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CHAPTER 13

Constructivism

of Jesse Delia

Constructivism is a communication theory that seeks to explain individual differences in people's ability to communicate skillfully in social situations. You probably don't need to be convinced that some people are better at understanding, attracting, persuading, informing, comforting, or entertaining others with whom they talk. In fact, you may be taking communication courses so that you can become more adept at reaching these communication goals. Although some might suspect that communication success is simply a matter of becoming more assertive or outgoing, Jesse Delia believes that there is a crucial behind-the-eyes difference in people who are interpersonally effective. His theory of constructivism offers a cognitive explanation for communication competence.

Delia is the former chair of the department of speech communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and now serves as acting provost at the school. Along with a network of constructivist researchers, he uses Walter Crockett's open-ended Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ) to help us "get inside our head."[1] So that you fully understand the theory and what it says about your communication, take 10 minutes to respond to the RCQ before you are sensitized to what the survey is measuring.

ROLE CATEGORY QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUCTIONS

Think of people about your age whom you know well. Select one person you like and pick someone you dislike. Once you have two specific people in mind, spend a moment to mentally compare and contrast them in terms of personality, habits, beliefs, and the way they treat others. Don't limit yourself to similarities and differences between the two; let your mind play over the full range of characteristics that make them who they are.

Now take a piece of paper and for about five minutes describe the person you enjoy so that a stranger would understand what he or she is like. Skip physical

characteristics, but list all of the attributes, mannerisms, and reactions to others that identify who he or she is.

When you've finished the description, do the same thing for the person you don't like. Again, write down all the personal characteristics or actions that you associate with that person. Spend about five minutes on this description.

PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS AS EVIDENCE OF COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY

The core assumption of constructivism is that "persons make sense of the world through systems of personal constructs."[2] *Constructs* are the cognitive templates, or stencils, we fit over "reality" to bring order to our perceptions. The Role Category Questionnaire is designed to sample the interpersonal constructs in our mental toolbox that we bring to the construction site of meaning—the central processing function of our minds. Much like sets of opposing terms (warm-cool, good-bad, fast-slow), constructs are contrasting features that we have available to classify other people.

A police artist has an identification kit with which an eyewitness can construct the face of a suspect. By systematically altering the shape of the chin, size of the nose, distance between the eyes, line of the hair, and so forth, the witness can build a likeness of the person in question. However, the RCQ doesn't bother with physical features. It centers on the categories of personality and action that we use to define the character of another person.

The arena of politics offers a familiar example of the way we use constructs to describe another individual. All of us have our own bipolar dimensions of judgment that we apply to politicians. Some typical scales are liberal-conservative, steadfast-flexible, competent-inept. The politically astute observer may draw on dozens of these interpretive orientations to describe shades of difference. There are *conservatives,* and there are *social* conservatives. Then there are *articulate* social conservatives. Some of them are *belligerent,* and so forth. On the other hand, those who are politically unsophisticated may use only one value-laden construct as they watch the six o'clock news. They see only winners and losers.

An Index of Social Perception Skills

Researchers who rely on the RCQ are trying to determine our degree of *cognitive complexity* as we form impressions of other people and analyze social situations. They are convinced that people with a large set of interpersonal constructs have better *social perception skills* than those whose set of mental templates is relatively small. Those skills include figuring out others' personality traits, where they stand in relationship to us, what they are doing, and why they are doing it. Recall from Walther's *social information processing theory* that impression formation is the crucial first step in relational development (see Chapter 10). Cognitively complex people have a definite advantage in that process. They also are better able to "take the role of the other," the mental perspective-taking that makes humans unique,

according to Mead (see Chapter 4). Brant Burleson (Purdue University), a long-time colleague of Delia in the constructivism project, maintains that those who have high levels of cognitive complexity are comparative experts when it comes to understanding the people and events in their social world.[3]

Delia and Burleson are more concerned with the *structure* of our constructs than with the actual judgments we make. Consistent with that focus, it's been said that there are two kinds of people in the world—those who think there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. Constructivists believe that the first kind of person is cognitively immature because he or she is able to see others only in terms of black and white. But the second type of person has developed into a sophisticated observer of the human scene, capable of distinguishing subtle differences among people. When it comes to thinking about these differences, the Role Category Questionnaire is designed to separate the kids from the grown-ups.

