

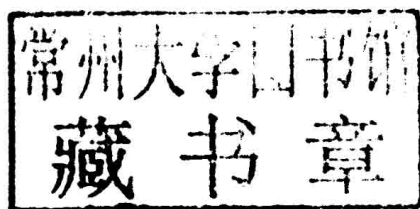


Observing  
*and Analyzing*  
Communication  
Behavior

*John A. Courtright*

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# Observing *and* Analyzing Communication Behavior



PETER LANG

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To Illene, Merissa, and Abby; they know why.

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# Chapter 1

## Preliminaries and Promises

“One of the great ironies of the field of communication is that we so seldom study our namesake.” (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984)

*“Plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose.”* (Karr, 1849)

A large and important segment of what we call human communication is comprised of overt, observable behavior. There is little doubt and no argument in this book that such communication behavior is frequently preceded by unobservable, high-level psychological processes. Similarly, communication behavior often produces unobservable psychological reactions in both the communicator and those who might be observing the communication behavior.

To be clear, however, those psychological processes will not be addressed in this book. They are interesting and important, but they have been examined in detail in many other scholarly venues. This is a book about communication behavior: how we conceptualize it, observe it, measure it, and analyze it. As a consequence, this book is a sort of a “way-back machine,” going way back to the 1980s and before. During those years, communication journals routinely published research in which overt communication behavior was the primary variable of interest. There were numerous books and articles on how to appropriately employ some procedure, methodology, or technique. There were controversies and disagreements, criticisms and rejoinders, not to mention a good deal of solid scholarship.

Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? If one sets aside for the duration of this argument the excellent research in mass communication using content analytic techniques, the halcyon days of communication behavior have seemingly disappeared. That is not a good thing. If the only purpose of this book was to reminisce about the good old days, the entire enterprise could be wrapped up in a couple of additional paragraphs. That is not the case. This book’s purpose is very much larger than that. The failure of the discipline of Communication to continue and to expand the study of communication behavior has the very real potential to relegate

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it to a perpetual second class status in the academic world.<sup>1</sup> Someone has to sound the warning.

Condit (2009, p. 9) succinctly expresses this concern when she writes, "Communication studies tried to skip the stage of rigorous observation....The consequence is that we don't really have much in the way of descriptions of what communication looks like, either at the social or individual levels." One could go even further. Virtually all of the theories of psychological processes that have emerged in the last several decades have embraced—to a greater or lesser extent—a common assumption. They assume that to some extent and for some reason these unobservable psychological operations influence the overt communication behavior that is actually emitted.<sup>2</sup> How does anyone know that assumption is true?

This is more than a loose conceptual thread on the back hem of an otherwise elegantly woven theoretical garment. To the contrary, this is theoretical ground zero. This is where the claim is made that what goes on inside a person's head has an effect on how he or she behaves. But if researchers are not able to validly conceptualize, systematically observe, and reliably measure that behavior, they will never be able to validate such claims in a convincing manner.

Accordingly, one of the purposes of this book is to nudge communication research back in time a bit; to reignite some interest in and passion about how human communication behavior should be studied. A second purpose is to present once again the best advice, techniques, cautions, and controversies from the 1970s and '80s. The idea is to dust them off, update them a bit, and collect them in one scholarly container, thus simplifying things for the next generation of behavioral researchers in communication.

Finally, the chapters that follow will intersperse those golden oldies with the best, most exciting work of numerous other disciplines that have not put the study of behavior on the back burner. Areas of study such as clinical psychology, child development, educational measurement, and even personality psychology have continued to study actual behavior, and there is much communication scholars can learn from their advances. Also included from time to time will be some interesting work from ethology and other animal studies.

The overall goal, however, is to produce a monograph that communication scholars and graduate students can actually use to

guide their study of communication behavior. As a result, the intended audience is decidedly *not* the most savvy and sophisticated methodologists in the discipline of Communication. Those several dozen people are fine on their own. In contrast, the intention is to make each major topic addressed in this book be technically accurate, yet as understandable as possible. Hopefully, researchers will actually use what is written here.

Don't be confused: no one will find the subsequent chapters to be light bedtime reading, but neither will they be reminiscent of *Psychometrika*. There will be plenty of references for readers who want fuller, more rigorous, or more sophisticated treatments. This book is intended as a guide, and no guide is successful if it overwhelms with detail those who are new to the journey.

## Defining Communication Behavior

The fact that this book is devoted exclusively to the study of communication behavior does not and should not imply that all behavior is communicative. To make such a claim would be absurd. Nevertheless, there must be some way to distinguish what qualifies as communication behavior (and therefore is worthy of investigation) and what does not. Without some conceptual boundaries, scholars end up studying everything—or nothing.

Over the last several decades, several articles and essays have attempted to define what attributes and characteristics must exist for some phenomenon to be called “communication” (see Andersen, 1991; Bavelas, 1990; Dance, 1970; Miller, 1966; Motley, 1990, 1991). There is no doubt that the authors of those thought pieces spent much time and considerable intellectual energy developing their finely nuanced positions. This book will devote no space to either. As a result, communication behavior will be defined as whatever behavior a communication researcher decides to study. No judgments will be made about whether that behavior is “really” communication or not. The goal here is to study communication behavior, not define it. Accordingly, communication behavior is whatever the reader or the author or any other communication researcher says it is.

Would-be behavioral scholars should not become too sanguine, however. Should that same researcher decide to submit his or her work for publication, such open-minded tolerance is unlikely. Editors and manuscript reviewers will almost certainly have opinions



about what is and is not legitimately “communication,” and they will not hesitate to express them. If one’s manuscript falls on the wrong side of those opinions, it will suffer an inglorious fate.

That said, none of the examples provided herein will likely offend anyone’s sense of disciplinary propriety. I know communication when I see it, and so do you. And as for those journal Editors...well, they need to get out more.

On a more serious note, two types of phenomena as communication behaviors will be included that require additional explanation. Their exclusion would make this book more than slightly incomplete.

### **Residual Artifacts of Communication Behavior**

Many times scholars cannot or do not observe a person engaging in communication behavior, but instead have available for examination the left-over or residual artifact of that behavior; e.g., written documents, highlighted reading materials, computer usage logs, caller ID logs, etc. And do not forget artifacts such as television programming, political commercials, or newspaper coverage, or the legitimacy of research in mass communication will vanish in a definitional poof.

The fact that an investigator did not actually observe the creation of these artifacts cannot be construed to mean that no communication behavior took place. Such artifacts have been studied for decades, frequently under the rubric of content analysis, but with other methodologies as well. They are fundamentally different from, say, interpersonal interaction, and they have their own set of problems and promises to discuss. Discuss them we will.

### **Outcomes of Communication Behavior**

Outcomes are different than artifacts. They are not left behind signs that a behavior occurred, but rather the effect or result of communication behavior having occurred. Both artifacts and outcomes exist because communication behavior has occurred, but they are demonstrably different phenomena and deserve two separate treatments. Outcomes include things such as the cessation of alcohol abuse, contracting or avoiding HIV (because of a prevention campaign), loss of weight, getting divorced, or donating money to a charity.