



Taking Stock of Research Practices: A Call for Self-Reflection

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My very first assignment in graduate school was to find and critique an article from *Communication Monographs*. Ever since, I have considered *Monographs* to be at the forefront of scholarly excellence and innovation in our field, so I am honored now to assume stewardship of this prestigious journal and am grateful to my colleagues for entrusting this responsibility to me.

In this transition, the journal leaves the capable hands of my colleague, Dr. Kathy Miller. Under her guidance as Editor-in-Chief, the journal saw its Impact Factor rise to its current level of 2.54, the highest in its history. Dr. Miller's thoughtful and judicious work has benefited not only those of us in the field today but also those who will join us in the years to come (and who will, perhaps, critique an article from one of her issues in their first graduate courses). On behalf of the discipline, I thank Dr. Miller and her editorial board for their selfless contributions to the journal.

The landscape of our scholarly work looks markedly different than it did when the article I critiqued was published. Our methods of collecting and analyzing data are certainly more sophisticated—and of course, we now study communication channels that didn't exist only a few decades ago. I wonder, however, whether a bit of self-reflection regarding our research practices would be beneficial. *Monographs* is the third journal for which I have served as editor or associate editor, and in that time, I have noticed some trends that I think are worth examining. These relate to the clarity of our measurement and the complexity of our analyses. Many of these issues apply to my own scholarship as well, so I am by no means immune to the need for self-reflection.

For instance, **we claim to study gender differences, but often we do not.** Our field usually defines gender as consisting of the culturally prescribed expectations for appropriate behavior that are typically assigned to individuals based on their biological sex. Stereotypically, men adopt a masculine gender and women adopt a feminine gender, although we understand gender to be fluid, meaning that anyone (regardless of sex) can be masculine, feminine, and/or androgynous.

It is common for communication studies to claim to examine “gender differences” in some outcome—but in nearly every instance, such claims are tested by comparing male and female participants to each other. That type of comparison tests for sex differences, not gender differences.

Some researchers justify that practice with the claim that all communication differences between the sexes result from psychological gender; thus, comparing women and men is a proxy for comparing genders. However, that approach disregards the fluidity of gender by assuming that all men are masculine and all women are feminine, because only if that were true would comparing sexes be a proxy for comparing genders. Moreover, the claim that communication differences between men and women are solely the result of gender is an empirical claim, and should therefore be tested rather than assumed. Unfortunately, almost no studies that claim to test for gender differences actually measure masculinity, femininity, or androgyny. By and large, therefore, we learn little about the potentially complex influences of gender simply by comparing women to men.

Similarly, **we claim to study cultural differences, but often we do not.** Like gender, culture is a complex phenomenon. Most introductory communication textbooks define culture as comprising the learned and shared symbols, values, language, and norms that distinguish groups of people from each other. We take pains to stress to our students that culture is not the same as ethnicity or nationality—that is, people can adopt any culture, regardless of where they or their ancestors come from.

As with gender, however, our scholarly practice belies our theoretic approach. Multiple communication studies claim to examine “cultural differences” in some outcome—but in nearly every instance, such claims are tested by comparing groups that differ in ethnicity (e.g., Caucasians vs. African Americans) or nationality (e.g., Americans vs. Japanese).

When we stress that culture is not synonymous with ethnicity or nationality (as we do in nearly every basic course text), we err in claiming to understand cultural differences by comparing ethnic or national groups. Few studies measuring “cultural differences” actually measure the learned and shared symbols, values, language, and norms of their participants. This isn’t to say there is no value in comparing ethnic groups or people of different nationalities—only that we ought to be clear in such instances that we are examining “ethnic differences” or “differences in nationality,” rather than culture.

We claim to study communication, but often we do not. I’m certainly not the first to point out that much of our research doesn’t actually examine communication at all. There may not be discipline-wide consensus on a precise definition of communication, but we can probably all agree that communication is a *behavior*—that is, it is something that people do.

So much of our research pokes around the periphery of communication. We often measure perceptions, intentions, attitudes, and the like as they relate to communication, without ever examining the behavior of communication itself. Perceptions, intentions, and attitudes are important, for sure, but they are not behaviors, and therefore, they cannot constitute communication per se. When I assess people’s affectionate behavior via a diary, an interview, or some other form of self-report, for example, I am not actually measuring their communication (or any other behavior), only their perception or recall of it.

There is merit to understanding these types of cognitive outcomes—but again, we ought to be clear in our claims about communication or any other behaviors. If I claim that my intervention has changed a health behavior, for instance, then I should be required to show a change in that behavior, not solely a change in attitudes or intentions related to it. Changing attitudes and intentions may be useful—in fact, it may precipitate a behavioral change—but unless I have measured behavior directly, I should make no claim about having affected it.

Finally, **our statistical methods grow in complexity, often to the detriment of our message.** To me, the proliferation of increasingly complex statistical methods is the most troubling of these trends. I often see reviewers encouraging authors to use more complicated analyses than they need. Many of our papers are now filled with convoluted structural equation models that are simply unnecessary to test the claims of the study. Complexity, it seems, has become an end unto itself.

As an empiricist, I am all for using the most appropriate procedure to test one's prediction—and I know there are instances when complex procedures are needed. The problem arises when the complexity of our analyses obscures our message. Complexity can be useful, but it comes at a cost to some of the most important values in science. Specifically, the more complex the model, the less *parsimonious* it is, the less likely it is to *generalize* or to *replicate*, and the more difficult it becomes to describe its *utility*. When a study requires a web of circles, arrows, and coefficients to demonstrate its point, what *is* its point? Is it useful to know that a relationship between variables is simultaneously moderated and mediated by a plethora of other variables? True, it demonstrates our belief that “communication is complicated,” but what does it teach us beyond that?

I'm not saying that researchers can't provide good answers to these questions. I'm suggesting that we ought to require that. We all understand that communication is complicated. Our goal as scholars should be to make sense of that complexity for the people who read our work. To do so, I believe we need to focus less on using the most complicated analyses and more on having something useful to say.

Paying attention to these issues—being clearer about what we actually study (with respect to gender, culture, and communication) and privileging our message over our statistical complexity—is a part of my mission as I take the reigns of *Communication Monographs*. I am honored to have this responsibility, and I look forward to publishing the best scholarship our field has to offer.