



## Theoretical Perspectives Influencing Communication Research: A Classification Based on Hollis' Model (1994)

*Perspectivas teóricas con influencia en la investigación en comunicación.  
Una clasificación a partir del modelo de Hollis (1994)*

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**Gómez-Diago, Gloria**

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (URJC)

[gloria.gomez.diago@urjc.es](mailto:gloria.gomez.diago@urjc.es)



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### Abstract:

Drawing on the usefulness of models as heuristic tools for reflecting on communication research (McQuail, 1997), Hollis's (1994) model for classifying social science theories was employed to organise some of the most influential theoretical perspectives in communication research. This model is structured around two dichotomies: Explanation versus Understanding, and Holism versus Individualism. These dichotomies generate four quadrants: Systems, Games, Agents and Actors. In the The Systems quadrant includes positivism, functionalism, and Bertalanffy's general systems theory. The Games quadrant includes Wittgenstein's theory of games, hermeneutics, Ricoeur's theory of action, symbolic interactionism, semiotics and Habermas's theory of communicative

action. Pragmatism and post-positivism are included in the Agents quadrant, while phenomenology and ethnomethodology are included in the Actors quadrant. While the model does not aim to cover all theoretical proposals that influence communication research, it highlights different conceptions of research and society that impact this scientific field. It also reveals the need to develop theoretical approaches to communication research that recognise the dual condition of people as subjects and objects, depending on the context (Rosengren, 1989).

**Palabras clave:** communication, epistemology, philosophy, history of communication research, meta-research, methodology, Hollis model (1994).

### **Resumen**

Partiendo de la utilidad de los modelos como herramientas heurísticas para la reflexión sobre la investigación en comunicación (McQuail, 1997), se empleó el modelo que propuso Hollis (1994) para clasificar teorías de las ciencias sociales, con el fin de ordenar algunas de las perspectivas teóricas influyentes en el campo científico de la investigación en comunicación. Este modelo se estructura a partir de dos dicotomías: Explicación versus Comprensión y Holismo versus Individualismo, que generan cuatro cuadrantes: Sistemas, Juegos, Agentes y Actores. En el cuadrante Sistemas se ha ubicado el positivismo, el funcionalismo y la teoría general de sistemas de Bertalanffy. En el cuadrante Juegos se ha situado la teoría de los juegos de Wittgenstein, la hermenéutica, la teoría de la acción de Ricoeur, el interaccionismo simbólico, la semiótica y la teoría de la acción comunicativa de Habermas. En el cuadrante Agentes se ha incluido el pragmatismo y el postpositivismo; finalmente, en el cuadrante Actores se ha ubicado la fenomenología y la etnometodología. Aunque el modelo no pretende abarcar todas las propuestas teóricas con influencia en la investigación en comunicación, permite visibilizar distintas concepciones sobre la investigación y sobre la sociedad con influencia en este campo científico. Asimismo, revela la necesidad de desarrollar enfoques teóricos para la investigación en comunicación que reconozcan la doble condición de las personas como sujetos y objetos, según el contexto (Rosengren, 1989).

**Palabras clave:** comunicación, epistemología, modelo de Hollis (1994), filosofía, historia de la investigación en comunicación, metainvestigación, metodología.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The epistemological frameworks through which research is conducted are among the factors that condition research activity. Linked to research paradigms, these frameworks shape the theories and research methods that guide and enable scientific practice. They reflect researchers' and research groups' perspectives on issues such as the role of science in society and the meaning of method. As Gadamer (1993, p. 182) puts it, “it is not new observations or progress in the experience of the world, but rather the new design of what knowledge is that has allowed new science to emerge”.

Various reviews of communication research academic production have revealed a lack of epistemological, theoretical, and methodological discussion in this field (Bryant and Miron, 2004; Martínez Nicolás & Saperas, 2016). This has favoured 'hyperspecialisation' based on fragmented theorisation, with a focus on subfields rather than a solid disciplinary foundation (Zelizer, 2015). Consequently, intellectual memory is reduced to local knowledge — the product of weak epistemologies specific to particular communities (Pooley, 2020). This fragmentation causes many researchers to overlook significant work within their own discipline and related fields (Pooley, 2016a), resulting in an 'intellectual amnesia' (Pooley, 2020) that impedes the development of shared theoretical frameworks capable of addressing the intricacies of contemporary communication (Martinez Nicolás et al., 2019).

