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Introduction to Qualitative Communication Research

Introduction: Working With (and Studying) Cops

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

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 research topics and sites. Gradually, she realized that her part-time student job with the university's police department was worth considering. In two years of working for its operations division, she had become steeped in the daily routines of the officers and civilian staff. She had learned how their communication with students, residents of the surrounding city, and members of other law enforcement agencies was shaped by formal policies and informal norms. In performing her duties, and in casual conversations, she had noticed that the officers expressed pride and frustration about their work. Over time, her interest in these matters deepened as she began to date one of the officers and to socialize with them outside of work.

Because of her status, Elizabeth recognized that she enjoyed a level of trust in this group that was rarely offered to outsiders. And there was something inherently interesting about the intensity of the officers' work. What could explain the

conflicting meanings they attached to belonging to this organization? But she agonized over her choice. Was it worth it to risk the officers' trust by formally studying them (she now viewed some as friends) and by reporting something that they might not like? Was it too late for her to be objective?

After talking with her thesis advisor and the police department's administrators, she 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 officers were welcoming; others were suspicious. Most desired 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 department personnel to talk with her in extended, one-on-one conversations. In these exchanges (most of them audio recorded), she asked these figures about events she witnessed and statements they and others had made. In a final step, she collected a variety of documents (e-mail messages, memos, etc.) that suggested how administrators desired the officers to see themselves and the department.

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. She recognized that the officers and their superiors were attempting to create an image for this organization that could survive accusations by outsiders that it lacked credibility (e.g., as a collection of "toy cops"). As a result, the officers sought from their superiors and peers continuous reassurance that their accomplishments confirmed that desired image. Indeed, they cultivated a parallel, positive image of the university and the department as valued sites of "good police work." Gradually, Elizabeth drew on 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 continues to study organizational communication. She even married the police officer she was dating (he is now studying to be a paramedic). 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 methodology known as "ethnography." Her story depicts how researchers develop questions, how they decide what is significant to observe and report, and how they become implicated in this process. For example, Elizabeth initially sensed that something in her immediate surroundings was an opportunity for study. This intuition arose from an accident of timing and empathy for the officers. While this situation at times felt like a source of conflict and concern, it was also (with practice) 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 the 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 effective qualitative claims about communication. We'll explore this method further in Chapter 5.

In addition to observing others, Elizabeth conducted *interviews*. As discussed further in Chapter 6, these interviews can go by several names. Generally, they resemble conversations between equals who systematically and collaboratively explore topics of mutual interest. Although qualitative researchers often go into interviews with an agenda, they usually do not impose much structure. For example, Elizabeth's questions encouraged the police officers to express their personal understandings of their work, rather than forcing them to choose from a list of predetermined answers. Qualitative researchers interview people for several reasons: to understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve their experiences from the past, to gain expert insight or information, to obtain descriptions of events that are normally unavailable for observation, to foster trust, to understand sensitive relationships, and to create a record of communication that can subsequently be analyzed.

Finally, in completing her study, Elizabeth also collected and analyzed *documents*, as well as other organizational artifacts. This was because her study examined narratives about the police department developed by its members. This kind of analysis typically supports other research methods by "reading" material culture (e.g., clothing, architecture, cars) as a primary means of symbolic expression (see Goodall, 1991). Visual media—such as

photographs or video—can also be used by researchers or group members to document behavior and to capture different perspectives on action (LeBaron & Streeck, 1997). We will explore this method further in Chapter 7.

We focus in this volume on these three techniques because they create a kind of flexibility that is necessary for successful qualitative research. In this way, Elizabeth's project suggests fundamental questions that qualitative researchers ask: *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? Who are "they"—both to me and to themselves? Who am "I" to them?* And finally, *How is this knowledge useful to communication scholars and professionals, as well as the general public?*

These questions embody what is arguably the defining commitment of communication scholarship: *to study human symbolic action in the various contexts of its performance* (Cronkhite, 1986). That is, qualitative researchers study *the performances and practices of human communication*.

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 more than "messages" or a transparent vehicle of information (Bauman, 1986). That is, performances are creative, local, and collaborative interaction events (like joke telling among friends). "Practices," alternately, form the generic and routine dimension of communicative acts. In comparison to performances, they are more abstract and standardized. They form the coherent action that is indexed by the material features of a particular performance, and they are attributed by social actors as a presumption of others' motives. For example, one cliché of Hollywood action-film dialogue involves one character invoking a practice (e.g., "Was that a *threat*?") to resolve the ambiguity of another's performance ("No. It's a *promise*.").

