

## CHAPTER 4

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### *Fieldwork Problems in Mexican Communication Research*

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One analytical approach to field research problems considers each of them as an isolated issue, confronting an individual researcher, probably (or ideally) well trained, who then attempts to use all the learned previous methodological and technical background and know how in order to solve it. If the researcher's previous knowledge and experience are not enough to sort out those peculiar problems, it becomes a matter of ingenuity and imagination, which in its turn may produce a certain innovation, usually at the technical or practical level. In the best case, it may even have innovative methodological consequences. This approach is fine. It may help us learn how others have solved particular problems that we might eventually confront when doing our own field research. We might also learn how to attempt to solve *similar* problems, or generally those examples can stimulate our own imagination and ingenuity for other different situations. We have in mind worthy examples such as the articles in *Unobstrusive Measures*, by Webb and Campbell (1966). This is an individualistic and voluntaristic approach to the issue. It is also a sort of "First World" view of the problematic, because it supposes that many other problems have been previously solved (proper training of the researchers, resources, institutional support, etc.).

On the other hand, by analyzing some of the main field research problems in the area of communication research in Mexico, we have come to the conclusion that most of them, actually, originate from

*structural conditions* that affect not only our own domain but scientific research in general. Therefore, we propose that the proper approach to the analysis of the problematic that a social scientist finds when doing field research in an underdeveloped (or "developing") setting such as Mexico has to unveil, first, the hindrances and limitations structurally produced. Then, after explaining and describing how "poor science" has to develop in a context of scarcity, social incomprehension, and other heavy structural limitations, the isolated instances of methodological success and advancement can be highlighted. We contend that ingenuity and innovation are not impossible within an underdeveloped society, but that they are also structurally limited.

Since 1982, Mexico is in its worst historical economic crisis. The disparities within the country have become larger: For example, the purchasing power of the working class' salaries has been cut in half since 1977 (Bolívar & Sánchez, 1987; Sánchez Lozano, 1985). The external debt (the second largest of the Third World, after Brazil's) has deepened the country's vulnerability and its dependence on outside economic and political forces, especially the United States. The economic situation has also brought about a deep legitimation crisis of the State, as well as a cultural and ideological crisis of identity of the Mexicans (Hernández Medina & Narro, 1987). However, scientist Pérez Tamayo (1985) contended that scientific research was in crisis long before the worsening of the general situation in the country. Although since the 1970s the government has fostered scientific research in Mexico and in the larger universities, there has been a gradual increase in this type of activity, the situation is still too fragile. According to the opinion of the president of the Mexican Academy of Scientific Research, the size of the scientific community is about 10 times smaller than required by the level of development of the country (*Uno mas Uno*, April 28, 1988, p. 1). There are today 2 scientists *and* engineers for every 10,000 inhabitants, whereas in the United States there are 31 scientists and engineers in the same proportion (UNESCO, 1987). Probably the UNESCO figures underestimate the number of scientists in the United States, because in the 1970s the proportion was estimated to be 42 for every 10,000 population (Pérez Tamayo, 1986). The UNESCO estimate for Israel in 1984 was of the order of 95 scientists and engineers per 10,000 inhabitants. There seem to be about 5,000 full-time scientific researchers in Mexico and around 16,000 persons working at all levels in research and development activities, whereas in the United States, in only the institutions of higher education, the figure is about 100,000. Research and development activities absorb only .3% of the GNP in Mexico, which looks rather low compared to the 2.6% of the United States—which, on the other hand, is a larger slice of a much bigger cake (UNESCO, 1987). In

the highly industrialized countries, such as Japan, West Germany, and the United States, the private sector supports about one-half the expenditures in research and development; in Brazil, the proportion is near 20%, whereas in Mexico the estimates range from 5% to 10 (the UNESCO figure for 1984 is .9%, but the former estimates seem more credible).<sup>1</sup>

Given the critical conditions for scientific researchers, and in order to stop—or at least to diminish—the brain drain that began to increase during the last decades, the Federal Government established in 1984 the National System of Researchers (SNI), which consists of a system of scholarships given to the most productive researchers in all fields of science. It is actually a monthly complement to the researchers' earnings and a distinction. In general terms, the System works honestly, and it is run by representatives of the scientific community. But, still, the National Researchers complain that their income is not enough to have a regular middle-class level of life. By 1987 there were 3,495 researchers in the System, of which 20% worked in the social sciences and humanities (Malo, 1988).

Several analysts have pointed out that because of the predominance of vertical, authoritarian relationships in the Mexican universities some of the best scientists' progress comes about through their occupying administrative posts that "imply greater material rewards and recognition in terms of prestige within the academic community. Paradoxically, in order to progress in the research career you have to stop doing research" (Lomnitz, 1985, p. 20). Hence, contended Perez Tamayo (1986), the "brain drain" issue is not only a problem of scientists migrating to the United States or to some other highly industrialized nation to work, but includes the fact that many potential or real scientific researchers quit their scientific careers proper because of the lack of incentives. It is only since the 1970s that in most Mexican higher education institutions a scientific tradition is beginning to generalize, so only gradually can the researchers acquire more status and recognition within and outside the universities (cf. Casas, 1983; Sala-Gomezgil & Chavero, 1982). There are also severe limitations (which vary by disciplines and fields of study) to the diffusion of the products of scientific research in Mexico, within the scientific community as well as among the general public, which includes the close to null role of the

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<sup>1</sup>In the particular case of communication research, private agencies perform a good deal of research, for the marketing needs of the media, advertising agencies and advertisers. However, this kind of applied research hardly ever is known beyond its immediate users and it is difficult to consider it "scientific research" proper, or still less, "private support to scientific research."

mass media in this respect (Gomezgil et al., 1980; Gomezgil & Tovar, 1982).