In this context, it is important to review the theoretical perspectives that have influenced communication research, as these shape the way research is conducted. As Chalmers (1997, p. 56) points out, “the statements resulting from observation are influenced by theory”. This paper identifies and organises thirteen relevant theoretical perspectives in communication research according to Hollis's (1994) model, which is based on two dichotomies: individualism versus holism, and explanation versus understanding.

## 2. EPISTEMOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Communication research is a relatively young scientific field. It is believed to have originated in the late 1880s in the United States, when professors John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, and students Robert Park and Charles Cooley, as well as journalist Franklin Ford, were based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ford shared Dewey's belief that a well-conceived newspaper could be the only viable form of social science, acting as a public laboratory for the systematic observation and critical reflection of social and political life (Carey, 1989). Between 1929 and 1932, the first systematic studies of the effects of the media were developed in the United States with funding from the Payne Foundation. These studies examined the role of American films in society and their impact on children (Rogers, 1994). However, it was not until the 1940s that communication research began to emerge as a distinct discipline; until then, scientific and social reflection on communication had predominated (Pooley, 2021).

The study of mass communication as an academic discipline was formalised in the 1950s and is structured around three main areas: practical training, empirical research into processes and effects, and cultural studies (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). While its development has been more institutional than epistemological (Peters, 1986), communication research is epistemologically rich and supported by multiple paradigms and theoretical perspectives (Potter et al., 1993; Martínez Nicolás, 1996; Bermejo Berros, 2014; Anderson & Middleton, 2015; Gómez Diago, 2022). It has also been influenced by psychology, sociology and political science — the disciplines of Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Hovland and Lewin, who are considered the 'founding fathers' of communication research (Schramm, 1983). These disciplines also gave rise to its 'founding mothers', such as Herta Herzog, Hazel Gaudet, Thelma Ehrlich Anderson and Rose K. Goldsen (Rowland & Simonson, 2014; Ashcraft & Simonson, 2016; García Jiménez, 2021).

Understanding the theoretical perspectives from other scientific fields that have contributed to defining the objects of study in communication research enables us to gain a better understanding of this scientific field. Disciplines are not fixed entities, but rather the result of traditions, intellectual trends, institutional and professional policies,

and interactions with society and culture (Craig, 2008). In this sense, the object of study is the reality being investigated, while the field of study is the reality subjected to scientific procedures (Rodrigo, 1989). Scientific objects are constructed through networks of concepts, theories and observation and measurement devices; without these, they would not exist (Verón, 2005). In the history of science, therefore, objects, methods and discourses are interrelated and evolve together (Pizarro, 1998). Therefore, the development of a discipline depends on the interaction between ideas, individual trajectories, and institutions, all of which change over time (Löblich & Scheu, 2011).

A paradox can currently be observed: while communication research is considered a post-discipline (Tenenboim, Weinblatt & Lee, 2020; Waisbord, 2019), the importance of interdisciplinarity is emphasised. However, this reaffirms the logic of disciplinarity, since interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary require clearly defined disciplines (Menand, 2010).

By identifying the theoretical perspectives that have influenced communication research, we can consider this field from an epistemological standpoint. As Baxter (2009) points out, this opens up the possibility of presenting communication research as an intellectually distinct field with unique methods and theoretical frameworks for studying the communicative phenomenon.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In agreement with McQuail (1997) regarding the usefulness of models for reflecting on research, this paper presents thirteen theoretical perspectives that have influenced communication research. These perspectives are organised according to the model developed by Hollis (1994) for classifying social science theories. The aim is to provide a graphical representation of some of the main theoretical approaches that have influenced communication research. It should be emphasised that this work does not claim to represent all theoretical perspectives that have influenced communication research in the model, an objective that would be impossible to achieve in an article. Therefore, it is anticipated that some theoretical and/or philosophical perspectives that have influenced communication research may be missing from the model. However,

rather than being a problem, this is a positive thing, as it implies that an epistemological dialogue has been generated from this proposal — the ultimate goal. The model includes thirteen theoretical perspectives that have influenced communication research, with the aim of proposing different ways of conceiving society and scientific practice.