Performances and practices, then, constitute the texture of our everyday communication. Through them, we enact the meanings of our relationships in various contexts. Virtually any communicative act can be studied as a kind of performance, which can, in turn, be viewed as a variation on a practice. Taken together, these elements make the social construction of meaning virtually indistinguishable from "communication."

In the next section of this chapter, we review the intellectual foundations of this assumption. Although it is not immediately apparent, research methods form the practical technologies of philosophical systems, including beliefs about the nature of reality (*ontology*) and about how that reality may be known (*epistemology*). These beliefs are often only implicit in actual studies, but they form an important code by which communication researchers assert

their work—and evaluate the work of others—as exemplars of a particular philosophical tradition. This assertion helps to set audience expectations about the form and content of that research. When these expectations are satisfied, audiences may find that research to be credible and valuable. Researchers who ignore this condition use qualitative research methods at their peril. They usually experience frustration and produce confusing results.

To avoid those outcomes, we next contrast four "paradigms" that have shaped the development of qualitative research in the discipline of communication. After that we'll review two trends that are currently shaping the conduct of that research, and we'll take a tour of how qualitative methods have been used in the different subfields of communication. We'll conclude this chapter by outlining the remainder of the volume.

Four Paradigms and (Maybe) a Funeral: A Brief History of Qualitative Communication Research

Writing in 1975, communication scholar James Carey offered the following vision of qualitative research:

> 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 *positivist* assumptions. These assumptions had become influential during the postwar era, as social scientists imitated the premises and activities of research conducted in the natural sciences (partly as a bid to gain equivalent prestige). In Freudian terms, positivism was the symbolic Father that qualitative research had to slay in order to stake its claim. As a result, this paradigm has been intensively caricatured, often under the related labels of "objectivism," "empiricism," and "rationalism." At the center of this struggle lie the following positivist claims (Anderson, 1987, 1996a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- "Reality" is singular, a priori, and objective. It exists independently of its knower.
- True knowledge arises from observation of empirical phenomena. These phenomena form the tangible, material traces of essential reality.
- The concepts and methods of natural science are—with some modification—a legitimate model for the conduct of social science.

- Essential reality constrains the range of claims that we can make about it. Those claims should seek to correspond with the nature of reality. As a result, we should constantly refine our methods to maximize their rigor and accuracy.
- In observing phenomena, their complexity should be reduced in order to isolate the existence of specific elements and to clarify their underlying relationships.
- The logic of measurement and quantification (e.g., expressed in the use of statistics) is best for depicting empirical observations (e.g., as amount, frequency, or rate).
- Researchers should look for, and explain, the mechanisms of cause and effect that determine human behavior.
- In order to examine relationships between variables, researchers should *aggregate* subjects (e.g., as population samples) based on their possession of a specific trait or performance.
- Theory is best developed *deductively*. Researchers should proceed by proposing—and then testing—explanations for phenomena based upon existing, verified knowledge about them. *Hypotheses* that hold up to testing should be incorporated in theory.

In communication, the impacts of positivism manifested themselves in a variety of forms. These included a search for external and psychological causes for communication, a focus on predicting and controlling that "behavior," and the use of quantitative methods in artificial settings (e.g., experiments and surveys). There are numerous examples of research programs that could be cited here; the study of media "effects" as the transmission of influence through program content may be the most prominent and resilient (Nabi & Oliver, 2009).

While the influence of positivism has been powerful (Anderson, 1996a), it has never been total or simple. One reason is that communication researchers were never completely unified about the appropriate goals and strategies of positivist research. This was partly because "positivism" is itself a conglomeration of multiple and conflicting traditions (Corman, 2005). As a relatively young and interdisciplinary field, also, communication tended toward a culture of pluralism and diversity—even if this tendency was not consistent across its subfields (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1985; Pearce, 1985; Peters, 1986). Finally, communication researchers responded in various ways to 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. These included its conflation of the discovery of phenomena with the verification of their explanations; its presumption of "facts" generated independently 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 detachment (even, potentially, in the face of human evil and suffering).