### THE TRIPLE MARGINALITY

Scientific research in Mexico, thus, is a rather marginal activity, whose situation is worsening with the crisis: The president of the Academy of Scientific Research has declared to the press that between 1977 and 1987 the real income of scientific researchers has been reduced by 50% (*Uno mas Uno*, 1988, p.15), a situation that should be relatively alleviated by the creation of the SNI, just described. Every new federal government declares that science and technology is a high priority, but the real support for scientific research (which is very small from the private sector) has been reduced with the worsening of the economic crisis (Lopez & Flores, 1988). The situation for the social sciences is relatively worse, because the "hard sciences" are closer to the possibilities of generating technology (at least in the pragmatic but shortsighted minds of politicians and decisionmakers). Besides, the mainstream of the social sciences in Mexico has been traditionally characterized by a critical orientation, so the establishment does not like very much the interpretations of Mexican history and reality produced by them.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, recent appraisals of the state-of-the-art in the social sciences show also a picture of crisis at the substantive, methodological and institutional levels (cf. Benitez, 1987; Benitez & Silva, 1984; for the case of communication research, cf. Fuentes, 1988; Sanchez Ruiz, 1988).

In a recent survey performed by the Mexican Council of Social Sciences (COMECOSO) and the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) the heads of nearly all the social research centers (390) that existed in Mexico in 1984 pointed out the main obstacles to research: (a) insufficient financing and low remunerations; (b) lack of proper training; (c) inadequate infrastructure; (d) lack of interinstitutional collaboration; (e) absence of research policies; (f) centralization; and (g) no favorable internal or external institutional conditions, among others (Benitez, 1987). Actually, the first three issues were the most frequently mentioned. However, in the last decade there has been a considerable growth of research centers in Mexico, especially out of the capital city. But the working conditions do not seem to be the most

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<sup>2</sup>This happens elsewhere too: After a recent conference of Brazilian communication researchers, the participants came to the conclusion that financing problems arise out of displeasure of government and private agencies because some "scientific findings and revelations go against 'institutional truths'." (Marques de Melo, 1983, p. 9)

suitable: Within the research just mentioned, an evaluation was made of the institutional conditions of the research centers, and it was found that 38% of them did not offer the minimal working conditions for research; 36% were deemed to fulfil those minimal requirements in the short term, and only 25% of the centers were found to offer favorable conditions. The situation worsens in the provinces, where only 13% of the centers were considered to offer suitable working conditions, whereas in Mexico City the proportion rises to 40% (Benitez, 1987). As to the level of schooling of the researchers employed in those centers, slightly over half (52%) of them had only undergraduate studies, 2% had studied some specialty after graduating; 28% held master's degrees, and only 17% had done doctoral studies—they do not report how many of them had *finished* their doctorates (Benitez, 1987). From the latter data we can infer the existence in Mexico of an important obstacle to rigorous social science research: the poor training that most researchers have. Even though with the recent proliferation of graduate programs in the social sciences it is gradually improving (Benitez & Silva, 1984), sometimes the situation tends to reproduce itself, as when poorly trained social scientists are the professors of those programs (Rota, 1979).

Even though a little over one fifth of the scientific research personnel in Mexico works in the social sciences and humanities (UNESCO, 1987), there are reasons to believe that they are relatively marginal with respect to the so-called hard sciences: not only in budget terms, but also in terms of status, social acceptance, and understanding. In its turn, communication research is a marginal activity within the social sciences. For example, COMECISO's research found only six centers that in 1984 conducted research *only* in the field of communication (Benitez, 1987). Out of these, only *one* presented the minimal requirements for the research endeavor; two other centers, also located in Mexico City, could fulfill them in the short term, and the other three (one in Mexico City and two in the provinces) did not seem to have any hope of meeting those requirements. In the last 2 or 3 years, the oldest and most prestigious research centers in the field of communication (in the National University—public—and in the Anahuac University—private) have practically closed, and at least three new centers have begun working in the provinces (at the University of Guadalajara, the University of Colima, and the College of the Northern Border). There are several other places where communication research is performed in Mexico, and one could think of *at least* 60 persons who could be considered serious communication researchers (the Mexican Association of Communication Researchers—AMIC—has had up to 100 members). However, at the level of excellence we seem to be rather poor, judging by the six communication scholars who belong to the National System of

Researchers (barely 1% of the total of social science research workers in the System).

The triple marginality in the heading of this section, then, means that communication research is marginal within the social sciences, which we contend are marginal within the general area of scientific research and, in its turn, the latter is marginal within the development priorities in Mexico as a result of the development model adopted since the 1950s (which showed signs of exhaustion by the late 1960s and entered into frank crisis by the late 1970s until the present).

We contend, thus, that the nature, orientations, and possibilities of social science research in general, and in particular modalities such as field research, is determined<sup>3</sup> by structural factors that range from the level of wealth of the nation-state under scrutiny, to cultural and ideological factors, such as the general scientific culture of the social formation and including the research ideologies of the community of scholars. Several of those factors have been illustrated for the case of Mexico by the figures and information provided in this section. The heuristic model presented in Fig. 4.1 shows some of the main structural determinant factors for field research. Figure 4.1 should be read downwards, in the sense of wider to more concrete conditioning factors. We *do not* assume linear causality.

It would be a matter of a larger chapter and of a wider research project to illustrate completely our model (which could surely be enhanced). However, we think it is plausible and useful for the generation of further hypotheses to explain why "poor science" occurs within certain economic, political, and cultural situations. Even though the heuristic scheme has been useful to us in order to organize our thoughts and some of the empirical information provided here, we have to clarify that it has not been our intention—and it is far from our present possibilities—to pursue an exhaustive or even systematic analysis based on it. We present it here because it gives an idea of the actual complexity of the problems at issue. Finally, the model should also be read taking into account not only particular conjunctures, but also the historical roots, residues, and emerging trends in the several factors included in order to acquire a greater heuristic and explanatory power.

