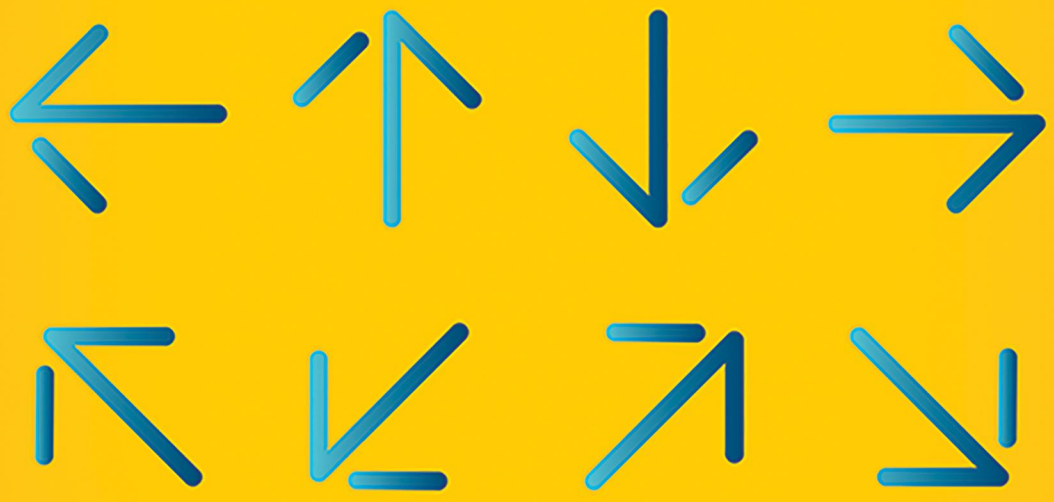
FOURTH EDITION

INTRODUCING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH



PATHS OF INQUIRY

DONALD TREADWELL / ANDREA DAVIS

Introducing Communication Research

Fourth Edition

For Charlotte, James and Joseph
Luke and Owen

And for Kristina

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Introducing Communication Research

Paths of Inquiry

Fourth Edition

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PREFACE

FOR STUDENTS

Let's imagine that you are looking forward to a well-deserved break; it is time for that trip you have been dreaming about. Two inescapable questions come to mind immediately. Where will you go, and how will you get there?

Generally, you will have some goal in mind. Perhaps, as a music lover, you will be thinking about a great concert experience somewhere. Perhaps you have always been intrigued by the cultures of Asia and think of Asia as a destination. Your trip is triggered by some basic interest, but interest alone will not make it happen. To get to your destination, you must have a specific address, and you must decide how you will get there.

Automobiles can stop when you need them to, but are mostly limited to roads. Planes can provide a wonderful overview of the territory but may not take you exactly where you want to go. So it is with research methods. There is no one best method, only a most appropriate method.

Then there's the question of how you will experience your destination when you get there. Some of us like to stay in one area to experience it as fully as possible. Others are movers—every day a new attraction. The first approach gives you an in-depth experience; the second gives you a broad experience.

Of course, you will want to record and share your experiences with others, so questions of recording and communication arise. What will you record—local music, architecture, interesting people, food, landscapes? How will you record this content—video, audio, photography, drawings, written notes? How will you share this content with others—blog, social media, e-mail, postcards, Internet chat?

Most journeys are fun, interesting, and intellectually and emotionally satisfying, but you had better know where and how you are going or you won't get there.

Researching human communication is very similar. At heart, it is simply a journey from not knowing something to knowing something or to knowing something more about human communication. Certainly it is interesting and intellectually rewarding. Virtual realities, social networking, web chat, soap operas, family dynamics, podcasts, advertising, tweets, and group decision making are just a few manifestations of the complex interactions that we call human communication and that we can research.

Other travel analogies apply. Because it is difficult to take two journeys simultaneously, most researchers opt to study one area at a time. They also have a "travel plan" in the form of decisions about the phenomena they will study, the method(s) they will use, and the people they will invite to be in their study. In the form of published research reports, they will undoubtedly read advice from those who have been there before to help them avoid the pitfalls and to maximize the return on the time, effort, and intellectual energy that good research demands.

The above introduction uses travel as a metaphor for the research process, but other metaphors are possible. We might, for instance, recast research as a fight against ignorance, as a

contest between what we intuit and what we can demonstrate, or between fact and sentiment. You will find other such tensions as you read through the text; for example, should the researcher be a dispassionate observer of communication phenomena or an individual with biases and preferences for viewing the world in a particular way?

Becoming comfortable with research is therefore not just a matter of mastering method; it is also a matter of identifying and understanding the assumptions and uncertainties that underpin the methods, and that you bring to your own research.

Just as maps, websites, and guidebooks can help optimize your travel experiences, this book will guide you through the basics of communication research design while pointing out many of the decisions that will need to be made en route.

Chapters 1 through 3 begin the journey by examining some of the basic assumptions and disagreements about human communication, how best to understand it, and the ethical implications of researching human participants.

Chapter 4 will help you find out more about your areas of interest. It will help you with the detailed reading and recording you will need to do in order to get a good working knowledge of the specific area you will be researching.

Chapters 5 through 13 discuss sampling, statistics, and the qualitative and quantitative research methods you will most likely encounter in a career in communication. Metaphorically, these chapters will help you with your mode-of-travel decisions.

We finish with a chapter on presenting your research results so that others can get a good picture of where and how you went, what you discovered, and how you chose to interpret it.

Throughout this edition, you will find an emphasis on the Internet and social media and the problems and challenges they present as both the topic of and tool for research.

Each chapter has learning objectives to highlight the skills and knowledge you should get from the chapter, a summary of key ideas, and an ethics panel to help you think about the ethics of research. The application exercises in each chapter will help you think about research design in practice. Terminology that may be new to you is shown in boldface **like this** and defined in the glossary at the end of the book.

The ideas and questions that you run into in your communication research courses will almost certainly come back to visit you in your professional career and certainly in an academic career. Therefore, we suggest that you keep this book and find a place for it on your bookshelf.

Welcome to that most fascinating of journeys—research in human communication.

FOR FACULTY

This text aims to provide a reader-friendly introduction to the basics of communication research and to some of the assumptions and questions behind research practice.

Our experiences in teaching communication research have led us to believe that an introductory text should give students looking at either academic or professional careers

- a mastery of basic communication research methods,
- an understanding of the assumptions behind research methods,
- an enthusiasm for research that will continue on into advanced research or careers in communication,

- an appreciation of the relevance of communication research to communication practice, and
- a sense of why we find human communication so fascinating as a research field.

We hope you will find that this text achieves these aims in your research courses.

Chapters 1 through 3 examine some of the basic assumptions and disagreements about human communication. Chapter 4 centers on bibliographic research and the literature review. Chapters 5 through 13 discuss measurement, sampling, statistics, and research methods. Chapter 14 covers research writing and presentation using traditional and social media for both scholarly publics and interest groups.

This edition has

- new vignettes at the beginning of each chapter, which present a student-friendly lead-in to the chapter content;
- an expanded discussion of basic research perspectives and assumptions in Chapter 2;
- an expanded discussion of online consent and permissions in Chapter 3;
- an updated and expanded discussion of statistical significance in Chapter 8;
- a new discussion of big data and its implications in Chapter 9;
- an expanded discussion of writing and presenting research via social media in Chapter 14; and
- an emphasis throughout on social media and the Internet as subjects of and tools for communication research.

Support for student learning in each chapter includes

- learning objectives to highlight the skills and knowledge students should get from the chapter;
- a chapter summary that provides an overview of chapter content;
- an ethics panel with questions to facilitate discussion of research ethics in practice;
- highlighted vocabulary words, which are defined and explained in the glossary at the end of the text; and
- application exercises to help students learn to make decisions about research practice.

Each method chapter has a practice-based organizing example that guides students through the practical and theoretical decisions a researcher faces when designing and implementing research.

The companion website has a section on APA style as well as the updated ancillary material listed below.

We hope that this text will make a useful contribution to your research courses, and we welcome your thoughts on it. Thank you for adopting it.

ANCILLARIES

SAGE edge for instructors supports your teaching by making it easy to integrate quality content and create a rich learning environment for students with:

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- learning objectives that reinforce the most important material;
- video, multimedia, and Web links that facilitate student use of Internet resources and further exploration of topics.
- industry case studies from previous editions that can be used as a basis for "research in practice" discussions; and
- a five-minute APA guide to help students structure their papers and properly cite their sources.

