

Middle range theories: a strategy for communicational knowledge¹

Teorias intermediárias: uma estratégia para o conhecimento comunicacional

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the profile of communicational knowledge between a concern with general theories and the interdisciplinary position, pointing out obstacles to both possibilities. As an alternative, it proposes an analytical approach aimed at the discovery of characteristics of the complex communicational phenomenon. The article recognizes the risk of comforting the current dispersion of perspectives. To overcome that dispersion, it proposes activating middle range theories of communication. It brings forward the needed precautions for the epistemological efficacy of this production. In conclusion, it systematizes some aspects of the strategy by four movements of a comprehensive dynamic.

Keywords: Middle range theories, communicational knowledge, analytics, unraveling

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RESUMO

O artigo apresenta uma percepção a respeito do perfil do conhecimento comunicacional, entre uma preocupação com teorias gerais e a posição interdisciplinarista, assinalando limites das duas possibilidades. Propõe, como alternativa, uma analítica voltada para a descoberta de características do complexo fenômeno comunicacional. Reconhece o risco de que a atual dispersão de abordagens seja reforçada. A proposta para superar essa dispersão é o desenvolvimento, a partir da visada analítica, de teorias intermediárias da comunicação. Discute os cuidados necessários para a eficácia epistemológica dessa produção. Em conclusão, sistematiza aspectos da estratégia através de quatro movimentos em uma dinâmica integrada.

Palavras-chave: Teorias intermediárias, conhecimento comunicacional, analítica, desentranhamento

INTRODUCTION

COMMUNICATIONAL KNOWLEDGE SHOWS itself, today, halfway between the status of academic discipline and that of an aggregate field of occurrences, perceptions and different propositions, without systematicity related to the notion of *communication*. There is a certain academic recognition of specificity, but also a realization of its low consistency, as well as a permeation by social knowledge of diverse origins, with no minimally agreed perceptions of what defines the communication phenomenon.

What we can group under the comprehensive name *communication phenomenon* begins to emerge mainly from the late 19th century, with different questions, arising and formulated in the body of different fields of knowledge – issues such as public opinion, conversation, rhetoric, current affairs information, production of meaning among social participants, interaction as psychosocial process, cultural industry, propaganda, entertainment, dissemination of knowledge, narrative processes, aesthetic experience, agonistic processes and new technologies.

In each field of knowledge or practice, concerns emerged as issues integrated into the scope of perception or action of their interest. The first hypotheses and questions of a knowledge not yet constituted thus arise in the practical questions of social or natural reality; or, according to Alain (1939/1947, referencing Auguste Comte), within an established discipline that inscribes them as part of its concerns.

The 20th century was rich in the production of such elaborated theories that – within the different human and social sciences – proposed to provide a comprehensive view of what presented itself there as *the communicational issue*. The word “communication,” of widespread use in common sense, seemed an appropriate reference. But each theory (*about communication* and not of *communication*, as Martino shows, 2007), in fact, can only propose itself comprehensive (*general*) regarding the specific concerns of the knowledge discipline that develops it.

For a sociology of communication, the relevant questions are only those that are inscribed on the horizon of the discipline. In this strict sense, and only in this sense, it is a *general theory* – which suggests a contradiction. As soon as we move from the strict sociological approach, in search of a proper communicational perspective, the aspired general theory shows itself unreachd. In the neighboring field, from the studies of languages and literature, we find concerns centered on *languages* – which expand from orality and writing to audiovisual processes; from literature to social narratives elaborated in the most diverse contexts, general or specialized. And so, it is for each human and

social science that concerns itself with issues posed by the express emergence of the communicational *in their respective fields*. Each field proposes general theories of Communication according to their disciplinary perspectives – but the communicational issue is diverse according to the discipline.

If we take a step back to observe the set of theoretical proposals offered by the various human and social sciences, their insufficiency to cover the set of issues that are manifested in this composite framework is clear. What have led to characterizing our field of knowledge as *interdisciplinary*. Such categorization, however, is inadequate, because interdisciplinary knowledge would involve a joint and articulated work between the different disciplines, which does not occur. What we see is a dispersed aggregate of issues related to different perspectives.

