A Content Analysis of Three Mass Communication Research Traditions: Social Science, Interpretive Studies, and Critical Analysis

By Edward J. Fink and Walter Gantz

This study assessed the extent to which researchers conform to the assumptions associated with the social scientific, interpretive, and critical traditions of inquiry. For each tradition, a set of ten variables was examined: ontology, epistemology, nature of the research question, theory, hypotheses, sampling, data collection, verification, data analysis, and generalization. Content analyses of 245 journal articles indicate that researchers conform highly to expectations associated with ontology, epistemology, data collection, and data analysis, but less so with the remaining variables. These data suggest that scholars are strongly guided by the expectations associated with these traditions. Occasional deviations suggest some convergence of attributes.

Multiple research traditions mark mass communication inquiry, and an analysis of these traditions ought to address the differences and similarities among them. This study examines the differences and similarities by assessing the extent to which researchers in mass communication adhere to the attributes of three different schools of inquiry: social science, interpretive studies, and critical analysis. The research question is: How well do mass communication scholars conform to the expectations of their research traditions? It is hoped that this assessment contributes to the conceptualization of mass communication studies as an academic field of inquiry.

Literature Review

Many authors have offered perspectives about mass communication research traditions. These scholars use different typologies when studying approaches to inquiry. One such typology consists of two traditions—science and nonscience. Other scholars find a similar two-category scheme in the "quantitative versus qualitative" debate.

These dichotomous categories do not fully delineate the entirety of mass communication research. Specifically, the tradition of "humanism" or "nonscience" or "qualitative research" envelops at least two separate sets of assumptions, that of holistic analysis—interpretive studies, and that of value-based judgments—criticism. For this reason, some scholars find it necessary and useful to divide communication research into three traditions. These authors agree that social science constitutes one tradition, but
they break out conventional humanism into two different traditions: interpretive studies and critical inquiry. A number of researchers have built upon this trichotomous scheme. This investigation expands upon this scholarship by employing these three research traditions for analysis: social science, interpretive studies, and critical analysis.

Recently, a team of scholars shed light on the characteristics attributed to these research traditions in mass communication. In their analysis of journal articles from 1965 to 1989, they explored the evidence for the existence of these traditions, concluding that an "emulative social science paradigm" has been, and continues to be, prevalent in the field. The significance of this study was its empirical illumination of the traits of the traditions, about which scholars had only speculated previously. The present study expands on this work by examining more recent literature, 1990 to 1992, and by focusing not on the empirical evidence for the existence of the traditions, but on the extent to which published scholars adhere to these traditions. The significance of this investigation is its assessment of the degree to which these traditions influence current mass communication inquiry.

**Research Components.** The three research traditions may be analyzed along four conceptual components: ontology, epistemology, purpose, and methodology. It is helpful to organize these components hierarchically in order to operationalize them for study. Ontological assumptions about the nature of reality, which are at the highest level, lead to epistemological assumptions on the next level - assumptions about what we know about reality. These assumptions in turn guide the aims of research as seen in the problems or questions scholars address at the next level - purpose. The purpose of inquiry then determines the research methodologies at the final level.

**Superordinate Variable: Nature of Research Question.** It is necessary to identify an attribute that is sufficiently high in this hierarchy to be a valid determiner of research approaches, but sufficiently low to be coded reliably. Because ontology and epistemology are abstract, philosophical concepts, it was decided to look at the next level - the purpose of a research study - to create the superordinate variable. One variable that can be operationalized for the purpose of a study is the nature of the research question a scholar poses.

Social scientists measure attributes and look for central tendencies and variation. Therefore, the nature of the research question of a social scientific study is: Is there a measurable tendency in this subject (e.g., people, events, phenomena, artifacts, etc.), and if so, what is it? Interpretive researchers arrive at meanings holistically in their contexts. Moerman writes that the main goal of an interpretive scholar "is to find out how the events he observes and experiences in the alien world make sense to the aliens, how their way of life coheres and has meaning and value for the people who live it." This reflects an implied question in this tradition: What do the people involved believe to be the case; that is, what do those being studied, or those involved with the context (e.g., event, phenomenon, artifact, etc.), think about the topic of study? Critical scholars conduct their examinations by analyzing values and judging, or criticizing, them. Vande Berg and Wenner assert that "the primary purposes of criticism... are understanding, explanation, and appreciation... [of] socio-cultural, symbolic form." This suggests an underlying research question for this tradition: What creates hegemony in the subjects...
of study (e.g., people, events, phenomena, artifacts, etc.); should the values of
that hegemony be changed; if so, how?

