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# Introduction to Qualitative Communication Research

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## Working With Cops: One Story of Qualitative Research

It's not like Elizabeth woke up one day and suddenly decided to study police officers, thinking about how organizational communication shaped their professional identities. That would come later. Instead, it all began with an unexpected coincidence of access and interest, and a nagging feeling that something important was happening.

Elizabeth was a Communication major at a large public university located in the western United States, and she had chosen to write a senior honors thesis. Early in the year, at the urging of the program's director, she began to consider her options for a topic to study, and a place (or "site") to study it. In this process, she realized that her part-time job with the university's police department was worth considering. In 2 years of working for its operations division, she had become steeped in the daily routines of the officers and the civilian staff. She had learned how their communication with students, residents of the surrounding city, and members of other law enforcement agencies was influenced both by formal policies and informal norms. As she performed her official job duties, and engaged in casual conversations, Elizabeth noticed that the officers expressed both intense *pride and frustration* about their work. Over time, her attention to these expressions deepened as she began to date one of the officers and to socialize with them outside of work.

Because of her unique status, Elizabeth enjoyed a level of trust in this group that was rarely offered to outsiders. And there was something persistently interesting about how the officers communicated. What could explain the conflicting

meanings they attached to their sense of belonging to this organization? Nonetheless, she agonized over her decision. Was it worth it to risk the officers' trust (she now viewed some of them as friends) by formally studying them, and by discovering something they might not like? Was it too late for her to be objective?

After talking with her thesis director and the police department's administrators, Elizabeth decided to take that risk. She began to ride along with the officers during their shifts, watching, listening, and taking notes as they talked with citizens, and with each other. She also started to document the conversations that occurred during her regular work shifts. In this process, some of the officers were welcoming; others were suspicious. Most of them expressed a desire that she understand how things "really" worked in their job: the organizational politics; the ever-present possibility of conflict and danger; the insult of being confused with "mere" security guards; and the gratification of "protecting and serving" those in genuine need.

Elizabeth took the further step of asking members of the police department to talk with her privately in extended, one-on-one conversations. In these exchanges (most of them audio recorded), she asked them to further discuss events that she had witnessed, and statements that she had heard them and others make. In a final step, she collected a variety of documents (e-mail messages, memos, etc.) that suggested how administrators of the department wished the officers to see themselves, the organization they worked for, and their profession.

Where did this all lead? Elizabeth developed a growing hunch that the officers' level of satisfaction with working in the department was connected to their image of "real" policing as a professional ideal. That is, she recognized that the officers and their superiors were working to create an image for this organization that could survive insinuations by outsiders that it lacked authority and credibility (e.g., as a collection of "toy cops"). As a result, the officers sought constant reassurance from their superiors and peers that their accomplishments conformed to that ideal. Indeed, they cultivated an alternate *positive* image of the university and the department as valued sites of "good" police work. Gradually, Elizabeth drew on communication theories of "organizational identification" and "unobtrusive control" to explain these discoveries.

Elizabeth's project turned out to be successful. She defended her thesis and received high honors. After taking a bridge year to work as a manager for a large retail corporation, she decided to go on to graduate school, where she has continued to study organizational communication (most recently, in a community resource center serving transgendered persons). She even married (but later divorced) the police officer she was dating. Looking back on it all, she says, "I think I always knew a significant story was waiting to be told."

This is a glimpse of a qualitative communication researcher at work. Elizabeth was actually learning the craft of a particular qualitative methodology known as “ethnography.” Her story depicts how researchers develop questions, how they decide what to observe and report, and how they become personally implicated in this process. Elizabeth’s story also offers some good news: While this research situation was at times challenging, it also became—with reflection, practice, and assistance—manageable.

What about the research methods chosen in this project? In this regard, Elizabeth’s study is a veritable trifecta. First, she employed *participant observation*. As this term implies, researchers using this method become active and involved members of an existing group, adopting roles that other members recognize as appropriate and nonthreatening. By participating in a group’s activities, researchers gain insight into the obligations, constraints, motivations, and emotions that its members experience as they complete their everyday activities. Effective participation is one prerequisite for making successful qualitative claims about communication. We’ll explore this method further in Chapter 6.

In addition to observing others, Elizabeth conducted *interviews*. As we’ll discuss further in Chapter 7, these interviews can go by several different names. Generally, they resemble conversations between equals who systematically explore topics of mutual interest. Most of what is said and meant in these conversations emerges through collaborative interaction. Although qualitative researchers often go into interviews with an agenda, they usually do not impose much structure on these conversations. For example, Elizabeth’s questions encouraged the police officers to express their personal understanding of their work, rather than forcing them to choose responses from items on a predetermined list. Qualitative researchers interview people for several reasons. These can include seeking to understand their unique perspective on a scene; to recover their memories of an event; to gain their expert insight or information about a problem; to obtain descriptions of events that are normally unavailable for observation; to foster trust; to understand sensitive relationships between group members; and finally, to create a record of communication that can be analyzed later.

Finally, in completing her study, Elizabeth also collected and analyzed *documents*, as well as other artifacts. This was because her study examined narratives (stories) about the organization developed by its members. Qualitative researchers performing this kind of analysis typically supplement their use of other methods by “reading” the “texts” of material culture (e.g., clothing, architecture, cars) as a primary means of symbolic expression. Visual media—such as photographs and video—can also be used by group members and researchers to document activities and events, and to capture

different perspectives on their significance. We will explore this method further in Chapter 8.

We focus in this volume on these three techniques because, when used together, they create a kind of flexibility that is necessary for successful qualitative research. This flexibility is important because qualitative research is fundamentally motivated by curiosity, and often characterized by improvisation. As Elizabeth's project demonstrates, that curiosity is expressed in questions such as the following: *What is going on here? What is being accomplished? How do they do it? How does this activity change, depending on who is doing it, and when and where? How do they understand and justify the things they do with each other? Who are they—both to me and to themselves? Who am I to them? And finally, how can the answers to these questions serve communication scholars and professionals, as well as the general public?*

**Performances and Practices.** These questions embody a principal commitment of qualitative communication research: *to study human symbolic action in the various contexts of its performance.* Put another way, qualitative researchers are committed to studying *the performances* and *practices* of human communication.