Not by chance, since the 1990s pretense comprehensive theories no longer emerge. It has become clear that the set of *communicational issues* is so complex and diverse that it extrapolates the scope of any of the established social disciplines. The collection of general theories of the 20th century is aggregated into a formidable set. In each of the great propositions, the communicational issues are intertwined with questions and logics proper to the discipline in which the theory was elaborated. They certainly make sense in their specific fields; but do not form an articulated set. Not that they are contradictory to each other – they are rather mutually indifferent². Strictly speaking, we have never had a real general theory of communication.

This situation favors a conforming adherence to the interdisciplinary perspective: a *mixed* field, composed of mere accumulation and/or application of offers from human and social disciplines. But this option does not allow us to make sense of the set of scattered questions and theories that, however, we recognize as pertaining to *human and social communication*. How to distinguish, in a situation, what is *ours* and what pertains to the theoretical propositions of any of the established disciplines?

Luiz Signates (2017) proposes that “the diversity... of the communication studies” related “to the most different social contexts provides the suspicion that communication emerges as a new basic, late and promising science, although still *theoretically inconsistent* [emphasis added]” (p. 13). We cannot exempt ourselves (as a field of work and knowledge, even if composite) from searching for meanings of this “aggregate.” Otherwise, how can we justify grouping processes and reflections that would not have made sense together? The main reference to communication would have to be discarded – but common sense would rebel against this discarding, as the presence of the *communicational* is well evident in all these issues. A relevant challenge for communication knowledge is to achieve theoretical consistency.

²In 1999, Robert Craig states that: “Rather than addressing an area of theory, we appear to be operating primarily in separate domains... There is no canon of general theory to which they all refer” (p. 119).

TOWARD AN ANALITICAL APPROACH

We find, for the challenge of consistency, two recurrent alternatives. We can try to produce meaning by developing a general, comprehensive theory of communication, independent of other disciplines. Such a theory would constitute a comprehensive paradigm, competent to direct the set of research, questions and approaches of interest to the field of knowledge. But without a detailed perception of the enormous diversity of processes, it risks rushing into restrictive *essences*, excluding from the horizon of perception everything that does not conform to the adopted perspective.

Or, secondly, it would be the case of carrying out the interdisciplinary intention: to develop an effective work of encounter between all the Human and Social Sciences (HSS) together, to build a shared knowledge consistency³. But this hypothesis, besides impractical due to the required dimensions, would depend less on decisions of our field and more on an interest of the other disciplines – which seems inexistent.

We consider, thus, more productive, in the current stage of our field of knowledge, a third alternative, which corresponds to betting on an *analytical approach of the communicational phenomenon*. This alternative seems to invite and open the possibility of productive compositions and debates among many researchers who, in their specific fields of interest, effectively already study sectoral characteristics of the communicational phenomenon.

What can be criticized in studies focused on the diversity of characteristics of the communicational phenomenon is the multiplication of angles and approaches, in attempts that effectively risk dispersion. Our alternative requires, then, an express concern with addressing this risk. This is a continuous survey of characteristics of the communicational phenomenon, seeking to unravel these characteristics from their dependence on other phenomena – until we can give *joint* meanings to these characteristics, detached from their primarily spaces of offer (Braga, 2018).

Importantly, an analytical approach does not dispense with the use of theories – it only opposes a general theory from which explanations on the most diverse aspects of the “theorized” phenomenon can be deduced. It is in this framework that the relevance of a work with middle-range theories, instead of a macro-theory, is evident.

If we are interested in elaborating proper communicational knowledge, we must search, in the theories of other disciplines, the angles that, giving attention to the most pertinent aspects for our objectives, favor the unraveling of communication from its subsumed position to other phenomena.

³This is what Robert Craig (1999) proposes with his integrative perspective of the seven traditions he mentions (rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, sociopsychology, sociocultural, criticism and pragmatic – the latter added in a new article in 2007).

We thus point out three angles that require attention in activating the proposed analytical approach: the risk of dispersion of questions; the relationships between analytical posture and theoretical activation; and the goal of unraveling.

Related to such issues, we see the importance of tensioning theories of neighboring fields. We will illustrate this point by referring to Stig Hjarvard's proposal (2014a) in his middle-range theory on mediatization. Researching the incidence of media institutions, Hjarvard characterizes mediatization as a generalized influence of *media logics* on all social institutions.