We illustrate the cultural component, especially the part on *research ideologies* with a simple analysis of the documents on communication produced from 1956 to 1986 in Mexico. Traditionally, in the Latin American social sciences, empirical work has been minimized. That is, the main emphasis has been usually put on the generation of plausible and elegant theories that attempt to explain everything. In the field of communication research, an extreme situation occurred during the

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<sup>3</sup>Determination in the sense of "setting of limits," in probabilistic terms.

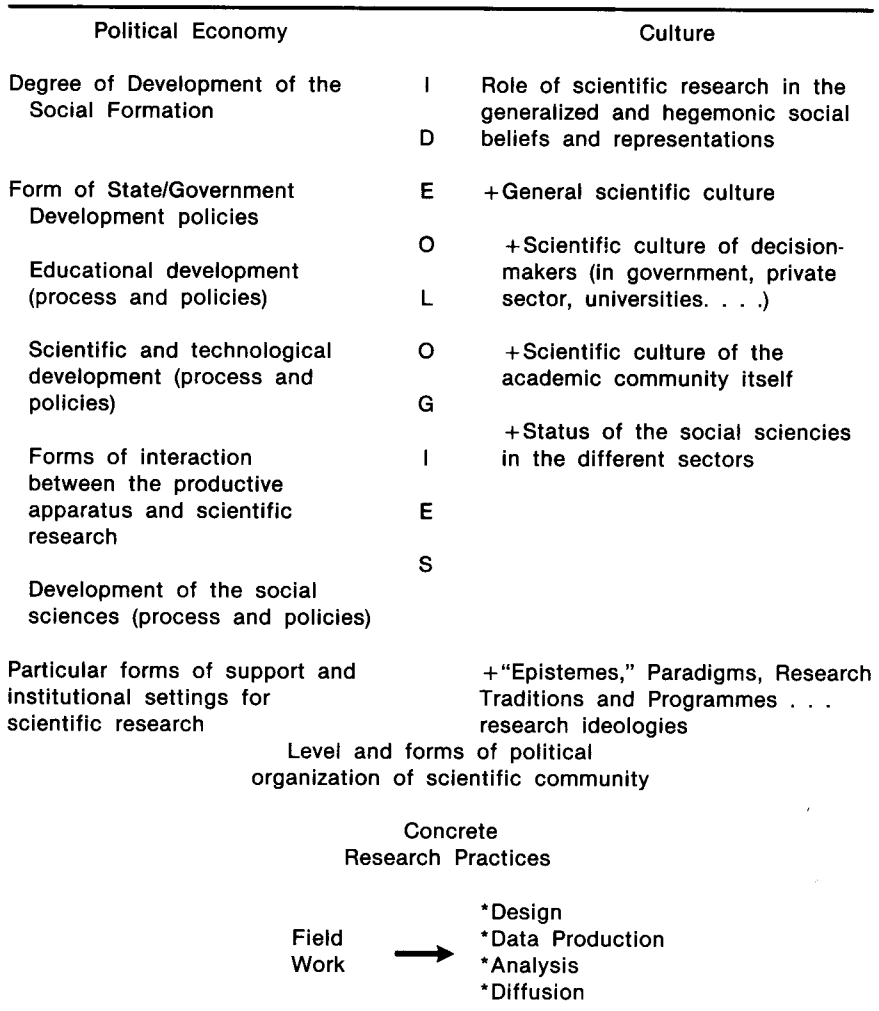


FIG. 4.1 Some general structural determinants for scientific research in the social sciences

1970s, when the prevailing orientation was what Prieto (1983) called—rather deprecatingly—*theoreticism*, which, exaggerating a little, in many respects constituted chains of “word games,” that led to absurd “deaf dialogues,” and contributed very little to the understanding of the concrete processes that were occurring in Mexican reality. The most salient instances of empirical work within communication research were the several historical and structural analyses of ownership and control of the media that proliferated during the 1970s. It should be

noticed also that as an extreme reaction to the early influence of North American social science, quantitative methods and techniques acquired the status of "suspects" so their use was minimized during the same decade. The general bias against empirical work can be found in a sample of scholarly works produced between 1956 and 1986.

Fuentes (1988) scrutinized the over 4,000 documents stored in the Documentation Center of the National Council for Teaching and Research in Communication Sciences (CONEICC), the largest in Mexico, and other sources. The researcher selected 877 works (books, published articles, research reports, and papers) that, in his opinion, contributed—even marginally—to the understanding of Mexican communicational reality or illustrated the best efforts of Mexican communication scholars. The main trends in Mexican communication studies that this rather large sample represents are described in his book. For the purpose of this chapter, we classified the documents in that sample in terms of their empirical content and whether or not they comprised some form of fieldwork. By *empirical content*, in a very wide sense, we mean what goes beyond the informed essay or sheer theorizing, and represents some kind of *organized* data collecting-producing effort. Thus, we include here historical and/or structural studies, as well as quantitative or qualitative content analysis (including semiological and discourse analyses), sample surveys, action-research and experimental research. On the other hand, among these documents, we searched for those that represented the work of "going to the field," that is, the researchers somehow interacting with their subjects of study, within any kind of target community, in order to directly ask or observe, in either a quantitative or qualitative fashion. It turned out that of the total of 877 documents only 336 (38%) had empirical content in the sense just described (which does not mean that most of the rest did not make use of some type of factual information). But one can infer from this that most probably less than two fifths of these documents are the result of *formal research projects*. Of the 336 documents with empirical content, 98, or 29% constituted the results of fieldwork research—that is, only 11% of the total sample of documents.

