

# What is Research? Part I: Thinking Like a Researcher<sup>1</sup>

**Graham D. Bodie, Ph.D.**  
**Professor of Communication Studies**

**Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College**

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What you will read in textbooks is not the whole story; in fact, it is not even the most interesting part of the story, which is perhaps why they are textbooks and not novels or bestselling non-fiction. It's not that textbooks are wrong, per se; it's just that what you really need to know about research is often not found in written form.

Janet Bavelas (1987, p. 307) of the University of Victoria said it this way:

...the best-known part of scientific research – the published report – is the visible fruition of a much longer process, the beginnings of which are different from its final form

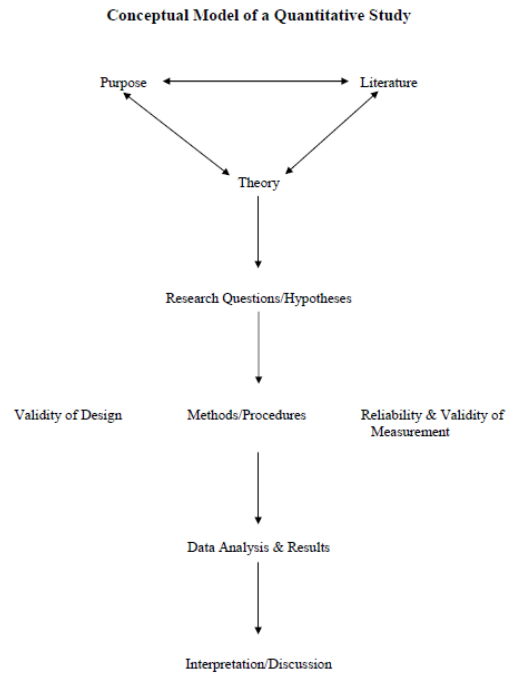
What the reader does not see are the meetings over coffee; the shaping and reshaping of central, driving questions; the frustrations when something does not go just right and the exhilaration when a new discovery is born; not to mention the writing and re-writing of a single sentence until callouses form. As an undergraduate I was intrigued by how knowledge was “created,” so I went to graduate school to figure this out. Much to my surprise, I found out that knowledge creation is often clumsy and chaotic.

In the process of discovery, researchers (a) choose problems that are personally, politically, or otherwise important; (b) design surveys and experiments using a range of informal (e.g., conversations over coffee) and formal (i.e., orderly and socially-agreed upon) procedures; and (c) collect, analyze, and interpret data outside of a vacuum. Likewise, scientific theories are often initiated through creative moments or intuitive hunches. To suggest that researchers are merely rigorous, blindly following specific procedures is to turn them into machines. Though I believe that all good research is systematic in some ways, so too is it imaginative work.

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An example of what you might find in a textbook is something like the image to the right. In the figure, the researcher starts with a purpose; investigates the literature and situates the phenomenon in a theory; then deduces hypotheses, develops procedures, collects and analyzes data; and finally, discusses the data as they do or do not support the theory. Although the figure does a decent job describing how a research article is written (Schroeder, Johnson, & Jensen, 1985), suggesting that the creative activity of doing research is always this nice and neat is a misrepresentation of colossal proportions.



And that is the important distinction between what you might read in a textbook and what I hope to accomplish in this and a follow-up manuscript— *the distinction between doing research and reading about doing research*; between being in the throes of it all and being

an observer or an interested consumer. The fact is that the doing of research is messy – good research is generative, not bound to strict rules and able to change the way we think about our

lives and those around us. As researchers we have guidelines, but like all guidelines there are exceptions made and reasons for breaking norm.

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My goal in this manuscript is to discuss how to think like a researcher, someone who is passionate about ideas and even more so about watching others succeed in

generating new and exciting ways of knowing about listening and human behavior. I will thus start by exploring three attitudes necessary for conducting good research. I will then turn my attention to what I view as a necessary component of quality scholarship, that is good theory. I will end by suggesting some resources and additional readings.

So, first things first, what sort of attitudes do you need to conduct good research?

### The Attitudinal Makeup of a Researcher

First and foremost, good researchers are *passionate* about what they study. In my 15 plus years as an academic, I can honestly say that I have met few people who were not passionate, so I am likely preaching to the choir. Like your intimate relationships, if your research lacks passion you lose interest – your eyes wander, and soon you have a mistress who you ultimately start a new life with before you know what hit you. If you are an academic, this mistress is often service – it's much easier to go to meetings and sit on committees; the payoffs are immediate, and you are

often thanked for your time and effort. Service is seductive, and, though important, it can take away from contributing to our store of knowledge. If you own your own business or do consulting, your mistress is the client –picking up an extra client means putting bread on the table. But how do you know if your most recent program is effective? How can you tell whether you should do a half-day presentation or try to establish a long term relationship with a client? It's research that paves the way – **without a test for effectiveness you won't have anything to train!** So passion for research will provide you that important motivation to say “no” to things that can take you away from the excitement of discovery.