In sum, the "nature of the question" of a research study may be one of
tree types: a question about measurable tendencies points to a social
scientific study; a question about people's contextual meanings points to an
interpretive study; a judgmental question about the hegemony of values
reflects a critical study. This variable serves as the superordinate determiner
of research traditions in this content analysis.

Ontology. Ontological issues deal with people's beliefs about the
existence and nature of reality. Social scientists believe in a rational and
atomistic ontology. Anderson writes that social scientists view "human
behavior atomistically, as divisible into many independent parts each of
which performs in reliably systematic [rational] rather than random or
capricious ways." In the interpretive tradition, "the important reality is
what people imagine it to be... The [interpretive scholar] is concerned with
understanding human behavior from the actor's own frame of reference." Interpretive reality is idiosyncratic - dynamic across contexts, and eidetic - a
holistic mixture of attributes, rather than a set of isolated variables. In the
critical tradition, phenomena are believed to be value-laden: "judg-
ments... are taken as data." These judgments arise from the researchers'
ideological perspectives, and critical investigations reveal particular sets of
values or judgments regarding concentrations of power. Critical scholars
believe these ideological power positions may be identified and challenged
in research.

In sum, the variable "ontology" may be operationalized with three
values: rational and atomistic fits with social science; idiosyncratic and eidetic
suggests interpretive studies; ideologic and value-laden points to critical
scholarship.

Epistemology. Epistemology refers to the generation of meaning, or
the creation of knowledge. Knowledge is created through shared percep-
tions. The axiomatic assumption of the social scientific epistemology is that
these perceptions are similar, or unitary, among humans. Interpretive
researchers believe knowledge to be created through a more subjective
process of holistic analysis. Carragee writes that interpretive studies "view
media texts as polysemic - that is, characterized by a multiplicity of
meanings." In the critical tradition, knowledge is created - as its name
implies - through "criticism." Critical scholars "reflect" judgmentally on
the subject of study to arrive at knowledge through an evaluation of inher-
ent values.

In sum, a unitary epistemology indicates social science; a polysemic
epistemology suggests interpretive studies; a judgmental epistemology re-
lects critical scholarship.

Purpose. Each research study has a specific objective, usually stated
in terms of research questions to answer, hypotheses to test, propositions to
explore, and so forth. Underlying this specific objective are assumptions
about the broader purposes of inquiry, as evident in three variables: the
nature of the questions asked, the types of theories explored, and the kinds
of hypotheses formulated. The nature of the research question was explicated
above as the superordinate variable. Here, theory and hypotheses are
discussed.

Theory. Theory construction is part of each of the three traditions,
though not all researchers necessarily construct theories. Many scholars
agree that the goal of social scientific theory is prediction and control.
goal of interpretive theory is contextual explanation. Lull writes that the intent of interpretive studies in mass communication is to “allow the researcher to grasp as completely as possible...the ‘native perspective’ on relevant communicative and sociocultural matters.” Interpretive theory leads to understanding that is contingent upon a context: it provides “thick description” of common perceptions. The goal of critical theory is emancipation and change. Critical theory is designed to enhance appreciation of phenomena and to lead to freedom and a new social order.

A theory, then, may be one of three types: a social scientific theory strives for prediction and control; an interpretive theory delights in contingent understanding; a critical theory seeks emancipation and change. Additionally, some studies may have no theories. This is expected most often in the interpretive tradition because of the situational nature of its research.

Hypotheses. Social science hypotheses, with their formal statements of variable relationships, reflect a belief that the purpose of research is to investigate measurable tendencies among individual attributes of phenomena. Interpretive hypotheses are thesis statements about beliefs. Critical hypotheses are also thesis statements, but they contain an additional element of judgment. Social scientists may be expected to use formal hypotheses because the scientific method calls for theories to be tested in terms of hypotheses that contain variables for operationalization and measurement. Interpretive and critical scholars, however, are not expected to formulate formal hypotheses in their approaches to research.

Methodology. Methodology refers to the way in which scholars gather and evaluate evidence. This component may be operationalized across five variables: sampling, data collection, verification, data analysis, and generalization.

Sampling. Sampling refers to the process of selecting a set of subjects for study from a larger population. For the social science tradition, generalizing from the sample to the population is important. As a result, probability sampling serves as the ideal. When constrained (e.g., by time or money), social scientists turn to nonprobability samples. For the interpretive scholar, scientific sampling is not the norm. Because interpretive researchers investigate contexts holistically, it is impractical to study a large enough number of whole situations to achieve any probable representation of a larger population. To be sure, some situations might demonstrate commonalities; however, these are more “shared perceptions,” or “shared constructions,” than they are scientific generalizations. Critical scholars also are not concerned with probability sampling. Often a single case study is sufficient to make a critical argument.