To explain, let's break down these two terms. First, by *performance*, we mean communication whose qualities of *skill*, *expressiveness*, and *immediacy* compel us to view it as something more than mere "messages," or as a transparent vehicle of information. That is, performances are *creative*, *native* (i.e., innate to group culture), and *collaborative interaction events*—one example would be a specific incident of joke-telling conducted among friends. They reflect what we know intuitively to enact with others, and how.

"Practices," alternately, form the *generic and routine dimension* of communicative acts. In comparison to performances, practices are more abstract and standardized. They form the coherent category of action that is indexed (referred to) by the immediate and vivid—and sometimes chaotic—features of a particular performance. As a result, finally, practices provide *cultural labels* for social action. These labels represent relatively formal *concepts* developed by communicators (and researchers) for use in interpreting each other's motives in particular situations. They allow us to carve out a portion from interactional flux, and make it meaningful. That is, I resort to invoking practices when I am trying to explain what I think you are doing, based on how you seem to be doing it. And you do the same with me. Our interaction often succeeds or fails based upon our ability to share these kinds of characterizations.

Let's illustrate with an example. The development of social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram has contributed to the growth of

“vernacular visual culture.” That is, regular people use these platforms to share digital images they have taken of events that are important for *them*. Many of these images reflect strategic efforts by the people depicted to arrange and present their bodies for the camera in a desirable manner—one that suggests a particular mood (party!), or creates a particular effect (ironic!). This development has given rise to a new cultural vocabulary that categorizes these images (e.g., the ubiquitous “selfie”). One example involves women striking a pose that will (allegedly) increase their appearance of physical attractiveness by reducing the visual prominence of unattractive features. In the words of one performer: “Get a group of 20-something women together and one (if not all) will pop their arms out. . . . The idea is that putting your hand on your hip. . . will make your arm look skinnier and your waist look smaller” (O’Neil, 2012, n.p.). The frequency and consistency of this performance has led some observers to label it “Chicken Wing” (edging out other candidates, including “the Sorority Girl . . . the Hand-on-Hip Pageant . . . and . . . the Sassy Arm Triangle of Insecurity”; Liebelt, 2014, n.p.). This labeling has enabled commentators to publicly discuss a number of related issues, such as the body images of younger and older women, the cultural history and disciplining effect of feminine beauty norms, and the migration of those norms between “old” media (e.g., the annual “red carpet walk” on the Academy Awards broadcast) and “new” media spheres.

Despite its growing status as a taken-for-granted default, however, we should not assume that merely labeling this practice can explain everything that is relevant about its performance. Instead, we need to remember that it always emerges in complex, local situations, where photographic subjects are experiencing unique requirements arising from the distinctive and unfolding interaction of people, motives, settings, and technologies. Amid these constraints, we are always making moment-to-moment decisions arising from the influence of our own—and others’—interests. As a result, a young woman about to be photographed most likely does not think, “I am now going to adopt the Chicken Wing pose.” She may instead be more concerned as a bridesmaid with not blocking the bride. Or with making sure that she is positioned next to her best friend, who is preparing to travel abroad and who she will not see for a year. Or with disguising a stain on her dress resulting from an overenthusiastic toast. Or with striking a pose that matches the pose of others in the shot. In this way, the Chicken Wing is performed amid a stream of other related activities: “adjusting our hair, switching positions so we could get our ‘good sides,’ sucking in, checking the lighting, or asking someone to take a vertical shot” (O’Neil, 2012, n.p.).

We offer this example to illustrate how qualitative researchers are concerned with *the interaction between performances and practices*, which

constitute the texture of our everyday communication. Virtually any communicative act can be studied as a kind of performance, which can, in turn, be viewed as a variation on a practice (i.e., not all enactments of the Chicken Wing are identical). Indeed, qualitative researchers often explore how far a performance can vary from the model of a particular practice, before it is taken by its audience as an example of a *different* kind or mode of practice (e.g., someone will likely develop a subversive *parody* of the Chicken Wing). Viewed in this light, the situated, practical, and relational construction of meaning is virtually indistinguishable from “communication.” That is, communication *constitutes* social reality as “a co-emerging act whereby our performances and practices are produced within, and participate in producing, cultural and political structures” (Farias & Chuang, 2014, p. 75).

In the next section of this chapter, we review the intellectual foundations of this assumption. More specifically, we compare and contrast four “paradigms” that have historically shaped the development of qualitative research in the discipline of Communication. After that review, we’ll discuss two trends that are currently shaping the conduct of that research.

## Rounding the (Paradigm) Bases: a Brief History of Qualitative Communication Research

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Research methods are the “practical technologies” of intellectual traditions. That is, they provide concrete resources for strategic activities that *sustain* formal theories and philosophies by generating knowledge that supports their claims. Particularly relevant in this relationship are core, taken-for-granted beliefs displayed in those traditions about the nature of communication’s reality (also known as *ontology*), and about how that reality may be known by researchers (*epistemology*). These beliefs are often displayed only implicitly in actual research studies, but they form an important code influencing how communication researchers present their work—and evaluate the work of others—as exemplars of a particular intellectual tradition. This assertion by researchers of a preferred frame for interpretation sets audience expectations about the form and content of that research. When these expectations are satisfied, audiences may judge that research to be credible. Researchers who ignore this condition use qualitative research methods at their peril. They usually experience frustration and produce confusing results.