SCORING THE RCQ FOR CONSTRUCT DIFFERENTIATION

Although the RCQ can be scored in different ways, most constructivist researchers cull the descriptions of liked and disliked peers for the amount of construct differentiation. *Differentiation* is defined as the number of separate personality constructs used to portray the person in question. I'll take you through a shorthand version of the scoring procedure so that you can see how constructivists might rate you on cognitive complexity.

Let's assume you wrote about the personal characteristics of a friend named Chris and a co-worker named Alex. Add up the number of different descriptions you used to describe both people. As a rule of thumb, consider that each new term represents an additional mental construct. Seeing Chris as both *sharp* and *competent* would earn two points. So would a judgment that Alex is *hurried* and *never has time.* But there are exceptions to the one-term-equals-one-construct rule.

Adjectives and adverbs that merely modify the extent of a characteristic don't reflect additional constructs. Score just one point if you wrote that Chris is *totally sincere.* Since idioms such as *good ole boy* have a single referent, they get a single point as well. On their own, physical descriptions *(tall)* and demographic labels *(Irish)* say nothing about character, so skip over them. Apart from these rules, close calls should get the benefit of the doubt and score an extra point.

Constructivists regard the combined number of constructs for both descriptions as an index of cognitive complexity. To use the four-year-old boy's playground analogy presented in the introduction to this cognitive processing section, the higher your score, the more elaborate is the jungle-gym structure within your mind over which your interpersonal perceptions play. I've seen individual scores as low as 6 and as high as 45, but about 70 percent of college students score between 15 and 25, with a mean of 20. Burleson interprets any score over 25 as a reliable indicator of high interpersonal cognitive complexity.

Are RCQ scores really a good measure of cognitive complexity? Delia makes a good case for their validity. His claim that cognitive complexity develops with a child's chronological age is reflected in progressively higher scores as youngsters

grow older. He also believes that individual differences between adults should be relatively stable over time. That standard has been met through good test-retest reliability.

Finally, Delia notes that a pure test of personality shouldn't be confounded by other character traits or extraneous factors. Research has established that RCQ scores are independent of IQ, empathy, writing skill, and extroversion. Some critics charge that it's merely a measure of loquacity, or wordiness, but constructivists maintain that high scores on this free-response test take more than the gift of gab. What's required is a wide range of interpersonal constructs.

PERSON-CENTERED MESSAGES—THE INTERPERSONAL EDGE

Now that you have an idea of what's involved in cognitive complexity, we'll consider the main hypothesis of constructivism. Delia and his colleagues claim that people who are cognitively complex in their perceptions of others have a communication advantage over those with less developed mental structures. These fortunate individuals have the ability to produce person-centered messages that give them a better chance to achieve their communication goals.

As Delia uses the phrase, *person-centered messages* refers to "messages which reflect an awareness of and adaptation to subjective, affective, and relational aspects of the communication contexts."[4] In other words, the speaker is able to anticipate how different individuals might respond to a message, and adjust his or her communication accordingly.

The study by Ruth Ann Clark and Delia of second- to ninth-grade schoolchildren is a prototype of constructivist research that links person-centered messages to cognitive complexity.[5] It focused on the children's ability to adapt persuasive appeals to different target listeners. After taking the RCQ orally, the kids were given the role-play task of convincing a woman they didn't know to keep a lost puppy.