In sum, sampling consists of at least four types: probability, nonprobability, and population or case studies – both of which involve no sampling. In some research articles, the sample may be unknown – a fifth value. Social scientists are expected to use probability samples because of their assumption of generalizable representation. Interpretive scholars are likely to use population studies, case studies, or nonprobability samples, as are critical scholars, because they are more concerned with context and values than with representation.

Data Collection. Data collection refers to the procedures that researchers employ to gather evidence of the phenomena they study. This variable may be conceived as a 2 x 2 x 2 matrix (see Figure 1).

One dimension consists of the values “filtered” and “nonfiltered.” A filtered collection procedure is one in which the researcher approaches the
subject of study with *a priori* categorization of desired findings: the scholar looks specifically for certain items, such as in formal surveys and content analyses. Nonfiltered collection occurs when the researcher takes notes on the subject of study and builds the organizational scheme later, such as in some nonparticipant observation.

A second dimension consists of the values "obtrusive" and "unobtrusive." Obtrusive procedures are those in which the respondents are aware of the presence of the researcher, such as in laboratory experiments. Unobtrusive procedures are those in which the researcher's presence is not known, such as in nonparticipant observation when no one is aware of the researcher.

A third dimension consists of the values "interactive" and "noninteractive." Interactive procedures are those in which the researcher is an active participant in the situation being studied and purposely influences the data, such as in experiments and some participant observation. Noninteractive procedures are those in which the researcher does not want to influence the data beyond focusing the topic, such as writing survey questions or devising categories for content analyses.

The most frequently expected social science values are those that reflect the social scientific method of searching for "facts" and "causes" through methods such as "survey questionnaires, inventories, and demographic analysis, which produce quantitative data. The most frequent interpretive values are indicative of researchers who "favor methods that open up the experiential or interactional realities of those whom they study," such as observation, depth interviews, and archival documents.

The most frequent critical studies value is the one that describes the method of applying an ideological perspective to some phenomenon in order to generate a value-based critique.

**Verification.** Verification refers to the way in which the accuracy or worth of an investigation is determined. In social science, "truth" is determined through a process of falsification and replication. In practice, social scientists typically engage in one or more of three types of verification: instrument, data, and analysis. In some studies, researchers might ask the participants to read the research reports and verify that their responses are accurately stated. This is a special kind of analysis verification—the kind that interpretive scholars might use when living respondents are studied, such as
in naturalistic inquiry.\(^{39}\) In other interpretive inquiry, such as historical research, respondent verification may not be possible. Interpretive researchers, then, are not always expected to engage in formal, intra-study verification. In the critical tradition, the validity of a study is determined by “free consensus.”\(^{60}\) Those who share the critical perspective of the researcher are free to accept or reject the argument. Critical scholars, then, are not expected to engage in any formal, intra-study verification.

In sum, the five values of the “verification” variable are: instrument-based, data-based, and results-based – expected of social science; respondent-based – expected sometimes of interpretive studies; and no verification – expected of both interpretive studies and critical scholarship.

Data Analysis. Data analysis refers to the way in which researchers make sense out of their information. To arrive at probabilistic patterns, social scientists typically collapse information into quantifiable aggregates in their analyses.\(^{41}\) Because of their interest in aggregate trends, social scientists normally employ quantitative analysis. Interpretive researchers construct qualified meanings from contexts. Lindlof writes that interpretive scholarship “seeks to preserve the form, content, and context of social phenomena and analyze their qualities. ... Any qualitative work is presented through one or more kinds of narrative which do more than present data and inferences; they reconstruct the historical or cultural milieu of the subject.”\(^{42}\) Analysis in the interpretive tradition is qualitative and holistic. Critical scholars order information in terms of a predetermined, evaluative framework. They analyze their data by placing them within the value system employed. Critical scholars challenge the attributes they investigate so that emancipatory change can be realized.\(^{43}\) Data analysis in the critical tradition consists of evaluation that is qualitative and judgmental.

In sum, data analysis may be of three types: quantitative, aggregate reduction reflects social science; qualitative, holistic interpretation indicates interpretive studies; qualitative, judgmental evaluation suggests critical scholarship.

Generalization. Generalization is the procedure researchers use to describe some phenomenon across a population when only a part of that population is studied. Some scholars generalize explicitly. Others generalize implicitly: they do not overtly discuss any generalizations, but they do not limit their discussions to their specific investigations. Some scholars do not generalize their findings at all. The “generalization” variable, then, may have three values: explicit generalization is typical of social scientists; no generalization is characteristic of interpretive researchers; implicit generalization suggests the critical tradition.

