# **Theory**

Theories help us make sense of the world. Wood defines theory as, “an account of what something is, how it works, what it produces or causes to happen, and what can change how it operates” (p. 31). Theories are ways in which we describe phenomena—they are created by people. For example, you may have heard of the Theory of Evolution before—the idea that humans have evolved into what we are today. This is an explanation, or account of how humans have come to be in this world.

There are four main goals that guide theory.

Two of these goals are objectives of all theories, they include:

1. Description: All theories work to describe or make sense of the world around them.
2. Explanation: All theories work to explain why and/or how something works.

The other two goals vary depending on the theory. Some theories seek to:

1. Predict and control communications, while other theories aim to simply understand a communications phenomenon.

Lastly, some theories seek to:

1. Reform, or actively pursue positive social change.

It’s important to note that not all theories seek to reform, however, reform and social change are at the core of some communication theories.

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**Who comes up with theories, anyway?**

Watch the following Big Bang Theory videoclip, 'Sheldon’s zones of privacy’ conversation between Amy and Sheldon.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\_PoqT3qg5o

In the Sheldon’s ‘zones of privacy’ theory, he maps different zones that govern different types of information he can talk about with different people. This is a theory that he’s come up with. The ‘zones of privacy’ both describes and explains who Sheldon can talk to about what types of topics. How would you describe Sheldon’s theory here? What does it describe?

Have you ever come up with a theory to describe and explain a phenomenon? Think of an example of either a theory you’ve come up with, or one that a friend has pitched to you. Does the theory meet the theoretical goals of description and explanation? Does the theory seek to predict and control communications (as in Sheldon’s case), or does the theory seek to simply understand a phenomenon?

As the reading and activity have explained in this topic, theories must be both descriptive and explanatory, and can either predict and control, or explain. In some cases, theories can also aim to change or reform.

# **Standards for Evaluating Theory**

Now that we understand theories and the main goals that guide theory, let’s discuss how we go about evaluating theories. There are five standards that we use when we’re evaluating theories. They are:

* Scope: How much does the theory describe and explain?
* Testability: Is the theory testable?
* Parsimony: Is the theory appropriately simple?
* Utility: Is the theory useful?
* Heurism: Does the theory generate new thoughts or insights?

We will use these standards as criteria for evaluating theories throughout the course, so it’s important to get a firm grasp on what each of these standards mean.

It’s also important to note that no one theory will sufficiently satisfy all five standards completely. All theories will have strengths and weaknesses that we can evaluate using these criteria.

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## Let’s Evaluate Sheldon’s ‘Zones of Privacy’

Let’s go back to that video clip where Sheldon explains and illustrates his ‘zones of privacy’ theory to Amy. How might we evaluate that theory based on the criteria that we’ve set out here in this topic?

Using the following criteria, which standards does Sheldon’s theory meet well? And, which standards does his theory not address well?

* Scope: How much does the theory describe and explain?
* Testability: Is the theory testable?
* Parsimony: Is the theory appropriately simple?
* Utility: Is the theory useful?
* Heurism: Does the theory generate new thoughts or insights?

We might argue that the ‘zones of privacy’ theory has a fairly strong scope, is easily testable, and is appropriately simple. Yet, we might also argue that his theory is a bit too simplistic, fails to be useful for anyone other than Sheldon, and fails the heuristic standard. Would you agree with this assessment of Sheldon’s theory? Assessing theories and debating their construction is half the fun in communications!