1.5: Approaches to Organizational Communication Research

Learning Objectives

- Explain what is meant by the social-scientific approach to organizational communication.
- Explain what is meant by the interpretive approach to organizational communication.
- Explain what is meant by the critical approach to organizational communication.

In Table 1.3 you saw the basic history of organizational communication and how it's grown into the academic discipline that it is today. The earliest years in the development of the field were predominantly marked by either thought pieces written about organizational communication or were driven by social-scientific/quantitative research. If you read Table 1.3 carefully, starting in the early 1980s new voices began emerging in the field of organizational communication bringing both qualitative/interpretive and then rhetorical/critical approaches to the study of organizational communication. In this section, we are going to examine each of these different methodological traditions and the types of research questions commonly posed in each. As authors, we find it very important to have this discussion in the first chapter because you’ll come in contact with all three methodological approaches as you read this book. We want you, as readers, to be able to critically analyze the research we are presenting and understand how the different methodological traditions impact our understanding of the phenomenon that is organizational communication. To help with this purpose, we are going to explore the two major branches of organizational communication: social-scientific/quantitative and qualitative (both interpretive and critical).

Social-Scientific/Quantitative

The first major tradition in organizational communication is the social-scientific/quantitative tradition to organizational communication. The bulk of the early work in organizational communication either focused on prescriptive methods for business speaking or came from outside the field of communication studies until the 1960s. The 1960s represented a
period when the field started to solidify and create professional boundaries to differentiate itself from business, psychology, sociology, and speech. During these early years of the field, the goal of organizational communication research was very scientific. In essence, researchers would use theory to form a series of hypotheses, the researchers would then test these hypotheses through experimental observation, and the outcomes of the experimental observations would help the researchers revise the original theory, which inevitably lead to new research questions and hypotheses. The predominant research methodology available at the time stemmed out of the world of social psychology and was based in statistics. As noted in the two studies examining organizational methodology discussed in the history of organizational communication, the bulk of research conducted today is still from this social-scientific or quantitative perspective.


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**Survey Research in Organizational Communication**

The first common type of social scientific method utilized in organizational communication is probably the most common in communication research as a whole, the survey. Surveys involve a series of questions designed to measure individuals’ personality/communication traits, attitudes, beliefs, and/or knowledge on a given subject. Surveys are as popular as they are because you can get massive amounts of information from a wide array of people very quickly. However, one always has to question whether or not a survey is adequately using the right types of participants for a specific study. For example, using a group of college students to discuss workplace violence may not be very accurate because of the limited exposure your average undergraduate college student has in the work world. As such, you want to look for studies that utilize people who not in school and work for a living outside of the college environment if at all possible.

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**Experimental Research in Organizational Communication**

The second type of common social-scientific/quantitative study conducted by communication researchers is the experiment. Like in the physical sciences, the goal of an experiment is to manipulate some facet of a participant’s experience to determine how that participant responds. For example, in a study examining the impact that an initial handshake has on potential interviewers, you could have a trained confederate (someone the participants do not know is working for the researcher) enter into a potential job interview and shake the hands in an aggressive, average firmness, or weak fashion. The goal of this potential study would be to determine if the interviewer’s experiences with the potential job candidate would differ based on the type of handshake he or she used at the beginning of an interview. In this hypothetical study, we, as the researchers, would manipulate the type of handshake an interviewer receives at the beginning of the interview in some kind of random fashion to ensure we are not accidentally biasing the results. Overall, experiments generally involve a lot of planning and time to pull-off competently.
Content Analysis in Organizational Communication

The final type of research conducted on the banner of social-scientific/quantitative research is the content analysis. A content analysis is a form of social-scientific research based on taking a series of artifacts and numerically coding information contained within the artifacts to see if a discernible pattern emerges. It involves taking a series of artifacts and numerically coding information contained within the artifacts to see if a discernible pattern emerges. First, we need to define what we mean by artifacts. In this sense of the word, artifacts are objects made by organizational members capturing communication attempts. For example, speeches of CEOs found on YouTube could be a video artifact or press releases from Fortune 500 corporations could be a different type of artifact. Second, we then numerically code these artifacts looking for specific details. For example, maybe we’re going to analyze speeches made by Fortune 500 CEOs looking for terms that resemble patriotic themes: patriotism, United States, duty, honor, America, etc... Our could would be to get a numerical count of this specific type of image. We could then also analyze the incidence of these themes across different organizational types: banking, automotive, etc... In this case, the goal would be to see if different types of organizations have CEOs who are more likely to invoke images of patriotism than other types of organizations.


