

Grounded Practical Theory

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INVESTIGATING
COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

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PREFACE

The central purpose of this short text is to make available a handy introduction and guide for students, teachers, and researchers who would like to use grounded practical theory (GPT) for the first time, as well as those who have previously used it but would welcome a more elaborated overview and update. Since 1995, GPT has become an established meta-theory and method that is being used by many people. Our aim is to bring together in one book information and debates about GPT, instructions about doing it, and a diversity of examples using it.

GPT, we believe, offers a particularly *communication-focused* approach to doing research. We (Robert T. Craig and Karen Tracy), as communication scholars and authors of this text, have been shaped by being members of the communication discipline, a field that has included humanistic and social science traditions since its inception. The field's hybridity of academic traditions—whether an individual sees him or herself as primarily a social scientist or as a humanistic scholar—has led communication folks to have certain commitments and to make particular assumptions that distinguish them from scholars in other disciplines. GPT is a social science method/metatheory that builds on and systematizes impulses that are widespread in the field of communication. In particular, GPT builds on a communication view of human action as strategic and responsive to contexts and audiences, and the field's interest in being practical and making a difference to the world in which we live.

In the 25 years since the introductory article (Craig & Tracy, 1995) first appeared, the field of communication has undergone significant change. No longer is traditional social science the main conversational partner when a new approach to inquiry is rolled out. Rather, there are many qualitative, problem-oriented approaches, a good number of which are also critical in some way. A second purpose of this book, therefore, is to engage with these newer research approaches, making clear the commitments GPT shares with them and, most importantly, how GPT diverges. For instance, critical approaches of a variety of stripes have become important voices in the

field of communication. New journals in the main communication associations have come into being—for example, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* in 2004 at the National Communication Association and *Communication Culture and Critique* a few years later in the International Communication Association. The first decade of the 21st century also saw the birth of multidisciplinary journals about communication that were either entirely committed to critical work (e.g., *Critical Discourse Studies*) or were where critical work was welcome and a common focus (e.g., *Discourse & Society*). GPT shares with this burgeoning critical scholarship an interest in speaking to normative questions—questions of *what ought to be*.

GPT differs from critical studies in that it is centrally interested in engaging in constructive critique—weighing in on how existing communication practices, which most people would agree should be continued, can be made better. GPT's commitment to constructive critique leads scholars using it to select different foci for study and to put relatively less emphasis on the issue of power inequality as a key cause of interactional harm. However, as we will show in Chapters 5 and 7, GPT's constructive approach can be combined with critical studies to cultivate resistant and emancipatory communication practices. In Chapter 6, we engage with the issue of how GPT is similar to and different from those qualitative approaches that are used frequently in communication and other social sciences.

We have designed this text to be useful for graduate and advanced undergraduate students in theory and methods courses but particularly in qualitative methods classes. We envision the text functioning as a reading for a course unit. Because GPT was developed to address questions about *communication*, we assume it will be of primary interest to communication students and scholars. At the same time, since issues of communication and problem-oriented qualitative research are lively in other social science disciplines—for example, sociology, linguistics, social psychology, education, nursing, political science—we have written the book in a way that does not assume readers are in the field of communication.

There are several features of this book that make it distinctive. First and foremost, this book provides an integrated approach to investigating communication problems, techniques for managing problems, and normative ideals for reflecting on practical choices. In addition, the text

gives a detailed road map for conducting GPT studies, including how to analyze discourse. It also provides a comprehensive review of studies creatively applying GPT methods and offers guidance about how to choose among methods by making clear GPT's niche in the ecology of qualitative methods. Finally, the book ends by outlining future uses of GPT in fields ranging from organizational communication to social media and health communication to critical studies.

This book benefited from input from many people. The most extensive feedback came from the official reviewers of the text. Five people gave us many great suggestions about how we could make each chapter clearer and more engaging, and we extend to them our heartfelt thanks. Those reviewers included Joshua B. Barbour (University of Texas at Austin), Laura W. Black (Ohio University), Theresa Castor (University of Wisconsin–Parkside), Christopher J. Koenig (San Francisco State University), and Sarah J. Tracy (Arizona State University, Tempe). Special thanks to Todd Armstrong, our publisher at Cognella, who shepherded our writing of this book. In addition, we received helpful feedback from other colleagues who read all or parts of the book. Our thanks to Mark Aakhus (Rutgers, State University of New Jersey), David Boromisza-Habashi (University of Colorado), Jess Hughes (Millersville State University), and Heidi Muller (University of Northern Colorado). Finally, we would like to thank all the scholars who have used GPT in their research. Through their articles, as well as through many personal conversations, we have been able to address questions about GPT that have enabled us to lay it out in a more compelling manner.