Out of this simple analysis we can infer the presence of the "cultural component," in the sense that we observe the social operation of minimization of empirical research as responding to the most widespread social representations and beliefs, which, by the way, are changing because of the current state of crisis in the social sciences. But this is not the only explanation for this finding. On the other hand, any kind of field work, especially the most technically sophisticated, such as the sample survey, is a very expensive type of empirical research. And we have been describing a situation of "poor science." The complete



explanation for this finding, then, has to include the interaction of variables, such as the "cultural component" (anti-empiricist bias) and the institutional conditions within which the researchers work (lack of proper financing, infrastructure, human resources, etc.). We describe some other findings from this analysis further on in this chapter.

### A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA AND MEXICO

In this section we describe the development of communication research in Mexico in the context of Latin American social sciences, and provide an overview of its main thematic and methodological trends in the last three decades.

Modern thinking about society began in Latin America and Mexico between the last decades of the 19th century and the beginnings of the 20th century, in the form of "erudite studies," most of them philosophically, historically, or legally oriented (Boils & Murga, 1979). The first communication studies, especially on the press, evolved on this general model (Beltran, 1980; Marques de Melo, 1984a). Without denying its enormous philosophical, historical, and often descriptive contributions to the understanding of Latin American reality, that paradigm of social analysis must be considered prescientific. Because of its constant use of the recourse to authority (citation or quotation to an authoritative source) and because of the final and definitive explanation it often implies, this approach is to a great extent authoritarian, and an influential heritage we still suffer.

By the end of World War II, the United States emerged as the indisputable hegemonic world power. Hence, during the 1950s and 1960s, besides many other things, Latin America received, uncritically and without mediations or proper adaptations, the theories and methods in vogue in the U.S. social sciences (empiricism, functionalism, diffusionism, and "developmentalism" in the form of modernity theory) as a part of the "modernization" process of the Latin American countries. In the field of communication, then, audience research, public opinion studies, and the like began to spread with the expansion of the modern mass diffusion media, of advertising and the commercial model that, also, was imported from the United States (Marques de Melo, 1984a). In rural settings the *diffusion of innovations* approach was widely used to investigate the effects of small-scale social change projects (Rogers, 1976). It was a time of intellectual dependence that would be manifest in that, for example, those Latin Americans who went

to do graduate studies in the United States, very often when back in their countries would serve as simple local fieldworkers for the big research projects of the North American scholars (Gonzalez Casanova, 1977). Actually, most of the academic research in the area of communication in Latin America during the 1950s and 1960s, was either performed or directed by U.S. scholars, or under their influence (Beltran, 1976).

Around 1965 there began a critical and revitalizing movement in the Latin American social sciences, especially in Santiago de Chile, where several important research, teaching, and planning international institutions were established. The Cuban Revolution was a key event to foster critical thought because it showed that there was a nearby option of socialist development in sight (seen very optimistically in the beginning) before the many injustices, inequalities, and contradictions that were observable in our countries. *Dependency theory* emerged, with a strong Marxist influence, but mainly as a critical reaction not only to the state of intellectual, political, and economic subordination of Latin America from the United States, but also because of the inadequateness of the social theories and methodologies imported to explain the local situations. The 1960s and 1970s were germinal for the development of a social science—communication studies included—with strong Latin American roots and characteristics. This happened not at all in terms of any kind of regional *chauvinism*, but in terms of the search for adequacy of the theories and methods, with the actual traits of the social processes in the region, and as a rebellion against the influences and determinations that were exerted by the core countries of capitalism on Latin American social thought.

However, in some cases what really happened was the mere change from a borrowed framework of analysis to another, borrowed also, that was sometimes more useful, but oftentimes was sterilizing, as when Marxism was taken as a “doctrine” that would automatically produce all the theoretical, empirical, and practical answers and solutions to the Latin American problems. At the same time, in communication studies, as well as in the rest of the social sciences, the search for pertinence of the analysis to the complex Latin American reality made some scholars assume that it was possible to generate theory, methodology, and even epistemology that would be totally original and “autochthonous.” The best Latin American contributions to the social sciences have been the product of creative syntheses of epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and technical or instrumental elements from diverse origins, with locally generated elements, and made pertinent to the concrete social reality, its processes and mutations. Two examples are, on the one hand, the “dependency approach” and, on the other hand, innovations such as Freire’s (1970) approach to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

During the 1970s, besides the influence of the Frankfurt School and Marxism in general, which already were present, Latin America received other European currents of social thought (some years after they had been in vogue in the Old Continent): Structuralism of linguistic roots with its developments in semiology, psychoanalysis, and sociology, as well as the influential "structuralist" Marxism of Althusser and his followers. Later on came the "rediscovery" of Gramsci's thought, especially as related to popular culture studies, and the French school of discourse analysis. In time, this constant flow of frameworks, which quite often have constituted mainly intellectual fashions, has become an important hindrance for the advancement of the understanding of our concrete conditions, inasmuch as the potential of a certain theory or methodology was not quite explored, when there came a new one, and previous work was rejected or put aside. Thus, this continuous process of intellectual change in some cases has been only a succession of intellectual fashions, not of rational debate that would include the critical discussion of such frameworks at the epistemological, theoretical, methodological levels, and on their *empirical*—and in the last instance *practical*—relevance to Latin American reality. However, we have to recognize that Latin American social sciences in general, and communication studies in particular, have benefited from the input of the analytical frameworks and debates from a good part of the world, as long as they have been adopted critically, incorporated into our own intellectual baggage, and made pertinent to the understanding of our reality through actual empirical research and practical action.

