



# Communication Research

Asking Questions,  
Finding Answers

Joann Keyton

Fourth Edition

# COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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# Communication Research

ASKING QUESTIONS, FINDING ANSWERS

FOURTH EDITION

**Joann Keyton**

*North Carolina State University*

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: ASKING QUESTIONS, FINDING ANSWERS, FOURTH EDITION

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4

ISBN 978-0-07-803691-0

MHID 0-07-803691-7

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Buyer: *Jennifer Pickel*

Cover Credit: *Lisa Zador/Getty Images*

Cover Designer: *Studio Montage, St. Louis, MO*

Compositor: *MPS Limited*

Typeface: *10/12 Times*

Printer: *R. R. Donnelley*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Keyton, Joann.

Communication research : asking questions, finding answers / Joann Keyton,  
North Carolina State University.—Fourth Edition.

pages cm.—(Communication Research)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN-13: 978-0-07-803691-0 (acid-free paper)

ISBN-10: 0-07-803691-7 (acid-free paper)

1. Communication—Research. I. Title.

P91.3.K49 2014

302.2072—dc23

2013043703

The Internet addresses listed in the text were accurate at the time of publication. The inclusion of a website does not indicate an endorsement by the authors or McGraw-Hill Education, and McGraw-Hill Education does not guarantee the accuracy of the information presented at these sites.

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# PREFACE

Thank you for picking up this book and reading the preface. I am a communication researcher who conducts and publishes quantitative and qualitative research. I am always learning something new about research methods, and, perhaps, most central to this preface—I really enjoy teaching research methods courses. I designed this research methods book to help students overcome their fear of research methods and to provide instructors with foundational material for their classroom use. Over the previous editions, including this one, I have received a substantial amount of feedback of how the book could be more effective for both instructors and students. Most directly, I receive feedback from my students when I teach undergraduate and graduate research methods courses. More formal feedback has come from the publisher who seeks professional reviews of textbooks before an author begins work on a new edition. Other times, feedback has come informally from conversations at conferences, or in e-mails from instructors or students using the book. I'm grateful for everyone who has taken the time to comment, to point out what's good or bad, and to suggest what they would like to see in a new edition—and what they hope I will remove.

So, simply, the goal of this book is to be helpful to instructors in teaching research methods, and to be supportive to students who are learning research methods.

My other goal is to focus on communication research. I emphasize *communication*, as all of the examples used in book are drawn from the published research of communication scholars in communication or communication-related journals. I hope you will (and you will encourage your students to) go back to these cited sources.

I've written this book to be most useful to students (undergraduate or beginning graduate level) who have little or no familiarity with

communication research. I have used previous editions at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and know others have done the same. I hope that the book hits a middle ground that is engaging for undergraduates but can also provide a foundation for beginning graduate students (with the help of additional reading material and more sophisticated in-class exercises). Across the chapters, I've selected techniques and methods that are foundational to more advanced methods and ones that students can learn to use in research settings.

What I've learned from the publisher's examination of the research methods book market and from my conversations with colleagues who teach research methods is that no two instructors teach the research methods course in the same way. Some faculty focus on quantitative; some faculty focus on qualitative; and some do a mix of the two. Some of us insist that students *do the math*; others of us want statistics presented conceptually. Some of us want more of the philosophical traditions that are the underpinning of quantitative and qualitative methods; some don't. Thus, I've had to make choices. But my choices were guided by a principle I've long believed in: Researchers must have a broad understanding and appreciation of all methodologies—quantitative and qualitative—to conduct their research effectively.

To that end, the fourth edition of this book continues to emphasize three important points:

1. All research starts with an initial research question or problem.
2. Research is a process in which the researcher makes important decisions at crucial points about what to do and how to do it. This is in contrast to viewing research simply as a series of steps to be completed.

3. To answer the varied nature of questions about communication, one must be familiar with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

*Communication Research: Asking Questions, Finding Answers* covers basic research issues and processes for both quantitative and qualitative approaches appropriate for communication students with little or no previous research methods' experience. The text's guiding principle is that methodological choices are made from one's research questions or hypotheses. This avoids the pitfall in which students learn one methodology or one methodological skill and then force that method to answer all types of questions.

