

# Theories as Universal Laws Governing a Communication Phenomenon

Dr. Chipo Mutongi<sup>1</sup>, Kudzayi Chiwanza<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD, MSc, MBA, BA, HND-LIS, Dip-Edu, Dip-LIS, Dip-P Magnt, Dip- Salaries Admn.

<sup>2</sup> PhD Candidate, Msc, BA, Dip-LIS, NC-LIS, Zimbabwe Open University

**Abstract:** *Concepts would be so difficult to understand without theories. Theories serve as lenses and back born to bring a point home. A phenomenon would be made clearer due to theories hence serving as universal laws governing a phenomenon in this case communication phenomenon. The communication process will be understood in almost similar way universally due to theories. It sharpens the route one should take. It can also be noted that theories can oversimplify reality and might not capture all aspects of the phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** theories, laws, universal laws, phenomenon, communication, communication process, information, media

## 1. Introduction

Theories are lenses of understanding the world around us. Poover (1984:19) avers that “theories allows us to organise and understand communication experiences, select communication behaviour to study, broaden our understanding of human communication, predict and control communication situations, challenge current and social and cultural relationships and offer new ways of thinking and living. There are various theories to help explain different disciplines and situations. We have the prominent Maslow’s hierarchy of need theory, McGregor theory X and Y. There are also communication theories and models that help to explain communication phenomenon like the Lasswell model, Shannon and Waver, Schrumm Theory and Johari Window model. Robbins and Coulter (2009:332) assert that “before communication can take place, a purpose, expressed as a message to be conveyed, must exist. It passes between a source (the sender) and a receiver. The message is converted to symbolic form (called encoding) and passed by way of some medium (channel) to the receiver, who translates the sender’s message (called decoding). The result is the transfer of meaning from one person to another.

## 2. What is a theory?

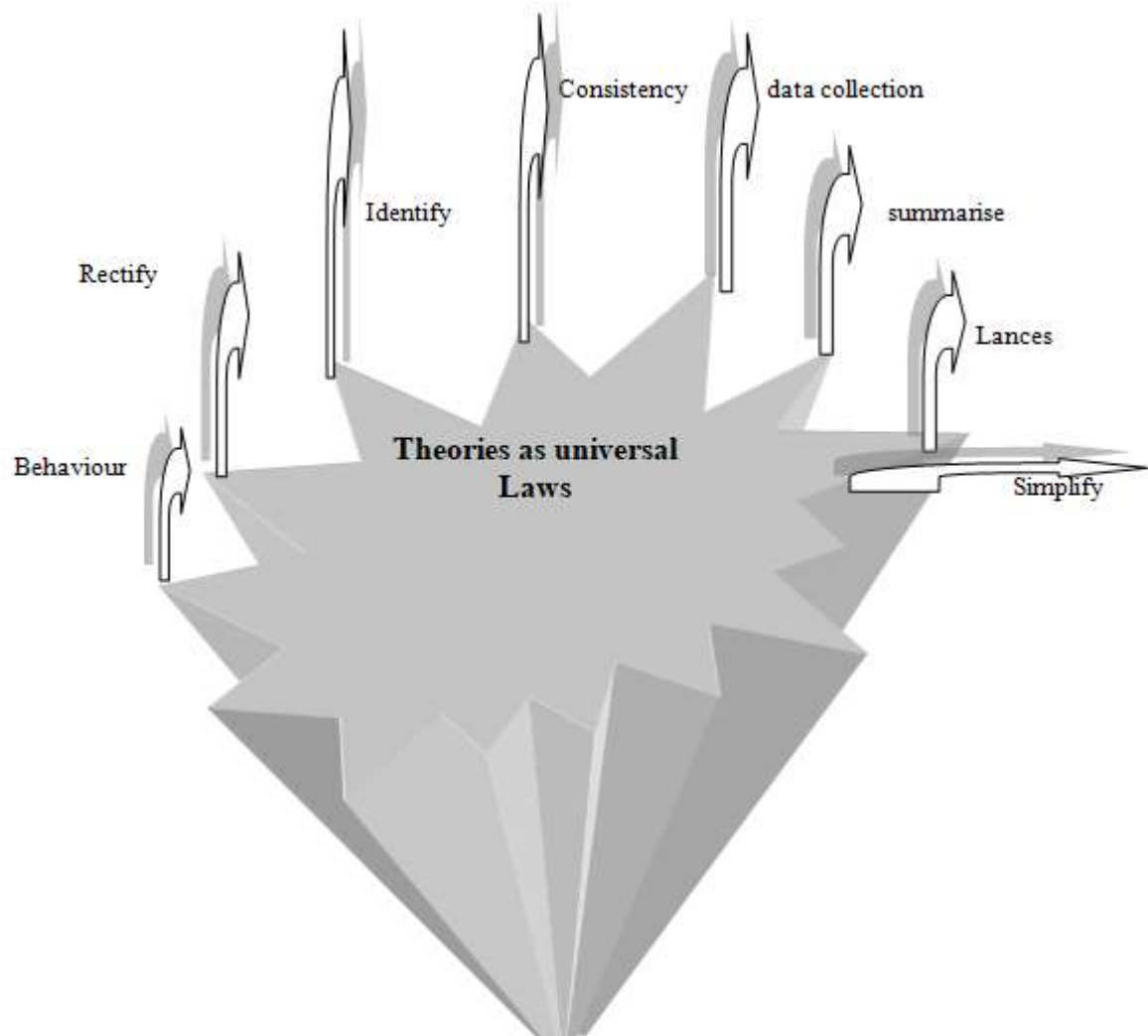
Hoover (1984) defined theory as a set of interrelated propositions that suggest why events occur the manner that they do. Foss and Griffin (1995) propound that theories are “a way of framing an experience or event. A theory is an effort to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world.