Example of Quantitative/Social Scientific Research

Individual Differences in Managers’ Use of Humor: Subordinate

Perceptions of Managers’ Humor

By Brian J. Rizzo, Melissa Bekelja Wanzer, and Melanie Booth-Butterfield (1999)


In this study, Rizzo, Wanzer, and Booth-Butterfield set out to examine subordinates’ perceptions of their manager’s use of humor in the workplace. The researchers recruited 151 participants in introductory communication courses, graduate communication courses, and MBA courses. All participants were either current or past part-time (less than 40 hours per week) or full time (40 hours per week or more) employees of some organization.

The researchers used three mental measures in this study: Self and Manager Humor Orientation (individual’s use of humor in interpersonal interactions—was completed once for self and once for their manager), Humor Behaviors (Individual’s use of humor strategies in the workplace—was completed once for self and once for their manager), Manager Affect (degree to which a subordinate likes her or his manager), and Manager Effectiveness (degree to which a subordinate perceives her or his manager as effective).

The researchers had four hypotheses in this study (taken from page 362):
H1: High humor oriented individuals will report using more humorous behaviors in the workplace than low humor oriented individuals.

H2: Hugh humor oriented individuals will perceive more types of humorous behaviors as appropriate for their manager to use in the workplace than low humor oriented individuals.

H3: Subordinates perceptions of managers’ humor orientation will be positively associated with liking toward these managers.

H4: Employees’ perceptions of managers' humor orientation will be positively related to perceptions of managerial effectiveness.

The Results

First, employees who rated themselves as using large amounts of humor in their daily interactions with others used more humorous behaviors in the workplace than those individuals who did not rate themselves as humorous.

Second, employees who rated themselves as using large amounts of humor in their daily interactions with others believed that managers could use a wider array of humor strategies in the workplace than those individuals who did not rate themselves as humorous.

Third, employees’ perceptions of their manager’s use of humor in her or his interactions with others was positively related to a subordinate’s liking of that manager.

Lastly, employees’ perceptions of their manager’s use of humor in her or his interactions with others was positively related to a subordinate’s perception of the effectiveness of that manager.

In essence, all four of this study’s hypotheses were supported.

Qualitative

Research generally divides methods into two different epistemologies, or ways of knowing: social-scientific and humanistic. We’ve briefly discussed the first approach, social-science, in the previous section and we’re going to explore the nature of this humanistic way of knowing, which is generally referred to as qualitative research. Wrench, J. S., Thomas-Maddox, C., Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, J. C. (2008). *Quantitative research methods for communication: A hands-on approach*. New York: Oxford. Qualitative research is "It is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world." Van Maanen, J. (1979). Reclaiming qualitative methods for organizational research: A preface. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24, 520–526, pg. 520. Because of the variety of different approaches available under the larger title “qualitative,” researchers often break discuss two different qualitative lines of inquiry: interpretive and critical. Fink, E. J., & Gantz, W. (1996). A content analysis of three mass communication research traditions: Social science, interpretive studies, and critical analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73, 114–134. We’ll explore each of these in the rest of this section.
Interpretive

Interpretive research is not an easy idea to nail down, so any discussion of what interpretive research is must start by clearly distinguishing this approach from the social scientific one. According to Amedeo P. Giorgi, the social-scientific (often referred to as positivistic research by qualitative researchers) method can be broken into six general parts:

1. Reductionistic, the goal is to reduce phenomena into operational definitions for easy of study;
2. Deterministic, the belief that outcomes and phenomena are the result of causes that can be duplicated;
3. Predictive, the general goal of scientific research is to predict behavior;
4. Observer independent, researchers attempt to be as objective as possible and avoid influencing the data;
5. Empirical, only data that can be observed or obtained from participants is worthy of analysis;
6. Repeatable, research results should be replicated by other researchers; and
7. Quantitative, all phenomena should be numerically measured.


Fundamentally, Giorgi believed that social-scientific researchers are asking fundamentally wrong questions. Instead of asking how a phenomena should be measured, Giorgi believed that researchers should ask, “What do the phenomena mean?” Giorgi, A. (1971). Phenomenology and experimental psychology, In A. Giorgi, W. F. Fischer, & R. Von Echartserg (Eds.), *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology* (vol. 1, part 1). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, pg. 21. Put a different way, interpretive research focuses on “how people communicate in their own natural environments, when they are guided by their own personal objectives, how they give meaning to their communication, especially when they are using communication for those pragmatic objectives that determine and control day-to-day existence.” Chesebro, J. W., & Borisoff, D. J. (2008). Interpretive research. In J. S. Wrench, C. Thomas-Maddox, V. P. Richmond, and J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Quantitative research methods for communication: A hands-on approach* (pp. 449–486). New York, NY: Oxford, pg. 451. Let’s break this definition down into its functional parts.