## WHAT'S NEW TO THE FOURTH EDITION AND ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

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The book presents a balance of quantitative and qualitative research because the communication scholarship embraces both approaches. In addition to updating the published research examples and research references sources (161 new references are included), the biggest change to the fourth edition is its organization and the continuation of the increased focus on qualitative research. More examples are given; more direction is provided in how to design and conduct a qualitative study and collect (Chapters 14, 15, and 16) and analyze qualitative data (Chapter 17), as well as writing a qualitative research report (Chapter 18). Information in each of these chapters has been strengthened with greater depth and more examples, and this information has been reorganized for improved flow that better mirrors the qualitative research process.

Based on feedback from reviewers, the book is now divided into three sections. In the first section, Research Basics, students are introduced to the research process, its basic principles, and research ethics. Chapters in this first section are introductory to research in general and are neutral with respect to methodology. The issues raised in these initial chapters are issues that both quantitative and qualitative researchers must address. Section 2 focuses on quantitative communication

research methods whereas Section 3 focuses on qualitative communication research methods.

Across all chapters, emphasis was placed on updating examples and reference sources to align the book with current research practices in the communication discipline. All of the new references are from the 2011 through 2013 published literature. Across all of the chapters, I also worked to be more inclusive of examples drawn from research conducted in other parts of the world, and by researchers outside the USA. Likewise I updated technology examples to reflect the current mediated environment.

The book remains in APA 6th, as that is the style requirement of most social science communication journals.

Material from the appendixes has been moved to the book's website, [www.mhhe.com/keyton4](http://www.mhhe.com/keyton4), where instructors and students will also find PowerPoint presentations for each chapter and short online quizzes for which results can be e-mailed to instructors. As with the last edition, a note about online resources available to students concludes each chapter ([www.joannkeyton.com/CommunicationResearchMethods.htm](http://www.joannkeyton.com/CommunicationResearchMethods.htm)). I update these resources each academic year. Whether you assign students to work with these resources inside or outside of class, or expect students to use these materials on their own, the online resources provide students with ways to enhance and test their knowledge of research methods.

## FEATURES

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The primary purpose of this textbook is to introduce students to communication research methods by meeting two objectives. The first objective is to help students become better consumers of the communication research literature by emphasizing effective methods for finding, consuming, and analyzing communication research. This objective is important because students are consumers of the communication literature through their participation in communication courses. The second objective is to provide a path for students who wish to develop and conduct research projects. To those ends, this book provides coverage of the entire research process: how one conceptualizes a research

idea, turns it into an interesting and researchable question, selects a methodology, conducts the study, and writes up the study's findings. I believe that students who can effectively navigate, select, and use the communication research literature can become effective researchers, and, reciprocally, that students engaged in communication research will be able to more effectively use the existing research literature. Regardless of the role in which students use their research knowledge, they must be able to read and understand the communication research literature.

This book provides several features to help students succeed in both roles.

1. The research process is situated in communication research about symbols, messages, and meanings.
2. 161 new research and reference source citations were added; these new citations were pulled from the 2011 through 2013 published communication and communication-related journals found on Communication and Mass Media Complete.
3. Examples cover the breadth of the discipline (for example, persuasion, interpersonal, group, health, organizational, and mass communication and public relations).
4. A boxed feature labeled *Design Check* alerts students to the practical and logistical issues that student researchers should consider when designing a study. These are the same issues that students should ask of the research studies they read, as how these issues are addressed by researchers influences study outcomes and data interpretations.
5. A boxed feature labeled *An Ethical Issue* alerts students to issues of research ethics and integrity. Not only must researchers balance practical and logistical issues, they must do so while addressing ethical issues that occur when *people* and their communication artifacts are used as the basis of research. *Chapter Checklists* begin each chapter to highlight for students the essential learning objectives for each chapter. End-of-chapter summaries provide point-by-point summaries of information presented in the chapter. Stated simply,

these factual statements can help direct students' study of the material. Key terms are boldfaced within the text and listed at the end of chapter. Key term definitions can be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

6. Continuing the active pedagogy approach of the book, *Try this!* boxes are placed throughout the chapters to engage students in short research activities that can be used in the classroom with individuals or groups, or as short homework assignments. Finally, the book focuses on students. It is written for them—to their level of knowledge and understanding about human communication, the communication research literature, and the relative research processes.