Since the end of the 1970s and along the current decade, the social sciences are going through a new stage of crisis and search. Marxism, on the one hand, has shown several signs of exhaustion in its possibilities to explain and guide action in today's capitalist society in its transnational and monopolistic phase. Dependency theory was found insufficient, in particular regarding its practical implications and the possibilities for change (Cardoso, 1980). The world crises (or the great crisis that began in the 1970s), not only of an economic nature, but also political and cultural-ideological, have in turn been an important source for crisis in the social sciences, which have usually lagged behind historical movements. Many of the great theoretical "certitudes" of the 1970s have tumbled down (Schmucler, 1984). The epistemological "purities" that the 1970s' theoreticians assumed were possible are now found sterile and sterilizing for the generation of rational, open, and plural debates (Sanchez Ruiz, 1985). Mexican social sciences are also in crisis (Benitez & Silva, 1984) and communication research is of course included (Sanchez Ruiz, 1988). New reflections and new practices—from points of departure that attempt to synthesize what we have learned from the previous

stages—are orienting Latin American critical communication research toward the immediate future.

We are, then, still searching on the one hand for a “grand synthesis” at the theoretical level that may let us comprehend the complexity and multidimensionality of the communicational phenomena and processes that operate within the complexity of the societal and cultural systems and processes. On the other hand, we believe that Latin American researchers have realized that theory is not all the stuff of science, especially if it is not validated adequately by the production of the empirical facts. In that sense, the aforementioned “grand synthesis” that we are searching for is not valued any more by the automatic answers it may generate, but in terms of the *problems* for concrete research and further theoretical elaboration that it may be able to produce.

### RECENT TRENDS IN MEXICAN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Once we have placed Mexican communication research in its structural context of triple marginality and described its historical background in the context of the development of the social sciences in Latin America, we analyze briefly its main thematic and methodological trends in the last 30 years. In order to do that, we depart from a recent systematic—but selective—inventory of documents in the field (Fuentes, 1988). This inventory, as we described earlier, finally included 877 academic documents (books, articles, reports, and papers), dated between 1956 and 1986. The distribution by dates of this sample already indicates an important characteristic: Mexican communication research has developed very recently (see Table 4.1).

In order to have a first approach to the most general main themes and

TABLE 4.1  
Communication Research Documents in Mexico, by date (1956–1986)

Years	No. Docs.	%
Between 1956 and 1961	3	0.4
1962 and 1966	19	2.2
1967 and 1971	35	4.0
1972 and 1976	107	12.2
1977 and 1981	273	31.0
1982 and 1986	423	48.2
No date	17	2.0
Totals	877	100.0

Note: From Fuentes (1987).

orientations that have attracted the attention of Mexican communication scholars, the documents were classified by content, using an adaptation of the taxonomy of UNESCO's (1984) *Thesaurus* (see Table 4.2).

Not being mutually exclusive the categories used for this classification, each document could be classified in several of them. The distribution, however, indicates which have been the main general thematic trends. It is not surprising to find out that almost two out of every three documents refer to the media, for the massive sphere of communication is the one that has mostly concentrated the research efforts not only in Mexico, but everywhere. Over one third of the documents explicitly link research with planning and administration, which is not far from communication policies and analyses of communication industries. It is interesting to notice the scarce number of studies dedicated to analyze communication technologies (31), which, notwithstanding their being one of the fundamental components for the development of the media, have been analyzed instead by engineers and put aside by communication researchers in Mexico. Out of the 877 documents, only 45 (5%) were directed to the study of interpersonal communication and 104 (12%) are about communication in groups. On the other hand, we can see in Table 4.2 that 283 studies (32%) have concentrated on communication users, and their distribution is shown in Table 4.3.

One third (298) of the studies have a sociological approach to communication problems, which is by far the predominant one. After that, we have about 10% (68) with an economic approach; 8% (73) historical studies; 8% (68) psychological; 6% (50) semiological and discourse analyses; 1% (10) epistemological; 1% (9) linguistic studies;

TABLE 4.2  
Communication Research Documents in Mexico, by Content (1956-1986)

Theme	No. Docs.	%
Communication research	154	17.5
Communication policies	133	15.1
Planning and administration	306	34.9
Communication personnel	143	16.3
Communication personnel training	96	10.9
Sociology of communication	298	33.9
Psychology of communication	68	7.8
Communication process	203	23.1
Communication media	553	63.1
Communication technology	31	3.5
Communications industry	113	12.9
Communication users	283	32.2

*Note:* The categories are not mutually exclusive.

TABLE 4.3  
Documents on Communication Users Mexico, 1956-1986

Type of Users	No. Docs.	%
Institutions	113	12.9
Peasants	57	6.5
Popular sectors	31	3.5
Children	31	3.5
Youth	15	1.7
Workers	14	1.6
Indians	14	1.6
Women	8	0.9

and .7% (6) philosophical analyses. Methodological discussions are found in 10% of the works, and 23% contribute to a more strictly communicational theory. These last two items indicate the search for suitable and proper orientations for the development of research and show the different influences just annotated.

Out of the 553 documents that dealt with the mass media, the majority (41%) analyzed them jointly. The press and television are the media that seem to have attracted more of the attention of Mexican communication researchers (see Table 4.4), although over time it has been increasing to TV and diminishing to the press.

The distribution of the documents by geographic reference points out clearly another characteristic of communication research in Mexico: its centralism. Out of 339 documents that contain precise geographic references, 250 (74%) are national studies and 89 refer to other countries. Within the national references, 10 of the 32 states of Mexico are absent. The centralism that pervades all spheres of Mexican life is reflected in the fact that almost half the documents with reference to a

TABLE 4.4  
Documents on the Media (Mexico, 1956-1986)

	No.	%
Media in general	228	41.2
Press (Newspapers, magazines)	108	19.5
Television	108	19.5
Radio	41	7.4
Movies	35	6.3
Comics and photo-novels	22	3.9
Theater	5	0.9
Photography	3	0.5
Audiovisuals	3	0.5
Total	553	99.7

*Note:* Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

specific state are comprised of studies made in the Capital (Mexico City, the Federal District).

