

Week 1 Required Reading: Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is often applied to fields such as psychology and education to describe how we understand things and how we see the world. As stated by Jesse Delia, professor and developer of constructivism as it relates to interpersonal communication, “The core idea is that people have experiences through which they come to understand their worlds; and, out of that experience, they develop constructs, or, repetitive ways of giving meaning to their world” (A First Look at Communication Theory, 2014). While many scholars have provided insight into this perspective, some of the major contributors to constructivism include Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. A great interview featuring some scholars discussing what constructivism is can be found here.

Professor Jesse Delia sought to further explore how constructivism was relevant to interpersonal communication, and developed the theory of constructivism to help explain this. Essentially, Delia (1977) states that how people understand others and their views are based upon the impressions that they have. How a person perceives another person or a situation involves how cognitively complex that person is, as experience helps to shape the constructs that they have. Furthermore, Delia (1977) notes that “...the mode of thought employed in understanding other people, their perspectives, and the social world will directly influence a person’s competence in interaction” (p. 72). Thus, how people see things helps to shape their own ways of communicating with others; those who reflect high cognitive complexity are more effective communicators. As noted in Burleson (2011), there are four processes related to communication that are part of constructivism: 1) *message production*, which is producing verbal and nonverbal behaviors that will result in the response you want to see in others); *listening*, which involves comprehending how others are communicating with you so you know what that behavior means); *interaction coordination*, or, using listening and message production together when interacting with others); and *social perception*, which is “...identifying and making sense of entities and events in the social world, including experiences of ourselves, others, and social relationships, situations, and institutions” (p. 28).

Constructivism contributes some important insight to the field of interpersonal communication. Waltman (2002) cites numerous examples of scholarly articles that support the idea that the more cognitively complex a person is, the more of a person-centered communicator he or she is. For example, cognitively complex individuals can effectively persuade others, help manage conflicts in ways that can appeal to everyone involved, and comfort others when it’s perceived they are in distress, among other things.

References

A First Look at Communication Theory. (2014, January 29). Jim Applegate, Brant Burleson, & Jesse Delia on constructivism. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8eas3cbXYs>

Burleson, B.R. (2011). A constructivist approach to listening. *The International Journal of Listening*, 25(1/2), 27-46.

Waltman, S. (2002). Developments in constructivist work in communication studies, psychology, and education: Introduction to the special section on constructivism. *American Communication Journal*, 5(3), 1.

Delia, J. (1977). Constructivism and the study of human communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 63(1), 66-83.

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