. Although these studies that proposed grounded theoretical conceptualizations of practice did not explicitly use a GPT methodology, they are broadly consistent with GPT and, in the future, might be usefully pursued in that framework.

**Design Theory**

A second approach to practical theory as engaged reflection conducts communication research as a disciplined design enterprise that, at once, is both theoretical and applied (see Aakhus & Jackson, 2005; Jackson, 1998). As Aakhus and Jackson (2005, p. 413) noted, “design is a natural fact about communication,” observable in the behavior of ordinary communicators, as well as experts, such as in their study of facilitators and developers of new group communication technologies (see Poole & DeSanctis, this volume). Aakhus and Jackson argued that designs for communication always involve “hypotheses about how things work,” but “professional communities that practice communication design
can be unreflective about the communicative theory underpinning the knowledge of their craft” (pp. 413, 416). Design theory, consequently, as Aakhus and Jackson explained, puts the design process on a theoretical basis:

The body of theory built up in a design enterprise is a body of interactional puzzles and the solutions designed to solve these puzzles. It is also built up through the development of the concepts and rationales used in judging what counts as a problem to be solved, what counts as an appropriate solution, and the justificatory link between problem and solution. In this sense, design expertise constitutes a practical theory about communication and interaction (Craig & Tracy, 1995). The activity in design enterprise, however, never moves far from the actual creation of usable procedures for communication. (p. 417)

Design theory, like GPT, generates both empirical descriptions and ideal normative models of communication. However, unlike the empirically grounded “situated ideals” of GPT, design theory pursues the creation of new designs for bringing communicative practices into closer alignment with ideal norms. Although we regard it as form of engaged reflection, design theory also has some resemblance to practical theory as transformative practice (discussed below) in that it is intended to be used by communication practitioners for the purpose of direct intervention into specific situations to transform communicative practices.

Applied communication research utilizing a design approach has included work on the design of Web-based instructional support protocols (Jackson, 1998; Jackson & Madison, 1999; Jackson & Wolski, 2001), discourse for policy controversy (Aakhus, 1999), tools to facilitate reflective dialogue in group meetings (Aakhus, 2001), and techniques of third-party mediation (Jacobs, Jackson, Hallmark, Hall, & Stearns, 1987). Harrison and Morrill (2004) used normative pragmatics and social–contextual approaches to identify normative ideals of dispute-resolution processes as a basis for “critical analysis of communication systems and protocols for the purposes of reengineering features to help achieve an ideal system” (p. 322). Also worth mentioning is work by Kaufer and Butler (1996) on rhetoric as a design art, and Goodwin’s (2002) line of design work in argumentation theory, both of which have shown important pedagogical applications.

Aakhus (2001), in a study of the professional beliefs of group decision support system facilitators, presented an interesting hybrid of the GPT and design theory approaches. Based on individual interview and focus group data, Aakhus reconstructed and critiqued what, in GPT terms, was the situated ideal of group facilitation: a philosophy of process management based on the assumption that content and process can be clearly separated. Arguing that this philosophy encounters several problems and contradictions, including a failure to understand communication as a constitutive process, Aakhus recommended that facilitators should adopt an alternative philosophy based in a design stance that emphasizes communicative expertise. The study illustrates that the GPT and design theory approaches to engaged reflection, although different in some ways, are not fundamentally incompatible.

**Practical Theory as Transformative Practice**

Practical theory also may be viewed as a transformative practice that simultaneously emphasizes the elaboration of the abilities of practical theorists and research participants. Cronen’s (1995, 2001; Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2001) view of practical theory best reflects this approach. Grounded in a pragmatic–systemic approach toward inquiry, Cronen (2001) argued that:
A practical theory informs a grammar of practice that facilitates joining with the grammars of others to explore their unique patterns of situated action. The proximal reason for joining is the cocreation of new affordances and constraints for creative participation in the instrumental and consummatory dimensions of experience. (p. 26)

To understand how this perspective toward practical theory approaches the practice–theory relationship, we explore the implications of this definition, highlight a research exemplar that adopts this approach, and reflect on ways that such an approach may be evaluated.