### 3.1. EXPLANATION OF HOLLIS'S MODEL

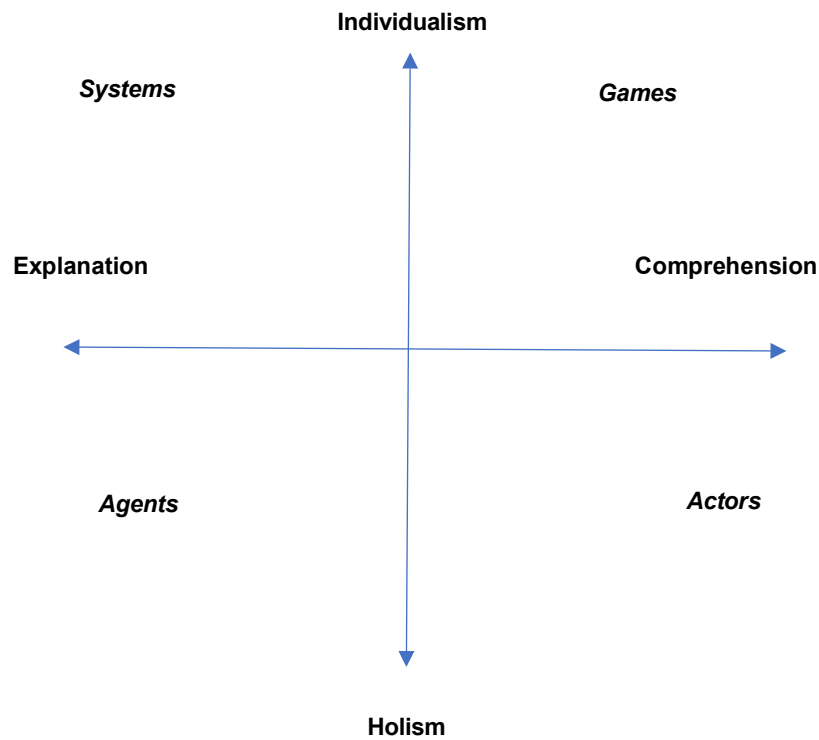
Hollis's model (1994) is based on two dichotomies: Explanation versus Understanding, as proposed by the German philosopher and historian Droysen (Wright, 1987), and Holism versus Individualism. Explanatory work seeks the causes of a situation, as in natural sciences, and is usually oriented towards prediction and control. Conversely, researchers oriented towards understanding seek the most appropriate interpretation of the object of study, often introducing references to the past, making comparisons, and providing background information. Understanding-oriented research incorporates the researcher's perspective, makes qualitative distinctions, uses argumentation and seeks to comprehend the social world from within rather than explain it from without. Instead of looking for the reasons behind behaviour, it looks for the meaning behind actions that are based on shared ideas and the rules of social life (Hollis, 1994).

Researching from a holistic perspective therefore involves considering that social phenomena are produced by the evolution of a social structure that conditions the actions of its members, who are elements of that structure. Consequently, even if they believe themselves to be free, the members of the structure are not free because their awareness of freedom is conditioned by the social superstructure. From this perspective, the main object of study is the superstructure. In contrast, an individualistic perspective considers the members of the social structure responsible for its evolution and shape, making the individual and their particular actions the object of study.

The model is shaped by two dichotomies: Explanation versus Understanding, and Holism versus individualism. These dichotomies give rise to four quadrants: Systems, Agents, Games and Actors. Thirteen theoretical perspectives that influence communication research have been situated within these quadrants.

Hollis (1994) proposes that the quadrants Agents and Actors quadrants focus on individuals, while Systems and Games focus on structures. Moreover, Agents and Systems adopt a naturalistic perspective, whereas Actors and Games adopt an interpretive perspective.

**Figure 1.** Hollis model



Source: Own preparation

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1. THEORETICAL AND/OR PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE SYSTEMS QUADRANT**

The Systems quadrant is formed by integrating explanatory and holistic perspectives. It includes research methods based on the design and application of empirical or quasi-empirical methodology. These methods are founded on the idea that social structures define social life. This quadrant includes functionalism, as well as Bertalanffy's general systems theory and Greimas's actantial model (1966).

Functionalism attempts to transcend the nature of positivism by examining the long-term functional patterns that link social relations and institutions in order to maintain harmony in a social system. Emerging in the early 20th century, it was associated with authors such as Durkheim, Parsons, Spencer and Merton, who dominated American social theory in the 1950s and 1960s. From a functionalist perspective, the structure and character of any society are determined by how its institutions relate to each other. Thus, function refers to the extent to which a given activity promotes or interferes with the maintenance of a system. The main question addressed by functionalists is: How do social systems hold together? Functionalist analysis formed the basis of many theories of media effects and extensive related research conducted during the 1950s and 1960s.

However, according to Krippendorff (1987), the dominance of the functionalist paradigm has prevented researchers from connecting their actions to their observations even when it is clear that when conducting a survey to find out what people think, data is not collected but rather constructed because people's attention is focused on an aspect that they would not otherwise pay attention to, and they are forced to choose between alternatives that they would not otherwise consider.