We are describing here the relationship of communication researchers to *paradigms*. This term refers to fundamental models, or frames of reference, that we use to justify our choices in designing and conducting communication research. Because they are relatively more abstract, paradigms exist

above and behind particular theories and methodologies. They represent ways of understanding communication that are more general than any specific tradition. As a result, they help us to classify those traditions as metaphorical “families” whose members possess key similarities. Paradigms are so intrinsic to our ways of thinking and acting that they are often not fully recognized until they are challenged by some unexpected development, or by the advocates of an alternate belief system. This condition confirms the *social*, as well as *intellectual* status of paradigms. As noted above, they include *normative sets of principles*. Communication researchers use these principles to prioritize which questions and problems should be investigated, and how. Paradigms establish limits on the kinds of work research communities view as worthy of investing their time, energy, and money. Scholars who orient to the same paradigm see each other as collaborators in the “normal progress” of related research.

**Positivism.** How have paradigms affected the development of qualitative methods in communication research? We can begin to answer that question by turning to a vision of communication research expressed in 1975 by the famous media scholar, James Carey:

To seize upon the interpretations people place on existence and to systematize them so they are more readily available to us. This is a process of making large claims from small matters: studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life. (p. 190)

At the time of its publication, Carey’s vision opposed the domination of communication research by a paradigm known as *positivism*. Positivist assumptions had become influential during the postwar era, as social scientists imitated the premises and activities of research conducted by natural scientists (partly as a bid to gain equivalent professional prestige). In Freudian terms, positivism was the symbolic Father that qualitative research had to slay to stake its claim to authority and legitimacy. As a result, this tradition has been frequently caricatured (and sometimes demonized)—sometimes under the related labels of “objectivism,” “empiricism,” and “rationalism.” At the center of this struggle lie the following positivist claims (Anderson, 1987, 1996):

- The “reality” of communication consists of its *actual, verifiable* nature, as opposed to our fleeting opinions or fantasies about it. That reality is a *singular*, a priori, and *objective* state of existence. It occurs *independently* of our efforts to know it.
- *True* knowledge of communication reality arises from our observation of *its empirical manifestations*—principally, people’s verbal and nonverbal

behaviors. These manifestations form the tangible, material—and informative—traces of that reality.

- The concepts and methods of the *natural sciences* are—with some modification—a legitimate model for the conduct of communication research.
- The reality of communication is *essential* (i.e., it constitutes the core of communication's enduring, distinctive, and irreducible *being*). This condition constrains the range of claims that we can make about communication. As a result, our claims should seek to continuously approach—and ultimately correspond with—that essence. To do this, we should constantly refine our research methods to maximize their *rigor* (i.e., thoroughness and precision) and their *accuracy*.
- In defining and observing communication, we should *reduce* the complexity of its manifestations in order to *isolate* the existence of their specific elements, and to *clarify* their underlying relationships.
- *The logic of measurement and quantification* (e.g., expressed in researchers' use of statistics) is best for depicting empirical observations of communication (e.g., as records of its amount, frequency, and rate).
- Researchers should look for, and explain, *the mechanisms of cause and effect* that determine human communication. They should uncover that unique mix of sufficient and necessary conditions that will *produce* a particular communication phenomenon.
- To establish cause and effect relationships, communication researchers should examine the relationship between *variables* (i.e., characteristic traits and performances that can assume different values, such as *low* or *high* communication anxiety). As a result, researchers should *aggregate* (i.e., artificially group together) research subjects (e.g., as population samples), based on their possession of a specific, desired trait or performance.
- Communication theory is best developed *deductively*. Researchers should proceed by proposing—and then testing—explanations for communication phenomena, based on existing, verified knowledge about them. *Hypotheses* (i.e., formal and falsifiable propositions about the relationship between variables) that are validated by careful and rigorous testing should be incorporated in theory.

In Communication, the historical impact of positivism emerged in a variety of forms. These included a commitment by researchers to establish external and psychological causes for communication behavior, a focus on predicting and controlling that behavior, and the use of quantitative methods to analyze data collected in artificial settings (e.g., experiments and surveys). There are many famous examples of research programs we could cite here; the study of “media effects” may be the most prominent and resilient.



While the influence of positivism on communication research has certainly been powerful, it has never been total or simple. One reason is that communication researchers were never unified about the appropriate goals and strategies for conducting positivist research. This was partly because “positivism” is itself a conglomeration of multiple and conflicting intellectual traditions (Corman, 2005). As a relatively young and interdisciplinary field, also, Communication tended toward pluralism and diversity in philosophical matters—even if this tendency was not consistent across its subfields. Finally, communication researchers responded in various ways to intellectual critiques of positivism mounted in the postwar era. These critiques emerged from innovations in both the natural and social sciences that challenged several of positivism’s core assumptions. Points of contention here included positivism’s conflation of the *discovery* of communication phenomena with the *verification* of their explanation; its presumption that “facts” could be generated independent of theory, values, or terminology; its imposition of artificial constraints on the goals and purposes of research, and ethical dilemmas arising from its commitment to researcher *detachment* (even, potentially, in the face of human evil and suffering).

**Postpositivism.** As a result of these critiques, many communication researchers affiliated with an emerging *postpositivist* paradigm. Postpositivists, explains Corman (2005, p. 21), “are people who value a scientific approach to explaining social phenomena, but who also accept many of the criticisms of the different positivisms, and have developed positions that transcend them.” As a result, these researchers oriented their work to the following premises (Corman, 2005; Miller, 2002, pp. 32–45):

- The reality of communication spans *physical* and *social* realms. These realms are composed of complex phenomena that exist independently of individual perception. Human *beliefs* about these phenomena, however, are multiple, partial, and inexact.
- Communication occurs as humans interact in *patterned* (i.e., recurring and similar) ways. Our participation in these patterns “reifies” (i.e., stabilizes and perpetuates) our beliefs about communication phenomena, and infuses them with qualities of *predictability*, *significance*, and *consequence*.
- Our knowledge of communication is best developed by searching for causal explanations for (i.e., generative mechanisms of) its observed patterns. We should assume that these causes are *interactive* and *evolving*.
- *Absolute* truth and *completely value-free* inquiry may be unattainable in communication research. Nonetheless, the discovery of *falsifying instances* for hypotheses, and the *reduction of bias* in research (e.g., through peer

review of reported findings) *are* both attainable and desirable. In this way, the “objectivity” of communication research is a product of *collective action* performed by a community of scholars—it is not the inherent property of an isolated, individual act.