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Donald Treadwell

Andrea Davis

1

GETTING STARTED

Possibilities and Decisions

"Hey Luke! How was your break?"

"Great, Sofia, except now it's back to reality. I need coffee already to get me through the semester. Want to get some?"

"Sure! We're both doing Comm. Research this semester, right?"

"Looks like it. Who else is doing it? Carlos maybe?"

"Jada I know for sure, James, maybe Charlotte. Carlos did it last semester."

"What about Eric? Think he's hiding from all the math?"

"Why would he? It's not a math course."

"Well, it's got that reputation."

"We'll get some statistics I hear, but Carlos said we'll do a lot of comm. research without going anywhere near stats."

"So the whole 'research equals math' thing is wrong?"

"Not wrong; math is a tool. You pick the tool for the job, is how Carlos explained it."

"OK—that I can handle, but how do I pick a research topic? I heard you had to do that."

"Keep your eyes open, I suppose. Look around. Like, how come everyone here in the coffee bar has to watch CNN and not Fox or MSNBC or whatever? How do they know what we want to watch? Did someone run a survey? Who decided and how? Who watches network TV anyway? Come to think of it, what does anyone watch?"

"I've got some answers to those questions. First of all, just look around. You can see who's watching TV . . . and you can guess at their ages, occupations, maybe majors even. And there you have it. Those are the people that watch TV."

"Doesn't sound very scientific."

"Well, you have to start somewhere. Now, as to what everyone else is looking at, why not just walk around casually and try to see what each person's looking at?"

"That's spying on people. You can't do that."

"Why not? You can walk around campus recording how many people wear baseball caps backwards, so why can't you record what's on people's screens—like text messages or movies? Should be easy with laptops and big-screen phones like the one Joe bought."

"That's just not ethical."

"Sure it is. You're just observing what's public. You'd have no problem recording what people were looking at in a newspaper would you? Lee says he's going to record campus traffic this semester to get some evidence for more parking spaces. How's that different from walking around looking at what's on people's screens?"

"It's different because there's no personal information in a newspaper, and because parking lots are public. Mobile devices have personal information, and they're not public. You're intruding on private discussions when you look at peoples' messages."

"If it's posted, it's public I say."

"Hey speaking of Joe! Welcome back. How was your break? Where are you going?"

"Hi back at ya—and in question order—lousy and library."

"Lousy and library???"

"Yeah . . . my laptop crashed over the break. No backup, so there was the whole recovery thing, and now I'm in debt to Mom until I pay her off for a new one. This semester I'm backing up everything and booking a study space in the library. That way I'm handy to real books and journals and a library computer if I crash again. You know what they say. Crash once, maybe it's someone else's fault. Crash twice, it's on you."

"Sounds from what Carlos said, we'll be seeing you at the library while we're all trying to get our heads around comm. research."

"Guess so. Don't know why we can't all stay home and do research. Everyone and everything is online."

"Except when your laptop crashes, Joe! Plus face-to-face with library staff is good. They're credible at helping you sort out stuff you need from all the stuff you don't need. Who on line is credible—and how would you know?

ASA Comments

ASA—your All-Seeing Authors—will drop into this discussion from time to time to make a few brief points. Communication research topics are all around us. From the preceding discussion, we can identify several. For example, what are students' preferred news sources? How are decisions about campus media made? Joe's arrival suggests additional questions. Luke and Sofia were getting into the ethics of accessing online content, but Joe seems to have redirected the conversation to laptops and libraries. How did that shift happen, and what might explain it?

Outside of specific research questions, there are broader issues framing research: for example, ethics, or the standards of behavior expected of researchers; the question of whether human communication is best understood through numbers (quantitative) or words (qualitative); and research

standards, or the methods and processes that make a research study credible. We'll delve into these issues in more detail in Chapters 1 through 4, after we meet Mike . . .

"Hey it's wonder boy—Mike. Heard you got straight A's last semester! You're treating us all to lunch, right?"

"Nah, just had breakfast. Actually, I'm embarrassed about those A's. I mean, I got a "93" in two courses; if they were "92s"—just one point less—I would have had two A minuses. It's more random luck than capturing my abilities. And Caroline, who was truly running straight A's, blew one question in one test, that took one course grade down, that took her GPA down, that knocked her out of the honor society when she should have been in it more than me. I don't know what they think they're measuring with this GPA stuff. "

"Sort of like the mystery muffins you're about to treat us to, if you're not treating lunch?"

"Nice try . . . maybe I will. Wouldn't you think they'd have upgraded the menu in all the time we've been here?"

"Yeah, you'd think they'd be responsive to all the vegan-vegetarian-paleo-whatever palates on campus—not to mention all the religious do's and don'ts. The food's so 'yesterday.' It's like farm-to-table doesn't exist. They should run a survey and get a read on what we like."

"And you would be the one to survey, Mike? You think the four major food groups are cappuccino, latte, Americano, and espresso!"

"OK. So who would they ask? We'd all be graduated by the time they got around to asking the entire campus."

"Right, but let's agree that not asking you would be a good idea if they want to capture some majority opinions!"

"Fine. Don't ask me. But you can't revamp an entire campus food plan based on what a handful of volunteers like you think."

"I bet you can if you pick the right people."

ASA Comments

Hello again. Our student group has now raised two further important topics. The first is measurement, in this case, of academic excellence. How do we define and measure it? Communication research faces similar problems. For example, how might we define and measure an attitude?

The second topic is sampling. If we want an accurate survey of student food preferences, whom exactly would we survey? This is not just a theoretical question. The survey industry spends time and effort trying to get representative samples of people at a time when most people are not interested in responding to surveys. As we will see, sampling techniques combined with some knowledge of statistics can let us make generalizations about large numbers of people from a smaller sample of them.

We discuss measurement, sampling, and statistics more fully in Chapters 5 through 8. In Chapter 6, Elizabeth begins the first of some campus-based research examples when she plans her own survey of student food preferences. Right now, Lee has his own problem—parking.

"Hey, Lee! Haven't seen you in a while?"

"Right! I've been looking for a parking space."

"I sort of meant over the last few months, but I hear you on the parking problem. I don't know why commuter students even come here—the parking's so bad."

"I heard some good news though; they're bulldozing the old Hunter building to put in a car park."

"About time too. It *is* an ugly damn thing. And we need a car park."

"Hold on. Hunter's got historic value, for starters. And even if it hasn't, I can't see that bulldozing it guarantees more parking space."

"I thought we were supposed to be going all green? A car park just encourages more cars. They don't want to do that do they?"

"Sounds as if nobody knows what they want."

"Pull it down and see who shows up to protest. That'll tell you a lot about who's really committed to saving it."

"Or just read all the campus graffiti and bumper stickers. Those'll tell you. Count up all the "Save Hunter" and all the "More Parking on Campus" and there's your vote one way or the other."

"Yeah, from everyone that gets a charge out of defacing buildings . . . or likes bumper stickers."

"Beats the hassle of interviewing. Why go around interviewing people when you can just sit back and let public opinion come to you?"

"Yeah . . . well. Hey Charlotte . . . we're just talking about parking. But you're more into clubbing tonight. Right?"

"Yep! Anyone interested? There's a new dive downtown doing lo-fi hip-hop—I think."

"Now there's a communication experience, Charlotte. Maybe you can write all that up for your comm. research project."

"Too much writing. I'd have books full of stuff. Plus I'd be a part of it. So it wouldn't be good research, right? Not objective."

"Who says you have to be objective?"

"Who says you don't?"

ASA Comments

In this third discussion, we discover what many people think of as the basics of communication research—method. There are many methods to think about. Surveys (Chapter 9) and experiments (Chapter 10) are two classic quantitative methods. Campus interest groups presumably would be surveyed on the future of the Hunter building. Pulling the building down does provide a low-level "natural" (albeit impractical) experiment in that it sets up a condition and then looks to see how people respond to it. Graffiti, bumper stickers, and social media postings pertaining to the proposed demolition can be analyzed quantitatively by categorizing and counting them as either for or against the demolition (Chapter 11). A qualitative approach (Chapter 12) would be to analyze the arguments in such content for insights on why people favor or oppose the demolition.