Along similar lines to functionalism is Bertalanffy's conception of what a system is. From 1945 onwards, the researcher began publishing his general systems theory in scientific articles, mainly in biology and philosophy journals. He addressed systems as a property of living beings, studying them from a perspective that placed them outside the observer (Krippendorff, 1979). According to Bertalanffy (1976), all sciences share common elements, and systems, including social systems, tend towards equilibrium. This theory aims to unify all sciences, including the social sciences. The researcher claims that there are models, principles or laws applicable to general systems or their subclasses, regardless of their type, the characteristics of their elements, and the relationships between them.

Carey (1989) attaches great theoretical importance to the concept of a system as a 'set of relationships that link objects in a specific and regular unit'. From this perspective, the focus shifts from individuals to social organisations in order to analyse how individuals contribute to the durability or decline of these larger units (Pooley, 2016b).

Finally, Greimas's actantial model (1996) is placed in this quadrant because it treats texts as independent units within the social structure and seeks explanations from this perspective. Greimas developed his work in structural semantics, introducing the concept of isotopy: a set of redundant semantic categories enabling a uniform reading of the text. According to this model, the objectivity of a text is independent of how it is received by a reader, as every text is marked by a dominant isotopy. Greimas's model is currently used to study aspects such as the functioning of 'creative artificial intelligence' (De Vries, 2020).

#### 4.2. THEORETICAL AND/OR PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE GAMES QUADRANT

The Games quadrant arises from the fusion of comprehensive and holistic perspectives. This includes research approaches that seek to understand social phenomena through introspection and subjectivity 'from above', considering that structure governs individuals. In this quadrant, we place Marxism, Wittgenstein's game theory, Ricoeur's theory of action, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism and semiotics.

Similar to positivist objectivism, a critical perspective considers that there is an objective reality external to individuals. However, it is emphasised that this reality is a historical product resulting from the interplay of social, economic, political, cultural, sexual, ethnic, and other factors (Martínez Nicolás, 1996, p. 59). Marxism provides categories for critically understanding society, such as social being, alienation, class, commodities, surplus value, capitalism, class struggle and praxis (Fuchs, 2017), and allows the phenomenon under study to be situated within the context of society as a whole, taking into account structures of domination, ideologies, contradictions, dynamics, crises and social struggles (Fuchs, 2017).

Marxist criticism is presented as the product of a knowledge-based process, an epistemology that distinguishes between truth and falsehood, and an objective to view all forms of domination and exploitation as repressive and combat these conditions. Furthermore, this perspective points towards a non-dominating state, or a classless society. Researchers such as Nordenstreng, Enzensberger, Hamelink, Schiller, Murdock,

Golding and Smythe (Smythe, 1997) have adopted a Marxist approach to communication research.

In his 1953 work *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposed a theory which argues that language is defined by how people use it, and that language games are established by institutions with the power to do so. Wittgenstein (1968, p. 230) provides examples of how people become accustomed to interpreting a given word as meaning one thing through education and emphasises the importance of establishing criteria for evaluating the quality of communication. These objective forms part of the purpose of communication research, which is to study what determines success in communication. 'If I speak of communicating a feeling to anyone else, in order to understand what I am saying, do I not have to know what I will call the criterion for having achieved success in communication?'

Another theoretical perspective that we place in this quadrant is Ricoeur's (1986) theory of action. This theory argues that action should be interpreted as discourse, integrating language and praxis into a hermeneutics of experience. Ricoeur (1998) also asserts that a level of language exists that encompasses action and experience, and that studying this level is fundamental to interpreting the meaning of texts. Ricoeur argues that all understanding is based on processes of interpretation, and asserts the importance of ideology because, in his words, beyond their negative function of distorting reality, ideologies can be a source of integration and therefore have the capacity to unite society. According to Ricoeur, the second pole of the social imaginary is utopia, which aims to critique ideology, 'break' the status quo, and give rise to new forms of reality. This highlights the productive and creative aspect of the social imaginary.

Hermeneutics became established in the nineteenth century as a general theory of interpretation, particularly through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. He proposed that the meaning of any text should be understood by considering both the author's intention and the context in which it was written. Wilhelm Dilthey later expanded on this perspective, and it reached a deeper philosophical formulation in Hans-Georg Gadamer's work *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, published in 1960.