My goal in writing the chapters was to explain the research steps and identify the steps researchers take in developing and conducting communication research. With study and instruction, students should be able to use this material and integrate it with what they know and are familiar with from their other communication courses to accomplish two objectives: (1) to be more analytical and make more sophisticated interpretations of the communication research they read, and (2) to design and conduct basic quantitative and qualitative research studies.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING SUPPLEMENTS

Detailed instructor's materials are available at the Instructor Center website that accompanies the book ([www.mhhe.com/keyton4](http://www.mhhe.com/keyton4)). The password-protected instructor's center includes an Instructor's Manual with sample syllabi, teaching tips, chapter and course assignments, exercises, and worksheets for each chapter. Typically one or two pages in length, worksheets can be used as a homework or in-class assignment for students to review their knowledge and understand about the material presented. Also included on the website are PowerPoint outlines for each chapter and a test bank. Question types include objective (for example, fill in the blank), comprehension (for example, explain how academic research differs

from proprietary research), and behavioral (for example, given a set of variables the student is asked to write research questions and hypotheses). For those chapters that cover statistics or the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, additional worksheets are available, which provide students with the opportunity to work several examples from raw data through to interpretation.

The Student Center can also be found at the same website ([www.mhhe.com/keyton4](http://www.mhhe.com/keyton4)). This site is not password-protected and includes PowerPoint outlines for each chapter, as well as online, self-grading chapter quizzes, outlines, checklists, and summaries.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Joann Keyton** (B.A., Western Michigan University; M.A., Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is Professor of Communication at North Carolina State University. She specializes in group communication and organizational communication. Her current research examines the collaborative processes and relational aspects of interdisciplinary teams, participants' use of language in team meetings, the multiplicity of cultures in organizations, and how messages are manipulated in sexual harassment. Her research is field focused and she was honored with the 2011 Gerald Phillips Award for Distinguished Applied Communication Scholarship by the National Communication Association.

Her research has been published in *Business Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Studies*, *Communication Theory*, *Communication Yearbook*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journal of Business Communication*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Small Group Research*, *Southern Communication Journal*, and numerous edited collections including the *Handbook of Group Communication Theory and Research* and the *Handbook of Organizational Communication*.

In addition to publications in scholarly journals and edited collections, she has published three textbooks for courses in group communication, research methods, and organizational culture in addition to co-editing an organizational communication case book. Keyton was editor

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In writing this book, I have benefited from the generosity of researchers, scientists, and scholars from many disciplines around the world. Unlike many other bodies of knowledge, the Web has become a cornucopia of information about research methods and statistics. When contacted by e-mail, these colleagues were both prompt and generous.

I have also benefited from the many undergraduate and graduate students in my research methods course who continued to say that they did not understand after I had explained a concept or technique. Their questioning and my inability to always provide them an appropriate and acceptable answer provided the motivation for this text.

This fourth edition has benefited from the many instructors and students who have e-mailed me with questions or issues they would like me to address or explain further. I appreciate this feedback-in-progress and much of it has been incorporated here.

I also thank the scholars who reviewed this text during its development for the encouragement and wisdom they extended. Reviewers for the fourth edition were: Christina Anderson, Coastal Carolina University; Gary Beck, Old Dominion University; Merry Buchanan, University of Central Oklahoma; Lovette Chinwah, Central State University; Janet Colvin, Utah Valley University; Leda Cooks, University of Massachusetts; Douglas Ferguson, College of Charleston; Eileen S. Gilchrist, University of Wyoming; Chia-Fang Hsu, University of Wyoming; Angela La Valley, Bloomsburg University; Danielle Leek, Grand Valley State University; Rick Olsen, University of North Carolina Wilmington; James O. Olufowote, The University of Oklahoma; Sachiyo Shearman,



East Carolina University; Laurel Traynowicz, Boise State University; Nicholas A. Valentino, University of Michigan; Margaret Wills, Fairfield University.

Thanks to the McGraw-Hill team, including Penina Braffman, managing editor; Judi David, project manager; and Alexandra Schultz, marketing manager, as well as to the developmental editing team at *ansrsource*. They helped me produce the finished product.

In the first edition, I thanked my colleagues—Tommy Darwin, Steve Rhodes, and Pradeep Sopory. In the second edition, I added Ron Warren, Debbie Ford, and Tracy Russo. Each of these six people have enriched and challenged my role as researcher. For the third edition, I added Paul Schrodtt, Ryan Bisel, Stephenson Beck, and Renee Meyers for always returning the e-mails in which I proposed a methods question or conundrum. The book has benefited from those online discussions. (We miss you, Renee!)