His question is the passage, after a *period of rupture*, from one institutional regime to another (in any social sphere), under the influence of media processes. It is, then, the variations in the *organizing principles* in social fields, which allows comparing structures established at different times.

The period of rupture appears only as a transition between two "institutional logic configurations." In situations where there is "rupture of an existing regime without a new regime occurring afterwards," Hjarvard's perspective (2014b) sees "a period of instability and uncertainty regarding the resources and values of practices" – a period that does not deserve, in the author's text, greater observations (pp. 37-38).

As a good example of middle-range theory, the proposal offers interesting sociological contributions to media knowledge *regarding institutional issues*. But can be tensioned, from our communicational perspective, in three ways:

- the preferential focus on the institutional as an organizer of society makes communication appear only as an epiphenomenon, as a variable dependent on the category institution;
- the proposal does not include in its horizon of relevance the *non-institutional experimental processes* directly communicational in nature that arise in the institutions and in their borders, resulting from delicate issues in mutual interpenetration;
- but, in a communicational perspective, this is, precisely, an object of relevance, in which we can perceive, with greater clarity, the interactional attempts to address the unusual – in which we can find the communication process in specific action, focused on the *tentative instituting gesture*.

This quick example (which appears in greater detail in Braga, 2015) illustrates what we will discuss later about the productivity of theoretical tensioning between middle-range theories. When activating middle-range theories for our questions, these should be reworked according to what – *on our part* – is

D

Middle range theories

assumed as a problem of knowledge. As Popper (2001, pp. 30-31) points out, it is from the problem that theoretical reflection emerges.

An analytical approach seeks to raise characteristics of processes related to the communicational – from a perspective *that assumes this phenomenon as the main one*, not as an epiphenomenon of other questions or categories elaborated in other fields of knowledge.

When observing social practices, the relevant thing is to perceive the specific strategies and objectives that, in their courses, trigger and develop communication processes. When observing theories, instead of seeking what they *say* communication *is*, our interest lies in: what is the communicational issue, the problem present there?

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We will then observe, as aspects related to the proposal of an analytical approach, some forwarding necessary for its effectiveness: attention to the risk of dispersion; choice of theoretical activation compatible with the analytical target; adoption of a goal of unraveling the communicational phenomenon; and methodological tensioning of the theories invoked. The next part, which discuss characteristics of middle-range theories, will give specificity and direction to these questions.

MIDDLE-RANGE THEORIES AS A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

In the mid 20th century, Robert Merton developed an in-depth reflection on the interest of middle-range theories for advancing sociological knowledge. In his work *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949/1968), Merton describes this basic middle-range condition as:

[they] lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization and social change. (p. 39)

All scientific fields have benefited from middle-range theories as a process of consolidating the discipline itself. Just one example: the development of neurology in the second half of the 20th century, from two middle-range theories about the process of synapses between neurons – as being of a chemical or electrical nature. Due to the research conducted based on these two theories and the

reflections resulting from their mutual tensioning, the discipline not only found keen and complex answers, surpassing the initial positions, but consolidated and advanced its own consistency of knowledge of the field⁴.

In this text, we propose redirections and additions to Merton's perspective, so that the logics of this type of theoretical exercise are adjusted to the purposes of developing the field of communication, thus unraveling it from the scope of the other HSS and addressing dispersion.

To characterize this defense of producing specific middle-range theories as a strategy for communicational knowledge, we point out below some relevant aspects between those inherent to the middle-range logic and those we consider as a necessary condition of effectiveness directed to our question. In this set of angles, the methodological work is closely related to epistemological objectives of the communicational field.

⁴Popper (2001, pp. 27-29) refers to the productivity of this case. As we can see, it is not a matter of searching for a defining concept of essences, but rather an inquiry on procedural characteristics that – once seized – favor a more acute perception of the comprehensive phenomenon and its logics.

Avoid the claim of universal comprehensiveness

This is an intrinsic characteristic of middle-range theories: they develop close to the specific phenomena of their interest, by observing occurrences of the processes to be investigated *in context*. They must have, then, a focused scope, without claiming universality in their propositions and without aiming to capture the essentiality of a complex phenomenon; but rather its characteristics and procedural aspects, evidenced in the social reality observed.