**The Implications of Transformative Practice**

Several implications flow from this definition of practical theory. First, practical theory informs a “grammar” of practice, a notion drawn from Wittgenstein’s (1953) ideas concerning “meaning-as-use” and “language games” as a grammar of practice reflected in the rules for meaning and action that people use in situated moments of conversation. Articulating a grammar of practice focuses attention on rules that people use to inform their practice and how the rules-in-use obligate, permit, or prohibit ways of making sense and acting into situations. For example, scholars who adopt a quantitative approach to study communication and other social sciences (see Query et al., this volume) use rules to make choices about what statistical tests are appropriate given the unique intersection of their theoretical presuppositions and hypotheses, the way they operationalized the variables studied, the type of data collected, and the particular characteristics of the research participant population. Similarly, family therapists make situated choices about questions to ask during sessions with clients. In both examples, a practical theory helps to inform the abilities of practitioners to act within an emerging situation.

Practical theories are explicitly heuristic in that they offer a set of guides in the form of models, concepts, principles, and practices that people use to make sense of and respond to situations. For those who view practical theory as mapping, these guides are used to describe reality. Even for those practical theorists who engage in interpretive and critical mapping, and recognize the fleeting and partial character of their depictions, models, concepts, and principles still are used to render a coherent mapping of the meaning of a communicative practice. The key difference between viewing practical theory as a form of mapping and transformative practice is that the models, concepts, and principles become instrumentalities or tools for furthering inquiry within the domain of transformative practice.

Second, practical theorists explicitly engage and address the interests of research participants. K. A. Pearce and Pearce (2001) argued that practical theorists are concerned with “helping participants in the projects they engage.… This implies engagement with, not just observations of, participants in our projects” (p. 109). This stance requires practical theorists to pay close attention to the unique, situated patterns of experience that participants cocreate, and to find ways to create new affordances and constraints for action. Practical theory as transformative practice embraces a participatory action research model, where there is shared ownership of the research projects by researchers and research participants, a joint analysis of social problems, and an orientation to action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). This stance, therefore, emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning during the process of practical theorizing.

K. A. Pearce and Pearce (2001) suggested that this process of joint learning involves developing the abilities to answer two questions: “What’s going on here?” and “What should I do?” (p. 109). More specifically, the questions are “What are the patterns of meaning and action that people create in their everyday practices that inform their way
of living together?” and “In light of those patterns, how do they inform what I do next?” The first question emphasizes learning with others about how to expand one’s vocabulary to make sense of situations; the second question involves learning how to elaborate one’s vocabulary of action. This learning occurs at two levels: In conversation with research participants, practical theorists enlarge their ability and vocabulary to describe situations and take actions; furthermore, as a result of the collaborative learning process with practical theorists and among other research participants, research participants enlarge their abilities to make sense of situations and act.

Third, practical theorists arrange conversations among other practical theorists, practitioners, and research participants (K. A. Pearce & Pearce, 2001). Research occurs at the nexus of several conversations, including the larger scholarly community in which one participates, which involves Institutional Review Boards (see Seeger, Sellnow, Ulmer, & Novak this volume), journal editorial boards, and the like, as well as a network of practitioners who share an interest in the domain of study and the research participants themselves (Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001). The decision that scholars must make is what conversations to privilege over others in the research process. Practical theorists focusing on transformative practice emphasize conversations with the research participants in their projects and with other practitioners and scholars within a particular area of study. A failure to keep in conversation with research participants inhibits the ability of practical theorists to respond to participants’ needs; a failure to talk to other practitioners and scholars within a particular domain lessens the likelihood of creating theory that addresses important issues and concerns within a given community of practice.

**Highlighting Research Exemplars**

Our review of five volumes of *JACR* found only one exemplar of applied communication scholarship that closely matched this view of practical theory: Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, and Ginossar’s (2004) use of muted group theory as a frame for exploring employee mistreatment and employee voice within an organizational setting. These scholars employed muted group theory to inform their inquiry, subsequently shared their research results with employees, and engaged them in discussion about future directions for the organization in light of their findings. The findings also were used to elaborate muted group theory by articulating the role of paradox in employee mistreatment. Meares et al.’s study, however, represents one isolated instance of practical theorizing as transformative practice. Grounding our understanding of practical theorizing as transformative practice is aided by examining a program of research rather than an isolated study. To that end, we examine how W. B. Pearce and Cronen’s (1980; Cronen, 1991, 1994; W. B. Pearce, 1989, 1994; see also Barge, 2004) coordinated management of meaning theory (CMM) has been used to promote public participation and dialogue processes as a case study of practical theory as transformative practice.

