

Narrating the Backstage of Qualitative Research in Organizational Communication: A Synthesis

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The five essays in this forum provide backstories about qualitative research in organizational communication. Although research journals, including *Management Communication Quarterly*, increasingly welcome qualitative research, most journal articles continue to be written in a deductive style that camouflages the messy, inductive processes by which most qualitative research unfolds (Tracy, 2012). Sharing the difficulties, foibles, uncertainties, tips, and tricks that make up “backstage” qualitative research behavior can provide great pedagogical value and help us learn from others’ experiences. Indeed, sharing these backstage moments—especially embarrassing or disheartening issues—provides social support as readers realize that other people, even senior or successful scholars, make mistakes and encounter challenges. Furthermore, vulnerably sharing backstage moments can encourage empathy from those who do not practice qualitative research and provide clarity about its challenges. In this introduction, we summarize the essays and offer questions to spur discussion and future research. Sarah J. Tracy, forum

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organizer, invited the rest of us—all junior organizational communication scholars who primarily use qualitative research methods—to read, reflect on, and meet virtually to discuss the essays.

In the spirit of openness, we should share some of our own backstage experiences. For instance, we are currently struggling with what Fairhurst (2014) calls “getting lost in voluminous data.” One of us, Elizabeth K. Eger, said,

It is overwhelming when you have a rich project, and you have to condense large extended ethnography data into small publishable chunks. It feels like I am a polar bear separating from my “little cub”—I grieve letting go of all the details and nuances.

Another of us, Timothy P. Huffman (2013), expressed a different form of qualitative grief: The heartbreak and emotional work he experiences in his participatory action research. Together, we also share frustrations in publishing. Shawna Malvini Redden has struggled with abbreviating qualitative writing and then being critiqued for glossing over steps in her analysis that she had previously cut for page length. Jennifer A. Scarduzio noted her challenges of framing essays as new, separate contributions to journal editors when they come from the same large qualitative data set (Scarduzio, 2011, 2012). From our varied and shared stakes in this forum, we joined together to synthesize the key issues in these essays.

Fairhurst—The Back Alleys of Publishing

Fairhurst addresses the quantitative bias that lingers in the publishing process and explains how the lack of the qualitative equivalence to statistical significance makes it sometimes difficult to impress editors and reviewers. As an ameliorative, she recommends that qualitative researchers rigorously showcase patterns in the data and avoid using “sweeping generalizations from very small samples” (Fairhurst, 2014). We appreciated Fairhurst’s candor and advocacy for telling the story of qualitative data and plan to heed her advice to ask colleagues to conduct pre-publication peer reviews. As Scarduzio noted,

I wish someone would have told me earlier that “experiential data and sound methods are not good enough” (Fairhurst, this volume) to get a publication. I think there is an assumption that if you have a lot of data, it must be a good study.

Malvini Redden added, “Yes, I’ve told a nice story, but if I want to publish, I need to know how to position the research and how to write for

reviewers who might be unfamiliar or skeptical of qualitative research.” Huffman noted the importance of clarifying the theoretical contribution.

Brummans—Mindful Qualitative Research

Brummans reflects on his qualitative study of mindful organizing in Asia. His take on interdependence in fieldwork moves beyond participant and researcher dualisms. He emphasizes the interactive and embodied parts of our research by focusing on materiality. Such a practice addresses the theory–method disconnect expressed by Ganesh (this volume). It also complicates organizational culture and structure; artifacts take on completely new meanings within Brummans’s guidelines, as we see in his example of sacred figures.

He invites us to “lay down a path walking,” and suggests that qualitative researchers recognize that it is “never possible to capture dynamic richness of situations” (Brummans, 2014). We appreciated the spiritual approach of finding meaning in the irregular and everyday life. As Huffman noted,

Being folded into scene isn’t a *distraction* from qualitative research. For my whole dissertation, my activist brain and scholar brain were fighting with one another. But the right way to do it is to put them both in the same cart and go over the edge.

Indeed, the authors loved Brummans’s suggestion to “embrace serendipity” and pursue unexpected directions rather than forcing preconceived notions on the scene. Malvini Redden (2013) especially appreciated this idea as it echoed the shifting directions of her fieldwork examining Transportation Security Administration security checkpoints. Embracing this freedom relieves some grief over hacking away at projects to create publishable tidbits or needing to feel in control.