The objective, therefore, is not to substantiate the field of knowledge, but to develop questions and hypotheses resulting from specific sets of empirical observations, seeking to perceive and understand the processes under examination, as well as to reflexively organize the characteristics raised – it is the intrinsic logic of an analytic approach.

Merton (1949/1968) proposes that a middle-range theory “is mainly used to guide empirical inquiry” (p. 39) and that it “deals with delimited aspects of social phenomena” (p. 40).

With middle-range theories, we also avoid the excessively explanatory tendencies of the object investigated that would only take it as an element to be categorized into universal processes, preestablished by paradigmatic macro-theories (as already observed in Braga, 2018, p. 131).

Specify its range

Investigating occurrences in case studies and singular situations can generate keen understandings about the characteristics of the processes evidenced therein.

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Middle range theories

Developed directly in the context of their production, these perceptions have the advantage of *contextual coherence*.

One question that emerges for the theoretical statements resulting from such research is the need to examine *the reach of the statements obtained by observation inferences*. The process of developing middle-range theories from research work therefore requires investigating the various situations for which they may or may not make sense. Since one of the objectives of scientific knowledge is to obtain statements with some degree of comprehensiveness, this corresponds to direct reflection to processes of reality in which those propositions can be considered relevant.

Being a complex object such as the communicational phenomenon (of still poorly systematized knowledge), it is relevant to perceive the viability of inferences made about a specific case as a basis to examine other cases⁵. We need, therefore, to develop a clear comprehension of its scope.

We have a beginning middle-range theory when it organizes questions and hypotheses around certain characteristics derived from a diverse set of empirical research. The next step, in the very elaboration and development of the theory, is its methodological exercise as heuristic proposition for other research – allowing to include in its own formalization the angles of validity and pertinence that it evokes.

In addition to the range and coverage test resulting from the activation for different research situations, the effective extent of such theories will result from tensioning with other middle-range theories. We will come back to this topic later.

Produce heuristic propositions

Characterized by a goal of opening paths and discovery, theories in the field of communication will inevitably be conjectural – and not deductively developed from inclusive fundamentals. Starting from observed characteristics, they should abductively seek relationships between them, as well as comprehensive senses within their range. They are neither explanatory nor proposers of fundamentals – they are heuristic theorizations, assumed as conjectures aimed at discoveries stimulated by their proposals.

A middle-range theory is not, therefore, founded as an expression of standardized truths. Based on lacunar evidence, it is justified by its probability of producing new evidence. Concurrently, it opens itself for the inclusion of the discoveries obtained in its heuristic movement, seeking its own qualitative development by continuously integrated adjustments.

⁵ And not to *explain* other cases – which would be an improper attempt at generalization. It is precisely the possibility of examining how other cases and situations behave from the same type of questions and hypotheses – assuming that different results are predictable, but also contribute to a broader perception of the whole *in its variations*.

The established social sciences have founding theories, a comprehensive and well-systematized theoretical body. Even when macro theories of origin are challenged or modulated by new questions, they are still a reference for the proposed questioning. In this situation, the macro theories are methodologically productive.

In the field of communication, in contrast, an excessive zeal for macro theories would risk the maintenance of communicational knowledge in the strict scope of another science already constituted. This does not mean that we advocate for a kind of anything goes in the production of unsubstantiated knowledge. Only that part of the knowledge produced by research cannot offer guarantees based on deductive pertinence to given theoretical frameworks – precisely because it intends to go beyond the foundations currently established in the neighboring sciences. We exemplified this point in the item “Toward an Analytical approach” of this article, referring to the theoretical bases of sociology.

In the absence of deductive guarantees, the conjectures present themselves as attempts, and should be sustained less on its foundation and more in the heuristic productivity of their propositions. Here, what allows testing a statement, hypothesis or conjecture is not the deductive rigor that these present from alleged foundations. Nor is it the immediate empirical verification, with its inductive support. The test of heuristics is its potential to produce discoveries and new investigations.