Naturally, the quality of messages differed. Some children showed no realization that the woman's perspective on the matter might be different from their own. Other kids recognized the difference but failed to adapt their message to this reality. A more sophisticated group took notice of the difference and were able to imagine what the woman was thinking. ("My husband will think I'm a sucker for every stray in town.") They then could make an attempt to refute the counterarguments they knew their appeal would raise. The most sophisticated messages also stressed the advantages that would come to her if she complied with the request. ("Having a dog for a companion will take away some of the loneliness you feel at night when your husband is out of town. He'll also feel better when he knows you've got a furry friend.")

Constructivists assume that strategic adaptation is a developmentally nurtured skill. Consistent with their belief, Clark and Delia found that the quality of messages improved as the age of the children increased. But differences in construct differentiation that weren't due to chronological age also had a significant impact. Cognitively complex students were two years ahead of their same-age classmates in the ability to encode person-centered messages. Thus, the older kids

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who possessed cognitive complexity beyond their years were best able to take the perspective of the other and tailor the message to the individual listener.

Scholars who study communication use different terms to describe the capacity to create person-centered messages: *rhetorical sensitivity, taking the role of the other, identification, self-monitoring, audience awareness, listener adaptation.* Whatever we call it, the creation of person-centered messages is a sophisticated communication skill. Constructivists say that cognitively complex people can do it better. Note that constructivists don't claim that such people *always* do it, only that they have a capacity that others don't. The way constructivists put it is that cognitive complexity is a "necessary but not sufficient condition" of person-centered messages."[6] Fatigue, the effects of alcohol, or pressure to conform to a fixed style of communication can mute the advantage. There are also many routine or mundane communication situations where this adaptive skill is neither called for nor particularly helpful. But when the stakes are high and emotions run deep, people who can craft person-centered messages are way ahead of the game.

MESSAGE PRODUCTION: CRAFTING GOAL-BASED PLANS FOR ACTION

Early versions of constructivism couldn't pin down the reason high construct differentiation usually leads to more effective communication. Like a terse bumper sticker, the theory proclaimed, COGNITIVELY COMPLEX PERSONS CAN DO IT BETTER, but Delia wasn't sure why. By the late 1980s, however, other cognitive theorists had begun to develop models of *message production* that constructivists could use to explain the thought processes that tie cognitive structures to speech acts. Delia and his colleagues now consider the basic mental sequence that cognitive scientists outline as the missing link that connects mental complexity with person-centered messages.

Chuck Berger's model of a goal-directed, hierarchical plan for communication diagrammed on p. 136 is one example that you've already seen. Recall that I suggested you could reach your goal to increase your earnings by building a better relationship with the dispatcher for your delivery route. The model's *goals-plans-action*

sequence is typical of what cognitive theorists believe goes on in our minds before we speak. For purpose of illustration, I'll use an example that's more challenging because it involves multiple goals.

Consider the workplace plight of a young single woman named Laura, whose married male boss suggests meeting together to talk about her career. Then at their business lunch he comes on to her—suggesting a sexual affair. Through no fault of her own, Laura's been placed in a tough communication situation.[7] In order to understand her thought process, we'll work through another *goals-plans-action model* of message production outlined by Pennsylvania State University communication professor James Dillard.[8]

Goals

What does Laura want to accomplish? If her sole aim is to stop her employer's sleazy suggestions once and for all, she might adopt a simple plan of attack that creates a message expressing the repulsion she feels:

> You are the most rude and disgusting man I have ever met. You're nothing but a dirty old man. Where do you get off thinking you could force me to have an affair with you? You make me sick.[9]

But she may have another goal that's equally important to her, such as keeping her job. If so, she would have two primary persuasive goals, which she has to juggle. In other situations, she might have different primary communication goals—to inform, advise, comfort, entertain, gain assistance, or alter a relationship. These goals are called *primary* because they "set into motion an ensemble of lower-level cognitive processes that occur in parallel and align with the overall aim represented by the primary goal."[10]