- In designing, conducting and evaluating research, we should equally value the goals of *discovering* (i.e., conceptualizing) communication phenomena, and *verifying* our explanations of them.
- In studying communication phenomena, researchers should document, preserve—and account for—the *emic* (i.e., ordinary, lived, and felt) experience of social actors (i.e., their authentic motives and interpretations).
- Communication research conducted in *natural settings* (e.g., the use of media by family members in their home) can usefully document contextual (i.e., situational) influences on social action.
- Both quantitative and qualitative methods are legitimate resources for conducting communication research.
- The use of multiple research methods can enhance our explanations of complex communication phenomena—for example, by “triangulating” (comparing and contrasting) findings from their use.
- Communication researchers should value qualitative methods for their contribution to structured (and potentially quantitative) analysis of collected data. The use of statistics by qualitative communication researchers, however, is more likely to be *basic* and *descriptive* (e.g., frequency counts), than complex and inferential (e.g., regression analysis).

Again, while examples abound, one notable site of postpositivist research is *health communication*, where the legacies of epidemiological science (which is concerned with the causes, spread, and prevention of illness) have shaped the relationship between “traditional” cognitive-behavioral approaches, and an “alternative” qualitative approach (Zoller & Kline, 2008).

While this paradigm shift may create the impression that “there are no positivists anymore” (Corman, 2005, p. 31), there are at least three reasons to believe otherwise. The first is that this shift has not been universal. While some elements of positivist research have been challenged, others—such as a belief in value-free inquiry—persist in modified form as both general ideals and specific protocols. Second, the tradition of postpositivism manifests differently in specific regional, disciplinary, and institutional contexts. There may be no bigger tent in the academic world than Communication, which serves as a *field* (i.e., an intellectual home, a topical cross-roads, a professional meta-identity) for many different groups, with their various theoretical, methodological and practical interests. As one travels among academic institutions located within a single nation—to say nothing of internationally—one finds both similarity and variation in what

the locals define as important traditions of “communication research.” As a result, it is best to consider postpositivism as a potential influence whose local manifestations are shaped as much by arbitrary group culture as by inherent intellectual validity.

Finally, in the aftermath of positivism, communication has become an increasingly specialized and fragmented discipline. Within and across its subfields, different traditions coexist in various states of tension and harmony (to be discussed further in Chapter 2). While a few communication scholars resent this pluralism (“Wouldn’t things be simpler if we could just . . . ?”), many welcome it, and almost everyone accepts it as a political reality created by the discipline’s increasingly widespread and explicit endorsement of progressive and radical ideologies (e.g., of diversity, social justice, and activism). That said, many communication researchers struggle to maintain a *lingua franca* for working with their colleagues. It seems that the best we can do in these circumstances is keep up with developments in our core fields of interest, while monitoring the interdisciplinary periphery for opportunities to innovate and collaborate. Put another way, communication researchers inhabit an archipelago: Your group has its “home” island and we have ours. When the winds and tides are favorable, we can visit and trade with each other.

**Interpretivism.** Capitalizing on positivism’s compromised status, advocates for qualitative methods moved to engage their opponents in a passionate debate. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a key group of scholars advocated for *interpretivism*—a paradigm that is also known as “naturalism,” “hermeneutic empiricism,” and “constructivism” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This paradigm developed from the convergence of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual traditions, including German idealist philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutic philosophy, and American pragmatism. We’ll explore these traditions further in Chapter 3, but for now we may consider the following as distinctive commitments of interpretivism:

- Because it is a fundamentally *human* and *social* practice, communication should not be studied according to the logics and methods of the *natural* sciences. Instead, researchers should use *qualitative methods* such as participant-observation and interviewing.
- Communication should be studied in the scenes of its *natural* occurrence (i.e., as opposed to contrived settings such as laboratory experiments). Qualitative researchers should go where the action is, and seek to become a part of it.
- The *realities* (note the plural here) of communication are *unique*, *simultaneous*, and *local* phenomena. In other words, reality is *prolific*, and *emerges between* humans through their symbolic activities of expression and interpretation. Instead of trying to resolve the single, objective truth of communication reality,

interpretivists prefer to examine “social realities,” which they believe develop as people collaborate in making sense of the communication they encounter, in deciding how to respond, and in performing that response (repeating as needed).

- Interpretivists believe that communication researchers should study how humans use *cultural symbol systems* (e.g., language) to create shared meanings for who they are and what they do. In this process, researchers should seek to achieve *deep, empathic understanding* of human actions, motives, and feelings. They should *preserve* the subjective experience of social actors by depicting their communication as something that is *distinctively meaningful for them*. This is known as the *emic* perspective.
- Interpretivist researchers prefer to develop theory *inductively*. Rather than engage in mechanical testing of hypotheses, and revision of *existing* concepts within established logics, they seek to develop *new* concepts, or to revise existing concepts using unexpected and provocative perspectives.
- This process of building theory is also *iterative*. This means that qualitative communication researchers develop *tentative* explanations of the data they gather, and then compare those *initial* explanations with knowledge they gain from *further* interaction with group members. And then the cycle repeats. As initial explanations are increasingly confirmed, their value is considered “expansionistic,” because they help us to better understand similar phenomena, both within and across particular sites of communication.
- We can never exist or work completely *separate* (e.g., objective) from the things that we study. We are always influenced at some level by basic beliefs about what those things may (or should) mean, that we carry with us as a result of our socialization concerning cultural categories such as race, class, gender, sexual identity, religion, partisan politics, military service, and ability status. Instead, researchers and the communication they study are *interdependent*. They are constantly influencing, implicating, and activating each other.
- Additionally, this socialization ensures that we can never have *total* or *final* understanding of the multiple realities existing in a scene of communication (could anyone?). Instead, our understanding is always *partial*: We instinctively gravitate toward noticing, validating, and emphasizing those realities that are familiar and comforting to us. As a result, we must work intentionally and to engage with the realities of groups that are less familiar and comforting.
- These conditions of interdependence and partiality mean that qualitative communication researchers do not *use* methodological instruments (i.e., like tools in a toolkit). Instead, they *are* the instrument. This is because interpretivism requires us to observe and interpret both *our own* lived experience *and* the expressed experience of others.
- These conditions also mean that our claims of knowledge in qualitative communication research are *contingent*: They depend for their accuracy and success on managing our tendencies to prematurely explain or judge the groups we study.