Ganesh—Confessional Tales and Fieldwork

Ganesh’s essay focuses on the challenges of cutting data, writing away felt emotion, and acknowledging participant interaction. He suggests that moments of researcher incompetency, incomplete data, and personal bias are “bursts of researcher insight,” because even seemingly “poor data” can teach us about unexpected areas of communication inquiry and the researcher’s own subject position (Ganesh, this volume). Eger agreed, “I try to show these ‘bursts’ by showcasing reflexivity from fieldnotes or memos.”

Ganesh cautions against dispassionate or impersonal methods. He shows how qualitative researchers may unintentionally discipline themselves through creating confessional tales that reinscribe realism—positioning

personal insights as asides, footnotes, or scrapping them to the editing room floor. As Scarduzio explained,

The way we write sometimes renders the actual fieldwork we do invisible when journals force us to write in a dispassionate and quasi-realist tone, which is opposite of how we are expected to write in the field.

Ganesh also shows the value of making friends with participants and not just treating them as sources of information (see also Ellis, 2009). In some cases, friendships, passion, and emotion are actually the mainstays of the story. His essay also demonstrates how robust and varied options for displaying qualitative data—for instance, through interspersing photographs with text—enrich what we can know.

Tracy—Fieldwork Horse-Assery

We appreciated Tracy’s humor and vulnerability in discussing “fieldwork horse-assery.” Tracy shares tales of putting up with embarrassing, snubbing, and objectionable moments in fieldwork and shows how these moments (even the mortification of her pants splitting midway through a field session) can provide remarkable researcher insight. Tracy reminds us that qualitative research is not all about *fieldwork* but also about *fieldplay* (Tracy, 2013) and that we can take our research seriously without taking ourselves all that seriously.

Tracy also showcases how access is a continual negotiation with organizational members up and down the hierarchy. As Eger noted playfully, “A letter from organizational gatekeepers is not enough . . . We should not *assume* access, because you know what happens when you *assume*.” Finally, we appreciated Tracy’s discussion of “going along with objectionable practices or talk” (this volume) to fit in but, at the same, noticing opportunities for performing small acts of resistance during fieldwork. Malvini Redden reflected, “This distinction is so important when working with people we completely disagree with on a personal or political level.” Researchers should not shy away from objectionable or challenging field issues, as these horse-assery moments “create little data treasures” (Tracy, 2014).

Myers—Social Identity Issues for Qualitative Scholar-Mentors

Myers’s essay rounds out the forum and provides valuable suggestions about how to thrive as a qualitative scholar in a quantitative and social scientific

institutional environment. We found Myers's essay to be courageous and helpful in addressing our own concerns of future work contexts that may not embrace qualitative approaches: Will we find community? Will we struggle? Will we be judged as not "social scientist" enough?

Myers's department builds on cultures and structures of united expertise that privilege certain shared *holographic* identities. She suggests that a holographic identity might concern those who practice outside of it, but can be very helpful for creating stability and a predictable reputation. As Scarduzio noted, "The lesson I learned from Myers is not to assume other faculty members are prejudiced against qualitative methods or experiences and instead ask them. Also, don't assume that graduate students are experiencing prejudice. Ask them as well." In other words, we need not become defensive when or if we find ourselves as a member of a methodological minority.

Myers's essay reminds us how important it is not to treat one another (or others' work) as caricatures or make quantitative scholars into straw people (Miller, 2000). Malvini Redden concurred, "In my grant-funded, mixed-methods work, I've been surprised by the support and interest of colleagues from other research paradigms" (Malvini Redden, Tracy, & Shafer, 2013). Thus, it makes sense to educate each other, become conversant in a variety of methods, and build ideas together, even crystallizing a varied spectrum of methods (Ellingson, 2008).

Overall Lessons Learned

After reading these forum essays, we all came away with a clear message that our research needs to advance theory, knowledge, and understanding and that we should not get lost in the data. Scarduzio said, "You need to have rigorous data procedures and methods, but you also need to have the skill to present that data in a publishable form." Transparently telling the story of how data were collected and how this leads to claims might involve artful, aesthetic, and continual editing and crafting of our fieldnotes. We have an obligation to our readers to make the data understandable and flow with the theoretical claims made.

A second important message in these essays is to embrace surprising, emotional, objectionable, or irregular data moments as opportunities for creating insight. Hurrah for being a horse's ass! When we treat the researcher as instrument, we also accept the researcher as human, and full of foibles and vulnerabilities.