Human interaction can of course be analyzed qualitatively, as we will see in Chapter 13 when Bonnie considers ways to research students' uses of social media.

Finally, Charlotte's thoughts about clubbing raise the important issue of objectivity. Charlotte's not sure she can be objective. Isn't research supposed to be objective? Or does it always carry the biases and assumptions of the researcher? Plus, how can she possibly report every interaction she observes at her research location. As she says . . .

"Write up everything that happened? I don't think so! Write up all that 'who said what to whom' stuff, plus what they did, what they wore, and who danced with whom, and I'll still be writing 800 pages later!"

"That's what's great about statistics. You can just write up that the average score was 42—or something like that—and you're done. Right?"

"Why not just submit a video of the whole thing and let people draw their own conclusions?

"But that doesn't explain anything. Print or video, people want to know who you researched, why you researched them, how you did it, why you did it, where you did it . . . and like that. You've got to justify yourself; got to address that big "so what" question, right?"

ASA Comments

The discussion about reporting research raises some valid questions. Why does everything have to be reported in print format? The short answer is, it doesn't. Conventionally, though, scholarly research reporting is "print heavy" and detailed so that readers can understand exactly how you did your research. Why not submit a video of the whole thing? Technology makes that possible, but what else would any researcher viewing your video want? And what about objectivity? Over time, communication research has seen a shift from striving for objectivity to recognizing that subjectivity will not go away—and addressing that fact. We'll discuss these topics and others in Chapter 14, by which time you should have your own answer to the objectivity question.

In the meantime, as Carlos might have advised, drink some coffee and read Chapter 1.

The coffee is optional.

Chapter 1 is not. It begins here.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Welcome to communication research. This chapter introduces some of the many ways scholars of human communication think about research, their main interest areas, and some of their research methods. It will help you with the often-difficult process of getting started and getting focused on a research project, and introduce you to some of the assumptions and decisions that every researcher makes, consciously or unconsciously.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you

- Identify basic assumptions behind human communication research.
- Identify research questions that might be asked about communication.
- Describe some of the decisions required when planning communication research.

GETTING STARTED IN RESEARCH

Any day or any journey requires that you first wake up and then make a series of decisions to get started. Stay in bed or get up? Gym first and then breakfast? Or breakfast first and hang out with friends? Bike, bus, or walk to work, or work online from home? Each day requires that you get oriented in some direction and decide on the priorities for that day. Similarly, any research project requires that you start by getting yourself oriented toward an area of interest. Then you will need to decide what questions, assumptions, and methods will best get you the answers to your interest questions.

Communication researchers have interests ranging from interpersonal communication on up to web media reaching millions of people worldwide. Researchers often specialize in areas defined by the numbers of people they are studying, as in interpersonal communication, groups, organizations, or social media. But many research interests transcend such categories. For example, rhetoricians, those who study the use of language and argumentation, may do so in all of these areas.

Potential topics for research are all around us. Why do people prefer some music genres over others? What is the best way to deliver instructional content—the web, readings, seminars, lectures, or hands-on experience? What websites are seen as the most credible sources of advice for students downloading new "apps"? Do student behaviors in class influence instructor behavior? Do blockbuster movies shape public opinion or follow it? What can we say about the effects of violent or sexually explicit media content on people exposed to such content? What predicts whether an online video will "go viral"?

The next step after finding questions of interest is deciding how best to get answers to these questions. You will find from the scholarly literature that this can be a hotly contested issue. Choosing a research method or methods unavoidably requires making assumptions and decisions about the nature of human behavior, such as whether people are basically all alike or are unique individuals. These assumptions and decisions will help you prefer some methods to others, but you may well find that for every researcher going down your road, there is another researcher opting for a different route to answering essentially the same question.

Every research question has assumptions behind it that reflect the researcher's view of communication and how to study it. These are discussed below and in Chapter 2.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Several basic assumptions underpin all communication research. Consciously or implicitly, researchers bring these assumptions to their research. Several major assumptions—each of which can be contested—are outlined below.

Observations Capture/Do Not Capture an Underlying Reality

One assumption is that what we choose to look at—dress or language, for example—tells us something about an underlying reality we cannot see but assume exists. For example, "power" is not something we can actually see. When you think about it, what we see is not power as such but rather someone behaving in a particular way and other people responding. Nonetheless, "power" seems like a useful concept in our efforts to understand human communication, and generally we elect to study it by looking at behaviors that we assume represent power.

Similarly, no one has ever actually seen an attitude. What people have seen is someone behaving in a particular way or responding to a set of survey questions designed to capture this thing called "attitude." Once again, "attitude" seems too useful a concept to discard, and so we research attitudes on the assumption that they exist or at least that the concept of attitude provides a useful tool for thinking about communication processes.

Theories About Human Behavior Can/Cannot Be Generalized

A second assumption is that theories about human behavior can be generalized. It may be insightful to discover that your grandfather has a LinkedIn account and that your little sister has a Twitter account. But your research would be much more useful and rewarding if you were able to make a general statement such as "Young people are more likely than older people to have a Twitter account." If true, this statement would be of interest to advertisers, educators, and disaster management agencies, the last of which might need to reach large numbers of people rapidly in an emergency. However, to make this statement, you basically have to assume that your grandfather is like other grandfathers and your little sister is like other little sisters, at least with respect to social media use.

Probably, though—and correctly—your grandfather and sister regard themselves as unique individuals, so to what extent can we assume people are basically like other people? It is an important question because if our world is full of unique individuals, we are not entitled to make any generalizations about them (except, of course, that each of them is unique!). Nonetheless, researchers using survey or experimental methods typically will want to assume that the results of their research will apply to people who are similar to the study participants but not in the study. That is, there is an assumption that people are similar in the way they behave.

Researchers Should/Should Not Distance Themselves From Their Research Participants

A third assumption relates to the researchers' level of engagement with their research participants. As researchers, we could get more involved with the students in the discussions at the beginning of this chapter—perhaps by sitting in on the conversations or by interviewing some of them. This brings up a fundamental decision. The more distant the observer becomes, the more neutral or dispassionate she can be in reporting a group's behavior, but she will be unable to get the insights she would get if she were closer to the group. On the other hand, moving closer to the group will provide her with insight, but she then becomes open to influencing the group dynamics or to seeing only the group's view of the world and becoming biased in her reporting as a result.

Research Should/Should Not Be Done for a Specific Purpose

A fourth assumption is about the purpose or reason that should underlie research. Most scholarly researchers probably began their careers with a simple curiosity about human behavior,

and it is that curiosity, plus the pleasure of discovery for its own sake, that continues to drive them. Scratch the surface of that interest, though, and we will find other purposes or motivations that come into play. At a personal level, it may be need for fame or funding. At another level, researchers may see their research as helping to solve society's problems or refining a highly theoretical model of human interaction. As we will see in Chapter 2, researchers may be content if their studies lead to accurate descriptions or an understanding of human behavior, but they are more likely to see their research as worthwhile if it explains or predicts that behavior.

Researchers whose work is funded by a corporation or foundation looking for specific answers to a question as quickly as possible may find that their personal motivations for research and their preferred direction for the research take second place relative to the needs and motivations of the funding agency.

There Is/Is Not One Best Position From Which to Observe Human Behavior

A fifth assumption is simply that some aspects of a question are more important to look at than others and, related, that there is one best standpoint from which to observe human communication. A simple way to understand this is to consider an early telecommunications-based model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Given the complexities of human communication, it is an overly simplistic model, but it does identify major components in any human interaction as follows:

- Source—the provider or initiator of content
- Message or messages—the content of communication
- Channel or medium—the vehicle for communication content; for example, social media
- Receiver(s)—the recipient(s) or consumer(s) of information
- Noise—extraneous information or distractions that can disrupt an interaction
- Context—the relationships between individuals, the situation in which the interaction occurs, and the cultural norms around that interaction

In human interaction, communication gets more complicated. Source and receiver may swap roles as a discussion proceeds. What is noise to one party may be useful information to another. Nevertheless, this basic model does indicate some possible major entry points into the study of human interaction.