One hundred thirty-seven (16%) documents contain references to the State (as related to communication) as the object of study, and 55 are oriented to the analysis of, or to propose modifications to, the existing communication legislation. Regarding some "social functions of communication," that could be found in 635 documents, they can be classified as in Table 4.5.

A more detailed analysis of these social functions would permit us to unveil the concrete links of communication research with the agents and social movements that in Mexico promote either change or conservation of structures and social relations. The predominance of the educational and political functions, followed by those that relate to organization, implementation, or evaluation of social campaigns and information, allow us to assume a generally critical orientation of Mexican communication researchers toward the reigning order, which may be verified in the discourse of many of the documents under analysis and which coincides with what has been found in other Latin American countries (Anzola & Cooper, 1985; Marques de Melo, 1984b; Munizaga & Rivera, 1983; Peirano & Kudo, 1982; Rivera, 1986).

We already pointed out that out of this sample of documents only 38% had "empirical content" and only 11% represented some kind of fieldwork. Most of the latter 98 documents, that is 69%, arose out of applied research projects and less than 30% from basic research. Of the former, the majority, 58%, reported evaluative inquiries; 49% dealt with educational uses of communication media or processes; 20% were on agricultural extension projects; 17% on some type of communication

TABLE 4.5  
Social Functions Analyzed, Communication Research Documents in Mexico  
(1956-1986)

Social Function	No. Docs.	%
Education	143	22.5
Politics	133	20.9
Organization	80	12.6
Social campaigns	73	11.5
Information	63	9.9
Rural development	49	7.7
Popular promotion	41	6.4
Advertising	37	5.8
Propaganda	13	2.0
Public relations	3	0.5
Totals	635	99.8

*Note:* Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

TABLE 4.6  
Field Research Documents, by Environment Studied, Mexico, 1956–1986 (Percentages)

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural/Urban</i>
1960s	18.6	4.6	8.3
1970s	48.8	44.2	41.7
1980s	32.5	51.2	50.0
	<i>N</i> = 43	<i>N</i> = 43	<i>N</i> = 12

*Note:* Percentages calculated columnwise.

alternative or innovation and 14% on participatory or action-research (none of these latter categories is mutually exclusive). According to the continuous process of urbanization that Mexico has been going through, the documents on field research in urban environments have been increasing over time, while those on rural environments tend to decrease by the 1980s, although there is also an increase in research performed in *both* environments (see Table 4.6).

Now, probably because most of these documents report applied research, but also because of several other more “structural” reasons for the lack of diffusion channels of social science research, only 38% are presented in the book or published article format. The rest, 62%, are either research reports with very limited circulation (27 of them) or unpublished papers, most of them delivered at some academic conference or seminar (34). Seventy documents deal with mass media communication and the rest with several other non-mass media or with interpersonal communication. The documents on the mass media are distributed as shown in Table 4.7.

More than half (61%) of the 36 documents that report fieldwork on non-mass spheres of communication, deal with interpersonal communication, 14% on other print media, and the rest on assorted communication situations, such as theater, slide shows, puppets, cassette forums, popular festivals, and written communication.

TABLE 4.7  
Fieldwork Research Documents, by Media (1956–1986)

<b>Medium</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Television	32	45.7
Mass media	18	25.7
Radio	16	22.9
Newspapers	2	2.8
Comic books	1	1.4
Film	1	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>



## FIELD RESEARCH PROBLEMS

From the field research documents just referred to, we could not pinpoint too many specific problems that their authors may have faced during the process. Thus, for this section we rely especially on interviews of several colleagues and our own direct experience. As we stated in the beginning of the chapter, most of those problems we could identify come mainly from structural conditions, rather than, for example, from cultural specificities of the populations studied. We divide this section into the four more general stages of a research process: design, data production, analysis, and diffusion.

### Design

We already pointed out the relatively generalized bias against empirical research, especially in its quantitative modality in Mexican social sciences. Thus, we contend that this bias is one of the first and more general cultural obstacles for the generation of research projects with a fieldwork component. Even though there have been in Latin America innovative proposals for qualitative research, which originated from critical theoretico-ideological stances such as Freire's thematic methodology and several kinds of participatory or action-research, the actual research projects in the field have been rather scarce (14% of our sample of documents, for example). Quite often we find in the literature many very interesting and sometimes innovative proposals that are not really translated into research designs and, consequently, into actual research *actions*. On the other hand, because of the heavy weight traditionally bestowed on the theoretical component, we find many research projects with grand—but potentially complex, multidimensional—theoretical frameworks and rather poor empirical research designs. That is, some researchers, by virtue of what we might call "methodological narveté," tend to believe that all the dimensions of a semantically charged theoretical construct<sup>4</sup> can be translated into conclusive empirical findings in *one* research project. Very often, because of their poor theoretical and methodological training, the scholars do not even realize the difficulty of translating multidimensional concepts into empirical indicators, through some kind of conceptual and operational definitions. Here, then, we find an interaction between the cultural aspect and another structural obstacle, that is, poor training. Several of our interviewed colleagues recognized that, in fact, inadequate training is an

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<sup>4</sup>A recurrent example in our field is the concept *ideology*.

important source of problems and obstacles for field research: For example, in the generation of projects without a proper formal design, that do not foresee possible further problems, or threats to validity, or even the analysis procedures of the data to be produced, and so forth.