## 3. What is a Phenomenon?

A phenomenon is a fact or situation that is observed to exist or happen (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016). It is something that exist and can be seen, felt and tested, especially something unusual.

### 3.1 Role of theories in governing phenomenon and serving as universal laws

Theories govern phenomenon and serve as universal laws in the way they direct us in understanding the phenomenon. They bring a better understanding of the phenomenon to the world and in a constant way.



**Figure 1: Theories as Universal Laws**

As illustrated in figure 1 theories serve as universal laws as they rectify, simplify, identify and summarise a phenomenon. They aid in communication behaviour and in data collection.

### 3.2 Theories as rectification of the communication process

Theories are used for the rectification or correction of the communication process since some of the theories complement one another. The Lasswell model and Shanon and Waver model of 1927 though they have no room for feedback but they take into account the concepts of effect. For example if one wants to correct a situation in a country through the television, they can communicate through the televisions which is one way communication thus governing a phenomenon.

### 3.3 Identify disagreements

Theories identify disagreements in the communication process. They therefore help in the identification of communication barriers and suggest ways in rectifying them in so doing the effective communication is achieved. Theories are of paramount importance and serve as universal laws as they are also principles. Tapfuma and Sithole (2013)

asserts that theories are about principles and they offer some apparent truth about the effect of communication.

### 3.4 Consistency

Consistency in the communication process is maintained due to theories. These theories are not changed over time henceforth, they clearly illustrates which model is being used with regard to a certain phenomenon. For example Laswell model is mostly used in organisations such as military or police where there is no room for feedback where as Schrumm model incorporate the notion of feedback and is employed in organisations that use the democratic leadership style that encourages feedback. This then makes theories universal laws which can govern phenomenon.

### 3.5 Aid in data collection

Theories aid in data collection process for example collecting primary data which can help or govern a situation. These theories aid in finding the best approach to collect and gather information and systematically arranging it and carefully analysing the data. The Johari Window is a model which best suites interpersonal communication between individuals henceforth the notion of feedback is best incorporated. The theoretical approach help in gathering

extensive information from a panel or individual thereby governing a phenomenon.

### 3.6 Summarise and organise data

Theories are used to summarise and organise a great deal of data to make it information thus connecting individual facts and give them meaning for example investigating a plane voice recording data gathered from the black box where information is gathered from voice recording from when the plane take off to when it crashes. Thus theories would be instrumental in deriving the communication process in an effort to exhumate events leading to a situation in which they would investigate the method of communication. Was the voice or transmission audible? Where there any distraction emanating from change of attitude?

### 3.7 Visual diagrams of abstract

Theories are visual diagrams of abstract understanding of the communication process. They capture the essential features of real situations in a simplified form to describe, explain and understand easily the processes. The diagrammatical illustrations of theories makes it easy to simplify ideologies henceforth compressing larger volumes of information into a diagram with sequential movement from one person to the next thus governing a phenomenon. Problems and arise barriers will be easy to pick and consequential delaying will be narrowed.

### 3.8 Aid in making predictions

Theories aid in making predictions and can be used as control mechanism. Thus through the employment of a certain theory in communicating one can denote that the information has reached its intended recipient for example the Lasswell model where one knows because of the effect a predication can be made. Furthermore, if there are any irregularities in which case the information has not reached its intended receiver because of barriers the person would be in a position to rectify and make corrective action in eliminating the barriers thus governing a phenomenon.

### 3.9 Lenses for the world

Theories give a way to look at the world. They provide lenses for one to view and appreciate a phenomenon. They can make clear, magnify or distort one's view of a concept or set of processes. Theories can make concepts bigger or larger than what they are. Communication theories can also illustrate aspects of communication and give one a better understanding of the process.

