

SPECIAL FORUM ON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

# Interpersonal Communication's Past, Present, and Bright Future

Jenny Rosenberg & Adrienne Kunkel

As with any discipline, current interpersonal communication scholarship relies heavily on its past in an effort to ensure an improved present and an even brighter future. Current research and teaching is informed by preceding theoretical and methodological trends and their associated strengths, as well as weaknesses. State-of-the-discipline publications focus on “where we have been, what we know, what we don’t know, what we need to know, and where we should be going” (Knapp & Daly, 2011, p. 3). The process of reflecting on the past as a way to inform the present is a hallmark of scholarship, yet how the present shapes the discipline’s future is less often considered.

The purpose of this special forum is to offer a platform for scholars to discuss the future of interpersonal communication by drawing on its past and present, as well as its challenges and affordances. The essays presented in this special forum for *Communication Studies* extend and formalize an intense and passionate conversation that began at a spotlight panel during the 2013 annual Central States Communication Association (CSCA) conference, “Interpersonal Communication’s Past, Present, and Bright Future.”

Seven high-profile and incredibly influential interpersonal communication scholars that represent a wide range of scholarly traditions, at different stages of their careers, were invited to participate in the panel (including Dr. Dawn O. Braithwaite, Dr. Steve Duck, Dr. Kory Floyd, Dr. Elissa Foster, Dr. Andrew Ledbetter, Dr. Jimmie Manning, and Dr. Sandra Metts). Panelists were asked to consider four specific questions in their brief, candid presentations at the panel: (a) How has the communication discipline changed since you began studying interpersonal communication? (b) What do you

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enjoy most about being an interpersonal communication scholar? (c) What is the greatest challenge of being an interpersonal communication scholar? and (d) Where do you see interpersonal communication going in the future?

All of the seven participants' responses to these questions were intriguing and thought provoking! Thus, we thought it would be a shame that, after such an intense and lively discussion at CSCA for the conversation to simply end there. So, shortly after the panel, we asked and secured approval from Dr. Robert Littlefield to put together a special forum dedicated to the bright future of interpersonal communication within *Communication Studies*. Indeed, we wanted the discussion that was started at CSCA to continue but in a more accessible venue. Consequently, we asked panelists to consider (and reconsider) their remarks at CSCA and to write up more formal reports about their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences as related to the future of interpersonal communication. As the coeditors for this project, we were very excited about the potential contributions and how this forum would ultimately take shape. As the essays began pouring in, we were thrilled at their depth, complexity, and insight! The responses we received from peer reviewers who offered their insights confirmed our appreciation.

To consider the future of interpersonal communication, we believe it is necessary to evaluate critically the discipline's past and present. Duck (this issue) carefully revisits enduring critiques of interpersonal communication scholarship and argues that scholars have failed to fully embrace these critiques in their research. Despite long-standing criticisms, the discipline has developed to include a considerably broader spectrum of contexts, theories, and methodologies, all of which are accompanied by unique challenges as well as opportunities.

One challenge brought about by the discipline's growth is to determine the boundaries and parameters of what comprises interpersonal communication. Thus, Floyd (this issue) beautifully renders the adage that you cannot truly know what something is unless you simultaneously know what something is not. Manning (this issue) furthers Floyd's essay by introducing a fully developed, carefully researched, and thoughtful constitutive model of interpersonal communication.

Whereas the communication discipline's breadth encourages a multitude of approaches to coexist, some have received more attention than others, although they all have much to offer to a more refined understanding of interpersonal communication. As such, Braithwaite (this issue) intelligently argues that a greater emphasis be placed on interpretative studies. She draws on her extensive and intimate experience with the discipline to make her arguments. In a similar vein, Foster (this issue) calls for the acknowledgement and a special place for autoethnography within interpersonal communication. Foster's arguments are powerful and moving. As much as challenges are a part of interpersonal communication scholarship, opportunities are bound to surface as well. For instance, teaching interpersonal communication provides opportunities to illuminate taken-for-granted dynamics in students' lives in creative and contemporary ways. Metts (this issue) offers compelling and nuanced methods for interpersonal communication pedagogy and mentoring. Studying interpersonal communication also enables researchers to embrace novel ways of relating

and communicating with each other by considering how technology can be studied from an interpersonal perspective. Ledbetter (this issue) thus provides a brief, yet amazingly comprehensive, review of technology research and theorizing within interpersonal communication.

Overall, we feel that the essays contained in this special forum for *Communication Studies* are groundbreaking and raise issues that will incite and inspire discussions about the depth, breadth, and richness of interpersonal communication. Indeed, interpersonal communication scholarship has evolved into the study of human interaction from a variety of vantage points, each of which offers distinct insights into its underlying roots and dynamics. We believe that the road ahead for interpersonal communication scholars is both challenging and exciting. And for every potential challenge, there is also an opportunity. Thus, we believe that the future of interpersonal communication scholarship is bright and promising!

### Reference

- Knapp, M. L., & Daly, J. A. (2011). Background and current trends in the study of interpersonal communication. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of interpersonal communication* (4th ed., pp. 3–22). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.