This is a meta-study: it is research about research. All research is necessarily conducted with certain assumptions and guidelines, and this study can be no exception. As discussed previously, the nature of a research question may serve as a determiner of a research tradition. The social science tradition is marked by questions about tendencies within and across populations. The question that guides this investigation—scholarly adherence to research expectations—is a question about tendencies among mass communication scholars; therefore, the social science tradition offers the framework for this analysis.

Sample. The emphasis here was on current adherence to research traditions, so the articles for coding were chosen from the most recent issues
of nine journals, selected because of their affiliations with major scholarly communication and media organizations in America (see Figure 2). These organizations cover the breadth of communication studies, so it was assumed that their scholarly publications represent the diversity of research in the field.

Coding began with the most recently available issue of each journal, which - at the time of the coding - was the December or winter issue of 1992 in most cases. The coders worked backwards in time with each journal. Initially, they coded every research article that examined mass communication or mass media. Excluded were book reviews; commentaries; introductions to special issues; poll reviews; and articles about speech, interpersonal, group, and organizational communication.

After about 70 articles, it became clear that the sample was skewed toward social science. Because relatively equal numbers of articles representing each tradition were desired, quota procedures were implemented. The coders were instructed to code only those articles that fit with the interpretive and critical traditions on the superordinate variable. Due to logistics (the senior author lived 2,000 miles from the coders, and conflicting school breaks occurred during the coding), the next group of articles coded was examined by the authors more than a week later. At that time, it was discovered that this procedure had overcompensated for the social science skew, resulting in more interpretive and critical articles being coded than social science articles.

All told, 253 articles were coded. Each article constituted one "case" in the data set. Eight cases were indeterminable on the superordinate "research question" variable, leaving 245 cases for analysis. Of these, 57 (23%) were social science, 104 (42%) were interpretive, and 84 (34%) were critical. They reflect research from 1990 through 1992, with one issue of JOC published in 1993. A total of 3 (1%) articles were coded from CM, 6 (2%) from CT, 52 (21%) from CSMC, 37 (15%) from JOBEM, 45 (18%) from JOC, 43 (17%) from JPC, 57 (23%) from JQ, 1 (0%) from POQ, and 9 (4%) from QJS. (Total percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.)

**Data Collection.** Two coders were hired, both first-year graduate students in mass communications at a large, midwestern university. Each coded a unique set of articles to avoid duplication, and each coded articles in each of the journals to minimize the potential for a coder-by-journal bias.

Reliability checks were made on 20 articles from each of the coders. The senior author independently coded these 40 articles and made comparisons with the coding decisions offered by each coder. Holsti's reliability

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Communication Monographs (CM)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication Theory (CT)</td>
<td>International Communication Association (ICA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Studies in Mass Communication (CSMC)</td>
<td>SCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Broadcasting &amp; Electronic Media (JOBEM)</td>
<td>Broadcast Education Association (BEA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Communication (JOC)</td>
<td>ICA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Popular Culture (JPC)</td>
<td>Popular Culture Association (PCA)</td>
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<td>Journalism Quarterly (JQ)</td>
<td>Association for Education in Journ. and Mass Comm. (AEJMC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Opinion Quarterly (POQ)</td>
<td>American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)</td>
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<td>Quarterly Journal of Speech (QJS)</td>
<td>SCA</td>
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coefficient was calculated for each variable: tradition .78; ontology .80; epistemology .80; theory .78; hypotheses .73; sampling .78; data collection .98; verification .80; data analysis .76; generalization .53.

Two of the variables, hypotheses and generalization, demonstrated unexpectedly low reliability (.73 and .53, respectively). Categories within those variables were collapsed, losing some of the distinctions, but gaining higher reliability scores. Two categories for "hypotheses" (formal and informal) were combined because both represented some type of hypotheses formulation. The remaining category, "no hypotheses," seemed distinct. For "generalization," two categories (explicit and implicit) were also combined because both represented some type of generalization. The value "no generalization" remained. After collapsing, Holsti was recalculated and the scores were acceptable (.93 for hypotheses; .75 for generalization).

Data Analysis. Three analyses were undertaken. First, frequency distributions were computed by research tradition to determine how well the journal articles in each tradition fit with the expectations of that tradition; that is, how well the authors of those articles adhered to their respective research approaches.

A second test was the construction of a conformity index. A summative procedure was employed to measure each scholar's adherence to the collective expectations associated with his or her tradition. The categories for each variable were recoded in dichotomous (yes, no) fashion, with "yes" representing expected values for each tradition and "no" representing unexpected values. For each tradition, the "yeses" were then summed, producing an index of conformity to the expectations of that tradition.

A third procedure was an examination of the patterns of deviation from the expected values, using the conformity index as a base. Articles with relatively high conformity scores (7 and 8) were examined, separately. Frequency distributions were run for each variable, using the recoded "yes/no" conformity scheme. This revealed the variables for which the authors most frequently met expectations, as well as those from whose expectations the authors most frequently deviated. This permitted, by research tradition, an assessment of patterns among the variables for which researchers most readily did not adhere to the expected values.