- Interpretivists generate credible knowledge through *prolonged immersion* in actual social settings (e.g., a motorcycle gang; scrapbooking clubs), and through *extensive interaction* with the members of those groups. In this process, they achieve *intimate familiarity* with the local meanings and practices of group members (e.g., their rituals for initiating new members, and for promoting experienced members).
- Interpretivists use *verbal* and *narrative* means to collect data, and to present evidence for their claims. For example, they write down their observations of events, and they record and transcribe their conversations with the people they interview.

During the 1980s, communication scholars identified with the interpretive paradigm published several compelling “experiments” based on the use of qualitative methods. In this process, they looked outside the traditions of American communication science for fresh inspiration: to *sociology* for its symbolic-interactionist and phenomenological traditions; to *literary theory* and *psychoanalysis* for new ideas about texts and audiences; to *critical theory* for alternate explanations of power, agency, and social structure; and finally, to *cultural studies* for its innovative integration of theory and method in the study of everyday life. This stream of publications continued into the 1990s, breaching the remaining strongholds of quantitative research. Significantly, these arguments did *not* prove that positivist science and quantitative methods were somehow *faulty* modes of inquiry. Instead, they established that they were *incongruent* with the goals of studying situated and reflexive social action.

There were, however, at least three obstructions on this path. First, communication scholars had to rebuild the institutional curriculum of qualitative methods training, which had languished since the 1960s. Second, researchers battled lingering perceptions that qualitative methods produced *soft science*, characterized by imprecise instruments, biased observations, selective reporting of data, and ambiguous, limited findings. Third, qualitative researchers battled a related stigma associated with their selection of controversial topics. Because some researchers had followed “personal” interests in choosing questions and sites, their studies grated against existing standards of decorum and rigor in Communication scholarship. Also, because qualitative research sometimes depicts “alternative” and “deviant” subcultures, it has provoked mainstream audiences to dismiss such work as trivial, irrelevant—and even offensive.

During the 1990s, however, this opposition lost much of its edge and energy, largely due to the development of increasingly sophisticated rationales for—and exemplars of—qualitative research. Sentiment swung in the other direction. Graduate-level offerings of qualitative methods instruction

increased. Journal editors devoted precious volume space to the publication of qualitative studies, and professional associations founded sympathetic journals and special interest groups (e.g., the National Communication Association's Ethnography Division). University and commercial presses followed suit with dedicated book series. And finally, communication scholars were motivated to adopt qualitative methods during this period because their interdisciplinary colleagues, funding agencies, and professional clients became interested in exploring this kind of research.

*Critique.* This history would not be complete, however, without discussing the concurrent rise of a *critical* paradigm in qualitative communication research. The term *critical* invokes a rich and complex set of intellectual traditions. Generally, these traditions promote ethically and politically sensitive study of the relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse that are produced in situations of historical and cultural struggle. As a result, critical research engages topics such as “exploitation, repression, unfairness, asymmetrical power relations . . . distorted communication and false consciousness” (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996, p. 192). One example of a critical research question in communication might include the following: *How can U.S. protestors concerned with the unjust use of deadly force by police officers against Black citizens find common ground with officers who feel unfairly judged? What counts as “legitimate evidence” in this controversy? What counts as “reasonable procedure” for investigating competing claims made by these groups? Who gets to decide?*

“Critique” has ascended to the status of a paradigm due to the synergy among several related theories (discussed further in Chapter 3). While these theories have as many differences as they do similarities, the overlap and resonance in their commitments has led observers to declare the existence of a distinct, meta-theoretical genre (Kinchloe & McLaren, 2005; Schwandt, 2007). Those commitments include the following:

- Our understanding of communication phenomena is “always-already” mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constructed. That is, we are born into structures of power and knowledge (e.g., patriarchy and heteronormativity) that we did not choose, but which nonetheless shape our understanding of what is normal, possible, and legitimate about communication.
- Those power relations are developed in and through our communication with others, which creates identities (e.g., forms of self-consciousness) through which we are able to view—and act toward—ourselves, others, and the world as *meaningful* objects.

- The “facts” of theory and research can never be isolated from the values exerted by influential institutions (e.g., the agencies and foundations that fund communication research). These activities are not—and can never be—“innocent.”
- While its influence is not total or final, *political economy* (i.e., the structures through which a society develops and allocates its resources) significantly shapes cultural meanings and communicative practices. This influence commonly divides actors into groups marked by unequal possession of—and control over—sources of power and status. These sources can be both material (e.g., manufacturing technology) and symbolic (e.g., refined “taste”). The identity structures associated with political economy (e.g., social class, occupation, etc.) interact with those produced by other institutions (e.g., religion, nation, etc.) to produce complex situations, in which mainstream communication is alternately accommodated, negotiated, and resisted by cultural members.
- Researchers should study (and challenge) the means by which *oppression* is created, reproduced, and transformed through communication. This term refers to conditions which passively or actively prevent individuals and groups from pursuing their social, economic, and political *interests* (i.e., freedom, security, and prosperity). Critical theory is particularly concerned here with the modern co-emergence of *capitalism* and *science/technology*. These forces have powerfully shaped human existence in liberal Western societies and have fueled their imposition of values such as consumerism and privatization on other developing societies.
- Researchers should consider how they may be *complicit* in reproducing oppressive conditions. For example, researchers studying social service agencies may unconsciously adopt the ambient professional value in those settings of “helping” clients. Depending on its local connotations, this value may encourage researchers to unintentionally patronize and control those clients, inhibiting their ability to make (and learn from) important life decisions. Instead, in this view, researchers should try to develop *authentic, collaborative, and accountable* relationships with the people they study. They should support marginalized groups in their humane pursuit of interests such as voice, dignity, justice, and autonomy. Critical research may contribute to the “emancipation” of these groups by providing them with new resources for thinking, feeling, and acting.