For the fourth edition, I'd like to thank Amber Messersmith for always being kind, friendly, and cheerful. I also thank Joe Bonito whose humor about research methods, communication research, and, particularly, group research, lifts my spirits. Thanks goes to Andrew Ledbetter for his willingness to engage me in Facebook discussions about research methods, especially why the doi is important in a reference citation. I

would also like to thank my growing network of research colleagues from other disciplines. Being asked over and over why communication matters and how we study communication are conversations I never mind having.

I would also like to thank the many undergraduate and graduate students who have worked with me at North Carolina State University, University of Kansas, and University of Memphis on research projects and who have worked through research issues (and challenged me) in methodology classes. For me, methodology is the best teaching assignment I can have.

Between the third and fourth editions, my Dalmatian family changed. Cher died shortly after the third edition came out. Sonny was sad and it took a while . . . but we recently found Zoe. Sonny and Zoe are making sure that I live up to my promise that I will not forget what my *real* job is: to let the dogs in, let the dogs out, let the dogs in, let the dogs out. . . .

Jeff—this book is for you. As a student, you would not allow me to let you down. As a friend, you have not let me down. Your invaluable lessons, both professional and personal, helped me write this text in the beginning and through its revisions. Thanks for your continual support and encouragement.

Joann Keyton

# Introduction to Communication Research

### *Chapter Checklist*

*After reading this chapter, you should be able to:*

1. Identify instances in which you could use or conduct communication research as a student, use or conduct communication research as a professional, and use the results of communication research in your personal life.
  2. Explain the goals of research.
  3. Explain the relationship of research and theory.
  4. Explain communication research as a social science.
  5. Describe how communication research from a social science perspective is different from other forms of communication research and other forms of social science research.
  6. Differentiate among the characteristics of science.
  7. Distinguish between research question and hypothesis.
  8. Describe the differences among questions of fact, variable relations, value, and policy.
  9. Identify questions about communication that you believe are worth pursuing.
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As a student in a research methods course, you have two roles. In one role, you are a consumer of communication research. You read summaries of research in your textbooks. In some courses, you may be required to read and analyze research articles published in the discipline's journals.

In the other role, you are a researcher collecting and interpreting data to answer research questions and hypotheses. These activities may be part of the course for which you are reading this book, an independent study, an upper-division course, or a capstone project. The information in this book can help you succeed in both roles. But before you identify yourself with either or both roles, turn your attention to answering the question "What is research?"

## WHAT IS RESEARCH?

In its most basic form, *research* is the process of asking questions and finding answers. You have likely conducted research of your own, even if it wasn't in the formal sense. For example, as you chose which college or university to attend, you asked questions of students, faculty, and staff at the various institutions you were considering. You might also have looked on web sites for answers to your questions or used the survey results from *U.S. News & World Report* that rank America's colleges and universities. As you made choices about your major, you read the college bulletin, talked to students and an advisor, and perhaps even talked to professionals in the field you believed you wanted to pursue. In these activities, you sought answers to your questions. Which school is best for me? Which school has the type of student experience I am looking for? Which schools are affordable? What is the annual income of alumni with my major? What kinds of career opportunities can I expect? By asking these questions, you were taking on the role of a researcher as you tracked down the information needed to make a decision.

Not only were you asking questions and seeking answers, but more than likely you were also relying on the results of research performed by others. It would be impossible for you to answer

your set of questions without such input. For example, for the question "What is the annual income of alumni with my major?" it would not be realistic for you to survey graduates in your major field to discover their annual income. More likely you relied on a survey conducted by a professional association, an alumni association, or a news organization. You used the reported findings of their research to answer your question. Although someone else did the research, you still needed to evaluate the efficacy of their research to gauge the usefulness of their findings in answering the question.

You are also familiar with other types of research. News reports profile the results of research each day. You have heard the results of medical research reported in the news. During political campaigns, the results of preference polls are reported in the news and archived on news organization websites. And, no doubt, you have heard the results of research on drug use and underage drinking. If you work, your company may have conducted research on the preferences of its customers or the quality of its products.

The point here is that research is all around us, often presented in ways that we would not recognize as research. Thus, **research**, as we will study it, is the discovery of answers to questions through the application of scientific and systematic procedures. Given this basic definition of research, you can see that you probably come into contact with several forms of research on a daily basis. You probably also use the results of research in making both personal and professional decisions.