The second attitude I think is important for doing good research is *curiosity*. Simply being curious about your surroundings helps if you are a social scientist, and most of us who study human behavior were likely people watchers at an early age. Stories abound about the physicist who used to sit on her front lawn looking up into the night sky wondering if there exists life outside Earth or the anthropologist who turned every childhood game into a search for bones. In high school I worked in a garage, pumping gasoline and changing oil for a man named Lynn Dossett. He was a linguist. Though not formally trained, he had a knack for correcting my (and everyone else's) language choices. Suppose, for example, a driver entered the store asking for directions.

Customer: “Which way to the interstate?”

Me: “Well, you go up there (pointing to the cross road), take a right at the red light, and continue until you see the Episcopal school. About 2 miles later, you'll see the interstate above you. Hang an immediate left, and you're on the service road.”

Lynn (after the customer leaves): “What if the light is green?”

I learned early to be careful in how I used language but even more careful in how I attended to others. There's a mysterious power in language and even more power in being a “good listener” (or so we are told).

When I finally declared Communication as my undergraduate major, I remembered Lynn's influence. Partly because of the interactions with him and his way of listening, I am intimately curious about how it is that we come to understand people with whom we interact. This curiosity peaked in the context of supportive communication because of my training at Purdue under Brant Burleson. At times when it is so desperately needed, why don't we listen? And what does that even mean, to be a “good” listener? Popular press books and magazine articles seem to have an easy answer to many of the questions we struggle with for decades as communication scholars. The inherent curiosity that sparked me as a 15-year-old garage technician abounds in our social world. What we do as researchers matters, and I hope that my research can begin to answer some of the important questions so often asked.

Answering important questions about human communication is made easier and exorbitantly more enjoyable in a team environment, and my third attitude of the good researcher is *humility*. Good colleagues and students are invaluable, and those who can question fundamental assumptions and otherwise cause me to rethink how to answer a particular question are the best. I believe that my research is made stronger by reading widely and by surrounding myself with intelligent people who can assist in my interpretation of how human communication seems to work. Most of these people are much brighter than I, must better at research than I might ever be. I have something to learn every day, something that can make me a better student of human communication. The important thing is to learn about listening, not to be right or to put plaques on my shelf. Even the academic journal editorial board member who called my research worthless has something valuable to say, though it might take me a few days to find it and realize what it is.

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The last attitude important for conducting good research is *persistence*. When I was in college I worked selling advertising space for a telephone directory targeted to fraternities and sororities. During our sales training, the motto was *Persistence Pays Profits*. And while the sales context is not isomorphic with the academic context, as a researcher I have to remember this same motto. Persistence means staying with a question even though the answer seems impossible to come by. Persistence means staying with a project even when there are precious few others outside of my research team who think what we are doing has any news value. **Persistence means putting yourself out there, taking risks, and ultimately staying the course.** Good research can cause others to fundamentally question what they believe about human behavior, and that is not a comfortable thing for most of us to do. We often stick tenaciously to our beliefs; change is hard. Persistence means striving for accuracy even in the face of unbelief.

In sum, to think like a researcher is to first take on the attitude of a researcher – be passionate, curious, humble and persistent. Of course, lots of passionate, curious, humble and persistent people are not good researchers, so while necessary these are not sufficient conditions. It is my belief that good research also necessitates a focus on theory.

### **Research and the Role of Theory**

Theory is simply an answer to the question why. Although the terms “model” and “theory” are often used interchangeably, they are not synonyms (Pavitt, 2010). Whereas models are useful, often graphical representations of a concept like listening, they do not explain why things are related.

In a chapter hidden in the back of Roberts and Watson’s *Intrapersonal Communication Processes* text, Andrew Wolvin (1989) suggested,

models of the listening process can assist listening scholars, students, and educators alike in coming to terms with the complexities of this communication behavior. A general

model of the listening process can be a valuable ‘starting point’ for understanding the intricacies of the process, how the elements of listening ‘fit’ together (p. 508).