Frequency Distributions

Ontology. Almost all the articles conformed to their expected ontological values (see Table 1). Every social science article coded (100%) demonstrated a rational and atomistic view of reality. The interpretive articles revealed an idiosyncratic and eidetic view of phenomena in all but two cases (98%). The critical articles were shown to have an ideologic and value-laden belief in research topics in all but three cases (96%).

Epistemology. This variable also conformed very highly to the expected results (see Table 2). Every social science article coded (100%) pointed to a unitary belief about knowledge. The interpretive articles illustrated a polysemic conception of knowledge in all but three cases (97%). Each critical article (100%) generated understanding through judgmental statements.

Theory. The majority of cases in each tradition were found to have no theory (see Table 3): 63% of social science, 83% of interpretive studies, and 69% of critical articles. Each of the social science articles that did utilize theories demonstrated the expected property of prediction. Among the 17 theory-driven articles using interpretive research, 76% made use of theories that had the expected attribute of contingent interpretation. Most (62%) of the
critical articles that employed theories utilized theories that embraced the expected value of calling for emancipation or change.

_Hypotheses._ Hypotheses were used in 67% of the social science cases (see Table 4). Among the articles in both the interpretive and the critical traditions, the majority of cases did not utilize hypotheses (87% for both), as expected.

_Sampling._ As expected, the majority (85%) of social scientists utilized some type of sampling technique (see Table 5). Those techniques were primarily nonprobability (60%), with 25% probability techniques. Nine of the social science articles (16%) utilized unknown samples, population studies, or case studies. For interpretive articles, a plurality (37%) had unknown samples; the second most frequently coded category (31%) was "case study"; the third most frequent (28%) was "sample used" – in nearly all cases a nonprobability sample; and "population study" accounted for the remaining 5% of the articles in this tradition. For the critical tradition, fewer articles utilized sampling techniques than those that did not. Nearly half (48%) of the articles coded had unknown samples; one in four (26%) used a case study; nearly as many (23%) used a sample, in all instances a nonprobability sample; and "population study" was coded for the remaining 4% of the critical articles.

_Data Collection._ The "data collection" variable conformed to the expectations associated with each tradition (see Table 6). For social science, the three most-expected values together comprised 97% of the cases. A large

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Social Science</th>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Critical</th>
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<td>Value-laden</td>
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<td>Judgmental</td>
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<td>84 100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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majority (85%) of researchers using the interpretive approach utilized “non-filtered, unobtrusive, and noninteractive” procedures, typical of archival research (e.g., history, law, and policy) and nonparticipant observation. Researchers using the critical tradition nearly always (92%) used data collection procedures that were “nonfiltered, unobtrusive, and noninteractive.” This type of research includes the application of a predetermined perspective to phenomena in order to make value judgments about them.

Verification. The majority of articles in all three traditions were found not to have any type of formal verification reported, but the percentages of these articles varied dramatically across traditions (see Table 7). In social science, 54% of the scholars reported no verification efforts. One in four (25%) verified their data, 18% verified their instruments, and 4% verified their results. In the interpretive and critical traditions, nearly all the articles (97% and 98%, respectively) had no verification reported.

Data Analysis. The variable “data analysis” was found to be extremely consistent with expectations across the traditions (see Table 8). For social science, 100% of the coded articles used quantitative techniques of analysis. For interpretive cases, 90% of the researchers employed qualitative analysis that was primarily holistic. For critical research, 95% of the articles utilized qualitative analysis that made value judgments.

Generalization. This variable did not conform strongly to expectations, though it did demonstrate a tendency in the predicted direction (see Table 9).
An overwhelming majority (93%) of the social science articles offered generalizations. In contrast, a smaller majority (55%) of interpretive articles offered no generalizations. One-half (50%) of the critical writings offered no generalizations.

**Measures of Conformity.** The second analysis of this investigation made use of an index created to determine the extent to which the researchers in each tradition conformed to the complete expectations associated with that tradition (see Table 10). The total number of relevant variables for this conformity test was nine, so 9 was the highest possible score on the index.

For the social science tradition, the mean was 6.42, the median was 6, and the mode was 8. Nearly half (48%) had a score of 7 or 8. No social science...
articles adhered to all nine expected values. For the interpretive tradition, the mean was 8.19, the median was 8, and the mode was 9. Just over half (54%) had a score of 7 or 8. For the critical tradition, the mean was 7.37, the median was 7, and the mode was 7. Almost all (90%) had a score of 7 or 8. All told, mass communication researchers conformed rather highly to expectations. Interpretive researchers were more likely to adhere to their tradition’s assumptions than were social scientists or critical scholars. Across traditions, conformity averaged 7.33.