For example, a major area of research on the first component of the model is source credibility. Why do some news consumers find the *Huffington Post* more credible than, say, the *New York Times*, or the *New York Times* more credible than *Al Jazeera* or vice versa? The "message" component raises any number of questions about communication content—how best to present complex scientific information to a lay public, for example. The "channel" component raises questions about the impact of process on human behavior. For example, what are the circumstances in which personal, face-to-face instruction should be preferred to online learning? Or what happens to a recipient's understanding of a complex issue when message content is reduced to 140-character tweets? The "receiver" component often raises questions about

how the demographic, cultural, and psychological characteristics of people influence their comprehension of messages or receptiveness to persuasive messages.

You will likely have already decided that none of these components can be studied in isolation. Receiver and sender interact and swap roles in many interactions. In the case of advertising research, receiver characteristics affect message content and channel selection. But researchers will typically find one of these components of the communication process more interesting than others and will give that component priority in their investigations.

By way of example, let's look at how researchers might approach a specific piece of communication content—an advertisement. We shall see that there are many possible approaches to studying such content.

SOME RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES: WHAT CAN WE DO WITH AN AD?

Let's explore how a single situation can lend itself to many research questions, using public service advertisements (PSAs) as the basis for our discussion. PSAs are targeted communications designed specifically to promote positive attitudes and behaviors. They focus on public interest topics such as health, education, safety, the environment, and other social causes. Many of them are likely to be familiar to you. Most PSAs are produced under the auspices of the Ad Council, a body that links nonprofit organizations with professional agencies that produce advertisements as a public service. For this discussion, we will focus on recent PSAs that tackle the problem of impaired or distracted driving. You can find the ads mentioned in this section, as well as many others, at www.adcouncil.org.

PSAs are typically based on, and address, a strong, often alarming fact or statistic, such as "Every 51 minutes, someone is killed in an alcohol-related car accident," or "In 2016, 3,450 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers." The creative challenge is to relate these often "remote," "happens-to-other-people" statistics to individual members of a target audience. This relevance is usually achieved by a tagline that makes the message personal, encourages a behavior or attitude change, and may become the overall campaign theme.

For example, the first statistic mentioned above resulted in the following anti–drunk driving campaign themes, which you will likely find familiar:

"Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

"Drinking and driving can kill a friendship."

"Buzzed driving is drunk driving."

And the problem of distracted driving inspired this texting and driving prevention campaign:

"Stop the Texts, Stop the Wrecks."

The second statistic inspired the themes of two anti–texting-while-driving messages.

The Ad Council's anti-texting print PSA features the image of an ambulance with the message "You don't want them responding to your text." Its television PSAs show the consequences of texting while driving—social opprobrium, missing a once-in-a-lifetime sighting,

and, yes, death. You can view these ads at www.psacentral.org/campaign/texting-and-driving-prevention.

You can view a further series of messages aimed at distracted driving at AT&T's "It Can Wait" campaign website: www.itcanwait.com.

Many of these ads are hard-hitting, "pull-no-punches" messages that have the potential to grab attention and, perhaps, shock the target audience into a behavior change. Others rely more on social appeals or on recruiting individuals to join the campaign and providing the resources they will need to become advocates in their own right.

Communication researchers may have a number of questions about any of these PSAs. Does it work or doesn't it? How or why does it work? Whose interests are advanced by the ad? Does the medium itself (radio, magazine, television, newspaper, Internet) have an effect on how the content is understood? The following sections introduce several approaches to researching advertising using these PSAs as examples.

Does the Ad Work?

This is a question that, essentially, focuses on the receivers of the message. We want to know what they did or how they felt as a result of exposure to the message. Applied communication researchers, and certainly advertising executives and their clients, want to know how many people adopted the recommended behavior or at least changed their attitudes as a result of exposure to this ad. The question is not that readily answered.

If statistics show that accidents associated with texting have decreased, we could assume that the anti-texting advertisement was effective. Correct? Not necessarily. There could be many other explanations for such a decrease, and these would need to be ruled out before we could conclude that the ad had a significant effect.

One way to assess the effectiveness of these advertisements is to take a scientific approach. Two characteristics of scientific method are observation or empiricism and the attempt to rule out alternative explanations. From a scientific point of view, we might measure how much advertising time or space the campaign received and the number of texting citations issued and then look for a relationship between the two. We would hope to discover that as the amount of advertising increased, the number of citations decreased. But we would also need to be sure that any observed decrease was related to our advertising and not to an increase in the number of police on the highways or to a new ad that was launched before assessing whether the old one was working effectively. All possible causes would need to be identified and ruled out before we could assume that the anti-texting advertisement and *only* the advertisement caused the decrease.

What Can Readers and Viewers Tell Us?

This question also focuses on the receivers of the message, but with a shift in emphasis toward understanding the "whys" of human behavior. Establishing that the advertisement did influence behavior or attitudes provides no insight on why it did so. One way to answer this question would be to conduct a survey, asking questions based on what you suspect made the advertisement effective—the celebrity spokesperson, the animation showing how distractions affect reaction time, or the real-life story of an "innocent victim" of a texting-related crash, for example.

It is likely that an advertising agency would ask such questions before the advertisement was released in order to make the ad as effective as possible. Of course, the audience could

have totally different perceptions of what is important about the ad; for example, viewers may decide that the catchy soundtrack is really what grabbed their attention. It is important, therefore, to capture what people have to say in their own words as well as to ask the questions that you think are important.

For such public opinion research, surveys are typically used to ask questions the researcher thinks are important, and focus groups are used to capture opinions that the audience thinks are important. Historically, surveys have used mail, phone, or personal interviews to present a series of specific, predetermined questions to a predetermined group of respondents, but today, the Internet and social media are equally likely vehicles, depending on the target audience. Focus groups involve bringing together maybe 6 to 12 people in person or online and asking them to discuss their reactions to an advertisement, issue, or product. The essential focus-group strategy is listening to people in order to capture their responses in their own words.

Surveys generally produce quantitative results (48% did not like the spokesperson); focus groups generally produce qualitative results in that they capture people talking ("I really did not like the spokesperson because . . ."). Surveys and focus groups both have their advantages and limitations, as we will see in later chapters.

What Can the Content Tell Us?

This question clearly focuses on message content. So far we have analyzed the texting campaign largely in terms of audience response, but what could we learn from the ad content itself? There are many angles from which to study media content, including rhetoric, content analysis, and critical theory. These angles share an interest in media content but take different approaches for different reasons.

Rhetoricians are essentially interested in the **appeals** or persuasive tactics used to persuade an audience to adopt the behavior. For example, if you look at the Ad Council's anti-texting campaign, two appeals are apparent: the appeal of the ambulance EMTs as authority figures (in the print ad) and the real-life experience of being in the car with a driver who cannot resist just a quick look at a text (in the TV ad). As with many commercial ads, this TV ad shows a "typical" teenager in a "typical" texting situation, leading to a further appeal that "people just like us" can be guilty of dangerous texting behavior.

Rhetoricians using theory developed by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) might search for appeals based on *logos* (logic), in this case the logic of "texting + driving = crash"; *ethos* (character), in this case the use of a typical teenager with typical reactions to a text; or *pathos* (emotion), in this case the tragic consequences of a crash.

Kenneth Burke, a 20th-century theorist who analyzed human communication in terms of drama, offered a set of analytical questions that ask, essentially, "What is the act, the scene, the people, and the purpose of the act?" We could analyze our ad using Burke's questions. Looking at the ad content, we could describe the setting, the driver, and the mini-drama of a person becoming absorbed in a text, losing control, and crashing.

Rhetorical approaches to researching advertising content are essentially qualitative; they analyze the use of language.

Content analysis, by contrast, is primarily a quantitative method for assessing media content. For example, looking at ads for distracted driving, including drunk driving, buzzed driving, and texting and driving, a content analyst might set up categories of content based on his interest in representations of gender in advertising. The analyst counts the number of appearances in the ads of men and women and compares them. He could also compare his

results to a known distribution of these categories in accident records. He might then be able to conclude that the advertisements overrepresent women as buzzed drivers and underrepresent them as texting drivers, for example. He would be comparing advertising's world with what we know of the real world.

Critical analysis works from a basic assumption that communication maintains and promotes power structures in society. Essentially, the focus is on the relationship, explicit or implicit, between message source and recipient rather than on just one component of the communication process. With that as a basis, the critical researcher asks "Whose interests are served by the advertising, and more specifically, how exactly do language and representations maintain the interests of such entities as corporations, colleges, or governments?" Unlike the content analyst, who looks for what is explicit and observable, the researcher may look as much for what is implicit or unsaid.