Merton (1949/1968) develops a proposal that relates well to the heuristic question:

The middle-range orientation involves the specification of ignorance. Rather than pretend to know where it is in fact absent, it expressly recognizes what must still be learned in order to lay the foundation for still more knowledge. (p. 68)

Focus on the communicational unraveling

Middle-range theories, close to empirical research, show potential for the future constitution of a discipline of Communication, provided that a unraveling goal is adopted.

Theoretical statements on communication within the established HSS disciplines integrates their macro-perspectives. Developing a proper communicational approach calls for the generation of other questions, free from this constraint.

The possibility of generating questions and hypotheses that will not be made in the scope of the established sciences can be effected in two levels of action, both related to a middle-range theory reflection:

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Middle range theories

- to unravel the communicational meaning of propositions from neighboring theories by tensioning what they say about communication, going beyond them in search for other issues;
- to unravel the communicational meaning directly from the situations observed in research, seeking to distinguish what can be explained by neighboring theories and what should be further investigated and discovered.

Thus, a middle-range theoretical elaboration for the field of communication should activate the potential of theories to productively articulate abstract propositions and empirical questions thought of *in a communicational perspective*.

Start from perceived characteristics and overcome its dispersion

I have emphasized, in articles developed in recent years, the interest of case studies and singular situations, in which we can observe, from different approaches, characteristics and aspects of the communicational phenomenon. This diversity of investigative angles favors to understand the complexity of the phenomenon. Simultaneously, however, we have a risk of an undifferentiated dispersion of proposals.

These two observations would seem contradictory: to defend the study of singular, contextualized situations, in which the communicational occurrence reveals observable characteristics and allows indicative inferences; and regret the dispersion arising therein⁶. But precisely, middle-range theories provide the articulating remedy between the two terms. On the one hand, they develop close to the material occurrence of the processes of interest; on the other, they seek a more abstract level, in which one can articulate relatively close characteristics or the composition between different characteristics.

Thus, these theories seek to relate episodes and aspects in a line of thinking that, besides giving consistency to the set of processes observed, offers questions and hypotheses resulting from a specific but diversified aggregate of empirical observations, focused on an integrated design of characteristics.

Merton (1949/1968) highlights this back and forth process between the empirical and the most abstract work: “Middle-range theory involves abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that empirical permit testing” (p. 39).

This characteristic, associated with the search for the scope of middle-range theories, reduces the risk of dispersion, producing articulation of questions and approaches. Thus, the work of generating consistency

⁶It should be noted, however, that this is not the only dispersive dynamic in communication studies. Another incidence is the variety of mutually indifferent macro-theoretical angles, which direct observations and interpretations about the phenomenon, as discussed in the initial item of this article.

of communication knowledge is done in a concrete way and based on differentiated reality – instead of pretending that consistency results from an ontological, conceptual, abstract gesture aimed at establishing a *wide comprehensiveness*.

Availability for mutual tensioning with other theories and with the empirical

Middle-range theories, as organizers of specific research fields, enable a mutual tensioning, in the process of competing hypotheses (Campbell, 2005). The idea of an evolutionary epistemology implies this tensioning agonistic process, as a joint tactic of testing and improvement, in which the best or most comprehensive hypotheses are developed, and the weakest or most restricted ones are surpassed.

The openness to a work of mutual tensioning with other middle-range theories shows itself as a strategy of acuity over facts, of keen adjustments in the design of its specific range, of revisions resulting from objections and empirical observation, besides enabling qualifying developments as a response to such objections and related empirical challenges.

The potential of mutual theoretical tensioning will be favored by a stance of avoiding explanatory answers based on fixed fundamentals. The heuristic characterization pointed out before favors an open confrontation for the empirical, since it is not about framing occurrences in established theoretical categories, but about *discovering specificities* from observing reality.

This offers a particular plasticity to middle-range theory – ready to readjust its perspectives before new clues and inferences in the research, to the extent that the object itself tensions and perfects it. This is, in fact, the very logic of abductive reasoning as the main inferential mode in this investigative line. Since abductive inference is the hypothesis for a better apprehension of things in the conditions of the available information, observing new tracks implies revising the hypothesis.