### 3.10 Reduce complexity

Complexity is reduced due to the use of theories. They have a heuristic value to provide new ways to conceive hypothetical ideas and relationships. Thus theories serve as universal law as they simply facts surrounding situations. Theories try to explain facts with only a few core ideas and can also be applied to wide range of situations. For example the Cambridge theory of perception was on how the artist

paints his work of art and how the viewer can appreciate the art that can be applied to communication.

### 3.11 Help in choosing the communicative behavior to study

Theories help us choose what communicative behaviour to study. They help us guide where to choose, look and what to look at and how to look at communication phenomenon. They help to focus attention on certain aspects of the definition of communication and guide on how to approach persuasive attempts and what you look for to see if one is successful or not.

### 3.12 Make people ask questions

People will find room to ask questions due to theories (Morlensen, 2008). Schramm's model emphasis that communication is incomplete unless and until the sender receives a feedback from the recipient and feedback can be in form of questions asked. Schramm argues that for the message to be understood both parties should share the same language since communication is a two way process. Tapfuma and Sithole (2013) describe the theory as a more complex theory which describes communication as a dynamic interaction in which meaningful messages are exchanged by two or more active participants. Theories serve as universal laws because they aid in identifying yet quickest ways of relaying information and are of significant importance in an organisation.

### 3.13 Shortcomings of theories

Although theories play a indispensable role in aiding communication and serving as a universal law governing phenomenon, they also have their shortcoming. They tend to over simplify facts ending up missing important points of comparison. Premature closures can be denoted and new ideas can be added after closures. Not all information flow through predestined channels as denoted by the theorist as other information may be intercepted along the communication channel. For example the source of grapevine cannot be illustrated.

## 5. Conclusion

Theories serve as universal laws governing a phenomenon. They give an idea of concepts in this case communication concepts. They seek predictions and understanding and they also interpret and present an understanding. Theories serve as lenses of understanding the world around us and magnify one's view of concepts. Theories make concepts bigger than what they are thereby managing or governing a phenomenon. Theories can however over simplify reality.

## References

- [1] *Cambridge Dictionary* (2016) Retrieved (20/06/2016) from [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/phenomenon](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/phenomenon)
- [2] Foss and Griffin (1995) *Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an invitational Rhetoric*. Vol.62.2-18.

- [3] Marlensen, C.O (2008) *Communication Theory*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- [4] Hoover, K (1984) *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*. New York: St Martins Press.
- [5] Tapfuma, M and Sithole, J (2013) *Communication Skills*. Harare: Zimbabwe Open University.
- [6] Robbins (2009) *Management*. London: Pearson Prentice Hall.

## Author Profile



**Dr. Chipo Mutongi:** A Part Time Lecturer at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) with more than ten years lecturing experience; PhD/DPhil research thesis Part Time Supervisor (ZOU). PhD/DPhil research thesis supervisor/ under study (2014-2016-ZOU), Research Supervisor for all levels of education; member of the International Board of Reviewers for the International Journal of Doctoral Studies (IJDS); Journal Reviewer-Journal of Information and Knowledge Management (JIKM); published over thirty six articles in International Journals; DCIZ board member (2016), Member of Institute of People Management of Zimbabwe (IPMZ) and member of Zimbabwe Library Association (ZIMLA), published more than ten modules with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU); is in the process of authoring books on Knowledge Management and Information Policy. An Acting Talent Development Officer in the City of Harare, worked as a Librarian at the City of Harare with more than twelve years experience in library, information and knowledge management; attained the highest and most prestigious degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Information and Knowledge Management (ZOU); Master of Science in Library and Information Science (NUST); the more professional degree of Master of Business Administration (ZOU); Media Studies Degree (ZOU); Higher National Diploma in Library and Information Science (Harare Polytechnic); Diploma in Library and Information Science (Bulawayo Polytechnic); Diploma in Education (UZ); Diploma in Personnel Management (IPMZ); Diploma in Salaries Administration (Stallone Consultancy); Certificate in Desk Top Publishing (CCOSA); Certificate in Web Designing (People's College); Certificate in Computer Repairs (People's College).



**Kudzayi Chiwanza** (Ms), born on 25/12/72, is a senior lecturer, and the current Chairperson, in the Department of Information Science and Records Management at the Zimbabwe Open University, National Centre in Harare. She is the Chairperson of the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences Journal (ZOUJASS). Kudzayi is a current Dphil candidate with UNISA, holds a Master of Science in Library and Information Science (MScLIS) from the National University of Science and Technology (NUST); a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies; a Higher National Diploma in Library and Information Science; a Diploma in Library and Information Science; and a Certificate in Library and Information Science. She has published more than 25 and presented research papers and articles in Library Management, Indigenous Knowledge, Records and Archival Preservation, Information Literacy and Quality Management. Kudzayi worked as a Librarian in different institutions in Zimbabwe, including the Zimbabwe Open University