We can blame each poorly trained researcher for his or her own difficulties and lack of skills to solve them, but the fact is that when a majority of the researchers suffer from the same weakness it is a situation that has to be *structurally* focused.

The lack of adequate libraries and documentation centers, as well as our current absence of scientific journals in the field of communication research in Mexico, also produce difficulties for the researchers to find easily any antecedents to a particular study; thus, many research designs lack an adequate literature review. Very often, the projects are stated in terms of exploratory or descriptive research, because the scholars do not know of previous studies, but in many cases those previous studies *do* exist, but they are unavailable (Jara, 1981). The National Council for Teaching and Research in Communication Sciences (CONEICC) has a very large Documentation Center, located at the ITESO University in Guadalajara. But even though efforts are made to let the community of communication scholars reach its published catalogs, it is very difficult for all those who do not live in Guadalajara where it is located to make constant use of it. Several universities do have specialized libraries and small documentation centers, but for the moment most communication researchers are constrained in their access to proper bibliographies and research documents.

Another hindrance for field research at the design stage is comprised by the high levels of uncertainty under which many university workers operate, especially—but not only—those in the public universities. It is not enough to produce a sound design when you do not know whether you can count on the required resources (or *when* you would obtain them). Many researchers prefer to do desk work because it is easier to labor when you do not have to be guessing whether you will receive some kind of necessary support later we provide a couple of examples).

### **Data Production**

This stage, we think, is the core of field research. Here, too, the “poor training” factor operates, as when researchers do not know how to select an appropriate sample of subjects, or to produce adequate data-collection instruments, or generally lack the rigor to do proper observations (problems that show up since the design stage). We and our interviewed colleagues agree that unfortunately we still bear this

problem in Mexican communication research. Thus, quite often, for example, we do not know how valid or reliable the techniques are that were used in research we read about. Another of our colleagues stated that he prefers “nothing” rather than those kinds of data, but we think that *sometimes* “something is better than nothing,” as long as the reports are read critically and the results are found useful to foster further inquiries.

But the most frequent problem we confront in doing fieldwork is the lack of resources, especially human resources, for the completion of the data-producing efforts. For example, one colleague did a three-stage survey in which he had to interview 1,000 individuals at each stage, but his university provided him with only six part-time assistants. He asked several professors he knew for help, and they sent him many of their students to aid with the interviews, but many deserted at the first try, which made it very difficult to have the replacements properly trained and to exert some control during the fieldwork. On the other hand, originally—in the research design—the interviews were supposed to be made as close together as possible during certain days (before, during, and after a certain sports event), but the turnover of interviewers made it difficult, so his actual samples finally had to be reduced because many interview schedules had to be discarded. He finally produced some data and says that he would do it again because, he says, “those are the actual conditions and either you accept the challenge or better quit.”

One of us once had to mobilize *all* the researchers at the center where he worked, each with one or two assistants, because a survey had to be applied simultaneously to a sample of 30 elementary schools one day after a certain TV program was aired. The researcher, with only one assistant would not have been able to achieve it. The researcher feels grateful to the colleagues who helped, but after that experience does not think all of them would cooperate again, and, fortunately, was not required by *all* of them to repay the favor in a similar way. (Imagine seven or eight researchers taking turns, helping each other in fieldwork; they might as well change status to research assistants and forget about finishing their own work.) Because of the difficulty of getting enough personnel, sometimes a researcher prefers to change the object of study, reduce any pretensions through a more modest—but limited—design, or simply do desk work. Another of our colleagues had to go alone to about 15 rural villages—many of them in remote areas—for the same reason. But this time the problem arose from an absurd—or funny, depending on how you perceive it—situation: In that prestigious research center there was an administrator who was proud of his savings and his ability to return money every year, at the expense of *not* providing the research projects with the necessary resources. This researcher could get help in

data collection from some rural teachers who knew the area well and some of the residents. Incidentally, the researcher could not sample the subjects (Purepecha Indians from the state of Michoacan) because of many factors, among them, the Indians' distrust of foreigners that forced the researcher to seek help from the local authorities. The authorities introduced the researcher to the "moral authorities" (usually elderly people), who sometimes determined which (and how many) villagers would "accept" to answer the questions. The interviews in the 15 or so villages had to last longer than usual because most of the oldest persons either did not speak Spanish or spoke it defectively (part Spanish, part Purepecha). Even though he was helped by the rural teachers (and he spoke a little Purepecha), sometimes the researcher could not inquire further about some issues implied in certain answers as a result of simply not understanding the "bilingual" expressions of the subjects. It was only when listening to the tapes, with the help of the rural teachers, that the researcher could realize that there were some interesting answers that could not be followed up. One more problem that our colleague faced was transportation, because some villages were far from the road and were accessible only after several hours walking, or riding a mule or horse. But the Sierra constituted not only a hindrance, but also, in one respect, an aid for the research. Several of the villages were in the middle of mountains where they did not receive radio or TV signals, and were similar in key variables to other villages that did receive them. Thus, the researcher had a privileged quasi-natural quasi-experimental setting there that made easier to pinpoint some relationships between the media, the Purepecha culture, and other variables.

The mistrust that most Indian populations have of foreigners,<sup>5</sup> especially of those who ask questions, is a general trait of Mexican rural populations, with regional variations. Thus, fieldworkers in rural settings have to search for ways to gain the villagers' confidence. Sometimes being introduced by the parrish of the place is enough, but some other times one has to stay longer in a village in order to learn through whom, how, and when is the right way and time to approach them.