Regarding tensioning between theories, this depends, of course, on a research environment that values agonistics as a productive process. But the heuristic openness of middle-range theories stimulates the work of scrutinizing close statements and objections brought by neighboring theories of the same pattern – which tends to generate conditions conducive to agonistic work. Conversely, the intended general theories about communication, developed in the 20th century by different human and social sciences, stimulate block choices directed by their fundamentals – determining that mutual indifference to which we referred before.

It may not always be possible to intend, as Merton (1949/1968), articulations between different theories: “These theories do not remain separate but are consolidated into wider networks of theory” (p. 68). Middle-range theories can also be extinguished in the face of others, more productive or more comprehensive. However, in the dimension between articulating dialogue and the possibility of extinction in contact with other more productive theories in discovery and scope, the mutual tensioning will favor either the possible improvement of each theory or – in the general result – the knowledge of the field.

Regarding mediatization, do not assume the object technologies as deterministic

The main perspective here is that this type of object and its processes in society, of relevant historical occurrence, do not correspond, however, to a *first* in a communicational perspective. The technological processes themselves result from objectives and communicational processes of society, which foster them.

After a time when it made sense to interpret the emerging dynamics as if they strictly resulted from technological functionalities, it becomes clear that the most diverse social interactions also offer their dynamics, activating diversified affordances (Gibson, 1977) of technology. It is this dynamic, even, that makes the different technological inventions, institutional procedures and professional fields of the field converge.

Just as technological occurrence is of great interest to sociology, economics, politics and other HSS, it is also of interest to the search for communicational knowledge, offering itself as a special *test field* for experimentation and for the theoretical-methodological generation of communication (Braga, 2007).

Thus, what should interest us, in the scope of middle-range theories on mediatization, are those that – intrigued by procedures or technological incidence circuits – seek to comprehend the complex relationships between affordances of digital technologies and the interactional logics in exercise, activated or in experimentation, which drive the participants and the social process.

IN CONCLUSION

We discussed, in the article, what is proposed as a strategy for developing consistency of knowledge in a communicational perspective. We emphasized some angles: the preference for an analytical approach rather than an ontological aim; the production and activation of middle-range theories; a work of unraveling communication processes; heuristic procedures; and a tactic of tensioning and transfers.

These four angles are articulated by their mutual incidences, explained in the item “Middle-range Theories as a Strategy for Communicational Knowledge” of this article. Beyond this conceptual level of articulation, a second level, methodological, in which they can integrate, is that of empirical research. With this objective, I propose a joint dynamic perception of the four angles. We understand that all these components are already present in the research work of the field, in Brazil and particularly within the Brazilian National Association of Graduate Programs in Communication (Compós) – although not necessarily articulated. We do not have to exactly *propose* such actions – it is by observing our academic reality that I meet them, and certainly readers recognize them in their surroundings and in their own current activities. The strategic aspect shows up in the objective of articulation and, consequently, in its productive dynamics.

For perceiving the dynamics of the process, we will observe some incidences in four moments of the research work: definition of objectives; theoretical transfers; adjustments between theory and research; and cross-cutting debates between published results.

On the research objectives

It is not a question of proposing this analytical approach as the main axis of singular studies. The objectives of the research in the field are diverse, as are the specific issues investigated. In other words, the article does not suggest a research model to ensure consistency: it would be contradictory with our defense of the diversity needed in the field.

My thesis is that – for any research objective or problem in the field – an analytical emphasis based on middle-range theories lends itself well to the debates of an evolutionary epistemology and favors unraveling characteristics of the communicational phenomenon. Its complementary activation with other research axes implies above all: a) to emphasize a properly communicational perspective; b) to activate authors from other fields, tensioning their proposals for our objects; and c) to treat established macro-theories as middle-range – since at the origin they are not concerned with communication objects but as referred to and problems of their field of knowledge.

The proposal, not excluding diversity, contrasts only with the activation of comprehensive theories for inferences strictly dependent on a deductive approach. Resisting comprehensive paradigms (developed in other disciplines), the proposal furthers research objectives, freeing it from aprioristic categorizations and suggesting more experimental approaches, focused on discoveries and, eventually, theoretical developments.