In the mid-1990s, a group of communication scholars and practitioners formed the Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC), which focused on developing public participation and dialogue processes to enhance democratic engagement within communities (see K. Pearce, Spano, & Pearce, this volume). The PDC’s Cupertino Project is its best-known work. This multiyear public communication project in Cupertino, California, was designed to “create communication structures and processes that would allow residents and city officials to work together to identify concerns, articulate visions, and develop action plans that enhance, strengthen, and build community” (Spano, 2001, p. xiv). The members of the PDC were guided by a social constructionist theoretical perspective that included CMM and they employed an eclectic set of interventionist practices. The PDC’s use of CMM reflects practical theory as transformative practice in several ways.
First, CMM provided a set of powerful descriptive–diagnostic tools that informed the PDC’s grammar of practice. The PDC’s ability to explore how persons-in-conversation coordinated their actions and the types of consequences that were produced relied on a variety of CMM concepts and models, such as constitutive and regulative rules (W. B. Pearce & Cronen, 1980), the hierarchy of meaning (W. B. Pearce, 1994), forms of communication (W. B. Pearce, 1989), and the serpentine model of communication (W. B. Pearce, 1994).

Second, the descriptive–diagnostic tools associated with CMM and their grammar of practice evolved during the Cupertino Project. For example, the PDC’s engagement with Cupertino led its members to reconsider important CMM concepts, such as “episode,” when they moved to the larger public context. As W. B. Pearce and Pearce (2000) explained:

CMM researchers and theorists have usually thought of them [episodes] as relatively short, uninterrupted patterns of interaction in face-to-face interaction, such as the phases of mediation or therapy sessions. The Cupertino Project required us to think on a very different scale, both in terms of the temporal extension and number of people and groups involved. (p. 414)

Rethinking the concept of episode led to the development of a three-level public dialogue process model that broadened episode to include: (1) strategic process design—the overarching plan or roadmap for a sequence of events intended to lead to particular outcomes; (2) event design—a series of activities that occur within a given event; and (3) communication facilitation skills—how facilitators respond to event participants, which includes conventional practices, such as keeping time and reframing comments (Spano, 2006).

Third, the abilities of research participants to work with one another were elaborated through their participation in the project. Their abilities grew as they appreciated new ways of making sense of their situation and taking action based on that new way of sense making. Consider the comment by a citizen who participated in a town-hall meeting (see Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, this volume) about the issue of cultural richness. At that meeting, six high school students who had participated in an intergenerational interview project about Cupertino’s future presented the information the project had generated. After hearing about the project and its findings, one citizen responded by saying, “Some of the best ideas I heard tonight came from the six kids that were sitting up here and who went out into the field and talked to people” (Spano, 2001, p. 107). This learning led to citizens organizing themselves and creating new community initiatives that addressed these ideas. For example, a group called the “Citizens of Cupertino Cross-Cultural Consortium” emerged out of a training and team-building program, and subsequently designed a series of culturally based activities.

Fourth, the PDC emphasized keeping a number of simultaneous conversations going. PDC members kept in close contact with the public dialogue participants and continually adjusted their discussion strategies depending on participants’ emerging needs. Moreover, throughout the process, conversations between PDC members and other theorists were maintained in the form of convention papers, book chapters, and journal articles, and by inviting scholars to offer feedback on the process. Conversations with other practitioners were generated by PDC members conducting workshops at professional meetings and publishing essays in practitioner-based journals.