The adoption of multiple primary goals usually prompts the rise of secondary goals. These additional but less important aims often conflict with the primary goals. In Laura's case, stopping the harassment and protecting her job require that she find a way to save face for both her boss and herself. She needs to keep a good working relationship with him while preserving her professional identity and reputation. If, in fact, Laura does simultaneously pursue multiple interpersonal goals, it's a sign of her cognitive complexity. Burleson says that "people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity . . . tend to develop more complex and sophisticated goals for many social situations, especially those that appear challenging or demanding."[11] The number and variety of her interpersonal constructs also equip her to develop a multifaceted plan that can pull it off.

Plans

Once Laura knows what she wants her response to accomplish, she'll devise a message plan using *procedural records* that are stored in her long-term memory.[12] According to John Greene, a colleague of Burleson at Purdue, a procedural record is a recollection of an action taken in a specific situation paired with its consequences—how things turned out. I think of it as a memory that has *if-when-then* implications

for future actions. For example, suppose when Laura hears the unwanted sexual proposition from her boss, a long-dormant image pops into her conscious mind. She was 12 years old when the high school guy who lived next door suggested he give her kissing lessons. Confused and troubled by his offer, she laughed and treated the whole thing as a joke, although she knew he was quite serious. If she and her teenage neighbor maintained a casual, nonromantic relationship after the incident, the procedural record filed away in her long-term memory might take this form:

> *If* I want to avoid getting physical and not offend a guy (goals),
> *When* he makes an improper sexual suggestion (situation),
> *Then* I should pretend he's just kidding (action).

Laura may have over a million procedural records in her long-term memory, but most of them aren't applicable to the problem posed by her employer's indecent proposal. The ones that will be activated and affect her message plan are the memories of times when she had similar goals in somewhat similar circumstances. Although not a perfect fit, the procedural record of how she handled her neighbor's proposal is a close match and will probably inform her response to her boss. If she has lots of memories of successfully feigning ignorance of questionable motives in a variety of situations, this approach could become the top-down strategy that dictates all the other tactics in her message plan.

In an article describing his basic goals-plans-action model of message production, Dillard addresses a number of frequently asked questions about constructing a cognitive plan.[13] Perhaps you'll find that format helpful to better understand the thought process that Laura and the rest of us go through before we speak. Dillard's answers are consistent with Berger's concept of hierarchical plans, discussed in Chapter 9.

- *What do we do first?* We search our long-term memory for tried-and-true, boilerplate plans that are likely to achieve our primary goal(s).
- *What if none of these prepackaged plans seem promising?* We'll make an existing plan more complete by fleshing out the details, or we'll make it more complex by adding steps to cover many contingencies.
- *Are we consciously aware that we're engaged in this mental process?* Most of this mental activity takes place below our level of consciousness. Yet if someone asked us to reflect on why we said what we did, we'd be able to identify the goals our plan was meant to serve.
- *How long does it take for goals to activate procedural records and to assemble them into a message plan?* Usually it's a matter of milliseconds. But if we decide to create a novel message plan rather than adopting or adapting an existing one, the mental process will take more time and effort.
- *Can we change the plan in midconversation?* Definitely—and we usually do if we aren't getting our hoped-for response. Berger's hierarchy hypothesis suggests that we will alter low-level elements of the plan such as word choice or facial

expression—changes that won't demand wholesale reorganization. If, however, we change our *goals* midstream, we automatically discard the original plan and adopt or create another one.

Action

Person-centered messages are the form of communication that Delia wants to explain, predict, and promote. Because cognitively complex people have the social perception to see the necessity of pursuing multiple goals and the skills to develop message plans to achieve them, they are the fortunate folks who can communicate skillfully when the situation demands it.