The specific focus of this text is communication research—that is, quantitative or qualitative research conducted by communication scholars about communication phenomena. The focus is also on research conducted from a social science perspective, which is distinct from rhetorical research and also distinct from critical research. Yet, distinctions among these three perspectives—social science, rhetorical, and critical—are not always clear (Craig, 1993), and scholars working from the other perspectives do use some methods more commonly associated with social science research. **Social science research**

is conducted through the use of scientific and systematic methods, and it is based on the assumption that research can uncover patterns in the lives of people. When patterns of communication behavior are confirmed or discovered, scholars develop useful theories of communication that speak to the regularity of communication (Bostrom, 2003).

The research techniques and methods presented in this book are used to study the communication behavior of humans and the communication artifacts that people create. Although some people think of social science research as objective research, communication scholars use both quantitative (more objective) and qualitative (more subjective) methods—sometimes separately and sometimes in combination with one another. Both types of methods are **empirical**, meaning that both methods are based on observations or experiences of communication. Both types are needed because it is unlikely that quantitative or qualitative methods alone can provide complete answers to the many questions we have about communication behavior.

### Your Relationship with Research

As discussed earlier, your relationship to this material can be conceptualized in two ways—as that of a researcher or as that of a consumer of research. You may take on the researcher role as a student, as an employee, or as a consultant. It is likely that the class for which you are reading this book will develop and conduct a research project as part of a class assignment. You may also decide that the process of research is interesting enough that you plan to take additional courses in research methodology. You might even decide to become a professor and spend much of your professional time as a researcher, finding answers to questions that interest you and matter to others.

After you graduate, you might find yourself in a professional position where research is part of your regularly assigned job responsibilities. Positions in marketing and advertising, as well as jobs in political, organizational, and health communication, are just a few in which research

plays a central role in decision making. Even though their organizational title may not be “researcher,” many employees at managerial levels are responsible for collecting and analyzing data to help organizations and employees make more effective and efficient decisions. But are these examples of communication research? They could be. Some organizations conduct surveys or focus groups to discover the degree of effectiveness of their internal communication practices. Media organizations regularly use surveys or focus groups to discover if informational, advertising, or promotional messages are being received as intended.

You could become a consultant and conduct **proprietary research**, research that is commissioned by an individual or organization for its own use. Organizations use consultants to evaluate their internal communication systems and operational effectiveness. Political figures also commission proprietary research to discover how they are doing in the polls and which of their messages have the most influence on potential voters. Marketing and advertising research is also proprietary. Even though the results of proprietary research are private and intended only for the use of whoever pays for the research, the researcher uses the same procedures and practices used in conducting scholarly or academic research.

Your relationship with research can also be conceptualized as that of a consumer. You consume the research of others when you read scholarly books and journals. You also consume research when you see or hear personally or professionally interesting information presented in the media, and use information about goods and services marketed to you. You might trust some sources more than others—or be more cautious—if you knew how the data were collected and analyzed.

Right now, your role as a consumer of research is more immediate than your current or potential role as a researcher. Your status as student forces you into the consumer role as you collect information in the library or online to complete class assignments. Your ability to evaluate the information you collect has a direct impact on your ability to learn and prepare assignments.

**AN ETHICAL  
ISSUE****Is Communication Public or Private?**

In general, what ethical issues do you believe are raised when researchers study the communication behavior of others? About what communication situations would you feel comfortable answering questions? In what situations would you feel comfortable having a researcher observe you? Should some communication contexts remain the private domain of participants, closed to researchers' inquiries? What about intimate communication between significant others in the privacy of their bedroom? What about the communication between parent and child when discipline is required? What about communication that occurs among co-workers as they joke about ways to ridicule their boss? How would you respond if a communication researcher asked you questions about your communication behavior during these events? What arguments could you develop both for and against communication scholars conducting research about such events? Should some communication behaviors or contexts be off limits to communication researchers?

