

INVESTIGATING COMMUNICATION (2nd Ed.): CHAPTER OUTLINES

CHAPTER 2: ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION

I. Introduction

A. Research begins with curiosity.

1. Researchers notice something about communication and wish to learn more about it.

B. Researchers move from that sense of curiosity to formulating a question that can be answered by engaging in a research project.

1. The questions we ask suggest what information we will gather (“in”-put), and the conclusions we will draw (“out”-put) are based on that information.

II. Defining Communication

A. Defining the term **communication** is like trying to describe a three-ring circus to a child—how can we put into a sentence or two everything that goes on when so *much* goes on?

1. A variety of images come to mind when you tell people you are studying communication.

- a. They react so variably because communication is an umbrella term that covers numerous, apparently disparate, activities.

2. The term communication, historically, is derived from the Latin word, *communis*, which means “to make common.”

3. Today, most definitions of communication emphasize one of two different views about making things common.

B. Those who focus on the process of *making* things common adopt what can be called an **information exchange** perspective.

1. They are primarily concerned with how communication can be used as a tool to transfer information from one person or place (a source) to another (a receiver).

C. Those who emphasize that which is made *common* adopt what can be called a **meaning-based or constitutive perspective**.

1. They are concerned with how perceptions of reality are shaped by communication processes.

D. We acknowledge these two views on “making things common” with our definition.

1. Communication refers to the processes by which verbal and nonverbal messages are used to create and share meaning.

III. What Constitutes Communication Research?

A. A traditional model of communication—*people exchanging messages through channels within a context*—provides a useful way to focus on the types of research done by communication scholars.

1. The *model* contains four important components: *people*, *messages*, *channels*, and *contexts*.

2. The pivotal element of the four is messages.

- a. **Messages** are the usual target of communication researchers—messages we send to ourselves, to others, within small groups or organizations, via the media, or within and between cultures.

3. The other three components of the model—people, channels, and contexts—are usually studied only as they influence messages.

IV. Areas of Communication Research

A. Message behavior covers a large array of processes and little can be said about “communication in general.”

1. Researchers’ first step involves carving out and defining the precise slice of the big communication pie they will investigate.

- a. They identify the **research topic**, the novel idea they consider worth studying and hope to understand better.

B. The communication realm can be divided in many ways.

1. Scholars affiliate with colleagues studying similar topics within the **professional associations** in the communication discipline.
 - a. The National Communication Association (NCA), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the Association for Educational Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) are major associations.
 - b. There are four regional associations—the Central States, Eastern, Southern States, and Western States Communication Associations.
 - c. There are many state associations.
- C. Professional associations are organized into different interest areas, each of which addresses the common concern(s) of a group of scholars (see Figure 2.1).
 1. Professional associations often publish academic journals.
 2. The interest areas of the communication discipline are reflected in the courses taught at universities and colleges, and, in some cases, in the concentrations offered for communication majors.
 - a. Within each interest area, several general topics attract scholars' attention (see Figure 2.2).
 - b. Existing interest areas within the communication discipline suggest fruitful directions for research.
 - i. Officially designated interest areas are not mutually exclusive compartments within which all communication research can be neatly classified.

V. Basic Versus Applied Communication Research Topics

- A. One distinction communication scholars make is between *basic* and *applied research*.
 1. **Basic research:** research designed to test and refine theory.
 2. **Applied research:** research designed to solve a practical problem.
- B. People often misinterpret the word theory, sometimes contrasting it negatively with practical knowledge.
 1. A *theory* is simply a generalization about a phenomenon, an explanation of how or why something occurs.
 2. There is an important difference between “commonsense” theories and “scientifically tested” theories.
 - a. Scholars are more systematic in the way they develop and test theories.
 - b. The purpose of **basic communication research** is to increase our knowledge about communication phenomena by testing, refining, and elaborating theory.
- C. Numerous theories have been developed to explain a wide array of communication events and processes, far too many to catalogue in this chapter.
 1. Not all theories proposed by scholars are equally worthwhile.
 - a. The value of a given theory is judged by the extent to which it explains an important phenomenon satisfactorily, organizes knowledge, predicts certain outcomes, focuses research efforts, and excites inquiry (see Figure 2.3).
 - b. The process of testing a theory is relatively straightforward (see Figure 2.4).
 - i. The first step involves the selection of a research topic.
 - ii. The next step is the choice of an appropriate theory to help explain important aspects of the research topic.
 - iii. A hypothesis (or hypotheses) is then derived from the theory, and the accuracy of that prediction is tested in a study.
 - iv. Data are collected and analyzed, and they are used to gauge the merits of the prediction.
 - v. If the findings confirm or support the hypothesis, the theory has one more piece of support. If the findings do not support the hypothesis, more research may need to be conducted, the hypothesis may need to be revised, and/or the theory may need to be revised or rejected.
 - c. Theories, like communication, are on-going and ever-changing, and can always benefit from further refinement and elaboration.