Most people regard the communication context as a factor that limits a speaker's options. It certainly seems that Laura is trapped in a no-win situation as the man who has power over her tries to use it to leverage sexual favors. But as a cognitively complex person, Laura has the ability to use context as a resource. The message she crafts parries her boss' unwelcome advances, salvages her job, and saves face both for herself *and* for him:

> We've got a great working relationship now, and I'd like us to work well together in the future. So I think it's important for us to talk this out. You're a smart and clear-thinking guy and I consider you to be my friend as well as my boss. That's why I have to think you must be under a lot of unusual stress lately to have said something like this. I know what it's like to be under pressure. Too much stress can really make you crazy. You probably just need a break.[14]

Some readers are bothered by this response. In their minds, Laura's words let her lecherous boss off the hook. These folks believe that a clear threat of exposure would be the appropriate way to block his sexual advances and possible retaliation for rejecting them. But from Laura's perspective, a person-centered message is the best way to meet her multiple concerns in this complex situation. By framing her employer's proposition as one that springs from stress rather than from sleaze, Laura is able to achieve *all* of her goals.

I've used the words spoken by a woman to illustrate a person-centered message. That choice seems appropriate because women display this crucial communication skill more than men do. You therefore won't be surprised that the average female scores three points higher for construct differentiation on the RCQ than her male counterpart. It turns out to be a difference that makes a difference when a sophisticated interpersonal message is called for. Burleson suggests that we can spot the reason for this gender discrepancy through the social life of children and adolescents. When guys get together they typically talk about others in terms of external *behaviors*—the sports they play, the cars they drive, the battles they fight. Conversely, girls tend to talk about *people*—their perceptions of internal motives, attitudes, traits, and personalities. As you'll see by the end of the chapter, it's by becoming sensitive to the inner life of others that a person's set of interpersonal constructs grows.

BENEFICIAL EFFECTS OF PERSON-CENTERED MESSAGES

Figure 13–1 portrays the linkages that constructivists have forged. High cognitive complexity facilitates sophisticated message plans, which in turn produce person-centered messages. Those links of the chain are well established. Constructivist researchers have now turned to exploring the positive effects of person-centered messages on every conceivable form of communication outcome. We've already seen that these messages can be more persuasive. In this section I'll highlight the findings in three other areas of research that my students have found particularly interesting.

Comforting messages try to ease the emotional distress experienced by others. Burleson has developed a nine-stage hierarchical scale to code the degree of solace a message of support offers. At the bottom end are messages that dismiss the thoughts and feelings of the person who is hurting: "You shouldn't be so upset about losing your boyfriend. After all, there are lots of fish in the sea." Midlevel messages take the other's distress seriously: "Gee, I'm sorry you guys broke up. I guess things like this happen, though. Breaking up just seems to be a part of relationships." Top-of-the-line, sophisticated support messages explicitly validate the other's feelings and often add an additional perspective to the situation: "I know it must hurt. I know you're feeling a lot of pain and anger right now. And that's

FIGURE 13–1 The Chain of Person-Centered Message Production

OK, 'cause I know you were really involved; you guys were together a long time and you expected things to work out differently. I'm here whenever you want to talk about things."[15]

As you might suspect, sophisticated messages are usually experienced as more comforting than clumsy attempts at social support. You hope that's reward enough for the friend who offers well-chosen words in a time of need. But Burleson notes that other positive outcomes accrue to the sensitive comforter:

> Compared to persons using less sophisticated comforting strategies, users of sophisticated strategies are better liked and more positively evaluated by both message recipients and observers. Further, users of sophisticated comforting strategies report feeling better both about themselves and those they try to help.[16]

Relationship maintenance is a process distinct from relationship development. As discussed in Chapters 8–10, voluntary relationships usually begin through mutual attraction, self-disclosure, and reduction of uncertainty. Once the relationship is established, however, its ongoing health requires periodic affirmation, conflict resolution, and the type of comforting communication that Burleson describes. As with any interpersonal skill, some people are better at relationship maintenance than others. Burleson and Wendy Samter of Bryant College figured that people with sophisticated communication skills would be especially good at sustaining close friendships. It turns out they were only partially right.[17]