As a researcher, you seek answers to questions by collecting data, and then interpreting results and findings to draw conclusions and make recommendations. As a consumer, you sort through results and findings others have provided. In this role you still need to distinguish good information from bad, test assumptions and conclusions drawn by others, and analyze the extent to which the research process others used fits your needs and situation. In this case, you need the skills to determine if the information you are using is misleading or misinterpreted from its original source.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed or intimidated by the particular vocabulary and traditions of research. But if you approach learning about research as another way to find information, you are likely to discover that formal research is an extension of the types of informal asking and answering of questions that you have done all your life. After reading this chapter, you should be able to identify how research acts as an influence on your life and in your decision making. Throughout the rest of this chapter and throughout the book as well, specific examples of communication research will be highlighted as we explore how research is conducted—that is, how research is planned and carried out and how data are collected, analyzed, and reported. The goals

of the book are to provide you with the basic skills of a researcher and to enhance your ability to be a better critic of the research reported by others.

**SCHOLARLY RESEARCH**

With this introduction to research in general, we will turn our attention to the formal and systematic method of scholarly research. Researchers, or scientists, who have been trained in research methods and procedures conduct research. These scholars formalize their questions into research questions or hypotheses, which provide the scope and direction of the research project as well as guide the researcher in selecting quantitative or qualitative methods to answer the questions. The questions or hypotheses direct what data the researcher collects. After the data are collected, the researcher or research team analyzes the data to draw conclusions about the hypotheses or answer the research questions. Essentially, conducting research is a matter of making claims based upon data (O'Keefe, 2004). Different types of claims require different types of evidence, or data, which may be quantitative data, qualitative data, or both.

But the process is not complete. Scholarly, or academic, research is also public and available to

others. However, the process of making it public is certainly different than it is for research conducted by a polling organization, for instance. Scholarly researchers describe what they have done in a paper that is submitted to a conference for presentation or to a journal or book for publication. Other experts in the field review the paper. This review serves as a test. Have the authors used an appropriate methodology to answer their questions or hypotheses? Have the authors explained the results thoroughly and logically? Are there critical flaws in the research process that jeopardize the results? The papers that make it through the review process are then presented at a conference or published in an academic journal or book. This is where the results become consumable.

Pick up a text that is assigned reading for one of your other communication courses. You will find many references to research within the chapters. As an example, the following passage is from my text *Communication and Organizational Culture: A Key to Understanding Work Experiences* (Keyton, 2011):

For organizations such as AT&T, Cisco, and Red Hat, the culture is technologically grounded. That is, “the organization is not simply a culture that uses a technology; instead, it is a culture whose image, identity, and relationship to its environment are strongly associated with—indeed, dependent upon—the functionality of the technology it produces, services or sells” (Leonardi & Jackson, 2009, p. 397).

The reference to the authors Leonardi and Jackson is called an in-text citation. If you turned to the references listed at the back of the text, you would find the publication information so you could look up the 2009 journal article written by these authors. As the author of the text, I relied on the research of Leonardi and Jackson. As the reader of this passage, you are also a consumer and could verify my interpretation of their work by going to the original source.

## Goals of Research

Accumulating knowledge through research is a continuous process. One research study cannot

answer all the questions about any one issue or topic. This facet of learning—building on the research of others—is central to any academic discipline. Thus, the primary goal of communication research is to describe communication phenomena as well as discover and explain the relationships among them. Continuing with the example just given, discovery occurred when Leonardi and Jackson conducted qualitative research using three types of data to explore the concept of technological grounding.

These scholars first built a case for their study by drawing on the published research of other scholars. Next, they collected data to be able to analyze each organization’s culture before the merger, and the organizational culture of the merged organization. Finally, they provided an explanation of how one company’s organizational culture prevailed after the two companies merged. Thus, to put it more formally, research is the process of discovery and explanation.

The research process, if approached systematically, can have one of four results: It allows the researcher to describe behavior, determine causes of behavior, predict behavior, or explain behavior. *Describing behavior* entails describing outcomes, processes, or ways in which variables (another name for the concepts we study) are related to one another. The following example illustrates a research project that enabled a researcher to describe behavior.

Guthrie and Kunkel (2013) analyzed participants’ diary entries to answer the research question, “What are the motives for using deception in long-term romantic relationships?” (p. 145). Across 68 participants who kept diaries about the use of deception with their romantic partners, 332 motives for using deception were identified. Across these, the researchers identified six overarching categories for using deception. These were: engaging in relational maintenance (e.g., engaging in deception to avoid a fight), managing face needs (e.g., protecting the partner’s feelings), negotiating dialectical tensions (e.g., balancing the need for independence vs. togetherness), establishing relational control (e.g., ensuring that the partner behaves as desired), continuing previous deception (e.g., continuing a lie from the past), and motive unknown