Theory and the Advancement of Listening Research: A Reply to Purdy

Graham D. Bodie [a]

[a] Department of Communication Studies, The Louisiana State University

Available online: 20 Sep 2011

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMENTARY

Theory and the Advancement of Listening Research: A Reply to Purdy

Graham D. Bodie

Department of Communication Studies
The Louisiana State University

This essay provides a spirited response to Purdy's essay decrying the necessity for theory-driven listening research. In it, I correct two primary misconceptions about my previous essay and attempt to maintain a place for theorizing listening.

"Good" theories are (a) useful for some practical purpose, (b) justified as useful, and (c) eventually accepted as useful by some larger research community. Thus, in an earlier essay, I (Bodie, 2009) explored the utility of social scientific theory in the advancement of listening research and proposed how an argument for a theory's usefulness can be made in light of the criteria important to the larger social scientific community. Toward this aim, I made two primary distinctions that Purdy seems to conflate in his response (Purdy, 2011/this issue). This essay serves to clarify these distinctions and offer a reprise on the importance of theory.

The first distinction I drew was between social science on the one hand and theory on the other. Purdy (2011/this issue), however, defines theory as "the use of one particular *scientific* [emphasis added] mode of research" (p. 132), thus placing theory-driven research exclusively in the domain of social science. As I defined it, social science is one among many ways to gain insight into listening. Though social scientists often extol theory in the research process, examples abound of

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Graham D. Bodie, Department of Communication Studies, LSU, Baton Rouge, LA 70803. E-mail: gbodie@lsu.edu

data-driven (variable analytic) studies from this paradigm (see Wolvin, Halone, & Coakley, 1999).

In general, there is no reason to believe that all scientific work has to start from theory or that all research operating from an alternate perspective is void of theoretical concern.[1] Purdy acknowledges this. He writes that "both theory building and grounded qualitative methods are heuristic in that they strive to 'discover' how people behave—how we listen—and both learn from and build upon past studies with their successes and limitations" (Purdy, 2011/this issue, p. 134). Discovery of how, why, and to what extent people behave is theory, plain and simple. It appears, therefore, that Purdy recognizes the importance of theory with that recognition limited primarily by his continual conflation of theory with scientific research.[2]

The second and more problematic conflation is as follows: whereas my essay was highlighting how scientists go about convincing others of the "goodness" of a particular theory, Purdy's main contention lies with how scientists "do science."

---

[1]I have purposely avoided using the terms "quantitative" and "qualitative" here and urge other listening researchers to move away from that dichotomy. Not only is the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy not very useful or insightful (Bavelas, 1995), it appears to have a divisive effect suggesting that people who do one type of research operate very systematically (i.e., try to develop theory) while others are relatively unconcerned with patterns of behavior. I find the veracity of this claim highly suspect in light of research using ethnographic methods (one method that Purdy highlights as "qualitative") seeking to understand why people of certain cultures operate in certain ways (Carbaugh, 1999). Indeed, some of this research even seeks to generate "general principles" of communication (Pearce & Pearce, 2000). In either case, the research is motivated by a desire to generate theory, that is, systematic explanations for some set of phenomena. Regrettably, I assume responsibility for enhancing the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010), and restrictions of language make it necessary to talk about quantitative "versus" qualitative research in some settings (e.g., when designing an edited text aimed at advanced undergraduate/beginning graduate student readers). Nevertheless, the "versus" in that phrase should be used carefully and with full awareness of its limitations. Avoiding the "versus" gets us away from statements such as "in the methodological process of doing theory-driven research one reduces the richness and variety of lived experience into 'numbers'" (Purdy, 2011/this issue, p. 136). Of course, this statement assumes that in order to do theory-driven research one must obtain data amenable to quantification, go about computing measures of central tendency and variability, and employing statistics to infer about the population from the sample. Scholars can do theory-driven research in a manner that does not require numbers, but if numbers are invoked scholars are fully aware of context and the lived experience.

[2]Purdy (2011/this issue) certainly recognizes the importance of theory as he proposes at least two in his response. First, he suggests that "listening is central to the research (ad)venture" (p. 133), thus, proposing listening as a mechanism underlying the research process. In other words, listening makes research possible similar to how implicit rules or social contracts make understanding others possible (e.g., Grice, 1975). Second, by stating "what is fixed by the culture can be undone by the culture, and what is fixed by the culture can be undone by the aware individual" (Purdy, 2011/this issue, p. 137), Purdy proposes a theoretical question—if things change why is this so? Indeed, both scientific and other philosophical approaches to the study of listening (each with their respective set of limitations) can lend unique insight into this important question and various theories can be proposed to investigate this practical concern.