Hermeneutics is opposed to positivism, but shares with analytical philosophy a focus on language, methodology, and the philosophy of science (Wright, 1974). Rather than viewing hermeneutics as a method, it proposes understanding it as a scientific approach to texts, aimed at unravelling the tradition that underpins them and interpreting them in their historical and cultural context (Gadamer, 1993). Hermeneutics avoids two assumptions of experimental science: the subject-object dichotomy and the idea that a perspective is absent. Therefore, it argues that the concept of subjects and objects should be abandoned, as the idea of omitting the researcher's perspective is detrimental to research. This approach increases a lack of critical thinking, as it seeks to create an appearance of scientificity and objectivity, thereby contributing to the spread of 'radical blindness' (Heidegger, 1999). Like phenomenology, hermeneutics seeks to arrive at knowledge through reflection, but it also values tradition. According to this theoretical perspective, social and historical facts depend on human will and have a dimension that is only accessible through an understanding of the intersubjective meanings that constitute social and historical realities, in contrast to natural phenomena (Martínez Nicolás, 1996).

Although Habermas is a proponent of hermeneutics, he, like Ricoeur, focuses more on communicative action and posits the existence of a universal competence that serves different social structures. Habermas (1987) therefore considers that the capacities of the socially acting subject can be studied from the perspective of universal competence, independently of culture. For the researcher, language and communication play a key role in the legitimisation of power and knowledge, and a theory of communication is required to explain communicative competence. Habermas believes that the ideal dialogue involves equal opportunities for all participants to initiate and maintain discourse, and to criticise, expand upon, or refute statements, explanations, and interpretations. He is concerned with the use of science to extend linguistic dominance, particularly through studying how those in power use technical knowledge and expert management to prevent citizens from participating in political debates. Habermas believes that this deprivation of rights has led to the collapse of the 'public sphere' and the passive acceptance of technocratic elitism. He argues that all modern governments, whether capitalist or socialist, violate the terms of classical theories of the social

contract of state power because none are legitimised by dialogical consensus (Jansen, 1983).

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meaning that people attribute to objects and actions, as well as on interaction as a process of interpretation. The theory was first developed by George Herbert Mead in his writings on social interaction and the construction of the 'self', particularly in his work *Mind, Self and Society* (1934). However, it was Herbert Blumer who coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' in his 1937 article "Man and Society", in which he presented the theory as a sociological perspective focused on the social construction of reality through symbols.

This research perspective emerged from the influence of German sociology prior to the First World War and was particularly influenced by Simmel and Weber. Comprehensive methods are applied in symbolic interactionism to generate knowledge of reality and understand the interactions established through intersubjectivity (Saperas, 1998). It focuses on how meaningful and repeated interactions between individuals shape the social structure. Its fundamental principles establish that: 1) individual actions are based on the meanings that people attribute to objects; 2) interaction occurs within a specific social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (including people) and situations must be defined by individual meanings; 3) these meanings emerge from interaction with other individuals and the social environment; 4) meanings are not static but continuously constructed and reconstructed through interpretive processes during interaction (Blumer, 1969).

The study of the media from the perspective of symbolic interactionism can be approached in four main ways: 1) the study of news and newsworthiness; 2) the study of professional practices as a form of news production, as pioneered by Gaye Tuchman (1978); 3) the study of institutional forms of mediation between communicators and receivers, and the analysis of communication logic and formats from an individual or group perspective; 4) the analysis of how messages are interpreted and the basic typification of social meaning (Saperas, 1998).

Finally, we place semiotics in this quadrant. Umberto Eco, an author who brought together structuralist and pragmatic semiotics, recalls that the semiotics of reception theories emerged in the 1960s in response to the rigidification of certain structural methodologies that sought to analyse text objectively as a language. The aim was to provide an alternative to the rigidity of certain formal semantics, which sought to abstract any reference to situations, circumstances, and context (Rodrigo, 1989). Saussure proposed his semiology in *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), which was published by his students. Peirce, considered the father of modern semiotics in the pragmatist tradition, wrote the key work *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, which was first published in a posthumous edition in 1916. Both Saussure and Peirce worked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Saussure developed a structuralist semiology based on the study of linguistics. Peirce, on the other hand, started from pragmatic philosophy to study all types of sign, not just linguistic ones. He considered that all signs have three elements: the representamen (which represents something to someone), the object (which is represented) and the interpretant (which relates the representamen to the object, giving rise to semiosis, or the production of meaning).

At different times, scholars of anthropology, folklore, linguistics, psychology, sociology, English literature and comparative literature have adopted semiotics (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

#### 4.3. THEORETICAL AND/OR PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE AGENTS QUADRANT

The Agents quadrant is formed by combining explanation and individualism. This quadrant includes perspectives that seek a causal explanation for social phenomena but base their analysis on the individual. This is because they argue that individual actions determine the evolution of the social system and its structure. This quadrant encompasses pragmatism and postpositivism (Baran & Davis, 2010).