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; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Miller, 2002, pp. 32–45):

- The physical and social worlds are composed of complex phenomena that exist independently of individual perception (a.k.a., "realist" ontology). Human *beliefs* about these phenomena, however, are multiple, partial, and inexact.
- Humans interact in patterned ways. Those patterns "reify" social beliefs about phenomena and infuse them with predictability, significance, and consequence.
- Knowledge is best created by searching for causal explanations (i.e., generative mechanisms) for observed patterns of phenomena. These causes are multiple, interactive, and evolving.
- While *absolute* truth and value-free inquiry may be unattainable, the discovery of falsifying instances for claims and the reduction of bias in research (e.g., through peer review of findings) *are* attainable and desirable. "Objectivity" is thus the product of systematic and collective action—it is not the inherent property of an isolated, individual act.
- The discovery (i.e., conceptualization) of phenomena, and the verification of concepts, are equally valued as logics of research.
- The "emic" (i.e., ordinary) intentionality and experience of social actors should be preserved in explanations of phenomena.
- Research conducted in natural settings is useful for documenting contextual influences on social action.
- Both quantitative and qualitative methods are legitimate resources for conducting research.
- The use of multiple methods enhances explanations of complex phenomena (e.g., by "triangulating"—comparing and contrasting—outcomes of their use).
- Qualitative methods are valued for their contribution to structured (and potentially quantitative) analysis. The use of statistics by qualitative 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 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 (Bochner, 1985; Craig, 1989), others—such as a belief in value-free inquiry—persist in modified form. Second, postpositivism operates differently in specific contexts. There may be no bigger tent in the academic world than communication, which serves as a master identity for several intellectual and professional interests. As one travels among academic institutions located within a single nation—and also among those located in different nations—one is likely to find *both* similarity *and* variation in what counts as "communication research." As a result, it is best to consider postpositivism as—at least in part—a local event that is shaped by intellectual history and institutional politics.

Finally, in the aftermath of positivism, communication has become an increasingly specialized and fragmented discipline. Within and across its subfields, different intellectual traditions coexist in states of tension and harmony. While a few communication scholars resent this pluralism, most seem to welcome it, and almost everyone accepts it as a political reality. Many, however, also 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 primary fields of interest, while monitoring the periphery for opportunities to innovate and collaborate (Van Maanen, 1995a).

Capitalizing on the decline of positivism, advocates for qualitative methods engaged their opponents in a passionate debate. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, a key group of scholars advocated for *interpretivism*, a paradigm that is also known as "naturalism" (Anderson, 1987; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), "hermeneutic empiricism" (Anderson, 1996a, 1996b), and "constructivism" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This paradigm developed from the convergence of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual traditions, including German idealist philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutic philosophy, and American pragmatism (C. Taylor, 1977). We'll explore these traditions further in Chapter 2, but for now we may consider the following as distinctive commitments of interpretivism (see Arnett, 2007; Cheney, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2005):

- In studying topics of symbol use, sensemaking, and choice making, the "human sciences" are inherently different from the natural sciences.
- *Realities* are unique, plural, simultaneous, and local phenomena. They are accomplished between human beings through their symbolic practices of expression and interpretation. *Social realities* are thus emergent and collaborative in nature.

- Research should seek to achieve deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings. It should illuminate how humans use cultural symbol systems to create shared meanings for their existence and activity.
- Knowledge of social reality emerges from the fundamental interdependence that exists between researchers and those they study. Researchers do not use methodological instruments. They *are* the instrument.
- Knowledge claims made by researchers are inevitably positioned and partial. As a result, they should reflect on—and account for—the contingency of their claims.
- Researchers generate credible knowledge claims through prolonged immersion in actual social settings and extensive interaction with other participants. Intimate familiarity with local meanings and practices is considered a requirement for successful explanation.
- Researchers should use verbal and narrative means to collect data and to present evidence for their claims.
- Researchers should preserve the subjective experience of social actors in explaining how their performances are meaningful.
- Researchers should develop theory *inductively*. This means that they repetitively test their tentative explanations against knowledge gained from ongoing interaction with group members. Explanation should create increasingly "expansionistic" understanding of phenomena, both within and across the sites of their occurrence.

During the 1980s, communication scholars identified with the interpretive paradigm published several compelling "experiments" based on the use of qualitative methods (e.g., Benson, 1985; Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, & Wartella, 1989; Gerbner, 1983). In this process, these scholars 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 innovative integrations of theory and method in studying the politics of everyday life. These publications continued into the 1990s, breaching the remaining bastions of quantitative research (e.g., Tracy & Gallois, 1997). Significantly, these publications did *not* prove that positivist science and quantitative methods were *faulty* modes of inquiry, but that they were *insufficient* for the study of situated and reflexive social action (Deetz & Putnam, 2000; Schwandt, 1989).

Before they could achieve their goals, however, qualitative advocates had to overcome three obstacles located on this path. First, communication scholars had to rebuild the curriculum of qualitative methods training, which had languished since the 1960s (Delia, 1987, pp. 69–73). 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 of them drew upon "personal" interests in choosing their research 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 offensive (Jenkins, 1988).