Practical theory from a transformative perspective can be used both prospectively and retrospectively. It can be used prospectively in the sense that it provides a set of resources for theorists and practitioners to employ as they think through and anticipate the type of intervention activities they wish to develop during inquiry. For example, in the Cupertino
Project, the expanded notion of episode proved to be a useful concept when PDC members began to design training activities. This new view of episode became a valuable resource for PDC members as they reflected on how they wanted to position themselves later in the process. Practical theory also can be used retrospectively in the sense that it provides a set of tools for making sense of unfolding interaction. For example, CMM tools, such as the hierarchy of meaning and coordination, became important when PDC members reflected on the information that was generated from the intervention activities to create an account of why particular consequences came into being and others did not. The continued use of a practical theory’s descriptive–diagnostic tools within various situations and sustained reflection on their use generate new concepts, ideas, methods, and techniques that can be employed both prospectively and retrospectively.

Assessing Practical Theory as Transformative Practice

Given its grounding in the interests of participants and the importance of generating new opportunities for meaning making and action, the primary criterion for assessing practical theory is a pragmatic one. Simply put, practical theory is judged by whether it informed patterns of practice that made life better (Cronen, 1995). To make life better, a practical theory must construct coherent descriptions of situations that implicate lines of action in the form of interventions to improve the situation (Cronen, 2001). From this perspective, descriptions of situations are not themselves a theory but are the findings that emerge from a process of inquiry. The findings then serve as important data for whether the pattern of practice informed by the theory facilitated making the situation better and whether the concepts, methods, and tools associated with the practical theory are useful.

The Prospect for Practical Theory in Applied Communication Research

Several findings emerge from our review of the theory–practice relationship and the process of practical theorizing. First, applied communication scholars are concerned with connecting theory to practice. Whether theory is used to develop predictive models for the design of communicative events to achieve planned outcomes, conceptualize practice, interpret and understand practical situations, or to reform current practices, applied communication scholars emphasize the importance of theory in their research. Second, Barge’s (2001a) characterization of the three approaches to practical theory reveals how applied communication scholars have viewed the theory–practice relationship, as examples of each approach were present in the discourse of applied communication scholarship. Third, applied communication scholars tend to adopt a view of practical theory that is rooted in the metaphors of mapping and lens rather than viewing practical theory as a form of reflective engagement or transformative practice. Our examination of JACR found numerous examples of practical theory as either scientific or interpretive/critical mapping, but relatively few examples of practical theory as reflective engagement or transformative practice.

Through our analyses, we have attempted to enlarge the vocabulary regarding what it means to engage in practical theorizing and to become practical theorists. By articulating various alternatives that scholars may engage in as they do practical theory, we hope to have provided a resource that facilitates making informed choices. Our belief is that the term practical theory has multiple meanings and that the particular meaning a scholar ascribes to it depends on his or her epistemological and ontological assumptions. Thus, we want to avoid fixing the meaning of practical theory by associating it with a particular
set of assumptions. For example, W. B. Pearce (1993) suggested that practical theorists are guided by a temperament that is rooted in curiosity conducted about a pluralistic social world that is best known by taking a participant position. From his perspective, theorists who view the world as monistic and conduct research to search for certainty are not engaged in practical theory.

Our point is that what practical theory means depends on the tradition of practice in which a scholar locates him or herself. For example, the work of health communication scholars using theories such as the EPPM (see Witte & Roberto, this volume) represents a scientific mapping approach, which emphasizes a unitary view of the world and a quest for certainty, and, as such, is not viewed as practical theory, according to W. B. Pearce’s (1993) theoretical commitments. However, such scholars hardly are passive observers of communication phenomena; they are passionately involved researchers, trying to make a better world by improving, for example, the effectiveness of public health campaigns. Their research is driven by curiosity and openness to whatever they can learn that will be useful, and they are actively involved in conversations with practitioners (e.g., public health professionals) to learn about health-related problems and needs that they can address in their research; indeed, their research often is conducted in conjunction with actual health campaigns. However, they (1) assume that causal patterns can be found, (2) use quantitative hypothesis-testing methods to verify knowledge claims against competing causal explanations, and (3) understand theories (models of underlying causal patterns) to be logically independent from their application in practice. They are practical theorists in the tradition of Lewin (1951), but they approach the theory–practice relationship differently than scholars in the engaged reflection or transformative practice traditions, given their philosophical assumptions.

