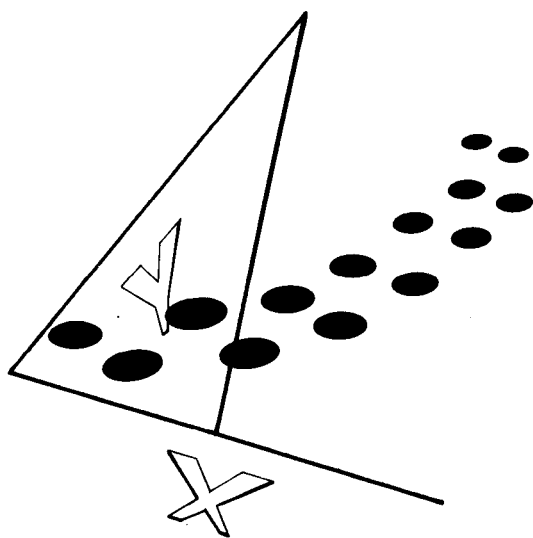


Studying Interpersonal Communication

The Research Experience



Ruth Anne Clark **2**
INTERPERSONAL COMMTEXTS

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The Research Experience

Ruth Anne Clark

~~INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS~~ 2

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Preface

Do you ever draw generalizations about interpersonal communication based on your observations? For instance, you might conclude that members of one sorority are more supportive of each other than members of another sorority. Or you might decide that individuals who talk a lot at a party are more popular than other individuals. Or you might infer that individuals who make grammatical blunders are judged to be inept.

Most of the time, however, both our observations and inferences are casual rather than systematic. Since we do not have a carefully selected sample of behavior, we rely on whatever information may be available. Rather than explicitly defining our terms, we settle for a general notion of key concepts such as "supportive," "popular," or "inept." Moreover, because we have no real measures of these concepts, we rely on our own judgments of what it means to be supportive, popular, or inept. And so on. The difficulty, then, is that our inferences may lack

precision, may not be persuasive to others, and worst of all, may simply be wrong.

If we wish to study interpersonal communication, therefore, it is important to understand systematic procedures that yield inferences that we can have faith in and that others will be willing to accept. And that is what this book is about, the systematic empirical study of interpersonal communication. Learning to study interpersonal communication in this manner does not require special abilities or background. Certainly you do not need to know advanced mathematics. The empirical study of interpersonal communication is like all scientific inquiry: It requires clear thinking.

The student encountering the terminology of experimental and descriptive methods for the first time may initially feel burdened by the need to master a new vocabulary. This vocabulary is not large, however. It contains perhaps 20 new terms. As you read this book, you will encounter many of these terms in the first chapter. Don't try to memorize them: simply try to understand them. As they are repeated throughout the remainder of the text, hopefully they will come to be terms that you can understand and use with ease.

The emphasis in this book is on experimental methodology. This is not because experimental methodology is of more value than descriptive approaches. (The distinction between these two types of research is made in Chapter 1). Rather, this emphasis was selected because the study of experimental methodology introduces core concepts in a systematic way that is useful in conceptualizing any piece of empirical research.

The purpose of this book is to help you become critical consumers of the empirical research in interpersonal communication. Moreover, by the time you have finished the book, you may want to design a simple study yourself. Although you will not have the technical tools for careful measurement and statistical analysis, you will have acquired a manner of thinking critically about research questions that should enable you to

design a study. You may discover that conducting your first empirical research is one of the most exhilarating experiences you have as a student. It is exciting to realize that you can go beyond understanding the research of others to having the potential to make a personal contribution to a body of thought.

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The Nature of Communication Research

As students of interpersonal communication, imagine that you are interested in the following question: Is the satisfaction of marital partners with the marriage directly related to the amount of communication between the partners? You observe couples you come into contact with, try to judge how much they communicate with each other in general, and then estimate their level of satisfaction with the marriage. We make such casual inferences frequently.

But our conclusions may be inaccurate. The couples you encountered may not have been typical of most marital partners. Your assessment of the amount of communication between the partners may have been biased by the circumstances in which you encountered them. And your estimate of their satisfaction with the marriage may have been faulty because you were able to observe them only when they were on their

best public behavior. In short, you just don't know how accurate your answer to the question is.

□ Why Understand the Research Process

RESEARCH ENHANCES THE ACCURACY OF OUR INFERENCES

In the example above, we might have carefully measured both the amount of communication between marital partners and their degree of satisfaction with the marriage. We might also have taken into account other factors that could affect the partners' level of satisfaction (such as length of marriage and outside sources of stress). By using such procedures we would be more confident about the relationship observed between the amount of communication and marital satisfaction. One of the most important reasons for conducting research is that we want to be accurate about the conclusions we draw.

As we shall see later, the results of a single research project are never completely conclusive. That is, on the basis of a single study, we could not conclude that marital satisfaction is always related to the amount of communication shared by the couple. Therefore it is important to understand the research process in order to be able to evaluate investigations in the same area that seem to present conflicting results.

Such circumstances are encountered frequently in medical research. For instance, women must decide whether they increase their risk of incurring breast cancer if they take birth control pills when the evidence is conflicting. The more we understand the research process, the better able we are to compare and evaluate specific studies.