In urban environments these kinds of problems do not arise usually. In these settings the problems are the usual ones of, for example, "social desirability" or "status" answers, such as when the people say they do possess a TV set and they do not. In the recent times, there is in Mexico City a popular TV program in which an actor, armed with a camera, asks the persons passing by about inexistent things or persons, or, for

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<sup>5</sup>Especially researchers, for anthropologists abound there, and we know of some cases where Indian villagers are just tired of being objects of study and not receiving anything in return, so they act unfriendly.

example, about “the latest hit of singer X” (who actually is a famous painter, not a singer). What is relevant for us is the fact that most people who answer say they do know those nonexistent things or persons (most of the respondents had heard the painter-singer’s latest hit). Social researchers have to double-check their inquiring instruments and the answers they get in Mexico City, if we think of the TV experience just described (that is, of course, a peculiar situation that we should not generalize, but it is a rather interesting experience to take into account).

### Analysis

We consider this stage to include also the interpretation of the data generated and even writing the research report (which is an analytic-synthetic activity). The obstacles and problems at this stage are relatively fewer in number than in the previous ones, but many of them derive from difficulties in those stages. If defective data were obtained from an inadequate design and incorrect data-collection instruments or through an unfortunate process, then analysis and interpretation would be rather dangerous. Among our colleagues there is consensus that, again, the lack of training and rigor is an important stumbling block for proper analysis and interpretation of field research data. Even if some of us agree with Kuhn’s (1970) observation that scientists very often attempt to “force nature into the conceptual boxes provided by professional education” (rationalist epistemological stance), we do not agree with the practice of *forcing data toward prejudiced findings* through defective analysis. This is due to both poor training and the ideological charge that social science objects of study frequently acquire. Just as we described before that we sometimes find research projects with a grand theoretical framework and a minimized empirical design, correspondingly we also find research reports with little or defective fieldwork procedures and limited data produced, but with enormous jumps to grand theoretical conclusions departing from a defective analysis of those limited data. This has been the case in several quantitative and qualitative studies we know about.

Another frequent obstacle for the analysis of data is the unavailability of computing equipment in the research centers. Actually, with the exception of the oldest and biggest, it has been only very recently that most research centers and institutes are acquiring mini- and especially microcomputing equipment. So, some of our colleagues commented us that, for example, even if a computer was already available there was not appropriate software. Or, even if you already had the software, there was no trained person to operate it or to teach the researchers and

assistants how to do it (very often, microcomputer software is imported from the United States, so you have to know both, English *and* computerese in order to understand and follow the instructions in the manuals). The confusion of priorities in some centers is also a problem: Sometimes the computing equipment is used mainly for the administrative and accounting chores and there is very little computer time left for researchers' needs. One of our colleagues lost about 1 month of analysis work because the microcomputers were transported to a book fair (which lasted only 2 weeks, but there was a "dead time" before and after). The show was deemed more important than the research work.

### Diffusion

We think that social research findings have to be useful and diffused as widely as possible, first, among the academic community itself, and then among potential users of that knowledge and the general public. There are several serious social science journals in Mexico today, but, unfortunately, communication studies have lost the two or three journals that existed until around 1984. The Mexican Association of Communication Researchers (AMIC) had to stop publishing its journal, *Connotaciones* because of financial limitations. Today AMIC circulates useful materials in the field through a mimeographed working papers series. During the last years, some commercial publishing companies have showed growing interest in communication materials, so AMIC has been preparing readers on key issues and themes of the field, which we then offer publishers. But in general terms, there are very scarce resources for academic publications.

One other hindrance in the diffusion of research originates from a certain lack of "publishing habit" that is generalizable to the social sciences in Mexico. On the one hand, as part of our "authoritarian" cultural heritage, we still have what we call the *treatise culture*, which means that some scholars refuse to publish anything until they are able to "say the last word" (which never happens). Although this is gradually changing, we still find in many of our colleagues some reluctance to publish partial findings of their research in the article form until they can produce "the book." But even then, we know of very many good research reports that do not circulate widely because there are not enough opportunities to publish them. Some Mexican universities do have resources for publications, but their policies and practices sometimes are guided by political motives and goals of the groups in power, rather than by academic considerations.

### SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

We hope we have substantiated our point that the Mexican communication researchers' problems for doing field research have to be studied not only in individual terms, but from a structural viewpoint. Crisis means also the creation of possibilities for change. Hence, in front of the critical situation that most Mexicans face today, many opportunities are opening up, and the peoples' struggles and movements may lead to substantial advancements. For example, the economic and political crisis has forced many Mexicans to be more politically concerned and involved. We are witnessing a gradual process of wider political participation and democratization on several fronts. In the same way, within the Mexican universities there is an increasing interest in raising academic levels and fostering scientific research. The scholars themselves, through their collegiate bodies (societies, associations, and councils) are beginning to exert more pressures on the government and society in general in order to obtain more support and recognition for the social importance of their profession. Yes, there are many structural (economic, political, cultural) obstacles for our labor that we have described throughout this chapter, but we and all the colleagues we interviewed think that it is a challenge, rather than a motive for retreat. The production in Mexican social sciences in general, and in communication studies in particular, has been growing quantitatively during this decade, and the quality of the studies has been increasing too, notwithstanding the adverse conditions. It is pointless to repeat here all the structural (historically produced) sources of the concrete obstacles and problems that we face for performing our fieldwork and completing the research cycle. The final result is that Mexican communication research has been marginal, poor, centralized, disperse (in thematic, theoretical, and methodological terms), pretentious and authoritarian hipercritical, anti-empiricist, and fashion prone. Besides, it is rather recent, compared to other social studies; most of the scholars within the field lack adequate training and work under unfavorable conditions, with little or no institutional support, and there is scarce diffusion to their work. But the discipline is pretty much alive and in constant search. Hence, we would like to end asserting about Mexican communication research that, just like Galileo's Earth, *eppur si muove*.

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