Given that practical theory can take on different meanings and be employed in different ways, applied communication scholars need to make conscious choices about how they position themselves in relation to the theory–practice relationship. Although we offered a tripartite system for distinguishing approaches to practical theory, theorizing a given practice and conducting a particular research study is not as simple as determining which of the three approaches to adopt. We offered these three approaches as ideal types, but recognize that in the course of doing theory and research, practical theorists may blur the boundaries among approaches and develop a blended approach for a specific research project. The task for practical theorists is how to manage the tension between the epistemological and ontological assumptions they adopt and the specific research problems and sites they engage.

To manage this tension, it is important for applied communication scholars to ask the question, “What contribution or difference do I want my scholarship to make?” This question highlights several important related questions that applied communication scholars need to consider when doing practical theory. First, does the research project emphasize more of a theoretical or practical contribution? As Cronen (2001) observed, “Practical theory does not require that everyone be a practitioner and theorist in equal degree. In any kind of work, various people will emphasize some aspects more than others, and practical theory is no exception” (p. 29). Practical theorists are concerned about the theory–practice relationship, but what position they take on this continuum varies as a function of their specific research project. There will be times when a scholar conducts research primarily to develop theory or to change an existing practice, but an emphasis on either theory or practice does not preclude a concern with the other. Although a single research project may focus on one end of the continuum, the long-term commitment of practical theorists is to keep theory and practice in a constructive tension.

Second, who needs to be involved in the research conversation to make this contribution
a reality? The choice point for practical theorists is which conversations need to be emphasized—those with other theorists, practitioners, or research participants. For example, if a practical theorist wants to create a causal map of a practice, the primary conversational partners are other theorists, with practitioner conversations occupying a secondary position. Moreover, those conversations with practitioners would focus on whether they find the map useful for creating intervention activities and how the theoretical findings subsequently can be applied, rather than conversations about the validity of the theory.

In contrast, the transformative practice approach emphasizes developing theory in the process of conversation with practitioners and research participants, and simultaneously maintaining ongoing conversations with other theorists to share insights gained from the research project.

Third, when do I want my scholarship to make a difference? One response to this question is to say that the scholarship will make a difference in people’s lives after a particular research project has been completed or a program of research is sufficiently developed. This is the position of those individuals who adhere to the notion of the scholarship of translation, as the theoretical knowledge gained from empirical research studies will be translated to practitioners or the public in the form of academic textbooks, training, and development programs (Petronio, 1999a; see also Frey & Sun Wolf, this volume). Once practical theorists have sufficient confidence in their research findings, they can enter the public conversation about how their work may make a difference in areas such as public policy, community development, and other intervention activities. Engaged reflection also allows for a temporal gap between practical theory construction and application, taking “a broader view that extends the theory–practice loop into the wider society and over a longer span of time” and envisioning that practical theories “may, in the long run, find a niche in the ‘ecology’ or ‘marketplace’ of ideas and thereby may influence [practice]” (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 268). The result is that the theory and research may not directly and immediately contribute to improving the lives of research participants but may, at some later date, influence them, as the knowledge generated from the theory and research becomes part of the larger public discourse on a particular topic.

A second response to this question is that researchers may decide that it is important to find ways to structure their theory and research to improve research participants’ lives, in addition to subsequently becoming part of the larger public discourse on a particular activity. This position suggests that practical theorists take more of an action research or collaborative learning approach (e.g., Costello, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2007; Stringer, 2007) and directly feed back the results of their inquiry to research participants so that participants can make wise choices of what to do next. These two answers are not mutually exclusive but practical theorists need to consider when they want their scholarship to make a difference and in what form.

Conclusion

Engaging in practical theory is important work that can positively influence people’s lives and improve the quality of practice. Given applied communication scholars’ commitment to addressing substantive, real-world problems, practical theory is an important part of making a difference in social worlds. By elaborating in this chapter the vocabulary of what it means to do practical theory and become practical theorists, we hope that applied communication scholars will make more informed choices about their position regarding the theory–practice relationship, the types of differences they wish to make in improving practice, and when they wish to make them.
References


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