Communicating in Natural Environments

The first major goal of interpretive research is the desire to see how people communicate in their natural environments. By natural environment, interpretive researchers do not want to view people engaging in communication within a laboratory setting. Instead, interpretivists want to observe people going about their daily communicative routines with their coworkers in a fashion that resembles as normal a communication experience as humanly possible. Yanow, D., & Ybema, S. (2009). Interpretivism in organizational research: On elephants and blind researchers. In D. A. Buchannan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 39–60). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. Interpretivists believe that communication that in one’s natural environment will be unforced and will resemble how people actually communicate instead of how they perceive their communication to be, which is an inherent problem with some social-scientific research (especially surveys).
Guided by Personal Objectives

Second, interpretivists want to observe participants as they go about their daily lives doing what they normally would do and not alter their behavior for the researcher(s). One of the inherent differences between social-scientific research and interpretivistic research is that interpretivists do not go into the research encounter expecting to “see” anything specific. Social-scientists set specific hypotheses, determine how to test those hypotheses, and test the hypotheses. By this purpose, social-scientists go into a research encounter expecting to “see” something very specific. Interpretivists, on the other hand, go into a research encounter to observe and learn and ultimately see what their participants show them. Instead of going in with a pre-set agenda, interpretivists watch how people behave when the participants are guided by their own personal objectives and not those of the researcher.

People Giving Meaning to their Own Communication

Lastly, interpretivists are interested in how people understand their own communicative behavior and give meaning to their own communicative behavior. Humans generally behave and communicate for a variety of reasons, and thus understand and prescribe a variety of meanings to their communication. An interpretivist is less concerned with attaching some kind of meaning to a researcher participant than they are with understanding how that research participant views her or his own communicative behavior. As an outsider looking in, we can ascribe all kinds of incorrect attributions to an individual’s communicative behavior. It’s only when we get inside a communicative interaction from the participant’s point-of-view, that we can truly begin to understand why someone is communicating a specific manner and how that communication is important to her or him. In the organizational environment, maybe a researcher is interested in understanding how people view the balance between their work lives and their personal lives. It’s only after someone engages with people that a researcher can start to develop a better idea of how people view this phenomenon of work-life balance answering the question, “what does this phenomena mean?” Renee Cowan and Mary F. Hoffman did just this in their study examining how people view their work and personal lives in the accompanying sidebar.


Example of Interpretive/Qualitative Research

The Flexible Organization: How Contemporary Employees Construct the Work/Life Border


In this study, the researchers set out to qualitatively examine how individuals manage their work lives and their personal lives with each other. Specifically, the researcher had one overarching research question in this study:

RQ1: How do employees of today define the terms flexibility and permeability in regard to work/life balance?

The researchers recruited 30 participants. All of the participants had to be at least 18 years of age and currently
employed in an organization that provided benefits (e.g., retirement, stock options, health care, etc.). 99 percent of the sample were permanent employees, 44 percent were female and 56 percent were male. 70 percent of the sample was married and 76 percent of the sample had children.

All of the participants agreed to take part in an interview about their “perceptions and definitions of work/life balance, what balancing work/life issues meant and looked like in their lives, what their company did that made it easy or difficult to balance work/life issues, and any stories they had heard about people using work/life benefits in their company” (p. 39). Ultimately, the 30 interviews generated 112 single-spaced pages of transcribed text for analysis.

Overall, the researchers found that the terms “flexibility” and “permeability” were used interchangeably by the participants. Furthermore, these issues can be broken into four distinct themes: time, space, evaluation, and compensation.

Time Flexibility. Employees wanted to have flexibility in how their time was calculated by the organizations. This included flex time issues (instead of coming in at 8 and leaving at 4, you could come in at 10 and leave at 6), and the possibility of examining time over a larger period (not always counting up 40 hours within one work week, but averaged over the entire year).

Space Flexibility. Employees saw space issues as a two prong construct: physical space and mental space. Physical space flexibility is the notion that individuals should have the ability to telecommute and work from home when capable. Mental space is the notion that individuals should be allowed to think about work at home and think about home at work.