For example, the AT&T "It Can Wait" campaign referenced above is a sophisticated web-based campaign that offers a virtual reality experience, a video gallery, a social networking hub, and ways in which the visitor to the site can take action against distracted driving. A critical analyst would want to know how AT&T—at time of this chapter's writing, the second largest provider of mobile phone services in the United States—benefits from this campaign. Do the company's messages distance it from the problem, and if so, how? How are the company's interests maintained and promoted by this campaign?

What Can the Creators of the Ad Tell Us?

This question focuses on the source of the message rather than on the recipient, message, or communication medium. Our understanding of the advertisement would, of course, be enhanced if we could talk with the client and with the producers, directors, and writers in the agencies that produced the ads. In this case, we would probably be interested in finding out how and why decisions about content and production were made. For example, might a truly hard-hitting PSA have been "watered down" because the sponsor wished to avoid controversy?

Researchers interested in organizational dynamics and decision making might want to know whether the basic creative approach was worked out over the course of extended meetings involving large numbers of people or if it came about as a directive from a client or creative director. Researchers interested in decision making would want to interview members of the creative team individually so that each member feels free to talk. They might also want to interview the team as a group and probably would want to get permission to record the creative meetings as they take place. Such research could give us insight on how communication facilitates or discourages creativity, decision making, and client-agency relationships, or on the process by which professional communicators build an image of the consumers they are trying to reach.

SOME RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES: BEYOND THE AD

The previous discussion centers on advertising by way of example, but analogous questions can also be asked of interpersonal, group, or organizational communication. For example, your academic department presumably uses social media to keep its student community apprised of relevant news such as new course offerings, faculty changes, and scholarship opportunities.

We might, again, ask the "Did it work?" question. For example, can we observe that the social media messages triggered additional numbers of students to register for new course offerings or apply for scholarships? We might, by using surveys, interviews, or focus groups, determine how students feel about this use of social media to provide them with departmental information. We could analyze this social media content to see what appeals are used to promote new courses and scholarships. We might even take the perspective of a critical organizational theorist and examine how such social media content encourages student compliance with the departmental "way of doing things."

If interpersonal communication were our field, we might be interested in tracking how communication changes as two people move from acquaintances to friends to romantic partners. Again, similar questions apply. The "Did it work?" question might be reframed in terms of trying to observe what vocabulary or behaviors work to strengthen or weaken the relationship, or we could interview the two individuals themselves to see what they have to say about their communication and why it works, or doesn't. Similarly, we could examine the content of their text messages or transcripts of their phone calls to relate the content to key events in the relationship.

A SERIES OF UNAVOIDABLE DECISIONS

"Communication researchers have different agendas and assumptions that underpin the methods they use. This is explained by the complexity of human communication. Because it is almost impossible to examine and explain a communication event in its totality, researchers focus on a part of that totality and choose a method for investigating it with which they have a comfort level, be it methodological or ideological.

For example, even though the research approaches outlined above share a common focus on understanding public service advertising, researchers clearly differ in what exactly they choose to research and the reasons for doing their research.

In addition to their theoretical priorities, all researchers face the reality of limited time, limited resources, and an inability to be in more than one place at a time (web conferencing excepted). Following are some of the choices that are almost inevitable for all types of researchers, based on their theoretical predispositions and resources.

The Field of Study—Wide or Narrow?

Time is short, the topic vast, and, realistically, we must research the available and the achievable. Methodological preferences aside, a communication researcher typically focuses on one of the many specific interest areas shown in Exhibit 1.1. This list is compiled from the names of the divisions and interest groups of the National Communication Association, the International Communication Association, and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

The Researcher—Dispassionate or Involved?

To what extent should researchers get involved with their human "subjects"? The scientific tradition values objectivity and dispassionate observation. The "reward" to the researcher is the satisfaction of a new finding, the development of a new theory, or the confirmation or disconfirmation of an existing theory.

EXHIBIT 1.1 ■ Communication Research Interest Areas

- Activism, Communication, and Social Justice
- Advertising
- African American Communication and Culture
- American Studies
- Applied Communication
- Argumentation and Forensics
- Asian/Pacific American Communication Studies
- Children, Adolescents, and the Media
- Communicating Science, Health, Environment, and Risk
- Communication and Aging
- Communication and Law
- Communication and Social Cognition
- Communication and Technology
- Communication Apprehension and Avoidance
- Communication Assessment
- Communication Ethics
- Communication History
- Communication Law and Policy
- Communication Science and Biology
- Community Journalism
- Critical and Cultural Studies
- Economics, Communication, and Society
- Entertainment Studies
- Environmental Communication
- Ethnicity and Race
- Ethnography
- Family Communication
- Feminist and Women's Studies
- Freedom of Expression
- Game Studies
- Global Communication and Social Change
- Group Communication
- Health Communication
- Human Communication and Technology
- Information Systems
- Instructional Development
- Intergroup Communication
- International and Intercultural Communication
- Interpersonal Communication
- Journalism Studies
- Language and Social Interaction
- Latino/Latina Communication Studies
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies
- Mass Communication
- Media Ethics
- Media Industry Studies
- Mobile Communication
- Newspaper and Online News
- Nonverbal Communication
- Organizational Communication
- Peace and Conflict Communication
- Performance Studies
- Philosophy of Communication
- Political Communication
- Popular Communication
- Public Address
- Public Diplomacy
- Public Relations
- Rhetorical and Communication Theory
- Semiotics
- Spiritual Communication
- Sports Communication
- Theatre, Film, and New Multimedia
- Training and Development
- Visual Communication

Sources: National Communication Association (NCA), International Communication Association (ICA) and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

By contrast, **action research** engages in research specifically to improve people's lives. The action research tradition is to be closely involved with people in order to better their lives. One school sees research as a quest for knowledge, and the other sees research as an engaged contribution to bettering society. In both cases, the researcher's behavior has ethical implications, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

The Approach—Objective or Subjective?

Can research be objective? **Social scientists** often bring the assumption of an external "real" world that can be observed, understood, and agreed on to the study of human interaction. For example, they assume that concepts such as intelligence or loyalty can be found across all people and measured objectively with an "instrument" that will apply universally and perhaps even predict human behavior.

By contrast, phenomenologists and ethnographers try to understand people's subjective worlds. They have an interpretive perspective in that they seek to understand how humans interpret or make sense of events in their lives. They assume that concepts such as intelligence or loyalty are indeed just concepts and are defined subjectively by the people they are researching, not to mention by researchers themselves. Such concepts vary from culture to culture, and from individual to individual. For example, simple interpersonal behaviors such as holding hands, kissing, or embracing may have widely different interpretations from culture to culture. The phenomenologist may observe a behavior such as kissing but really want to know what that action means for the individuals involved. There is no assumption that such behavior has a universal meaning.

The Perspective—Your Questions or Their Answers?

All researchers have a fundamental perspective that frames their research. Imagine, for example, that this is your research question: "Do men and women view social media differently?" To get an answer to such a question, researchers have two basic options. The first is to ask men and women a series of specific questions that will provide an answer to the researcher's question. Often, these might be survey-type questions such as "On a scale of 1 through 10, where 1 is not at all important and 10 is extremely important, how would you rate the importance of social media in your life?" Typically, this would be one of many such questions aimed at assessing how or why social media is used, how many hours a day participants spend on social media, and so on.

This approach may well answer the researcher's question but completely fail to capture how users feel about social media. For example, if users see social media primarily as entertainment, it may never occur to them to describe social media as "important." A second option, then, is to elicit respondents' views of social media in their own words—typically a qualitative process.

Another basic research decision, then, is whether to get answers to specific questions you have or whether to elicit people's views in their own language—not quite knowing what you might get.

The Sample—Large or Small?

How many people do you need to talk to in order to know that you have "an accurate picture" of a communication phenomenon? Public opinion researchers can answer that question: For an accurate view of adult public opinion in the United States, you need about 1,200 randomly selected people—as long as you can live with something like plus or minus 3% error.

"True enough," the small-sample people might reply, "but counting gives you only numbers and knowledge, not understanding. Will a survey of the thousands of people affected by weather, hunger, or a down-sliding economy give us any more understanding of how people communicate about such events than an in-depth interview with one family? You know what's going on, but you don't know why or how people feel about it or explain it. That is why one solid series of interviews with a few people can give a better grasp on a situation than all of the thousand-people surveys that the big-sample people can conduct."