To test their hypothesis, Burleson and Samter reviewed their own previous studies on friendship as well as the work of other researchers. They discovered a consistent pattern, which they labeled the *similar skills model.* To their surprise, individuals' ability to give ego-support, resolve conflict, and provide comfort in times of stress did little to guarantee that their close personal relationships would survive and thrive. But the degree of similarity with their partner did. Friendships tended to last when partners possessed matching verbal skills—high or low. Apparently, highly refined communication skills are an advantage only when a friend has the sophistication to appreciate them. And a person with few of these abilities may be more comfortable spending time with someone who likes the same activities, can tell a good story, and isn't always "talking about feelings" or "pushing that touchy-feely crap."[18]

Organizational effectiveness isn't determined by a single, sophisticated message. According to constructivist theory, high performance and promotion reflect a continual use of person-centered communication that seeks to achieve multiple goals with customers and co-workers. Employees who do it better should climb the corporate ladder faster.

Beverly Sypher (Purdue University) and Theodore Zorn (University of Waikato, New Zealand) conducted a longitudinal study of 90 white-collar workers at a large Eastern insurance company.[19] At the start of the study they measured cognitive complexity with the RCQ, tested for perspective-taking ability, and gauged communication skill by asking employees to write a charitable fundraising appeal. As expected, workers with highly developed social constructs wrote letters that were more persuasive. Four years later, Sypher and Zorn checked each employee's progress within the company. Cognitively complex workers had better-paying jobs

and were moving up through the ranks of the company faster than were their less complex colleagues. Anytime we deal with people, cognitive complexity seems to play a significant role.

SOCIALIZING A NEW GENERATION OF SOPHISTICATED SPEAKERS

In early editions of this text, I chided constructivists for not addressing the question of how cognitively complex thinkers get that way. That's no longer a fair criticism. Burleson, Delia, and James Applegate of the University of Kentucky have marshaled evidence that complex thinking is a culturally transmitted trait. Specifically, they suggest that parents' capacity for complex social thinking is re-created in their children through complex messages of nurture and discipline.[20] Their claim is an extension of the truism that culture is produced and reproduced through the communication of its members.

Suppose, for example, a 5-year-old boy picks a flower from a neighbor's yard without permission and presents it to his mother. Almost any parent can scold the kid for stealing. ("Taking people's things without asking is wrong. Now go and apologize for taking the flower.") But it requires a mother with a complex set of interpersonal constructs to create a sophisticated message that encourages reflection and helps her son focus on the motivation, feelings, and intentions of others—mental exercises that increase the child's own cognitive complexity. After warmly thanking her son for the gift, such a mom might say:

> When people work hard to have things (flowers), they usually want to keep them to appreciate them. Mrs. Jones might have given you a flower if you'd asked, but taking things from people without asking upsets them a lot.

Who is most likely to use this form of sophisticated socialization? According to Burleson, Delia, and Applegate, parents from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are likely candidates. They inhabit a world of intricate work environments, role systems, and social expectations. This more complicated social world stimulates the development of more complex ways of thinking and communicating. And once developed, complex ways of thinking and acting tend to perpetuate themselves. The **culture → complexity → communication** path seems to ensure that, cognitively speaking, the rich get richer. This cognitive fact of life was obvious to me in a paper submitted by Jane, a 40-year-old grad student in my interpersonal communication class. She recorded the precocious words of her 7-year-old daughter, Sunny, a child raised in the midst of sophisticated adult conversation.

> Mom, is nonverbal communication like when you don't point your face at me when we're talking about my day? Or when you say "Uh-huh" and "Really?" but your face doesn't move around like you really care what we're talking about? When you walk around cooking or Dad writes while we're talking, I feel like I'm boring. Sometimes when you guys talk to me it sounds like you're just teaching, not talking.