In other words, Purdy fails to distinguish between what some philosophers of science call the context of discovery, or the specific historical or communicative conditions giving rise to a scientific result or "fact," with the context of justification, or the community-based assessment of the rationale behind that "fact" or result (for review see Huene-Hoyningen, 1987). I acknowledged that "doing science," although a valid domain of interest, was not the primary goal of that essay (see Bodie, 2009, p. 84 footnote 2). Instead, my original essay dealt primarily with the context of justification and with how a scientist can go about justifying a theory to the larger scientific community. In his response, however, Purdy primarily focuses on "doing science," the context of discovery. However, I never claimed that scientists operate in a completely orderly fashion within that context. To be clear, in the process of discovery, scientists (a) choose problems that are personally, politically, or otherwise important; (b) design surveys and experiments using a range of informal (e.g., conversations over coffee) and formal (i.e., orderly and socially agreed upon) procedures; and (c) collect, analyze, and interpret data outside of a vacuum. Likewise, scientific theories are often initiated through creative moments or intuitive hunches, something I also noted in my original essay (see Bodie, 2009, p. 85, footnote 4). In general, to suggest that scientists are merely rigorous, blindly following specific procedures is to turn scientists into machines.

Purdy is right to suggest that "the best-known part of scientific research — the published report—is the visible fruition of a much longer process" (Bavelas, 1987, p. 308) and to invoke the work of Latour and Woolgar (1979) whose book was instrumental in shifting the conception of science from knowledge to practice, focusing on what scientists do rather than what they say.

A primarily point of *Laboratory Science,* however, is overextended in Purdy's conceptualization of this context of discovery. As Latour and Woolgar (1979) state: "We do not wish to say that facts do not exist, nor that there is no such thing as reality . . . Our point is that 'out-there-ness' is the *consequence* of scientific work rather than its *cause*" (pp. 180–182). Due to space considerations, the complexities of Latour's ontology cannot be fully explicated here; however, it is sufficient to say, at least from an epistemological standpoint, that through the practice of science we come to believe that certain things exist. More specifically, we come to believe that certain things exist and that they are related to other things by scientists proposing theories that help connect otherwise seemingly unconnected phenomena.

In other words, scientists primarily "give meaning" to actions, objects, events, etc., through their placement within a theory, and concepts such as listening take on various meanings as they are studied through various theoretical perspectives (Bodie, in press). Thus, theories help give structure to otherwise structureless concepts and guide practice in complex situations. Indeed, this is the primary strength of "theory-driven" research, or research which primarily attempts to understand and explain some practical problem in a general and abstract way. Theory attempts to momentarily abstract some specific or common experience,

to take a look at that experience from afar. This appears to be the primary tension between myself and Purdy. Whereas Purdy wants us primarily to remain stuck in and close to the concrete, lived experience, I want us to go beyond that experience. As Dewey (1991) says, "Abstraction is the heart of thought; there is no way—other than accident—to control and enrich concrete experience except through an intermediate flight of thought with conceptions, relations, abstracta" (p. 216).

From Purdy's framework, nothing is ever abstracted or seen outside its social context; things are always immersed in experience. If "listening" is only an affective, "lived experience" unable to be abstracted from its immediacy, then it becomes impossible to talk about it with anyone other than the one who experienced. To be clear, I am not advocating the complete abstraction of listening or listening-related phenomena. As Dewey (1991) continues from the quote above, "What I regret is the tendency to erect the abstractions into complete and self-subsistent things, or into a kind of superior Being" (p. 216). As early as Bacon, scientists recognized that experience has a profound power to teach, but experience must also be verified and examined. Theory helps in this endeavor and plays a central role in helping to make sense out of what otherwise remains purely an affair of personal liking.

A theory, once created by the individual or team of scholars, has to be presented to and verified within a larger scientific community. For Purdy to suggest that in this context of justification we should propose theories more gently, paying particular attention to necessary qualifications and potential biases, thus misunderstands the nature of what Latour calls the "agonistic field" in which scientists find themselves. The process of presenting and defending a theory is more than, as Purdy suggests, scholars listening to each other. As Latour notes, rival claims are forwarded and scientists seek attention from the larger scientific community and eventual acceptance of those claims as fact. Terms such as listening therefore become "useable [concepts] only as a by-product of agonistic activity (Latour & Woolgar, 1979, p. 237). But "useable" is not equated with "concepts take on meaning." For Purdy (2011/this issue) to suggest that observations have "no meaning until they [are] brought into the social realm—expressed and most importantly listened to" (p. 136) is a misunderstanding of Latour's primary point—that the laboratory is "a system of fact construction" and that the outward appearance of an orderly process of discovery is actually "fabricated from disorder and chaos" (Latour & Woolgar, 1979, p. 41). The larger scientific community does not create the meaning but instead chooses whether to accept or reject a particular meaning created by a theory that was proposed by part of that community.