The Data—Quantitative or Qualitative?

Are humans storytelling animals, counting animals, or both?

Numbers are important; they are how democracies and committees make decisions. Count the vote; the majority wins. Numbers and counting are an important component of scientific methods, and the number of research findings in agreement with each other helps to suggest the current "truth" of the findings.

Researchers with interests in human subjectivity respond that the complexities and subtleties of interpersonal attraction or use of social media cannot be captured in mere numbers. The "truth" can best be understood by listening to what research participants and researchers themselves have to tell us. By extension, there may well be more than one "truth" or understanding of an issue or situation.

Few of the above "either-or" distinctions are clear-cut. For example, a passionately involved action researcher could use objective social science methods to study a problem. Or the survey questions that a numbers-oriented methodologist asks could be based on extensive initial qualitative interviewing. The storytelling or counting ideas have been presented here as "either-or" to help you think about where you stand on such issues. In practice, many of the seeming opposites blend together. The most obvious blending is in the approach called **triangulation** in which researchers use multiple methods providing multiple perspectives to ensure that they have a good "fix" on a problem.

For example, in trying to understand how family life interacts with television viewing, a researcher might survey several families on their use of and attitudes toward television, interview a few family members in depth, live with one family as members watch television, and conduct a content analysis of television content to determine how content shapes the family's interactions and vice versa. Advertising executives will frequently pretest or pilot a commercial with a focus group before running the advertisement and then assessing results with a large-scale survey.

Approaches such as **Q methodology** assume that it is respondents' subjective views of the world that are of interest but combine that research focus with quantitative, computational approaches to recording and assessing these views.

In Chapter 2, we will argue that "Quantitative or qualitative?" should not be an initial decision about your research but rather one that comes after you have decided on the purpose of your research and the assumptions behind it.

The Report—Subjective or Objective?

Just as there are different ways of doing research, there are different ways of writing research. Researchers interested in interpreting the subjective world of their informants may use the primarily qualitative languages of ethnomethodology and phenomenology and report what their informants have to tell them in their informants' own words. By contrast, social science researchers typically use statistics to report and interpret the data they have collected.

The involved researcher may unabashedly use "I" writing as in "I lived with Thomas and his two children for three months, and we formed a warm social bond that had us eating together, watching movies together, and exchanging seasonal gifts." Dispassionate researchers will report in a language that strives for neutrality and that removes them from the narrative altogether—thus, "Subjects were recorded on video and their facial expressions analyzed for changes in response to visual stimuli." Critics of this style will point out that such a dispassionate style is in itself a persuasive strategy aimed at convincing the reader of the author's credibility as a researcher.

The subjectively involved researcher believes that credibility and reporting are enhanced by including personal experiences and reactions. We are getting "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." The dispassionate researcher believes credibility is maximized by objective reporting "uncontaminated" by sentiment and value judgments (ignoring perhaps the idea that to adopt this style of writing is in itself a value judgment).

Research and research reporting both are communication activities framed by disciplinary standards and expectations, ethical decisions, and personal motivations. As critical theorists would point out, published and topical research carries a "metamessage" about what research topics are "hot," what approaches are in vogue, and who the current "stars" are.

The fact that research has an argumentative component does not necessarily mean it is adversarial. The academic journals in which research is published reflect ongoing discussions about research. A research study may be followed by responses, critiques, and other studies that change our thinking about it. You can think of articles in the scholarly communication journals (some listed at the end of this chapter) as a considered, continuing worldwide conversation among researchers on how best to understand human communication.

As we will see in Chapter 2, communication research has many different starting points, purposes, and basic assumptions. It inescapably involves ethical decisions. The following ethics panel and the ones in each chapter will give you a sense of the ethical decisions you may face as a researcher. You should try to reason through to a decision for each of the ethics problems, as they are typical of the decisions you may face when doing your own research. For help with these ethics panels, read Chapter 3, "Ethics: What Are My Responsibilities as a Researcher?"

ETHICS PANEL

A HEALTH COMMUNICATION DILEMMA

Suppose that a public health agency wants to determine the best way to help people identify the symptoms of diabetes, so they can take preventive measures and better deal with the condition if they are diagnosed as diabetic.

To do this, the agency hires your research firm to find out how best to get messages about diabetes to the public. You decide to run a three-group experiment in which people in county A will receive messages about diabetes by traditional mass media (newspapers, television, and radio) and social media. People in county B will receive intensive interpersonal communication about diabetes through neighborhood meetings, counseling, and their workplaces. People in county C will receive no messages because you need a "baseline" against which to measure whether your interventions in counties A and B have any effect. As a result of this study, you will be able to develop effective communication programs for your region.

What are the ethical implications, if any, of not providing people in county C with information that might save a life?

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the ways scholars think about communication research, their main areas of research, and the methods they use. In summary:

Communication research is a process of posing questions about human communication and designing and implementing research that will answer those questions.

Communication researchers typically specialize in one aspect of communication.

Researchers may use qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or both.

Researchers have empirical, interpretive, or critical perspectives on communication.

Human communication research inescapably involves ethical decisions.

Key Terms

action research 15
appeals 11
Q methodology 16
social scientists 15
triangulation 16

Application Exercises

The application exercises you will find at the end of each chapter are warm-up exercises or mental experiments you can do to help you translate the chapter principles into research practice. For example, the following application exercises will help you identify and refine your thinking about your own research interests.

Research is much more than simply finding a topic area and questions that interest you. You must also, for example, choose a research method or methods that will give you the data you need to answer your research questions.

For example, observing people, interviewing them, and analyzing message content are all valid research methods, but we must also consider the positives and negatives of each method in order to choose the one most likely to provide credible data. For example, in relation to the student conversations earlier in this chapter, you might consider such issues as these:

If you interview a group, won't each member tell you only what he or she wants the rest of the group to hear? Would you be better off interviewing each member separately?

Would questionnaires give you more honest answers because you are not interviewing face to face? Or could the time and effort required to complete a questionnaire mean that you would get less than full answers?

Does listening in on a private conversation raise ethical issues? If so, shouldn't you introduce yourself and ask permission to listen in? Might your presence then change the nature of the conversation?

This chapter begins with interactions among students in a campus coffee bar. Based on these interactions, comments from the "ASA," and your reading of this chapter, identify as many research questions as you can about human communication behavior. Think freely and broadly. No question is irrelevant at this stage of your thinking, and one may well be the spark that ignites a long-term research interest for you.

One way to develop your own interests is to go to the websites of two of the major communication research associations—the National Communication Association (NCA) and the International Communication Association (ICA)—listed in this chapter's recommended web resources. At the NCA site, on the "About NCA" menu, look for "What is Communication?" Then expand the "Areas of Specialization" section. At the ICA site, look for "Divisions" and "Interest Groups" under the "Groups" menu item. In both cases, you will find a list of the specific interest groups for each association. The interest areas that overlap will give you a sense of the "mainstream" fields of research, and either list may spark your interest in an area that perhaps you were not previously aware of.

Access the website for the Pew Research Center's Internet & Technology division, listed below under "Recommended Web Resources." Locate a March 2018 survey report titled *Social Media Use in 2018*. At the report site you will find the full report, the questionnaire, and the data from which the report was compiled. From the questionnaire, select two questions that interest you, ask the same questions of 10 people you know, convert your answers into percentages, and compare your results with the Pew Center results. For example, questions 1 and 2 in the survey ask respondents which social media they use and the frequency of use of those media. The third question asks respondents how difficult it would be to give up their televisions, smart phones, Internet, and social media.

Do your results differ from those reported by the Pew Center? If so, how? Why do you think your results differ? What might you do to improve the credibility of your results?

The Ad Council reports that its "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" campaign began in 1983 and that alcohol-related traffic fatalities dropped to an all-time low in 1998, after which they began to rise again.

From a communication perspective, what research would you suggest would be needed to establish with confidence a relationship between anti–drunk-driving campaigns and alcohol-related traffic statistics?

The Ad Council's strategy, as of 2017, regarding "buzzed driving" is to prompt viewers to examine their own warning signs of impairment and take responsibility for their decisions behind the wheel. The focus shifts from "friends" to the driver, with the tagline "Probably Okay isn't Okay" intended to plant a seed of doubt and to remind drivers to find a safe way home if they've been drinking.