Pragmatism originated in the early 1870s with the reading group The Metaphysical Club, whose members included James, Peirce, Nicholas St. John Green, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Chauncey Wright (Simonson, 2001). From this perspective, a proposition or theory is considered true if it works satisfactorily, and ideas are subject to change as a result of

future research. Pragmatism posits that a belief can only exist by virtue of its reference to a context of possible action. In other words, no concept or proposition can have any meaning unless it refers to a context of action. Thus, Peirce seeks to free himself from the dichotomy between theory and practice (or science and technology) that has dominated Western thought since classical Greece (Génova, 1997). For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is the desire for the broadest possible consensus (Rorty, 1991). Pragmatism links knowledge to social practices and ethics, views research as a collective activity shaped by history, considers the world to be a work in progress, and rejects the dualisms of mind and body, knowledge and action, fact and value, and individual and society (Simonson, 2001).

Abduction lies at the heart of the logic of discovery and is central to Peirce's pragmatism. This concept was first proposed by the author in his 1978 *Popular Science Monthly* article, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear". The researcher positions abduction as the initial stage of the research process, linking it to the formulation of hypotheses within a scientific framework. Abduction is the process of reasoning through which new ideas, explanatory hypotheses and scientific theories are proposed. In his most mature theory, Peirce does not view induction, deduction and abduction as three distinct processes of reasoning, but rather as three phases that work together in the research method (Génova, 1997).

Postpositivism seeks empirical observation guided by the scientific method, but recognises that human beings and behaviour are less constant than elements of the physical world. It proposes that knowledge advances through the systematic search for regularities and causal relationships using the scientific method and considers progress to occur when intersubjective agreement is reached among researchers. Postpositivists trust the community of social researchers rather than any individual social scientist and considers that the objectivity inherent in the scientific method should, wherever possible, keep the researcher's personal values out of the process of knowledge production. This position stems from the fear that such values may bias the choice and application of methods, meaning that the results obtained are more likely to align with the researcher's expectations or desires than with empirical reality. Like the natural

sciences, the objectives of postpositivist theory are explanation, prediction and control. Its ontology acknowledges that the world, including the social world, exists independently of our perception of it. It considers human behaviour predictable enough to be studied systematically, while recognising that the social world exhibits greater variation than the physical world (Baran & Davis, 2010).

#### 4.4. THEORETICAL AND/OR PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE ACTORS QUADRANT

Combining the comprehensive perspective and the individualistic approach results in the Actors quadrant. Like the Games quadrant, it seeks to understand social phenomena through processes linked to reflection. However, it considers that individuals shape the social structure and that meanings are subjective and, subsequently, intersubjective by mutual agreement. In this quadrant, we find phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

Emerging in the early 20th century, phenomenology is both a philosophical perspective and a methodological movement. It emerged in a context that sought to correct the shortcomings of the objectivist rationalism of modern philosophy, which assumed that scientific concepts captured the world as it was, and that the spirit was the receiver of such concepts. Phenomenology proposes the concept of 'experience', which implies that neither reality nor the subject exists in isolation, but rather each exists in relation to the other (Choza, 1985). In phenomenology, there is no distinction between the subject of study and the researcher. From a phenomenological perspective, observing things and events and reflecting on them brings us closer to scientific knowledge. Hegel defines phenomenology as the science of consciousness insofar as consciousness is knowledge of an object, whether external or internal (Lyotard, 1989a). According to phenomenology, the question of whether to start from the object (realism) or the self (idealism) is irrelevant, as the notion of phenomenology eliminates this distinction: consciousness is always consciousness of something, and nothing exists without being an object for something else (Lyotard, 1989b).

Husserl, in *Ideas Relating to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, in German, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (1913) and in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*

(1936), in German *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, argues that the researcher's subjective perspective is inseparable from the research process. Husserl considers that, in addition to being inseparable, this subjectivity is necessary, since observation itself constitutes a form of science in which the meanings attributed by the observer and the participant are the subject of continuous reflection. According to Husserl, meaning can only be understood from a subjective dimension. Starting from the assumption that the experiences of others are analogous to their own, observers can establish correspondences between their intentions and goals, thus initiating the explanation of social life (Harris, 1994).

Schütz, a follower of Husserl's phenomenology, argues in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932), in German, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt: Eine Einleitung in die verstehende Soziologie*, that individual beings, through their lived experiences, shape their cultural heritage and that all social reality can and should be reduced for study to actions performed by individuals, as they shape history and social situations (Martín Algarra, 1993).