Wolvin presented several models that include anywhere between 4 and several dozen variables. Regardless of the specifics, models of listening do nothing more than define the term and set the boundary conditions for what can be studied as listening. Necessarily then, all models are not only incomplete; they also are not right or wrong, simply more or less useful for a particular purpose. Don’t be fooled into thinking that you have to take someone else’s definition or model as your own. If it does not work for what you want to study, your attitude of creativity should take over – do your own thing, mark your own territory, create your own model.

But even when you have a model, you are still left questioning why.

Imagine the following conversation between two sisters, Brooks and Laurence.

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*Brooks: “Hey, Laurence, where are you? When we talked last night we agreed to meet at The Chimes for lunch.”*

*Laurence: “Yes! I was just about to call you and ask where you were.”*

*Brooks: “What do you mean? I’ve been sitting here for a half-hour waiting. They’ve already given away four tables, and now they’re saying it will be an hour before we can be seated.”*

*Laurence: “Wait a minute. Where are you?”*

*Brooks: “I’m at The Chimes, you know right by campus.”*

*Laurence: “Oh wow! I’m so sorry. I thought you meant Chimes East.”*

*Brooks: “Why would you think that?”*

*Laurence: “Well, when we made the plans we were on that side of town. It just stuck, I guess. I thought it was weird, but I figured maybe you had something to do over here. Anyway, can we have a rain check?”*

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So what happened when Brooks and Laurence hung up their phones? If it were you, what would you do? If you are like most people, you would seek an explanation of why the misunderstanding occurred. Perhaps, if you were Brooks, you might think, “The reason Laurence misunderstood me is that she just doesn’t listen.” By invoking this reason—that Laurence did not pay attention, which led to a misunderstanding, which led to her not showing up for lunch—you are engaging in lay, or informal theory making (providing a simple explanation, answering “the why”). Indeed, any time you ask questions that seek a more abstract or general answer to a particular circumstance, you are constructing a theory.

A theory is basically a “careful, systematic, and self-conscious discussion and analysis” (Bormann, 1980, p. 6) of some aspect of human interactive life. As scholars, we attempt to answer questions like, “How does listening work?” and “Why do misunderstandings happen?” When scholars ask questions like these, we attempt to momentarily abstract some specific or common experience, to look at that experience in a more general way.

Researchers primarily “give meaning” to actions, objects, events, etc. through their placement within a theory, and concepts like listening take on various meanings as they are studied through various theoretical perspectives. Thus, theories help give structure to otherwise structureless

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concepts and guide practice in complex situations. Indeed, this is the primary strength of “theory-driven” research, or research which primarily attempts to understand and explain some practical problem in a general and abstract way. Theory attempts to momentarily

abstract some specific or common experience, to take a look at that experience from afar.

Theory begins in the lived experience but goes beyond that experience. As Dewey (1991) stated, “Abstraction is the heart of thought; there is no way--other than accident--to control and enrich concrete experience except through an intermediate flight of thought with conceptions, relations, abstracta” (p. 216).

Not wholly unlike your speculations after a confusing conversation, scholars attempt to abstract from particular instances a more general understanding of human communicative life (Bodie, 2011). Unlike informal theories, however, formal theories are based on a more in-depth and systematic exploration of human interaction. You can go about proposing and acting on any number of informal theories without ever formally submitting them to any strict test, whereas scholars eventually must either test their theories with some form of data (e.g., surveys, performances, texts, examples, case studies) or apply their theories to solve some practical issue. And, whereas your own personal theory is typically only subject to criticism from yourself, scholars must face the academic judge and jury if their theory is to be accepted as valid.

Suppose, for instance, you are interested in the nature of supportive communication, or specific “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 374). In your daily life, you have certainly observed the fact that there are many ways in which a helper can provide assistance. Some of your friends and family are highly supportive and helpful, while you avoid others because they make you feel worse about yourself. But while your own experience is interesting to you, much more helpful and practical would be a theoretical classification of message types into those more generally helpful and those more generally harmful; even more helpful is the theoretical specification of when messages have their effects on particular people in particular circumstances and why.

Scholars have proposed several typologies of supportive behavior, ranging from general typologies that classify support as emotional (comfort, affection), informational (advice, direction), and tangible (material assistance, money) (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), to more specific typologies such as the one described by Burlison and his colleagues (Burlison, 1984, 2003;

Jones & Bodie, 2014). The typology of comforting messages introduced by Burleson orders the phenomenon of emotional support—messages directed at helping someone deal with an upsetting event—by classifying ways in which it can be done. In particular, this typology ultimately describes emotional support in terms of nine hierarchically ordered message types, arranged from the “most” (9) to the “least” (1) sensitive.