- D. **Applied communication research** is conducted for the purpose of solving a “real-world,” socially relevant communication problem.
1. Applied communication research seeks to demonstrate the relevance of communication knowledge to a particular event or challenge of everyday life.
 - a. Applied researchers start with a communication problem in a specific context and conduct a study to lessen its intensity and/or prevalence.
 2. Many important problems experienced by individuals, couples, groups, organizations, and societies have attracted the attention of communication scholars (see Figure 2.5).
 3. One type of applied research that has important consequences for the study of communication is **action research**, “a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems” (Stringer, 1996, p. 5).
 - a. Action research stresses *participative inquiry*, that is, communication and collaboration with community group members throughout the course of a research study.
 - b. Working with a researcher, stakeholders define a problem in their community, determine the methods to be used to collect, analyze, and reflect on the data, and use their new understandings to design action steps to resolve and manage the problem.
 4. One important type of applied communication research that lends itself well to action research methods is **social justice communication research**.
 - a. This research deals with and contributes to the well-being of people who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced and disenfranchised.
 - b. One way researchers do this is by identifying and critiquing dominant structures that underwrite equality.
 - c. Sometimes social justice communication researchers go beyond identification and critique to actively change an oppressive situation.

VI. An Integrated Model of Basic and Applied Communication Research

- A. Although there are some important differences between basic and applied communication research (see Figure 2.6), these should not be treated as unrelated endeavors.
1. *Theory* and *practice* are inherently intertwined.
 2. The interrelationship of theory and application is especially important in a “practical discipline” such as Communication that has enormous potential to make a difference in people’s lives.
- B. Kreps, Frey, and O’Hair (1991) advanced a conceptual model that integrates concerns for theory with concerns for practice (see Figure 2.7).
1. This model employs two axes: one describes the relative emphasis of a particular study on theory and the other axis references the relative emphasis on application/practice.
 2. This model is useful for assessing the potential benefits of research studies.
 - a. A study low on both theory and application (1/1) is rarely worth doing.
 - b. A study may have relatively high theoretical interest but little practical application (1/9), at least in the short run.
 - c. A study rated high on applied value but low on theory (9/1), is one which the research solves an important problem in a particular context, but the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts (see Chapter 5).
 - d. Many studies fall between the extremes, of course (5/5 studies for example), but communication scholars should aim to do research that has high concern/potential for both theory and practice (9/9).

VII. Justifying Communication Research Topics

- A. R. K. Tucker, Weaver, and Berryman-Fink (1981) argue that all researchers should be prepared to answer the questions: “So what?” and “Who cares?”
1. Researchers, therefore, must develop a clear rationale for why their research topic is worth studying.

2. Research should contribute to the “conversation” between those who conduct research and those who might use their research findings.
 - a. In that light, research can be addressed to three primary audiences, each of which has slightly different needs: scholars, practitioners, and the general public.
 - i. A research project is important to communication scholars when it investigates an important communication phenomenon/problem, extends previous research by providing a more complete understanding of that phenomenon/problem, tests and refines theory, and suggests directions for future research.
 - ii. A second audience is practitioners who apply the knowledge that scholars produce, and they value communication research projects that help them do their job better.
 - iii. A third audience is the general public, non-professionals who want to know what messages will help them handle their everyday communication challenges better; therefore, a communication project is important to the extent that it helps them live more fulfilling life.
 - b. Some communication research has utility for all three audiences.

VIII. Research Questions and Hypotheses

- A. In research articles, researchers first explain why they chose their topic, review the relevant literature, and then they articulate the research question or statement that guided their investigation.
 1. These questions and/or statements usually are designed to accomplish one of two goals:
 - a. To describe communication behavior.
 - b. To relate communication behavior to other variables.

IX. Describing Communication Behavior

- A. One important purpose of communication research is to describe the nature and characteristics of a particular communication behavior or sequence of communication behaviors.
 1. A **research question**, a formal question posed to guide research, of this type essentially asks, “What is the nature of communication behavior ‘X’?”
 - a. An example is: What receiver behaviors trigger perceived suspicion? (J. K. Burgoon, Buller, Dillman, & Walther, 1995).
 2. These questions attempt to categorize a concept, and, thereby, measure it and turn it into a variable (see Chapter 4).
 - a. A **variable** is any concept that can have two or more values.
 - b. A single object, therefore is not a variable; it becomes a variable only when it exists in different types or in different amounts and we understand those different states.