Gaye Tuchman and Giorgio Grossi during the 1940s and 1950s integrated the ideas brought by the socio-phenomenology created by Alfred Schutz in 1932, with the publication of his work *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, in German, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, in which he combined Husserl's phenomenology with Max Weber's sociology to explore how people construct meaning in everyday life. The central elements that motivated interest in the use of sociophenomenology to study communicative activity were the recognition of the cognitive dimension, the study of objectivity and the problems posed by the narration of reality, and the study of the selection capacity exercised by information professionals (Saperas, 1992).

Ethnomethodology, whose approach was first explained by Garfinkel in his 1967 work *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, has been placed in this quadrant because it integrates a comprehensive orientation with an individualistic perspective. Unlike structural functionalism, which frames the social actor within the social system, in ethnomethodology, the actor is the protagonist of sociological thought (Saperas, 1992). Ethnomethodology consists of a set of methods that allow data to be obtained in such

a way that it is the subjects who structure it and not the researcher. This ethnographic data reflects the subjects' point of view, capturing their constructions of reality.

From this perspective, small contexts are typically examined in great detail, with the aim of acquiring in-depth knowledge rather than generalising the results (Rogers, 1994).

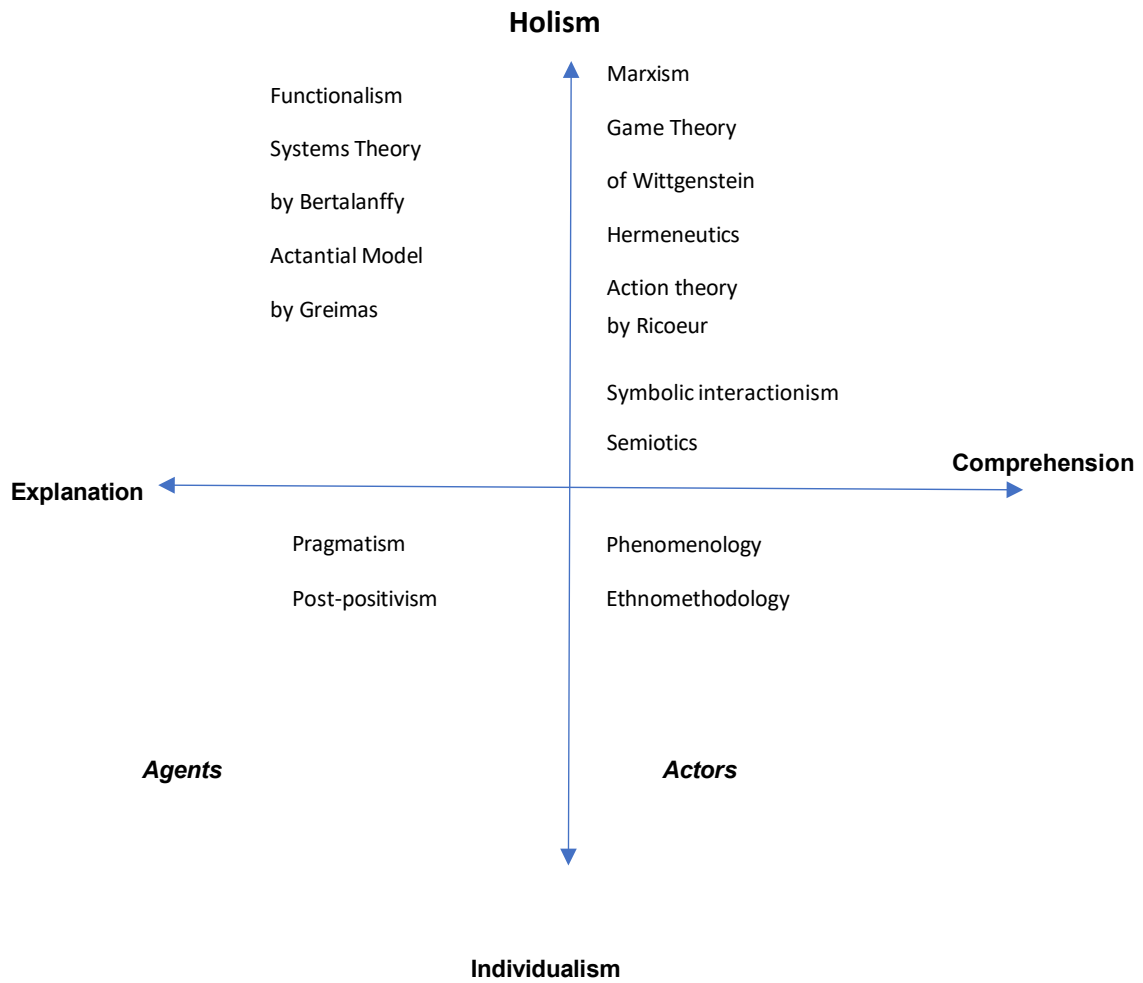
In a scenario dominated by quantitative data and algorithms, ethnography promotes a deep understanding through narratives and participant observation. This approach helps rescue qualitative dimensions that are now at risk of disappearing. As Jacob (1987) points out, communication ethnography is a coherent tradition with its own theoretical assumptions, methods and criteria, making it a robust research tool for explanations beyond mere descriptions. Communication ethnographers study the patterns of social interaction among members of a cultural group or various groups. They are interested in understanding how micro-processes of social interaction relate to macro-social aspects, such as culture or social organisation. Culture is a central aspect of communication ethnography in shaping social interactions. Despite the deterministic role of social context in shaping interactions, a fundamental aspect of this approach is that social structures and institutions are partly produced by face-to-face interaction. Consequently, studying interaction patterns provides valuable insight into the culture of social groups (Soriano, 2011).