Evaluation Flexibility. Employees believed that the evaluation of one’s work should be based on the quality of the work itself and not on the amount of time an individual spends in the office doing the work.

Compensation Flexibility. Employees believed that their quality work should receive extra financial compensation (bonuses, increase in pay, etc.) or time compensation (increased number of vacation days, telecommuting options, etc.).

Critical

Traditional social-scientific research wants to make hypotheses and test them interpretive research wants to study how people communicate in a natural environment and understand that communication. Critical research is less interested with explaining or understanding organizational communication than it is with “analyzing values and judging, or criticizing, them.”Fink, E. J., & Gantz, W. (1996). A content analysis of three mass communication research traditions: Social science, interpretive studies, and critical analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 73*, 114–134, pg. 115. As the word “critical” entails, critical research is about seeing how society, or for our purposes an organization, exists in a world of power imbalances. Within most groups there are those with power and those without power. Critical researchers strongly believe that those with power purposefully prevent those without from achieving equality. As such, “critical scholarship tends to stand on the side of ‘weaker’ parties when studying or commenting upon relations of dominance.”Alvesson, M., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2009) Critical methodology in management and organization research. In D. A. Buchanan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 61–77). Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pg. 61. According to Mats Alvesson and Karen L. Ashcroft, critical theory entails four specific parts:

1. The critical questioning of ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities (what might be called ‘the 4 I’s’) deemed dominate, in some way harmful, and/or unchallenged.
2. Through some form of denaturalization and/or rearticulation.

3. With the aim of inspiring social reform in the presumed interest of the less-privileged and/or majority—particularly resistance to ‘the 4 I’s’ that tend to fix people into unreflectively receiving and reproducing limited ideas, selves, motives, and practices.


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**Questioning the 4 I’s**

The first part of critical theory identified by Alvesson and Ashcroft is the idea that critical theory helps people question ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities that appear dominant and are in some way problematic. Alvesson, M., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2009) Critical methodology in management and organization research. In D. A. Buchanan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 61–77). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. Let’s look at these in turn. First, we have ideologies—the beliefs, myths, and doctrines that guide an individual, group, or organization., which are the beliefs, myths, and doctrines that guide an individual, group, or organization. From the critical theorists perspective, they want to examine whether or not these ideologies that have been developed within an organization are fundamentally harmful (especially to workers). Furthermore, critical theorists question if specific ideologies have are unchallenged. By unchallenged, we mask whether or not a specific ideology is allowed to be pervasive and no questions the ideology or where it came from and how it stays. Often organizational leaders create ideologies that are inherently problematic for workers. If workers never question these ideologies, they’ll stay in place for years or decades without ever being challenged. Critical theorists attempt to look at a variety of ideologies that exist (and get communicated) within an organization in an attempt to shed the light on how ideologies function to keep workers subjugated by management.

Second, critical theorists examine various institutions that are dominant in society and examine them to see if they are harmful for the general worker. In fact, it’s this category of critical examination that really focuses its attention specifically on how modern organizations are institutions that attempt to create structures that keep workers subjugated. We’ll talk more about this idea in Chapter 4.

Third, critical theorists examine various interests to see if they are harmful to workers and remain unchallenged. By interests—Whether or not an individual (or group of individuals) has a clear advantage or advancement of a personal or group agenda that is not necessarily clearly articulated to everyone within an organization., we are specifically referring to whether or not an individual (or group of individuals) has a clear advantage or advancement of a personal or group agenda that is not necessarily clearly articulated to everyone within an organization. One of the more interesting and seedy aspects of modern organizational life is the issue of unarticulated or hidden interests that people (especially those in leadership positions) may have. Critical theorists attempt to seek out these interests and bring them to the light of day in an effort to show workers how they are being manipulated to help people in power achieve these interests. Furthermore, often the interests of those with power are not the same as those without the power.

Lastly, critical researchers attempt to examine various identities that could be harmful or under-challenged. For critical purposes, identity—The state of being or believing that you are the same person or thing described or claimed by those
with power. refers to the state of being or believing that you are the same person or thing described or claimed by those with power. Under this premise, workers are often labeled with specific identities that are designed to subjugate the workers. For example, someone may be told that if he or she was a “good worker” then he or she wouldn’t question having to put in 50 of 60 hours a week at a job. Inherent in this use of “good worker” is often the veiled threat that bad workers get fired and good workers have prospects at getting promoted. As such, workers often adopt either the good or bad worker identity without ever realizing that it is a tool of managerial control.