X. Relating Communication Behavior to Other Variables

- A. Turning a communication concept into a variable makes it possible to examine the relationship between that communication behavior/variable and other important variables.
 1. Researchers can answer specific instances of the general research question, “How is communication variable ‘X’ related to other variables.”
 - a. One example: Is affective orientation related to the reported use of specific types of nonverbal comforting behaviors? (Bullis & Horn, 1995).

B. Independent Versus Dependent Variables

1. When researchers study how two variables are related, they often assume that one of them influences the other.
 - a. The variable that is thought to influence the changes in another variable is called an **independent variable (IV)** (sometimes called an **explanatory variable**; in nonexperimental research a **predictor variable**).
 - b. They call the variable thought to be changed by another variable a **dependent variable (DV)** (in nonexperimental research, sometimes called the **criterion variable** or **outcome variable**).
2. Sometimes researchers suspect a **causal relationship** between variables, believing that changes in

the independent variable cause observed changes in the dependent variable.

- a. Researchers sometimes study independent variables that are not about messages, but are thought to influence people's communication behavior (such as the attractiveness of people's appearance may influence how others talk to them)
- b. Communication behavior, of course, can also be studied as an independent variable that causes changes in the dependent variable; for instance, researchers may suspect that certain messages designed to get other people to comply with a request may actually cause people to *resist* doing what was asked rather than agreeing to it.
- c. It should be pointed out that causality is very difficult to establish; we would not want to conclude that a drug cured a disease on the basis of a single study, or two or three, and the same is true when attempting to establish causal principles for communication behavior (see Chapter 5).
- d. There are also various models of causal relationships between variables.
 - i. In **recursive causal models**, the causal relationship is one way in that the one variable influences another but not the other way around, that is one is the cause and the other is effect.
 - ii. In **nonrecursive causal models**, the causal relationship is reciprocal or two way, in that a variable can be both a cause and effect.
- e. At other times, researchers assume a **non-causal relationship** between variables, meaning that the variables are associated, or occur together, without one necessarily causing changes in the other.
 - i. When posing formal research questions for a study that assesses noncausal relationships, researchers typically designate one variable as the independent variable and the other as the dependent variable, depending on their primary interest.

C. Ordered versus Nominal Variables

1. Variables can also be differentiated with regard to the values researchers assign to them or the kind of "scale" used to measure them.
 - a. **Ordered variables** can be assigned numerical values that indicate how much of the concept is present.
 - i. Variables such as age, weight, temperature, and income are ordered variables.
 - b. **Nominal variables** (also called categorical, classificatory, or discrete variables), by contrast, can be differentiated only on the basis of type (nominal means "in name only").
 - i. Variables such as gender (male and female), race (e.g., Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Native American), and political affiliation (e.g., Democrat, Republican, and Independent) are nominal variables.
 - ii. A nominal variable that can be divided into two categories, such as gender, is called a **dichotomous** or **binomial** variable.
 - iii. A nominal variable that can be divided into more than two categories, such as ethnicity, is called a **polytomous variable**.
 - c. In some cases, a potentially ordered variable is treated as a nominal variable; however, due to a loss of important information, researchers do not typically turn ordered variables into nominal variables.

D. Research Questions versus Hypotheses

1. Research studies usually are designed to answer research questions or test hypotheses about relationships between variables.
 - a. Questions are typically posed when researchers do not have enough evidence, on the basis of the literature reviewed, to predict the nature of that relationship.
 - b. At other times, researchers have a hunch or tentative answer about the nature of the relationship between an independent and dependent variable.
 - i. When researchers feel confident enough to make a prediction, they advance a hypothesis (Ha is the general symbol for a research hypothesis; H1 is used to refer to a specific research

hypothesis), a tentative statement about the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

- ii. If the hypothesis predicts a relationship between variables without specifying a relationship, it is called a **two-tailed hypothesis** or, less accurately, a **non-directional hypothesis**.
- iii. If the hypothesis predicts a specific relationship between variables, it is called a **one-tailed hypothesis** (sometimes called a **directional hypothesis**) (see Chapter 12).