While the history of the critical paradigm in Communication is quite complex, we can note three points of intersection with qualitative methods. First, critical research traditions have been particularly strong in Communication’s humanistic subfields (e.g., rhetoric). Qualitative research methods thus supplemented “the interpretive turn” as a medium through which those humanist scholars could develop a relationship with social science. Conversely, critical theory entered qualitative communication research

because it shared some interpretivist premises, for example, that social action could be viewed as a “text” amenable to both description and judgment.

Second, critical traditions have been cultivated in Communication subfields characterized by international membership (e.g., media studies), and by a predisposition to engage oppression (e.g., somewhat unexpectedly, organizational communication). Many members of these subfields were thus receptive to the influence of critical theories, and were prone to recognize the value of qualitative methods for advancing critical projects.

Finally, it’s worth recalling a brief period of overt conflict during the 1980s and 1990s between critical theorists and qualitative researchers. The accusations in this conflict flowed two ways. Critical theorists claimed that ethnographers displayed naïveté in their “integrationist” depictions of cultural order, mistook cultural members’ *consent* to dominant arrangements for their *endorsement*, and ignored the political complicity of a “neutral” research stance. Critical theorists thus feared that “detached” qualitative researchers could perpetuate oppression for no other reason than that they failed to conceptualize it (Putnam, Bantz, Deetz, Mumby, & Van Maanen, 1993). In turn, some qualitative researchers argued that extreme and rigid critical agendas were inappropriate for the conduct of qualitative research. These skeptics indicted critical theorists for deductively imposing their political agenda on the analysis of social action, for failing to prove that emancipation was itself an undistorted ideal, for oversimplifying the operations of power in actual cultural practice, and for failing to provide those they studied with viable solutions to documented problems.

This conflict was not intractable, however. Increasingly, qualitative communication researchers made use of sophisticated critical theories of identity, culture, and power to frame their studies. Critical theorists, in turn, adopted qualitative methods in growing numbers as a means of carefully describing everyday life.

## Covering New Material(Ism), Going Big: Two Trends in Qualitative Communication Research

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Let’s shift gears for a little bit. We have just reviewed the history and diversity of qualitative methods by examining different paradigms of communication research. One of our goals for this volume, however, is to identify *current* trends inside and outside academe that may affect your work (both now and in the near future). This shouldn’t be a surprise: If there is anything that our history demonstrated, it is that qualitative communication research is a



sensitive creature that is constantly responding to changes in its environment. This discussion has become something of a tradition in this volume. In 2002 (the second edition), we discussed the revived diffusion of qualitative research methods among communication subfields, and the growing interest displayed in qualitative studies of (what was then called) *computer-mediated communication*. In 2011 (the third edition), we turned our attention to two other concerns: the *globalization* of Western-style communication (both as a cultural phenomenon and a research topic); and the resurgence of positivist and “neoliberal” values in institutional fields such as health and education—specifically, the threats posed by related policies (e.g., of funding research) to the integrity of the qualitative enterprise. As we turn to current concerns, we offer two caveats. First, those previously discussed themes are still relevant, and so they will reappear throughout this volume. Second, our discussion here is more like a weather report than a photograph. It can only assess developing conditions, not confirm their final form. We don’t pretend to know how they will play out, but we do believe you should be paying attention to them. In that sense, you will extend this discussion through the research you conduct.

Our first trend brings to mind a famous lyric from a song by the pop icon, Madonna: *We are living in a material world*. This line is relevant here because communication scholars have recently been discussing the relationship between “material” and “discursive” dimensions of communication. By “material,” they mean worldly forms and processes that appear to enjoy a prior, objective, natural, tangible, and embedded existence. We typically characterize material phenomena as being relatively *solid* (persistent in form), *independent* (not reliant for their being on human perception), *obdurate* (resistant to human will), and *determinate* (i.e., imposing an irresistible force on human activity). One example here would include genetics.

The term *discursive*, alternately, refers to a range of phenomena associated with the human development of symbol systems (principally, spoken and written language). These systems serve to express human cognition and intention, to establish common understanding, and to coordinate social behavior. However, because of its association with intangible, ideational phenomena (such as meaning), and its apparent limitations of *transience*, *arbitrariness*, and *inconsistency* (e.g., in influencing outcomes), “discourse” has typically been opposed and subordinated to materiality within Western metaphysics. In related logics, materiality is prioritized as an enduring realm of the Real that may be indicated—but not fully manifested—by mere, derivative discourse.

Recently, longstanding academic conversations about the material and discursive status of communication have become more urgent (Aakhus et al.,

2011; Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Leonardi, Nardi, & Kallinilos, 2012; Lievrouw, 2014; Packer & Wiley, 2012). Across disciplinary subfields such as rhetoric, and organizational and environmental communication, we hear a common refrain:

- That our entrenched habits of theorizing communication reflect increasingly unsustainable commitments to the values of *idealism, disembodiment, humanism, and symbolism*.
- That communication has *always been material*. It must assume some physical form, and requires some kind of biological, mechanical, or electrical infrastructure for its production.
- That our human performance of speech and writing *depends upon, and coexists with*, the *agency* (i.e., the capacity to act and produce effects) of other *objects, bodies, species, places, technologies, environments*—and even *spirits!*
- That this agency manifests as these entities *participate* in our communication through *organic, unpredictable, and influential* means. These means may include *sentience, expression, mediation, and collaboration*.
- That we should no longer *suppress or minimize* the significance of this material effectiveness in our explanations of communication—for example, as-if mere “context” for more important “textuality.”
- That we should instead depict ongoing “entanglements” and “articulations” of materiality and discourse, which emerge among and between *the heterogeneous networks and economies* of actual communication.
- That communication subsequently appears as *a deeply contingent phenomenon* bristling with provocative qualities such as *relationality, temporality, assembly, and imbrication* (i.e., patterned overlap).
- That such communication may be a kind of construction, but *not* one that is singular, autonomous, or complete.