Third, most qualitative organizational scholars share some similar dilemmas—such as navigating access or trying to figure out how to publish—and just knowing that we are all in it together is empowering. On the contrary,

one person's backstage can also be completely different from another's, and we cannot always rely on someone else's advice to see us through. We would like to see all qualitative researchers spend a bit more space—if only several sentences—sharing “backstage” moments in their publications so this insight need not be relegated to forums or separate confessional tales.

Questions and Areas for Future Research

These essays also prompted questions, which we leave purposefully open-ended so they might elicit discussion about the essays as a collection. We were encouraged by Ganesh's (2014) point that “every event is a universe of possibilities” and we wonder:

- Should we pay attention to the guilt we feel when we can only tell a fragment of a story? Whose story gets told? And why?
- Furthermore, many of us, like Ganesh, have participants who are friends. What should we do with the heartbreak if those friends are hurt or disappear from our lives?

Also, we discussed the risks of sharing vulnerability. Although we did not view the authors' disclosures as diminishing their credibility, we wonder about who is asked to share their horse-ass selves and who can hide their embarrassing moments. So we ask the following:

- Are qualitative or other reflexive researchers singled out to share themselves? At what risks? What emotional labor goes into this process?
- How do we know when to speak up if something in the scene is objectionable? Is it best to suppress a critical voice in the beginning and then, once relationships are established, engage in resistance?

And what about publishing backstage insights? Fairhurst suggests we tell the story of our data and build theory, but we also have to share this within page limits that can feel constraining. We recognize a tension between embracing the unexpected and also efficiently articulating how the data lead to a specific claim or a theoretical extension. So, we ask the following:

- How do we follow the path of the irregular and avoid erasing the relevant emotional, objectionable, or happenstance data unless publication expectations change?

- How can scholars invested in qualitative methods create immediate changes—in their own writing, reviewing, or gatekeeping—that would positively impact research value?
- Who has the responsibility to take that risk given different power dynamics, and is it really even that big of a risk—or just one that is imagined?

As Myers points out, fears of marginalization can be worse than realities, and perhaps we should just plain ask editors about alternate publishing options.

Thinking about Brummans's discussion regarding pathways of "mindfulness as a collective" (2014), we contemplated how his arguments could help us re-read Fairhurst's essay on reviewer reactions. Specifically,

- How might we think of writing, reviewing, and editing as a collective process where we are "inter-beings" in the academy?
- How do we honor each component—human (our editors and reviewers) and non-human (journal scope or page lengths)?
- How do we respect the process of reviewer feedback while also honoring the participants with whom we first laid down our paths?

Especially as junior scholars, it feels as though reviewers have so much power. Brummans prompts us to consider how we might frame reviewing and editing as a way to collectively generate knowledge.

Finally, we considered how "choices" about where to place oneself in future jobs shape budding academic identities. We may indeed encounter quantitative biases in publishing or land in departments that may not primarily practice qualitative methods. If we read Brummans's argument about holistic thinking in conversation with Myers's comments about holographic identity, it moves us to think beyond specific journal reviewers or departments toward the organizational communication field as a whole. Given that, we ask,

- What is organizational communication's holographic identity, if any?

Complementing our discussion, Eger noted that the organizational communication field is experiencing "ecumenical fragmentation," which means scholars increasingly accept and foster parts of the field in which they are involved and ignore other elements "with little reflection on larger theoretical issues or attempts at integration" (Deetz & Eger, 2014, p. 27). For example, conference program planners might schedule panels with articles associated

with one paradigmatic approach at the same time as those from a contrasting paradigmatic approach. Even when unintentional, these mundane activities can further isolate schools of thought from one another. Rather than organizing around theoretical, epistemological, or methodological approaches, we agreed that another—perhaps more fruitful way—to address our differences would be to organize panels, departments, and conferences among essential organizational life issues or relational politics (Deetz & Eger, 2014).

Our shared connections with the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University provide one example of organizing not only by traditional sub-disciplinary areas but also via dynamic strategic initiatives. These initiatives draw together scholars from disparate epistemological, methodological, and disciplinary orientations for collaborative conversations. Perhaps this can be organizational communication's holographic identity—a disciplinary niche in which scholars, new and established, are using a variety of methods and a diversity of thought to address, understand, and transform important organizational phenomena from a communicative perspective.

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