On importing theories (transfers)

We find middle-range theories that can be productive for developing the communicational field in two spaces: in the set of offers already available, produced by the other human and social sciences; and *ad hoc* production by the field itself. In this second production space, the theories under development are already middle-range: there is no effective offer of comprehensive and integrated macro-theories, developed by the field itself.

When importing theoretical production on communication from neighboring disciplines, the point argued here is that *we must expressly treat each imported theory by the middle-range angle*. This results from the perspective, here sustained, that a communication theory is only general in the source discipline (which has no obligation to reach the totality of our objects and questions). Even a macro-theory enables a middle-range adoption, as long as it is not activated only deductively, to explain and categorize. It can be productive by its questions, heuristic potential and tensioning from communication problems of other orders. This entails, at first, to search the problems that generate such theories; the types of objects to which they apply; and what it understands as a *communicational issue*. Then, the results of such searches may *be redirected* to the specificities of the research to which they will be transferred.

We also need to examine the propositions of imported theories based on a critique directed by the specific objectives of our research, in the search for issues perceived as more specifically communicational. One way to unravel such issues is to attribute main relevance to the observed communicational aspects, making them independent of the logics of the paradigm of the source discipline.

It is possible, then, to derive – from the very horizon questions implicit in the theories mentioned – other work questions and hypotheses, even if tentative, with the willingness to transfer their propositions, to adjust to our specific objects in their own observational perspectives. It is this adjustment to the specific that, in turn, is offered as a contribution to the field.

On the back and forth process between research-and-theory

When seeking specific characteristics of the communicational occurrence, an analytical approach establishes empirical bases to warrant theoretical propositions. Here we have a mutual productivity between research actions and theoretical actions: theory feeds research and research generates theory. Working with middle-range theories, operating in the vicinity of the empirical, favors this conjunction. The activation of macro-theories in explanatory and categorizing patterns does not show equal productivity of the investigative process for

theoretical development, because the initial theories activated, distant in their elevated position, are hardly sensitive to tensioning by the object.

The heuristic aspect of middle-range theories – by definition stimulating discovery – is structurally subject to the object and its contexts, open to revision and improvement. Such theories emphasize, therefore, the potential of empirical research that, besides the immediate results, of clarifying the singular object, enables theoretical modeling. With this formulation of a theoretical configuration, the research completion process can be characterized as *making a theory of the object*.

The mutual productivity between empirical research and middle-range theories can only be achieved in an tensioning environment between theories – assumed as middle-range for characterizing aspects of the communicational phenomenon. It is in this back and forth process between empirical research and theoretical development that the basis for the generation and consequent activation of theories is built.

On the diversity of research in the field

The variety of issues, objects, theories and approaches – already established and usual in the field of Communication – need not be *reduced*: all scientific disciplines show similar diversity. What produces consistency is the work of composing similarities and differences into diverse but connected sets, as the realities to address vary.

This cross-sectional work between theories and research requires a plural process – of tensioning between different proposals, objections, replicas, composition between diverse discoveries, revisited heuristics, comparison between multiple analytics, tentative transfers – in which the field itself develops by testing ideas, by verifications and adjustments and by theories at possibly expanded levels of coverage and scope. A field of knowledge is developed by a comparative analysis of propositions and conjectures aimed at its improvement.

The field of Communication in Brazil, since the 1990s, took a first step of great relevance toward a productive debate, by organized discussions about the field of knowledge and by articulated debate within specific fields of interest.

A second challenge for the field in Brazil today, will be to invent debate processes transversal to the established areas of interest. I believe that, in this debate environment, we will start to produce, with greater intensity and relevance, middle-range theories specific to the field of communication, from their fields of interest – directly generated and activated with a common focus on developing communicational knowledge.

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From diverse analytical approaches, we can arrive at synthesis that generate increasingly consistent communicational perspectives – whilst anchored in empirical references and questions of reality. It is not a comprehensive theory that will provide consistency to the field of knowledge; but rather a complex perception of the diversity of communicational problems – in a general topography, albeit lacunar, of different theories that prove themselves relevant to their scope and range, showing in this unraveling of characteristics the communicational perspective that is offered for the whole. As we can see, this is not a task of an isolated researcher, not even a research group, but a constant and diversified activity of a field of knowledge in constitution – seizing every occasion to debate ideas and approaches. ■

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