What research might you do to find out how likely it is that this message strategy will work? What alternate message strategies might be more effective?

For both questions, you can get additional information at https://www.adcouncil.org/Our-Campaigns/Safety/Buzzed-Driving-Prevention.

Recommended Reading

There are many books and journals available on communication research, as a visit to your campus library will indicate. Many journals, ranging in focus from administrative theory to women's studies, may also report on human communication. A few key journal titles are listed below. Chapter 4, "You Could Look It Up: Reading, Recording, and Reviewing Research," will move us on to developing more relevant, targeted lists of readings.

Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies
Communication Monographs
Communication Research
Human Communication Research
Journal of Applied Communication Research
Quarterly Journal of Speech

Critical Studies in Media Communication
Journal of Public Relations Research
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly
Quarterly Review of Film and Video
Television & New Media

Academy of Management Review
Administrative Science Quarterly
Business and Professional Communication Quarterly
Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict
Management Communication Quarterly

Group Analysis
Group & Organization Management
Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice
Group Processes & Intergroup Relations
Small Group Research

Human Relations
Journal of Applied Psychology
Journal of Family Communication
Journal of Research in Personality
Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking
Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication
Journal of Magazine and New Media Research
New Media & Society

Recommended Web Resources

Note: The websites recommended in this and subsequent chapters are a mix of scholarly and commercial sites. They may or may not require a fee or membership for access. Inclusion does not imply endorsement, and no criticism of similar resources not listed is intended or implied.

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).....www.aejmc.org
Canadian Communication Association.....www.acc-cca.ca
Human Communication Research Centre (HCRC), University of Edinburgh.....www.hcrc.ed.ac.uk
International Communication Association (ICA).....www.icahdq.org
National Communication Association (NCA).....www.natcom.org

Defining the boundaries of human communication studies is difficult and a debate in its own right. The ICA, NCA, and AEJMC are three of several U.S. academic associations devoted to the study of communication. Looking at their websites will give you an idea of the many areas of research specialization under the "communication umbrella." By contrast, the HCRC site shows one of many institutions in which communication studies are being reconceptualized by bringing together such fields as computing, philosophy, psychology, and language studies.

Pew Research Center, Internet & Technology.....www.pewinternet.org
The Pew Research Center's Internet & Technology division studies how Americans use the Internet and how their online activities affect their lives. The project uses nationwide random phone surveys, online surveys, and qualitative research, along with data from government agencies, technology firms, academia, and other expert venues. You should become familiar with this site, and with the Pew Research Center more generally, as we will refer to it throughout this book.

References

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2

FIRST DECISIONS

From Inspiration to Implementation

"Prof. Michaels, I'm worried about getting a comm. research topic."

"Well, as I told Carlos last semester, start by just looking around. There's everything from social media sites involving millions of people down to looking at how two best friends interact."

"OK, but I don't see how I get focused down to one topic."

"Well, all research starts from an interest; first decide what interests you. Then look at what's doable."

"Meaning what?"

"First, you'll want to get comfortable with one or more research methods. Second, be practical. You have to get finished by the end of semester, right? Let's say you're interested in students' attitudes to current politics. I'd research just one small group instead of say an entire class year or everyone in your major. You could also decide to look at local politics only rather than national politics or vice versa.

Also think about why you're doing your research, your methods, and what use your results will be when you get them; you have to be able to justify your research.

"OK. Anything else?"

"Try to step back and figure out how your own assumptions about the world might be shaping your ideas about research."

"Now there I really need help. What's an example?"

"OK. You're an individual, right? Nobody else out there's like you?"

"So my parents keep telling me."

"So here's the question—if we're all individuals, how can you make any generalizations about people, or should you? Or think about why you believe anything. For example, can you trust your own intuition? What makes an authority an authority?"

"That's some heavy-duty stuff."

"Trust me, you're about to find more in this chapter. You do need to wrestle through stuff like this though if you're going to do defensible research."

"Thanks, Prof."

"No problem. You can catch up with me again in Chapter 10: I might need your help with some experiments I'm thinking about. See you then."

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Getting started may be the most difficult issue of all for the beginning researcher. As we explored in Chapter 1, there are many possible starting points. Think how many questions could be generated from even the most casual overheard conversation. Of course, this is also the good news. **Research questions** are indeed all around us, and identifying some questions about topics that interest you is a good start. You might even have good ideas about how to answer those questions, especially if you have jumped ahead to some other chapters in this book.

Appropriate research methods are those that best match your theories about human communication and the type of data you intend to collect. Behind every research project are assumptions and decisions that you cannot escape about the nature of human communication and of research.

This chapter discusses four important aspects of getting to the research starting line. The first is the basic assumptions that underpin communication research. As you will see in the following sections, your research will be unavoidably based on your assumptions about human communication and people more generally. For example, a basic assumption that we are all individuals makes it difficult to argue that your research findings can be generalized to other individuals. We will discuss such assumptions and their implications for research under "Starting With Basic Beliefs and Perspectives."

Second is deciding on a focus. There are two fundamentally different ways of doing this. Just as you can dine out knowing in advance precisely what you want to eat or deciding to be open to whatever the chef's special might be, so too you can focus your research with specifically worded research questions and **hypotheses** or you can let the world come to you and be open as to what you might find. We discuss these approaches under "Deciding on a Focus."

Third is deciding on the purpose of your research. Most scholars are ultimately motivated by a desire to understand human communication, but the specific "whys" of research can be as varied as human motivations. Every research study starts with a purpose, be it testing a sophisticated theoretical concept or attempting to get an A in a research course. Peer pressure, "first-to-publish" pressure, ego, or financial incentives may all motivate researchers. This topic is further discussed under "Starting With a Purpose."

Last but not least is the question of a research topic itself. The interest areas presented in Chapter 1 will help you with this. In this chapter, under "Starting With Ideas and Observations," we suggest that you can also use the basic "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how" questions to get started.

By moving between basic assumptions about human communication and your interest areas and by considering your degree of focus and the purpose of your research, you should arrive at a sound research proposal with a defensible match among theory, method, and the data you plan to collect.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you

- Define the terms induction, deduction, and abduction.
- Identify key reasons for doing research.
- Explain the ways we "know what we know."
- Describe major worldviews in human communication research and how each shapes the nature of research.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of basing your work on the work of other researchers.
- Explain with examples the difference between a research question and a hypothesis.

STARTING WITH BASIC BELIEFS AND PERSPECTIVES

Let's start with the basic beliefs and perspectives that shape our thinking about human behavior and therefore how we might research it. What ultimately do we believe about humans and their behaviors? Are people all alike or fundamentally different—each of us an individual? Are we predictable or unpredictable; predisposed to cooperation or to conflict; living in a shared, tangible world or in our own internal, subjective worlds? Such questions underpin the assumptions about how best to study and represent human communication.

The argument for reality as an underlying, objective, concrete entity versus reality as no more than a product of our senses is almost as old as human thought.

Generalizations and predictions about human behavior often can be made with some success, but it is equally true that many predictions fail—as political pollsters can find to their dismay. Predictions are often more successful when we observe large numbers of people rather than individuals. For example, faculty can be quite confident predicting that most students will attend class on a given day. Predicting that a specific student will attend a specific class on a specific day is a different matter altogether.

As evidence can support any and all such views, ultimately we are obliged to use our own best judgment to decide which basic beliefs will inform our research, and to live with them. Basic assumptions about human behavior coalesce into broad **worldviews** or basic sets of beliefs that underpin our perspectives on communication research.

At one extreme, Worldview I sees human behavior as predictable, objectively measurable, and generalizable. Worldview I researchers aim to make generalizations about human communication that will hold true across space and time. This emphasis on measurement and generalization is called a **nomothetic** approach.

Worldview II, by contrast, sees human behavior as individualistic, unpredictable, and subjective. This view assumes that knowledge is socially constructed out of interaction

between people and is subjective. Research based on these assumptions attempts to describe and assess the subjectivity and individuality of human communication, rather than aiming to discover universal laws. This emphasis on individual understanding is called an **idiographic** approach.

Worldview I privileges the researcher's perspectives; Worldview II privileges participants' perspectives. For example, the student discussions at the beginning of each chapter are what we might call "naturally generated" or "participant generated." An external observer or researcher has had no influence on this content. However, as soon as a researcher decides to impose a method, such as a survey, on the group members, the research data are researcher generated and may have little or no resemblance to the participant-generated data.