### Denaturalization and/or Rearticulation

After identifying relevant ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities, a critical researcher must “articulate an alternative position that challenges conventional representations and critically probes (rather than taking at face value) the reported views and experiences of research participants.” Alvesson, M., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2009) Critical methodology in management and organization research. In D. A. Buchannan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 61–77). Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pg. 64. In essence, the critical theorist attempts to show individuals that the specific ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities that they believe are steadfast and unchangeable, are in fact creations of people in power and can be altered. Part of this process involves the critical theorists clearly articulating a new vision for ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities that are more egalitarian or worker friendly.

### Inspiring Social Reform

Further the notion of rearticulating ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities is taking those changes to a more societal level. The goal of a critical theorist is to not just notice problems that exist in society but to help people change the power imbalances that exist. Part of this process is helping people see new ideas, selves, motives, and practices. In the organizational context, the goal is to emancipate workers or “break away from structures and ideologies that tend to constrain forms of consciousness into prespecified routes that stifle imagination.” Alvesson, M., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2009) Critical methodology in management and organization research. In D. A. Buchannan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 61–77). Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pg. 64.

### Constraining Choice and Action

While it would be wonderful if modern organizations could be utopian enterprises where everyone was truly equal, critical theorists must also realize that overly revolutionary or radical perspectives on organizing and the modern workplace may not be realistic or helpful. Alvesson, M., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2009) Critical methodology in management and organization research. In D. A. Buchannan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 61–77). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. Instead, critical theorists should focus the real lives and experiences that people in modern organizations have. This isn’t to say that critical theorists must always be strictly “realistic,” but rather critical scholarship “seeks to acknowledge how realizing ideals such as class, gender, race, and ecological justice may have drastic consequences for the material functioning of organizations alongside effects on member subjectivities.” Alvesson, M., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2009) Critical methodology in management and organization research. In D. A. Buchannan & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational research methods* (pp. 61–77). Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pg. 65.

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**Example of Rhetorical/Critical Scientific Research**

The Communicational Basis of the Organizational Text as Macroactor:

A Case Study of Multilevel Marketing Discourse


In this study, Carl wanted to examine a macroactor (an individual who is empowered to speak on behalf of a large number of people). In this specific analysis, the macroactor was a letter to the editor in *Forbes* magazine by Ken McDonald the managing director of Quixtar, Inc. Prior to this letter, Karen J. Bannan had written an article in *Forbes* magazine titled “Amway.com” discussing how the notorious multi-level marketing firm Amway was the sister company of Quixtar along with the perils of multi-level marketing. McDonald’s letter in response to the Bannan letter to the editor took issue with the article because it “did not provide an accurate picture of the company,” citing an inaccurate understanding of the corporate relationship among Amway, Quixtar, and Alticor, unfair representations of Quixtar business meetings as ‘cult-like,’ and only publishing accounts from dissatisfied ‘Independent Business Owners’ (p. 23).

The purpose of Carl’s analysis of McDonald’s letter was to demonstrate that the letter is a clear piece of organizational rhetoric. While the organization attempts to hide its actions in the voice of a single individual speaking out, the very act of this letter is clearly a message with backing from the institution itself. To aid in the development of his argument, McDonald examined four major issues “(1) the features of the text that make it a letter to the editor and not, for example, a press release or news story or some other kind of text [company logo, date, salutation, name of author, author identity, etc.]; (2) the issue of authorship and its authorizing function [the signature on the letter with the company’s logo makes the letter act as a function of the organization itself]; (3) the presuppositions that, thought absent, are necessary for the text to ‘make sense’ to its audience [the primary presupposition is that the reporter did not provide a fair, accurate, and objective account of Quixtar]; and (4) how the text is constructed to orient to these presuppositions and to build up a rhetorical case imputing motive to *Forbes* magazine [the letter systematically explains why Quixtar felt the need to respond]” (pp. 23–24).