Next, this typology explains why some messages are likely to be perceived as more sensitive than others: Messages are more sensitive because they are more “person-centered.” Person centeredness (PC) in the context of support refers to the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the feelings and perspective of a distressed other (Burleson, 1994). In other words, PC is a theoretical explanation for why some messages “work” better than others—they “take into account and adapt to the subjective, emotional, and relational aspects of communicative contexts” (Burleson, 2007, p. 113).

- Messages in the lower third of the hierarchy (levels 1–3) are referred to as low person centered (LPC) because they deny the other’s feelings and perspective by criticizing or challenging their legitimacy, or by telling the other how he or she should act and feel.
- Moderately person-centered (MPC) comforting messages (levels 4–6) afford an implicit recognition of feelings by attempting to distract attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy, or presenting non-feeling-centered explanations of the situation.
- Finally, highly person-centered (HPC) comforting messages (levels 7–9) explicitly recognize and legitimize the other’s feelings by helping the other to articulate those feelings, elaborate reasons why those feelings might be felt, and explore how those feelings fit within a broader context.

Imagine that you are enrolled in a class that is required to enter your academic major. You need a B to be enrolled, but you make a D. A friend approaches you and says:

Well, it makes sense that you feel bummed out about the grade. I mean, I know how frustrating it is to work really hard in a class and still not do well. That can drive you crazy – it can sort of blow your self-confidence. You’ve got every right to feel that way. I mean, getting a bad grade is always hard. I’m sure that you can figure something out; you’re one of the brightest people I know. That’s why this must be getting to you right now.

The above message is “highly person centered” which can be contrasted with a LPC example:

Well, maybe you just didn’t try hard enough. Maybe that’s why you got a D. You’re probably just gonna have to study harder from now on. You know, you shouldn’t be so upset about the class if you didn’t work as hard as you could have. Just try to forget about the class. You know, there are more important things in the world than getting into a certain major. Anyway, it’s a pretty dumb class; it’s really not worth worrying about. So, just try to forget about it. Think about something else.

Over 30 years of supportive communication research finds that messages higher in PC lead to a range of positive outcomes, from making the recipient of such messages feel better about a particularly stressful circumstance to helping the recipient cope successfully with later stressors (High & Dillard, 2012). Based on cumulative research, our theory of supportive communication can predict how people are likely to react when confronted with messages that contain a certain level of person centeredness. Likewise, we can potentially control the outcomes of support by instituting training programs that attempt to educate people about the benefits of PC support and how to consistently be person centered in their support to others.

Even so, research has shown that the impact of PC messages is variable – sometimes we feel better after a HPC message, but other times these messages don't make us feel quite as good. But why?

My colleagues and I have proposed that the impact of supportive behaviors on outcomes is both a function of the content of those behaviors and how they are processed by recipients. One of the primary contributions of our *dual-process theory of supportive message outcomes* is to suggest a reason why messages often have variable impacts on people's coping. Specifically, the theory predicts that when individual motivation and ability to process are high, messages and other behaviors that require extensive thinking will have a greater impact than when people are not motivated or unable to process these elements of support. In conditions of low motivation and ability, message content has less of an impact compared to factors such as the closeness of the relationship between the two people and the biological sex of the support provider. These latter factors are thought of as environmental cues that trigger decisional heuristics – quick decision rules that allow people to quickly (and mindlessly) process a supportive encounter.

### Conclusion

Before closing, I think it is important to highlight some distinctions about how I view theory and how others might view me as viewing theory. Let me be clear: Although theory is a necessary part of all good research, I am not suggesting that all research is designed to test theory. Theory of the descriptive type is just as valuable as theory of the prescriptive type. Fields such as biology and physics have survived for centuries by first attempting to understand nature and not by first imposing some theoretical structure on nature. As Harry Reis and Shelly Gable put it, “To carve nature at its joints, one must first locate those joints.”

This quote brings us back to the attitudes I laid out at the beginning – good researchers are primarily a curious bunch; we notice things around us and gradually formalize our observations over time. Hunches and intuition along with imagination turn eventually into a curiosity of why there exist these patterns of human behavior. If we aren't seduced by service, we start to investigate those questions more systematically all the while with an eye toward theory building. Good research tests theory as much as it ignores it – sometimes the best discoveries are those that happen outside of conventional thinking. It's hard to think outside of the box if that box is on your head, clouding your vision.

Below I have listed a few readings that I have found useful for learning to think like a researcher. Be on the lookout as well for the companion article, acting like a researcher. It is more nuts and bolts and is focused on defining useful vocabulary researchers use in their published reports. We



will extend our example of supportive communication to show how we have gone about testing our theoretical ideas of when and why messages have their effects on outcomes.

### **Additional Readings**

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