Advertising and audience researchers subscribe to Worldview I. Researchers seek to find rules that will predict the success of interpersonal relationships, direct-marketing campaigns, or the ability of group members to work together and successfully complete a project. Television infomercials, for example, are presumably based on research indicating that using a particular type of spokesperson plus showing the product plus repeated exposure of the 1–800 phone number will maximize the number of consumer call-ins. In principle, such a generalization would apply to most products and most television audiences.

By contrast, Worldview II researchers would be interested in how consumers respond subjectively to media content. They will therefore spend time listening to individuals, with a view to capturing this subjectivity. Their goal might be, for example, to understand why some people develop a close relationship to soap opera characters or to a Second Life avatar and to investigate how these people describe those relationships. Researchers make no assumption that their findings will be generalizable and typically reject counting or measuring in favor of reporting what their interviewees said. Their overall goal is understanding rather than generalization or prediction.

Exercise 2 at the end of this chapter will help you decide which of these opposite worldviews you most identify with.

Between the two extremes of Worldview I and Worldview II are more nuanced views of human communication and how to research it.

For example, Creswell and Creswell (2018) identify four worldviews, as follows:

- **Postpositive.** This worldview challenges the notion of absolute truth but emphasizes cause and effect and the idea that the world is governed by laws or theories that can be tested or verified. Big ideas are reduced to sets of data that allow hypothesis testing. Theory leads to data collection and then to testing of the theory using quantitative methods. The emphasis is on objective observation and measurement.
- **Constructivist.** This worldview is that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and construct their own views of it. Researchers therefore rely on participants' own, subjective views of the world and use qualitative methods to capture them. Research is interpretive and qualitative, moving inductively from observation to theory development.
- **Transformative.** This worldview is change oriented and argues for mixing research with politics to confront social oppression and change lives for the better. There is

a basic interest in the marginalized and disenfranchised. The worldview embraces a variety of research interests, including action research and critical analyses.

- **Pragmatism.** This worldview focuses on solutions to problems—what works—and using all possible approaches to understanding these problems. It does not commit to any one basic philosophy and therefore embraces mixed-method research. It is "real world" and practice oriented with a focus on the problem rather than the research method. Research decisions are based on what the researchers want to do with their research—on why they are doing it.

To further fine-tune your ideas, consider Craig's (1999) communication **metatheory**—a family of concepts embracing several different traditions of communication research.

- **Rhetorical.** This tradition considers the practical art of discourse, debate, or discussion; it emphasizes the use and power of words.
- **Semiotic.** This tradition focuses on the uses and interpretations of signs and symbols; it emphasizes the study of how meanings are constructed and the relationships between words and symbols—and thought.
- **Phenomenological.** This tradition considers the experience of others; it emphasizes the study of objects and events as they are perceived, in other words, the study of the meanings that things have as experienced phenomena, as opposed to the nature of the things themselves.
- **Cybernetic.** This tradition focuses on the flow of information; it emphasizes communication as a system of information processing and feedback. The basic source-message-channel-receiver model introduced in Chapter 1 is in this category.
- **Sociopsychological.** This tradition focuses on the interaction of individuals; it emphasizes attitudes and perceptions and individuals influencing each other or working toward collective outcomes.
- **Sociocultural.** This tradition considers the production and reproduction of social order; it emphasizes the ways in which shared meanings and social structures are produced and reproduced through communication. Its focus is conflict, alienation, and the individual as products of society.
- **Critical.** This tradition focuses on power, the perpetuation of power, oppression, and emancipation in society; it challenges common assumptions.

Craig also suggests other perspectives that might be considered—for example, you might also view communication from feminist, aesthetic, economic, or spiritual perspectives.

The research method you select should follow logically from your basic assumptions about human behavior and communication. For example, a Worldview I researcher who believes that people's thinking can be measured and that careful sampling will allow her to generalize results from a small sample to a large number of people may ask "What type of survey can I run?" A Worldview II researcher interested in hearing people's subjective experiences in their own words is more likely to ask "What focus groups or interviews will I need?" and will

use theory-based judgment rather than statistical sampling to select participants. The first researcher will use quantitative methods by virtue of her worldview; the second will prefer qualitative approaches.

There is no inherent reason that one perspective on human communication should be privileged over others anymore than one specific research method should be privileged. Rather, the focus and the method of research are the outcome of the researchers' interests and assumptions about research.

The first question, then, is not whether to prefer qualitative over quantitative methods. Rather, it is "What are my basic assumptions about human communication?" The answer to this question should drive the decisions about the nature of the data to be gathered and therefore the research methods to be employed.

Foundational beliefs and arguments about human behavior are issues ultimately of **ontology**, which addresses the nature of what we study. Ontological questions deal with the nature of existence and what language actually refers to. In communication studies, ontology wrestles with assumptions about the nature of human communication and what we "really" observe when we observe it.

For example, have you ever seen someone's attitude? You might answer, "Yes, many times." But what have you really seen? What you have really seen is someone behaving in a particular way, being verbally aggressive perhaps. Or perhaps all you saw were check marks on attitude scales, from which you infer an attitude. Where is the attitude itself? Is there, in fact, such as thing as an attitude?

Ontological questions for communication scholars include "To what extent do we make real choices?" For example, is your decision to attend class voluntary or not? Is human experience primarily individual or societal—what would you know of the world and of yourself if you had no interaction with other people? Is communication contextual or universal—does a smile always mean the same thing to everybody or does the meaning depend on who is smiling and under what conditions?

The Relationship Between Theory and Observations

A theory or generalization about communication is weak if not supported by evidence, so researchers move between theory and observation. They may start with a theory that needs testing with observations, or they may have observations that lead them to construct or reconstruct a theory. Three thought processes that link observations with theories are induction, deduction, and abduction.

Induction

Induction is reasoning from observations to a theory that might explain your observations. Induction moves from the specific to the general. Let's go back to Chapter 1, in which we dropped in on students socializing. As an observer, you might make a note of communication behaviors such as the following:

- Gender clustering—males are more likely to sit with males, and females to sit with females.
- Class distinction—upper-class students are more likely than first- or second-year students to socialize in the coffee bar.

What theories might explain these observations? You might think of several. For your gender-clustering observation, you might theorize that

- Students have a greater comfort level with same-sex than with opposite-sex conversations.
- Male and female students have already formed separate social groups by virtue of being in separate campus housing units.

For your class-distinction observation, you might theorize that

- Upper-class students are more likely to have jobs, grants, or fellowships, so they can afford to socialize and drink handcrafted coffees.
- Upper-class students are more likely to live off campus, and meeting on campus is the only way to get group projects done.

Having generated several such theories, you could then design a study that would help you decide which theory offers the best explanation of the phenomenon.

Deduction

By contrast, **deduction** moves from a theory to defining the observations you will make to test the theory; it moves from the general to the specific. For example, you might have some reason to theorize that women are more likely than men to discuss grades and academic performance. You would then design a study to capture the observations that would test this idea. In this case, your research might involve recording the conversations of both men and women and counting for each group the number of times words such as *grade, grade point average,* or *assignment* occur. If you could then show that the frequency of these words is greater in women's conversations than in men's, your theory would be supported—except for two big "ifs."

First, you will want to be confident that your statement is true for all female students, not just the small group you observed. Second, you will want to know that this pattern you observed is true at all times, not just for the one discussion you happened to observe, perhaps as final examinations were approaching. This is where appropriate sampling (Chapter 6) can help us.

Deduction is in a sense more efficient than induction in that it leads to a specific observation that will test your **hypothesis**—the statement about the relationships you expect to find. Having completed that test, you can then move on to another hypothesis. With induction, you have a further step: finding a way to decide which of the many possible theories you induced from your observations are correct. Induction requires the confidence that you have enough observations to support your conclusion and that you can rule out all the other conclusions that might also be derived from your observations.

Abduction

In the context of research, **abduction** refers not to being kidnapped by aliens from the planet Zog but rather to reasoning from an effect to possible causes. For example, a large group of young children in the campus coffee bar would be an unusual sight. That occurrence might raise some questions, but a perfectly plausible answer might be that university employees are participating in a "bring your children to work" day. With abduction, your starting point is