**Theory:**

“ Set of ideas to explain any phenomenon”

* A theory is an attempt to explain why and so to provide understanding.
* A theory is not just ‘any’ explanation - a theory comes into being when a series of ideas come to be held and accepted by a wider community of people.
* A theory is not necessarily factually based – how we understand and provide explanations arises from our cultural background and how we view the world.
* Developing theory:
* Observation
* Description
* Possible theory - hypothesis
* Reading - placing individual understanding in context
* Research
* More reading
* Accepting, rejecting or modifying a hypothesis
* Theory – understanding why – and this being accepted by a wider community of people

**Criteria for evaluating theory:**

**Area of Evaluation** **What to Look For**

Accuracy Has research supported that the theory works the way it says it does? Practicality Have real-world applications been found for the theory?

Succinctness Has the theory been formulated with the appropriate number (fewest possible) of concepts or steps?

Consistency Does the theory demonstrate coherence within its own premises and with other theories?

Acuity To what extent does the theory make clear an otherwise complex experience?

**Two approaches to theory building**:

Deductive approach

Inductive approach

**Deductive Approach** From the general to particular; the process by which theory is tested Deductive approach to theory building tends to give primacy to theory. That is, abstract theories are developed early after initial sensitizing observation, and then empirical observations are used to test those theories. The researcher begins with a general idea or theory and asks a specific statement or hypothesis, then tests the hypothesis with the collection of data. The movement is from the general proposition to the specific instances seen in the research.

**Inductive Approach** Inductive approach to theory building gives primacy to observation. FROM THE PARTICULAR TO THE GENERAL; THE PROCESS BY WHICH THEORY IS GENERATED. In this approach, theoretical abstractions are based on- or grounded in empirical observation. The scholars immerse themselves in the situations and then come up to any conclusions. The researcher begins with a simple research question and collects data that describe a particular case, and then develops a theory based upon findings.

**Functions of Communication Theories**

* The first function theories serve is that they help us organize and understand our communication experiences. We use theories to organize a broad range of experiences into smaller categories by paying attention to “common features” of communication situations (Infante, Rancer & Womack).
* A second function of theories is that they help us choose what communicative behaviors to study. Theories guide where we choose to look, what we look at, and how we look at communicative phenomenon.
* A third function of theories is that they help us broaden our understanding of human communication. Scholars who study communication share theories with one another online, through books, journal articles, and at conferences. The sharing of theories generates dialogue, which allows us to further refine the theories developed in this field.
* A fourth function of theories is that they help us predict and control our communication. When we communicate, we try to predict how our interactions will develop so we can maintain a certain level of control.
* A fifth function of theories is that they help us challenge current social and cultural realities by providing new ways of thinking and living. People sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the ways we communicate are innate rather than learned.

**Types of Communication theories:**

The study of communication and mass media has led to the formulation of many theories: 

**Structural and functional** theories believe that social structures are real and function in ways that can be observed objectively; the structural-functional approach is a theoretical approach that sees society as a complex and interconnected system, whose individual parts work in concert to promote stability and harmony in the system as a whole. That's how structural-functionalists will look at society in the same way. Each part of society has a function that contributes to the maintenance of society as a whole. So these parts of society then are called structures. Each structure has a function.

**Cognitive and behavioral** theories tend to focus on psychology of individuals; The **behavioral perspective** is the psychological approach that suggests that the keys to understanding development are observable behavior and external stimuli in the environment. Behaviorism is a theory of learning, and learning theories focus on how we respond to events or stimuli rather than emphasizing internal factors that motivate our actions. These theories provide an explanation of how experience can change what we do.

**Interactionist** theories view social life as a process of interaction; **interactionism** is a **theoretical** perspective that derives social processes (such as conflict, cooperation, identity formation) from human **interaction**. It is the study of how individuals shape society and are shaped by society through meaning that arises in interactions.

**interpretive** theories uncover the ways people actually understand their own experience; **Interpretive** approaches to political studies focus on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so. ... As important, they study beliefs as they perform within, and even frame, actions, practices and institutions.

**Critical** theories are concerned with the conflict of interests in society and the way communication perpetuates domination of one group over another. The **Critical Theories Paradigm** helps us *understand how communication is used to oppress, and provides ways to foster positive social change* (Foss & Foss; Fay). Critical Theories challenge the status quo of communication contexts, looking for alternatives to those forms of oppressive communication. These theories differ from other theoretical approaches because they seek praxis as the overarching goal. Easily identifiable examples of critical approaches are Marxism, postmodernism, and feminism. These critical theories expose and challenge the communication of dominant social, economic, and political structures. Areas of inquiry include language, social relationships, organizational structures, politics, economics, media, cultural ideologies, interpersonal relationships, labor, and other social movements.