Constructivists would note that Sunny can reflect on her social world because communication from mother Jane has been anything but plain.

CRITIQUE: SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY

Delia launched what he called an interpretive theory of cognitive differences in the 1970s, when most communication scientists were trying to discover laws of behavior that applied equally to everyone. While these empirical researchers were assessing communication effectiveness by crunching the numbers from standardized attitude scales, Delia called for "free response data" that could reflect subtle differences in mental processes. He believed that open-ended responses would also force researchers to become theoretically rigorous. Constructivist analysis of person-centered messages clearly meets that goal.

Constructivists' total reliance on the RCQ to gauge cognitive complexity is another story. It's difficult to accept the notion that a single number adequately reflects the intricate mental structures that exist behind the eyes. Doesn't it seem curious to ask respondents for their perceptions of two other people and then reduce their rich narratives to a mere frequency count of constructs? The total number may predict interesting communication differences, but explanatory depth is lacking.

A prophetic ethical voice also seems to be missing. If cognitive complexity is the key to interpersonal effectiveness, and if construct differentiation is enhanced by a privileged upbringing, advocates of the theory should devote some effort to creating reflective settings for disadvantaged kids. That way black-and-white thinkers could develop the ability to see shades of gray. There are precedents for such a reform agenda.

Once medical researchers discovered the brain-deadening effects of lead poisoning, they were quick to mount a public campaign to stop the use of lead-based paint. Likewise, teachers lobbied for "Project Head Start" when they realized that food-for-the-stomach was a prerequisite of food-for-thought. Obviously poverty, peeling paint, and poor nutrition are linked and constructivist research suggests that a childhood devoid of reflection-inducing communication is part of the same vicious circle. Constructivism is open to the charge of elitism unless the theorists devise a plan for remedial efforts that will help narrow the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Burleson is keenly aware of this weakness:

> As a communication researcher and educator, I find this situation embarrassing and unacceptable. We researchers now know a lot about cognitive complexity and advanced social perception and communication skills, but thus far there have been few efforts to translate what we know into proven programs that effectively enhance these skills.[21]

More than most scholars, constructivists are capable of spearheading a reform movement to shape public policy. Early on, Delia made a strong call for a "reflective analysis of the implicit assumptions and ordering principles underlying research questions and methods."[22] He launched a research program that models that commitment, and others have enlisted in the cause. As one of the best known theories about communication to spring from within the discipline, constructivism is worth thinking about.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How many points for *differentiation* would the phrase "humorous and totally funny" score on the *Role Category Questionnaire?*

2. Look at the "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon on page 194. How would *constructivists* explain Calvin's success in getting a horsey ride from his father?

3. Sometimes during an argument, one kid will chide another with the words "Aw, grow up!" According to constructivists, the phrase offers good advice in a way that's ineffective. Why?

4. Osama bin Laden has constructed a highly effective terrorist campaign that reflects *sophisticated message plans.* Can you explain why the successful achievement of his goals does not necessarily show that he is *cognitively complex* as Delia uses the term?

SELF-QUIZ

www.mhhe.com/griffin6

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment on the book's CD.

In this discussion, Jesse Delia (right) is joined by Brant Burleson (center) and Jim Applegate (left), the other leading theorists on the constructivist research team. They link our ability to communicate effectively with our mental constructs, our degree of cognitive complexity, the way we process information, and the way we form impressions of others. The theorists then describe the advantages of crafting person-centered messages that are designed to accomplish multiple goals. How well do you think Delia, Burleson, and Applegate adapt their messages to their audience—students of communication theory? Do you think the theorists are pursuing multiple goals? If so, do they succeed?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Brant R. Burleson, "Constructivism: A General Theory of Communication Skill," in *Explaining Communication: Contemporary Theories and Exemplars,* Bryan Whaley and Wendy Samter (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2005, in press.

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