Patterns of Deviation. This assessment was designed to look for patterns among those articles where researchers did not conform to all nine expectations. Within each tradition, frequency distributions were run for each variable, using articles with conformity scores of 7 and 8 as a base, in order to determine the variables on which scholars most often did not conform (see Table 11). Of the 26 social science articles with scores of 7 and 8, 17 (65%) deviated on the sampling variable, 11 (42%) deviated on verification, and 8 (31%) deviated on theory. Of the 54 interpretive articles, 43 (80%) deviated on generalization. Of the 75 critical articles, 61 (81%) deviated on theory and 38 (51%) on generalization. Across traditions, scholars deviated most frequently on generalization (52%, all of them interpretive and critical) and theory (46%, almost all of them critical). Deviations for all other variables were below 30%.

Superordinate Variable. All but 8 of the 253 articles coded were classified on the superordinate variable, the nature of the research question. This indicates that these traditions can, in fact, be distinguished in the literature. The remaining 8 cases were classified as indeterminable because

<table>
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**TABLE 7**
Verification by Tradition

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative, Holistic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative, Value-judging</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 8**
Data Analysis by Tradition

**Discussion**
Generalization by Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generalization Offered</th>
<th>Social Science n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Tradition Interpretive n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Critical n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>(40)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Generalization</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their attributes crossed over among the expectations of the three traditions to such an extent that the coders could not confidently assign them to just one tradition. With so few cases, all that can be concluded is that one may occasionally encounter an article that does not easily fit into a single research tradition.

Ontology and Epistemology. It is not surprising that almost all the articles were coded as conforming to their expected ontological and epistemological values. Underlying beliefs about the nature of phenomena and the generation of knowledge are part of the foundational assumptions that define the research traditions. Because these assumptions are more intuitive than are the assumptions regarding the other components considered here (purpose and methodology), it may be more difficult to falsify the coding decisions for ontology and epistemology than it is for purpose and methodology. Ontology and epistemology may serve not so much as concrete variables that reflect scholars' conscious research decisions, but as abstract variables that reflect scholars' intuition and, consequently, the validity of the superordinate variable itself. The decision rules for coding ontology and epistemology embrace what scholars take for granted, where the decision rules for coding purpose and methodology embrace what scholars decide.

Purpose. While social scientists were expected to utilize predictive theories, just over one-third of the social science articles were coded as theory-driven. One explanation for this anomaly rests with the stringent guideline employed for coding research articles as theory-driven: a theory had to be

**TABLE 10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Variables with Expected Values</th>
<th>Social Science n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Tradition Interpretive n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Critical n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Cases</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
stated overtly in the article. It is possible that some research articles with *implied* theories might have been coded as having *no* theories. Moreover, if scholars built toward grounded, or inductive, theories, they might not have given those theories identifiable names. Because such theories might not have been expressly stated in research articles, some inductive theories could have been missed by the coders.

Interpretive researchers were not expected to employ expressly-stated theories, and for this tradition, that expectation was realized. When interpretive scholars did employ theories, those theories were designed to offer contextual understanding of situations. Critical scholars were expected to utilize theories to guide their inquiry; yet, only about one-third did so. As with social science, the best explanation for this anomaly is the restrictive guideline used for coding theory-driven research. A second explanation is that some critical research is, indeed, not theory-based. This, however, seems antithetical to the tradition. If critical scholars, by definition, employ theoretical positions for their critiques, how can some of their research *not* be theory-driven? The answer lies in the nature of critical scholarship. Critical researchers bring judgmental perspectives to their analyses and argue for change; however, those perspectives may not be articulated as truly ideological, theoretical positions.

Though most critical articles were coded as utilizing no theory, about one-third were coded as having some type of theory, in most cases emancipatory theories that argued for change, as was expected in this tradition. Ten critical articles were coded as utilizing interpretive or predictive (social science) theories. This points to some possible scholarly crossover among traditions in terms of theory. Indeed, there may be theories of value to more than one tradition. For example, gatekeeping and agenda setting have an inherent critical attribute of power assumptions: those who keep the gate to news, and thereby influence people's agendas, exercise tremendous power over the consumers of news. Yet, these theories, with their predictive abilities, stem from the social science tradition. Other theories, too, such as cultivation, diffusion, spiral of silence, and uses and gratifications, while normally associated with the social science tradition, have a premise of power on the part of those who control the content of media programming.