XI. Posing Research Questions and Hypotheses about Relationships between Variables

A. How the research question or hypothesis for a communication study is phrased usually depends on two things:

1. Whether the independent variable is nominal or ordered.
2. Whether a researcher wishes to pose a research question or a hypothesis about the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

B. Example

1. When the independent variable is nominal, divided into categories, the research questions asks whether there is a difference between a (the first category of the nominal independent variable) and b (the second category of the nominal independent variable) with respect to c (the dependent variable).
 - a. In studying the effects of gender (the independent variable) on self-disclosure (the dependent variable), the research question asks whether there is a difference between males (a , the first category of the nominal variable) and females (b , the second category of the nominal variable) with regard to the self-disclosure (c , the dependent variable).
 - i. Some actual examples: Will females provide more sensitive comforting messages than males? (Hoffner & Haefner, 1997); How do doctors and patients differ in their covert responses during the medical interview? (Cegala, McNeilis, McGee, & Jonas, 1995); and Do program enrollees and nonenrollees [in a Breast and Cervical Cancer Control Program] differ in their preference for persuasive messages delivered through mass media, one-to-several interpersonal channels, or one-to-one interpersonal channels? (A.A. Marshall, Smith, & McKeon, 1995).
2. A hypothesis for a nominal independent variable predicts the nature of the difference between the two (or more) categories of the independent variable.
 - a. It takes the form: a (the first category of the nominal independent variable) will be greater (or less) on c (the dependent variable) than will b (the second category of the nominal independent variable).
 - i. Regarding the effects of gender on self-disclosure, the hypothesis might state that “men self-disclose more than women” (or “men self-disclose less than women”).
(a) Note: Like most research hypotheses, this statement is one-tailed; a two-tailed hypothesis would state: “Men and women self-disclose differently.”
 - ii. Some actual examples: Women report more than men that verbal interactions contribute to their relational closeness (Floyd & Parks, 1995); employees provided with justifications will perceive the manager’s actions as fairer than employees provided with excuses or no social accounts (Tata, 1996); older people will evaluate their communication with young family adults more positively than young people in general (Cai, Giles, & Noels, 1998).
3. When the independent variable is *ordered*, measured in sequenced numbers, the research questions asks whether there is a relationship between x (the independent variable) and y (the dependent variable).
 - a. To ascertain how age (x , the independent variable) affects self-disclosure (y , the dependent variable)—with age being an ordered variable—the research question asks whether there is a relationship between the variables of age and self-disclosure.
 - i. Actual example: What is the association between leadership evaluations and specific types of leadership-relevant talk? (Pavitt, Whitchurch, McClurg, & Petersen, 1995)

4. A hypothesis for an ordered independent variable specifies the nature of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable.
 - a. Independent and dependent variables may be related in quite a few ways; however, we focus on two types of relationships:
 - i. A **positive relationship** (also called a **direct relationship**), in which increases in an independent variable are associated with increases in a dependent variable (e.g., the more hours one spends studying before an exam, the higher one's scores will be).
 - ii. A **negative relationship** (also called an **inverse relationship**) in which increases in an independent variable are associated with decreases in a dependent variable (e.g., the more hours one spends "partying" the night before an exam, the lower one's exam scores will be).
 - b. A hypothesis, thus, takes the form: x (the independent variable) is positively (or negatively) related to y (the dependent variable).
 - i. For the effects of age on self-disclosure, the hypothesis might be either "Age is positively related to self-disclosure" or "Age is negatively related to self- disclosure."
 - ii. A two-tailed hypothesis would state: "Age and self-disclosure are related."
 - c. Actual example: Cognitive efficiency will be positively related to interaction involvement (Jordan, 1998).
5. Some independent variables are obviously nominal or ordered, such as the variables of gender and age above, but others can be treated as ether nominal or ordered.
 - a. As a general rule, if a variable can be measured either way, it should be treated as ordered and a scale should be used to measure it.
6. Researchers are often interested in the effects of *multiple* independent variables on a dependent variable (an even multiple dependent variables).
 - a. In such situations, researchers are especially interested in **interaction effects** (also called **conditioning, contingency, joint, and moderating effects**; sometimes known as **multiplicative reactions** in nonexperimental research—effects due to the unique combination of the independent variables that make a difference to on the dependent variable(s).
 - i. Interaction effects are due to the effects of multiple independent variables working together, in contrast to the effects of each independent variable working alone (called **main effects**).
 - ii. Actual RQ: Do argumentativeness and verbal aggression interact to predict an individual's reported use of evidentiary appeals to respond to refusal of a request? (Ifert & Bearden, 1998)
 - iii. Actual H: The combination of interpersonal communication apprehension and receiver apprehension is more strongly associated with sexual communication satisfaction for women than men in sexually intimate, heterosexual relationships. Wheeless & Parsons, 1995)

XII. Conclusion

- A Research does not occur in a vacuum. Communication researchers must examine what is already known.
- B. Determining the "lay of the land" will require finding and evaluating a wide variety of information sources.
- C. The research process does not stop at the "end" of a study as the process is cyclical beginning anew.