In interpersonal communication we also find conflicting evidence. For instance, Shaffer and Ogden (1986) note that most research indicates that women engage in more self disclosure than men; yet this is not always the case. Understanding the

research process helps us to determine whether some of the work reported is faulty, or whether we can identify specific circumstances in which men are likely to defy the general pattern.

RESEARCH ENABLES US TO MAKE PREDICTIONS

If we feel confident in our conclusions regarding the relationships among variables, then we can make predictions in specific cases. For example, suppose we find that the amount of communication among marital partners is associated with more satisfaction with the marriage. We could then look at specific marital partners and, if we could assess the amount of communication between them, make predictions about the general level of satisfaction they experience with the marriage. It might be possible to extend this line of work to couples prior to their marriage, which then would enable us to predict level of satisfaction with the marriage before it even occurs. Needless to say, this could be quite useful.

RESEARCH ENABLES US TO INTERVENE TO ALTER OUTCOMES

If we have faith in conclusions reached by careful research, we can go beyond making predictions to actually intervening to alter outcomes. Suppose we encounter a couple who is experiencing dissatisfaction with their marriage and we have evidence that they communicate very little with each other. A counselor might then suggest to the couple that they try to increase their communication with each other, since there is reason to believe that amount of communication is associated with marital satisfaction. Thus research can serve as the basis of intervening in situations to produce more desirable outcomes. As you can see, then, understanding the research process is important not only for those who intend to conduct research projects, but for all of us who need to use the findings of research as well.

□ Basic Concepts in Empirical Research

As we saw earlier, casual observations can produce misleading conclusions. Therefore, researchers engage in systematic direct observation of phenomena of interest, which is called *empirical research*. Rather than relying on observations reported by others, even very reputable observations, empirical research is based on firsthand observation. Moreover, the observations are not casual or random, but are systematic (i.e., observations are made under carefully predetermined conditions).

A researcher could systematically observe almost any phenomenon. For instance, one could observe which presidential candidate speaks in shorter words. But the kind of phenomena that are of interest to us transcend specific situations. We shall focus on the relationship between two or more variables. A *variable* is simply a class of phenomena that differs from each other along some specific dimension. Both marital satisfaction and amount of communication with spouse are variables. There are different or varying levels of satisfaction and different or varying amounts of communication with spouse.

Thus when we ask whether the amount of communication between spouses is related to the level of satisfaction with the marriage, we are studying the relationship between two variables. The reason we are interested in studying relationships between variables is because it allows us to make specific predictions and at times even to alter outcomes.

The statements or propositions that describe the anticipated relationships among variables are called hypotheses or research questions. *Hypotheses* describe predicted relationships among variables. *Research questions* pose questions about potential relationships among variables. Thus the researcher might hypothesize that "the more marital partners communicate with each other, the greater the level of their marital satisfaction." A research question addressing the same issue might be stated: "Is the level of marital satisfaction related to the amount of communication among marital partners?" Typically the researcher uses a hypothesis when there is sufficient evidence

to make a specific prediction about the relationship expected between the variables. Regardless of whether a hypothesis or a research question is pursued, the purpose of the kind of research in which we are interested is to find recurring and predictable relationships among variables.

A crucial feature of good research is that it takes account of potentially contaminating variables. *Potentially contaminating variables* are variables other than those being investigated that can obscure the real relationship among the variables under investigation. For instance, if the researcher studied only couples who had been married less than six months, the researcher might conclude that there is no relationship between the amount of communication between marital partners and satisfaction with the marriage. In this case, length of marriage might be a potentially contaminating variable. Perhaps newlyweds are excited enough about marriage to overlook difficulties that individuals married for many years do not. In such a situation, failure to take account of length of marriage might lead to a generalization that is not true for couples who have been married longer. We shall see later that a variety of approaches are available to the researcher for dealing with such potentially contaminating variables. But such variables must be dealt with if the conclusions drawn are to be generalizable to a variety of situations.

□ Types of Research

We will be discussing two major types of empirical research, *experimental and descriptive*.

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

Experimental research is research in which one or more variables is manipulated under controlled conditions in order to

observe the impact on another variable of interest. The crucial distinction between experimental and descriptive research is that in experimental studies at least one variable is manipulated under controlled conditions while in descriptive studies the way that the variables are related is observed without intervention.

Independent Variable

An experimental study involves at least two variables, an independent and a dependent variable. The *independent variable* is the variable the experimenter manipulates in order to observe its impact on the dependent variable. Put another way, the independent variable is deliberately manipulated; then the dependent variable is assessed to determine the influence of the manipulation.

Consider again the question of whether amount of communication between marital partners is related to the degree of satisfaction with the relationship. It is possible to study this question experimentally. The researcher might treat amount of communication as an independent variable. If so, the researcher would deliberately manipulate the amount of communication between marital partners. For instance, the researcher might randomly divide a large number of married couples into three groups. With one group, the researcher might ask each couple to attempt to talk with each other more frequently than usual. Another group might be asked to talk with each other less frequently than usual. The third group would be asked to talk about as frequently as they normally do. After a specified period of time, perhaps three months, the researcher might measure the level of marital satisfaction of all the couples and compare the average level of satisfaction for the three groups.

In any experiment, there must be at least two levels or conditions of the independent variable. In our example, there were three levels of communication: more than usual, less than usual, and usual amount of time. As you can see, the *levels or*