In other words, theoretical terms gain meaning not when they are "brought into the social realm" but rather when they are adopted and incorporated into a theoretical framework of practice, an abstract structure that aids in understanding.

Drawing from a pragmatic perspective, Kaplan (1963) recognized that the utility of a concept depends on its use. In particular, Kaplan distinguished between constructs and theoretical terms. While a construct is defined individually and in relationship with observables, a theoretical term derives its meaning "from the part it plays in the whole theory in which it is embedded, and from the role of theory itself" (Kaplan, 1963, p. 56). To date, it seems as if listening has largely been defined as a construct, one with a single definition and without explicitly theorizing about its nature (Bodie, 2010, 2011; Bostrom, 2011). Listening should instead be viewed as a theoretical term with the theoretical structure a kind of "social context." In this way, listening is allowed various meanings depending on the practical purpose pursued by an individual or team of scholars. This structure could be lay theories of listening, or "what people say or believe" about listening (Purdy, 2011/this issue, p. 137), or one of various scholarly theories of a particular type or mode of listening. Irrespective of the particular structure, it is important to note that viewing listening as a theoretical term operates to "analyze its meaning and role within a [particular] theory . . . [with] theory [as] the starting point, not the destination" (Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p. 7). That is, theory construction is a means to a larger (and more practical) end. We use theory to answer important questions and to gain insight into phenomena with otherwise narrow meaning. In general, situating listening as a theoretical term seems to take listening seriously (Bodie, 2010), making it more complex, unfamiliar, and central to the human (not just individual) experience.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Purdy's response deals with how scientific facts are constructed, taking as his lead the study of laboratory life by Latour and Woolgar. But this critique deals most readily with the context of discovery, that is, how social scientists are creative and bring all forms of "evidence" to the table when attempting to understand some aspect of social life. This includes not only what we typically think of as "data" but also things we do not (e.g., hunches, intuitions, theories) which assist when interpreting data. Indeed, social scientists agree with Purdy that data do not speak for themselves. More importantly, the context of discovery is theoretically separable from the context of justification or how ideas, theories, and interpretations of data are justified to the larger scientific community. This process, ideally, follows an agreed-upon norm, a method. When social scientists argue a particular point they are speaking to a particular audience and with a particular purpose in mind. That purpose is the advancement of knowledge, at the center of which is the activity of abstraction, theory, and agonistic justification.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Bavelas, J. B. (1987). Permitting creativity in science. In D. Jackson & P. Rushton (Eds.), *Scientific excellence* (pp. 308–327). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bavelas, J. B. (1995). Quantitative versus qualitative? In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.), *Social approaches to communication* (pp. 49–62). New York, NY: Guilford.

Bodie, G. D. (2009). Evaluating listening theory: Development and illustration of five criteria. *International Journal of Listening*, 23, 81–103.

Bodie, G. D. (2010). Treating listening ethically. *International Journal of Listening, 24*, 185–188.

Bodie, G. D. (2011). The understudied nature of listening in interpersonal communication: Introduction to a special issue. *International Journal of Listening, 25*, 1–9.

Bodie, G. D. (in press). Listening as positive communication. In T. Socha & M. Pitts (Eds.), *The positive side of interpersonal communication*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Bodie, G. D., & Fitch-Hauser, M. (2010). Quantitative research in listening: Explication and overview. In A. D. Wolvin (Ed.), *Listening and human communication in the 21st century* (pp. 46–93). Oxford, England: Blackwell.

Bostrom, R. N. (2011). Rethinking conceptual approaches to the study of "listening." *International Journal of Listening, 25*, 10–26.

Carbaugh, D. (1999). "Just listen": "Listening" and the landscape among the Blackfeet. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63, 250–270.

Dewey, J. (1991). In reply to some criticisms. In J. Dewey (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works (1925–1953)*, (Vol. 5). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. N. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics*, (Vol. 3). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Huene-Hoyningen, P. (1987). Context of discovery and context of justification. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 18, 501–515.

Kaplan, A. (1963). *The conduct of inquiry: Methodology for behavioral science*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1979). *Laboratory life: The social construction of scientific facts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pearce, W. B., & Pearce, K. (2000). Extending the theory of the coordinated management of meaning ("CMM") through a community dialogue process. *Communication Theory*, 10, 405–423.

Purdy, M. W. (2011/this issue). Grounding listening: The limitations of theory. *International Journal of Listening, 25*, 132–138.

Wilson, S. R., & Sabee, C. M. (2003). Explicating communicative competence as a theoretical term. In J. O. Greene & B. R. Burleson (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and social interaction skills* (pp. 3–50). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Wolvin, A. D., Halone, K. K., & Coakley, C. G. (1999). An assessment of the "intellectual discussion" on listening theory and research. *International Journal of Listening*, 13, 111–129.