Ethnomethodologists emphasise the importance of the researcher's subjective perspective in establishing relationships based on sensory perception. Ethnomethodology is concerned with how meanings are shaped in contexts of social interaction, how people develop their diverse worldviews, and the origins of what is considered implicit or logical in social contexts. According to this perspective, culture is not an entity to which social events, modes of behaviour, institutions or social processes can be causally attributed; rather, it is a context within which all these phenomena can be intelligibly described (Geertz, 1990).

#### 4.5. COMPLETE MODEL

Below is the model (Figure 2) with theoretical perspectives that have influenced and continue to influence communication research.

**Figure 2.** Background theories of communication research. Source: own elaboration



Source: Own preparation

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Thirteen theoretical perspectives that have influenced, and continue to influence, communication research have been integrated into Hollis's (1994) model. These are: positivism, functionalism and Bertalanffy's general systems theory in the Systems quadrant; Marxism, Wittgenstein's game theory, hermeneutics, Ricoeur's theory of action, symbolic interactionism, semiotics and Habermas's theory of communicative action in the Games quadrant; pragmatism and post-positivism in the Agents quadrant; phenomenology and ethnomethodology in the Actors quadrant.

This exercise enables us to position these perspectives epistemologically and emphasises the necessity of transcending the dichotomies that underpin the model. It

proposes adopting approaches that view structures as dynamic configurations of actors, agents, and technologies, acknowledging that individuals and social groups function under varying conditions, and degrees of freedom, depending on the context. To address complex communicative phenomena from multiple levels of analysis, it is necessary to integrate structural approaches with actor-centred perspectives. This view is particularly relevant in fields such as journalism and technological design, where responsibility must be analysed at organisational rather than individual levels given external constraints on moral action (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017; Meyrowitz, 2017).

The fragmentation of the field and hyper-specialisation have led to disciplinary isolation, weakening the capacity of communication research to engage in dialogue with related disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, cultural studies and science and technology studies (Pooley, 2016). To counteract the superficiality that can result from hyper-specialisation — especially when it is used to formulate research problems without first justifying their social relevance — four possible avenues are proposed. Firstly, work should be situated within broad theoretical frameworks and specific social, cultural and technological dynamics.

Secondly, the current scenario is characterised by the rise of artificial intelligence and massive data storage (Gehl, 2014). There is therefore an urgent need to revive qualitative methodologies that focus on understanding and producing narratives. These methodologies are currently under threat due to the limitations of social media (López Mondéjar, 2024) and the dominance of quantitative data (Byung-Chul Han, 2022). It is crucial to examine the impact of AI on the epistemology of communication, to design ethical technologies and to avoid the “platformisation” of research, whereby digital logic is imposed on topics, methods and forms of knowledge production, forgetting that life exists beyond screens.

Thirdly, to strengthen the relevance and depth of communication research and place it in dialogue with contemporary technological and social challenges, it is imperative to actively involve diverse social groups in the research process (Martinez-Nicolas, 2019). Finally, it is necessary to promote open and dynamic spaces for debate and reflection,

such as forums, conferences, and publications that prioritise epistemological, theoretical, and methodological discussions beyond the study of particular cases.

## **6. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## **7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **8. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

The author declares that she has not used artificial intelligence in the preparation of this article.

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