What are the implications of resurgent materialism for qualitative communication research? Two are immediately apparent. The first involves a tension between this development and intellectual traditions conceptualizing culture primarily as *a human system created to develop symbolic meanings*. The resonance of those traditions with the “oralist” study of “speech” and “face-to-face” communication has produced a powerful “common sense” about what communication *is*. As a result, we must reconsider—and perhaps redesign—our routines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Indeed, those changes reflexively penetrate fundamental assumptions in qualitative research about who (or what) is performing that research, and how. No longer, in this view, should we romanticize the individual researcher as-if a principal “author” of events, nor should we automatically privilege *their*

point of view in research narratives (e.g., what if we studied communication on road trips from the car's perspective?). Instead, the researcher is merely one element in a holistic "assemblage" which coordinates the competing influences of theoretical frameworks, methodological traditions and technologies, visceral feelings, spatial and temporal contexts, and institutional policies (Fox & Alldred, 2014). Additionally, "new materialists" reject the assumption that qualitative analysis of data should necessarily produce clean and neat categories (e.g., of themes). Instead, it should more richly depict provocative (and sometimes disorienting) qualities of *multiplicity*, *ambiguity*, and even *incoherence* in communication (Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

The second implication of this trend here is more comforting. It recognizes a partial connection between materialist concerns and traditions of cultural research. Here, we recall that qualitative researchers have a long history of dealing with "cultural artifacts" outside of traditional discursive texts, such as tools, architecture, and music. While we cannot cover every possible category of these artifacts, we will discuss this diversity of qualitative data in Chapter 8.

Our second trend in qualitative research derives from the conventional wisdom that we are living in an era of rapid, widespread, and intensive change in information and communication technology (ICT). Frequent topics of discussion here include the conversion of "old" (i.e., analog, mass, and broadcast) media systems to "new" digital, peer-to-peer networks; the ascendant popularity of visual, multimedia culture over the ancient intimacy of face-to-face communication, and the modern logic of print; the "convergence" of communication tools and systems enabling cross-platform interaction with programs and data; the growth of portable, mobile, and "smart" (i.e., Internet-capable) devices that "dis-embed" the use of ICT from fixed times and places; and finally, the astonishing growth of "social media" systems (e.g., Facebook; LinkedIn; Twitter) enabling us to display customized profiles, to internally mail, chat and text with members of our networks (i.e., followers), and to (re)produce (i.e., "post") media content outside traditional constraints. A key economic bargain that has been struck in this process involves the requirement by Internet companies that users of their products and services permit corporate access to, and ownership of, the personal data they generate. Generally, these corporations promise that these data will only be stored in the aggregate, with personal identifiers disguised or removed (i.e., as meta-data).

How is this development relevant to qualitative research? We can begin by recognizing that the business model of these companies *depends* on their routine surveillance of user behavior, and their timely collection and analysis of related data (e.g., to anticipate market trends and pursue innovation). To this end, companies like Google and Twitter employ teams of social

scientists, both to sift (“scrape”) their constantly growing archive of passively collected user data, and to *actively* generate new data through strategic polling and interviews, and (most controversially) covert experiments that secretly alter the content of users’ feeds and measure their response. For a variety of reasons, however, this development has begun to seep into the standards and practices of scholarly research. One factor here is the relative accessibility of this proprietary data—at least, for authorized researchers with inside contacts, legal contracts, or the funds to purchase datasets from commercial resellers. Importantly, system owners and resellers “clean” such datasets, imposing formats that *may* serve researcher needs (and that may also infuse systematic errors—the analogy here is eating someone else’s left-over cooking, scraped from their dinner plate). Finally, we note the aura of currency (both temporal and financial) surrounding social media systems, which draws researchers to this exciting “real-world” setting of apparently spontaneous, continuous (and even authentic) communication. Together, these factors illustrate how technological innovations involve more than material infrastructure (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). They also involve ambiguous opportunities, professional norms, and cultural myths (perhaps even fetishes). Here, those influences have contributed to increasingly hegemonic assumptions concerning the role of Big Data in qualitative research.

What are the implications of those assumptions? First, we can note the persistent influence of positivism that shapes professional expressions of excitement and anxiety concerning *very large* sets of digital data (e.g., as of this writing, Facebook has over 1.7 *billion* monthly active users). Qualitative researchers have been quick here to note that “more is not necessarily better” and that the postpositivist ideal of generalizable sampling is not served unless the nature of data is already congruent with the goals and questions of a particular study (Marotzki, Holze, & Verstandig, 2013). That is, “big” is no guarantee of achieving rigor or elegance in our work, and Big Data may thus perpetuate outdated stereotypes concerning quantitative and qualitative research. Instead, we must summon the courage to ask whether a popular innovation is *actually* useful for qualitative needs—for example, will having more data help us to improve our concepts and theories? Indeed, decontextualized digital data can prove to be disappointingly “thin,” brittle, and opaque—providing insufficient information about initial sampling, limited flexibility (i.e., no opportunity for ongoing dialogue with users), and scant evidence of the meaningful performances typically sought by qualitative researchers (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). It can also be quite difficult for researchers to verify identities and follow up with participants whose expressions remain anonymous. Finally, the ethical issues surrounding use of such data are complex, exacerbated by the lack of consensus among research

communities and their institutional regulators concerning standards for protecting participants.

All this does not mean, of course, that qualitative researchers should ignore opportunities to explore the enhanced, unobtrusive collection of digital data, or that they must know completely beforehand how such data will be used. It *does* mean that, if they choose to do so, they must develop the best possible rationales, as early as possible, and design the best possible systems for collecting and analyzing that data so that its rate, volume, and complexity do not contradict their paradigmatic assumptions, or defeat their human limitations (i.e., some large datasets may generate economy of scale; others may generate rapidly diminishing returns). Additionally, it means that qualitative researchers will likely encounter Big Data in the context of large-scale, grant-funded projects involving interdisciplinary teams of researchers. In a recent, eye-opening forum, one organizational communication scholar described the often-frustrating (if not outright degrading) facework that interpretivist researchers must perform to influence the postpositivist researchers who typically lead those teams (Bisel, Barge, Dougherty, Lucas, & Tracy, 2014). For these reasons, qualitative communication researchers do well to approach claims and opportunities surrounding Big Data with a healthy degree of caution.