Because the scientific method calls for *hypotheses*, it was expected at first that the majority of social scientists would state hypotheses formally.
However, in light of the finding that the majority of social science articles did not contain theories, and in light of the fact that scientific hypotheses are generally derived from theories, it could also be expected that social scientists would not formulate hypotheses. But they did: two-thirds of the social science articles were coded as having hypotheses, yet about two-thirds did not have theories.

One explanation is that the coders for this study were simply unable to infer the theories from the hypotheses. It might also be that some of the researchers formulated hypotheses without actually deriving them from theories. Not all hypotheses stem from articulated theoretical propositions. Some may be formulated based on research questions, or on observations that have no theoretical benchmark, or on data sets that have no guiding theory.

Interpretive and critical scholars were not expected to formulate hypotheses, and indeed most did not. Of those who did, most stated their hypotheses informally. This was expected because formally-stated hypotheses typically belong in the realm of social science.

**Methodology.** Regarding **sampling,** because social scientists measure general tendencies in populations, it was expected that they would employ probability samples; however, in the majority of research articles coded, they did not. In the interpretive tradition, a plurality used unknown samples, with case studies accounting for an additional one-third and nonprobability samples an additional one-fourth. This is evidence of an assumption that representation of a larger population is not necessary in creating understanding. In the critical approach, as expected, no probability samples were found in the articles coded.

Scholars conformed to expectations across all three traditions on the **data collection** variable. Social scientists typically collected data that were filtered, obtrusive, and noninteractive (surveys); or filtered, unobtrusive, and noninteractive (content analysis); or filtered, obtrusive, and interactive (experiments). Interpretive scholars engaged in nonfiltered, unobtrusive, noninteractive means of data collection, such as archival and ethnographic studies. Critical scholars also engaged in nonfiltered, unobtrusive, and noninteractive research. They made no a priori categories for data collection; they typically studied texts of some kind, so their presence as researchers was a moot point; and they did not manipulate situations to control outcomes.

Surprisingly, the majority of social scientists reported no **verification.** One explanation for this centers on the nature of verification itself. It can be argued that a good literature review serves as verification for a study by positioning that study appropriately in the context of a research history, or that the logic of a given research design is itself verification. Indeed, some exploratory studies might have no way of being verified because there is no previous history of research against which to evaluate them. In such cases, the authors can only rely on the logic of their research designs to offer some type of verification. This type of informal verification was not coded in this investigation.

Interpretive scholars were not expected to engage in any formal means of verification, and all but a few did not. To be sure, a second researcher can examine the data and findings of a study in order to offer some evaluation of their validity. However, because of the idiographic ontology and polysemic epistemology of this tradition, a second researcher might interpret the data differently from the first. This variation among interpretations makes verification difficult in the interpretive tradition.
Critical scholars were not expected to utilize any formal means of verification, and almost all did not. This falls in line with the critical tradition because criticism, by nature, is difficult to verify. When applying a critical perspective with the intent of arguing for change, verification can only be left to those who agree with that perspective. Bochner calls this “free consensus.” Those who agree with a scholar’s ideology can verify his/her conclusions, and those who disagree with that ideology cannot.

The type of data analysis researchers employed was found to conform highly to the expectations associated with each tradition. All the social science articles were coded as having quantitative analysis. This raises a salient question, “Must social science research be quantitative?” Here, many scholars would answer no. For example, Anderson discusses qualitative research in scientific terms. Nearly all the interpretive scholars employed holistic, qualitative analysis, as expected. The situational nature of scholarship in this tradition leads researchers to this type of investigation. Occasionally, interpretive scholars stepped outside of their tradition and borrowed a type of data analysis from a different tradition. Critical scholars, as expected, nearly always utilized judgmental, qualitative data analysis. Given the ideological nature of this tradition, qualitative analyses that result in value statements about phenomena were expected.

Nearly every social scientist attempted some generalization. Yet, this is unusual in light of the findings of the “sampling” variable because the majority of social science studies did not report probability sampling techniques. Without probability sampling, generalization cannot be done confidently. It seems that these scholars are willing to settle for generalizations that, at least sometimes, lack the degree of confidence expected in conventional science. Interpretive scholars were not expected to generalize; however, nearly half did. In this tradition, it seems some scholars feel comfortable generalizing beyond the situations examined. Critical scholars were expected to generalize, at least implicitly, because they argue for change, and change typically involves contexts beyond any single study. However, this was the case in only half the critical articles. When critical researchers did offer generalizations, they were nonscientific generalizations because they were based on nonprobability samples or on no samples. This suggests that scholars in this tradition accept nonscientific generalizations. Still, half the critical scholars offered no generalizations. This unexpected finding suggests that scholars in this tradition also accept critical research that does not support a broader, ideologic perspective, but criticizes only a single text or context.