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**Comparing the Three Types**

Now that we’ve explained how each of the three methodological traditions approaches organizational communication, let’s see how the three compare when we put them side-by-side. Table 1.4 provides an explanation for how the three methodological approaches differ in their understanding and approach to organizational communication.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Methodological Traditions</th>
<th>Interpretive</th>
<th>Critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basic Goal</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>The goal of social scientific research is to classify organizational communicative phenomena, measure them, and construct statistical models to explain the phenomena.</td>
<td>The goal of interpretive research is a complete, detailed description of the organizational communication phenomenon examined.</td>
<td>The goal of critical research is to examine how organizations exists in a world of power imbalances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td>Organizations are naturally existing phenomena open to description, prediction, and control.</td>
<td>Organizations are social entities with day-to-day talk, rites, rituals, and stories that develop its own unique culture that has aspects that are similar to other cultures.</td>
<td>Organizations are inherently places of power imbalances. Workers are typically subjugated by superiors who have implicit or expressed power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>View of</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizations</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Social Scientific researchers have a very clear idea what they are examining at the start of a research study.</td>
<td>Interpretive researchers generally only have a vague idea of what they are looking for at the start of a research study and prefer to view organizational phenomena from the viewpoint of their participants.</td>
<td>Critical researchers generally select artifacts from organizations or about organizations and analyze those artifacts in an effort to see how power is communicated and utilized within an organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Social Scientific research designs are very carefully planned before the data are ever collected.</td>
<td>Interpretive research designs develop over the course of data collection.</td>
<td>Critical researchers can follow very stringent ways of analyzing artifacts or create the ways of analysis while examining the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Scientific/quantitative researchers use a variety of measurement devices (e.g., questionnaires) as the primary tool of data collection.</td>
<td>Interpretive/qualitative researchers collect their data themselves through interviews and observation, so the researcher is the primary tool of data collection.</td>
<td>Rhetorical/critical researchers do not need data sources beyond the act (an actual communication event) or artifact (the record of a communication event) being analyzed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tools of Research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Numbers and statistics are the primary forms of data. Writing tends to be very formal.</td>
<td>Words, pictures, and artifacts are the primary forms of data. Writing tends to be very narrative.</td>
<td>Acts and artifacts are the primary forms of data. Writing tends to be narrative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Social Scientific research tends to be more succinct, quickly</td>
<td>Interpretive research tends to be more</td>
<td>Critical research tends to be detailed in its analysis, but the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
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<td>Critical</td>
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### Issue Methodological Traditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Science</th>
<th>Interpretive</th>
<th>Critical</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conducted, and can be generalized to larger groups than the sample utilized in the study.</td>
<td>detailed, time consuming, and limited to the group the researcher studied.</td>
<td>findings should help researchers understand organizational communication in an effort to move towards egalitarian power structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of Research</td>
<td>Social Scientific research is more objective and you are able to achieve a more detached view of the communication phenomena.</td>
<td>Interpretive research is more subjective and you are able to achieve an insider’s point-of-view of the communication phenomena.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Theory</td>
<td>Scientific/quantitative researchers view theory as the guiding metaphor for research. As such, research starts with theoretical ideas, poses hypotheses, tests them, and makes revisions to the theory.</td>
<td>Interpretive/qualitative data collection ends with the creation of hypotheses and the generation of theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiques</td>
<td>A lot of social scientific research is prescription based and looks at skills people need to have in modern organizations. However, the researcher is ultimately responsible for which skills are analyzed. Furthermore, there tends to be little research examining skills interculturally.</td>
<td>Interpretive research is often very subjective. Furthermore, there is a serious debate as to whether the information gained from one organization can or should impact how we view another organization.</td>
</tr>
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At this point, you may be wondering about the state of organizational communication as a field today. Today there are still a wide range of scholars investigating organizational communication from a social-scientific, interpretive, and critical vantage point. In a 2007 article by Patric Spence and Colin Baker, the researchers set out to examine what types of methodologies modern organizational communication scholars were using. Spence, Patric, R., & Baker, C. R. (2007). State of the method: An examination of level of analysis, methodology, representation and setting in current organizational communication research. *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association*, 36, 111–124. Using a period from 1998 to 2004, the researchers located 153 articles discussing organizational communication in major communication journals published by regional, national, and international communication associations. Figure 1.4 demonstrates the basic findings from this study.
Figure 1.4 Types of Research Conducted


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**Key Takeaways**

- The social scientific approach to organizational communication is based on the notion that researchers start by desiring to test a specific theoretical idea about organizational communication, which leads to specific hypotheses being made, data is gathered and interpreted, and lastly the data leads to further generalizations that help to refine the original theory. Social scientists typically conduct research using surveys, experiments, or content analysis that can be analyzed using statistical reasoning.

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**Exercise**

1. Create an experiment testing the impact that verbal, nonverbal, or mediated messages have on ensuring employee understanding about a new organizational policy.