## Conclusion

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We've covered a lot of ground in this opening chapter. Let's summarize our discussion of concepts, histories, paradigms, and current trends in qualitative communication research. One key point is that, having won a historical battle for acceptance, *qualitative research methods* have continued to grow in influence within the Communication discipline. This trend has been fueled by ongoing developments, including the increased offering by programs of research methods courses to their undergraduate students (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009), and the appearance of numerous publications (including this one) seeking to standardize the conduct of qualitative communication research (Jensen, 2012). Despite some important exceptions and periodic relapses (discussed further in our next chapter), Communication has institutionalized *qualitative research* as a covering term for scholarship that values the *systematic study*, conducted in *natural settings*, of the *empirical features* and *lived experience* of *situated interaction* (Rawlins, 2012). More specifically, it values those elements as opportunities for researchers to practice *participation*, *reflection*, *description*, and *interpretation* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Potentially, our use of these methods makes the *ongoing accomplishment* and *meaningful interpretation* of social worlds more visible and discussable to their participants.

In qualitative research, we try to understand the communication of people who are actively engaged in trying to understand their own—and each other’s—communication. We seek to develop useful stories about *their* stories, while accounting for the influence of our own values and beliefs on this process. Our activities of collecting and analyzing data come together as we develop increasingly precise and compelling language for explaining and critiquing human communication. Our research is successful if the people we study recognize in our work the felt significance of their struggles and their achievements.

Hopefully, you will find at least some of these features of qualitative research appealing. But we would be remiss if we did not offer a caution. It has to do with the “highly particular and hauntingly personal” nature of qualitative research (Van Maanen, in Berry, 2011, p. 166). Put simply, one legacy of positivist science involves the belief that researchers and their methodological “tools” are inherently separate—that those tools originate somewhere else, may be used at arm’s length, and can be easily swapped out. This means that, when taking a course on qualitative methods, students may be influenced by a deep-seated expectation that *someone else* (e.g., the instructor or the textbook authors) will provide them with the “right” techniques and answers, enabling them to feel relatively *safe* and *comfortable* doing research (e.g., by reducing uncertainty about the outcomes of investigation).

For better and for worse, that is not always possible in qualitative research. Instead, conducting qualitative research requires us to develop a high tolerance for *interdependency*, *uncertainty*, and *improvisation*. Its epistemology and methodology are premised on our *not knowing*—completely, confidently, or in advance—how (or when) things will turn out. It requires us to risk our egos by attempting things, even *before* we know how to do them skillfully. It challenges us to tolerate *unfamiliarity*, *ambiguity*, and *vulnerability* surrounding the performance of communication—both our own, and other’s. It offers us the opportunity to develop *curiosity*, *compassion*, and *patience* in learning about ourselves—because others have offered us the opportunity to learn responsibly about them (and also *with* them). For this reason, some communication scholars have characterized qualitative research—only half-jokingly—as “a way of life.” Our point is that, if you sometimes feel overwhelmed or discouraged in using these methods, you may want to reframe that initial reaction. That is, *those feelings may actually be a sign you are doing qualitative research the way it should be done*. If that is the case, we believe you should be acknowledged and encouraged. Over time, you may even come to *accept* those feelings as a welcome sign that a deep part of your mind is working on something important about your research. If you invite those feelings to speak, rather than push them away, they may offer you something

unexpected and helpful. The issue, in other words, is not that you have such feelings. It's what you choose to do with them.

## Exercises

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1. Search for a film or online video clip that depicts relatively plausible or unscripted communication between two or more people. Isolate a scene material that appears to depict the tension between performances and practices (e.g., two or more participants who share competing definitions of which practice should be invoked to interpret someone's performance). How does this exchange illustrate features of a performance that qualitative researchers should preserve in their conceptualization of a related practice?

2. This chapter compares and contrasts different paradigms that have shaped qualitative communication research. Think of a specific communication-related topic that you are interested in studying. To appreciate how choosing among different paradigms might influence you in this process, consider the three sets of questions in Box 1.1, which follows. Begin by answering each set of questions for your topic in the "positivism" column. Then, choose at least one other column that represents a different paradigm that you are interested in. Now answer the questions for your topic again, from that perspective. Compare the answers you come up with in each column. What are the apparent advantages and disadvantages of using each perspective to study your topic?

### Box 1.1 Diagnostic Questions for Distinguishing Communication Research Paradigms

	Positivism	Postpositivism	Interpretivism	Critical Theory
According to this perspective, what can I assume is <i>true</i> about this phenomenon? For example: 1. <i>Where</i> is it located? 2. <i>How</i> does it occur (what causes it)? 3. <i>What happens</i> as a result of its occurrence (what are its effects)?				

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	Positivism	Postpositivism	Interpretivism	Critical Theory
<p>According to this perspective, how should I study this phenomenon?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>What</i> research methods should I use?</li> <li>2. <i>How</i> should I use them?</li> <li>3. <i>How would I know</i> if I was using these methods correctly?</li> </ol>				
<p>According to this perspective, what <i>values</i> (if any) should I consider in studying this phenomenon?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Whose</i> interests should I take into account?</li> <li>2. What <i>ethical conflicts</i> might arise?</li> </ol>				

3. Imagine that a “neomaterialist” researcher is studying the communication in your research methods class. In addition to “normal” verbal interaction between the members of the class, what other material conditions or artifacts might they study? For example, how do different *objects, bodies, species, technologies, and environments* all “participate” in this communication? How might that communication appear differently if it was depicted from a “nonhuman” point of view?