Measures of Conformity. Two explanations account for the relatively high conformity scores. The first is straightforward: mass communication researchers may, in fact, adhere rather strictly to their respective traditions. The second is that the high conformity scores may reflect the requisites of publication. In order to be published in the journals sampled here, researchers might have to conform to tradition-bound assumptions. Future research might look at studies published in books or presented at conferences to determine how strongly these mass communication scholars conform to traditional expectations.

When the conformity measures were assessed on a tradition-by-tradition basis, interpretive scholars were found to conform most strongly to their tradition (8.19 out of 9); critical scholars second most strongly (7.37); and social scientists the least (6.42). The best explanation for this ranking may be with the nature of the expectations themselves. Interpretive scholars may
have the greatest latitude in their expectations, social scientists the least, with critical scholars between the two. The scientific method may be more stringent than the research approaches of the other two traditions. Because the path of scientific research is rather narrowly defined, social scientists have a greater likelihood of stepping outside that path than do scholars in the other traditions with their more broadly defined paths.

**Patterns of Deviation.** Social scientists deviated from expectations most frequently on the variables of sampling, verification, and theory. Interpretive scholars failed to conform most frequently on generalization. Critical scholars did not meet expectations most often on theory and generalization. Collectively, these findings reveal that scholars do not always meet every expectation of their respective traditions. This could be done unwittingly in some cases, due to poor research training. In other cases, scholars might wittingly fall short of their research expectations because their inquiries demand research designs that do not adhere uniformly to conventions.

Two prescriptions emerge. The first calls for researchers to strive to adhere to the expectations of their traditions, thereby gaining some potential leverage among their peers. The cost for this is a potential loss of some creative scholarship. Researchers would be less likely to cross traditional boundaries, resulting in "more of the same." When a scholar asks a question that might be answered by designing a nontraditional study, he/she might hesitate to do so.

The second prescription is that mass communication scholars might change their expectations of these traditions to reflect the research that scholars actually conduct. This is in keeping with the position of Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, and Wartella who argue that systems of classification "should arise from the effort to understand the actual configuration of research work in the field and not from metaparadigmatic habits of thought." The benefit of this is an increase in pragmatism: expectations would match the kinds of inquiry scholars actually perform. It can be argued, though, that the cost of expanding the range of permissible options might be an undermining of the quality and stature of research in the field. Additionally, journal editors - who might stem from traditional research approaches - could find the task of evaluating research increasingly difficult.

These two prescriptions - modifying research to fit traditional expectations and modifying research expectations to fit actual research - seem at first to be contradictory. However, there is room in the field of mass communication for both. Certainly, scholars can always strive to improve the quality of their research. Not all research, however, "fits the mold" of the traditions. For this reason, the second prescription is the more realistic: modifying expectations to reflect real-world research.

**Conclusion**

Mass communication scholars appear to conform relatively strongly to the expectations of the three research traditions of social science, interpretive studies, and critical analysis. This is indicated by an average score of 7.33 out of 9 indexed variables. It can be concluded that these three approaches to inquiry guide the bulk of research in the field.

Though conformity was strong, there was some variation both within and across traditions. Scholars sometimes deviated by utilizing attributes associated with traditions other than their own. This suggests some convergence of traditions, at least at the applied levels of purpose and methodology. At the abstract levels of ontology and epistemology, however, the traditions
seem to be more exclusive: the coding for these two items revealed virtually no deviation.

In major communication journals in America, these three research traditions co-exist. It is interesting, though, that scholarship was published even when it occasionally deviated from some of the expected attributes of these traditions. This suggests that while researchers, reviewers, and editors understand these research traditions well, they also allow for some cross-traditional inquiry. That there is some tolerance for nontraditional investigations is to be exalted and encouraged. Each tradition offers a valuable approach to research in the field, so utilizing elements from more than one tradition can also be valuable. Understanding the traditions, and recognizing that cross-traditional (nontraditional) research can be published, may lead mass communication scholars to new, innovative, and creative research designs.

NOTES


5. Gene D. Fowler, "Philosophical Assumptions and Contemporary


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16. Bochner, "Perspectives on Inquiry: Representation, Conversation, and Reflection"; Craig, "Communication as a Practical Discipline."

17. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication.


21. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication.


23. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication.


29. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication; Real, "Demythologizing Media."


32. Lincoln and Guba, Naturalistic Inquiry.


34. Bogdan and Taylor, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods, 2.


36. Bogdan and Taylor, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods; Carragee, "Interpretive Media Study and Interpretive Social Science."

37. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication.

38. Bochner, "Perspectives on Inquiry: Representation, Conversation,


40. Bochner, "Perspectives on Inquiry”; Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*.


42. Lindlof, “The Qualitative Study of Media Audiences,” 24-25.