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 (Frey, Anderson, & Friedman, 1998). Journal editors devoted precious volume space to the publication of qualitative studies (Pardun, 1999), and professional associations founded sympathetic journals and special interest groups. University and commercial presses followed suit with dedicated book series. And finally, communication scholars adopted qualitative methods during this period because their interdisciplinary colleagues, funding agencies, and professional clients were also interested in their application.

This history would not be complete, however, without discussing the recent 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 among 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).

"Critique" has subsequently ascended to the status of a paradigm in qualitative communication research due to the synergy among several related theories (discussed further in Chapter 2). While these theories have as many differences as they do similarities, the congruence of their commitments has led observers to declare the existence of a distinct, metatheoretical genre (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Kinchloe & McLaren, 2005; Schwandt, 2007; Strine, 1991; Thomas, 1993). Those characteristic commitments include the following:

- Our understanding of phenomena is mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constructed.
- Those power relations are developed in *discourse*, which creates "subject positions" through which humans are able to view—and act toward—Self, Other, and World *as* meaningful objects.

- The "facts" of research can never be isolated from its values. Research is not—and can never be—"innocent."
- While its influence is not determinate, "political economy" (i.e., the structures through which a society develops and allocates its resources) significantly shapes cultural meanings and practices. This influence commonly divides actors into groups marked by unequal possession and development of sources of power—both material (e.g., manufacturing technology) and symbolic (e.g., refined "taste"). The identity structures associated with political economy (e.g., social class, occupation) interact with those produced by other institutions (e.g., religion, nation).
- Researchers should study (and potentially challenge) the means by which oppression is created, reproduced, and transformed. Critical theory is particularly concerned 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 their *complicity* in reproducing oppressive conditions (e.g., by endorsing the paternalism of service providers toward "helpless" clients). Instead, they should adopt dialogic methods that encourage the development of authentic and collaborative relationships with their participants. Research goals and procedures should support subordinate groups in their humane pursuit of interests such as voice, dignity, justice, and autonomy. Potentially, researchers contribute to the "emancipation" of these groups by providing them with new resources for thinking, feeling, and acting. Potentially, researchers and group members can discern and exploit vulnerabilities in dominant institutions, depriving them of needed resources such as consent and legitimacy. At its most potent, research may stimulate popular insurgency against regimes of exploitation.

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 and affiliated disciplines (e.g., rhetoric). For scholars in those areas, qualitative research methods thus supplemented "the interpretive turn" as a medium through which they could develop a relationship with social science. In exchange, critical theory entered qualitative communication research through openings created by its embrace of overlapping interpretivist premises—for example, that social action could be viewed as a "text" amenable to both description and judgment (Ricoeur, 1977).

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, we may note a tradition of tension between critical theorists and qualitative researchers. The accusations in this conflict have been two-way. Critical theorists have claimed that ethnographers display naïveté in their "integrationist" depictions of cultural order, mistake cultural members' *consent* to dominant arrangements for their *endorsement*, and ignore the political complicity of a "neutral" research stance. Critical theorists thus fear that "detached" qualitative researchers may perpetuate oppression for no other reason than that they fail to conceptualize it (Hawes, 1983; Ortner, 1997; Putnam, Bantz, Deetz, Mumby, & Van Maanen, 1993). In turn, some qualitative researchers have argued that extreme and rigid critical agendas are inappropriate for the conduct of qualitative research. These skeptics indict critical theorists for deductively imposing their political agenda on the analysis of social action, for failing to prove that emancipation is itself an undistorted ideal, for oversimplifying the operations of power in actual cultural practice (Hammersley, 1992; Philipsen, 1991), and for failing to provide those they study with viable solutions to documented problems (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992).

This conflict is not intractable, however. Increasingly, qualitative communication researchers use sophisticated critical theories of identity, culture, and power to frame their studies (Barker & Cheney, 1994; Deetz, 1998; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). Critical theorists (Forester, 1992), in turn, have turned to qualitative methods in growing numbers as a means of carefully describing everyday life.

What conclusions can we draw from this overview of research paradigms in communication? One is that, having won the battle for acceptance, qualitative communication research has consolidated those gains and continued to grow in influence. (Some might even say it is now the discipline's *dominant* methodology, but it does not seem necessary to keep that kind of score, no matter how accurate it might be.) Despite the occasional relapse, communication has generally institutionalized "qualitative research" as a covering term for scholarship that views the empirical dimensions of symbolic interaction as the raw material for documentation and reflection. Potentially, these practices can make the ongoing, mundane accomplishment of the social world more visible and discussable to its participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). In qualitative research, the processes of collecting and analyzing data are ultimately resolved by rigorously developing increasingly precise and useful language for describing,

conceptualizing, interpreting, explaining, and critiquing recorded communication (Waite, 2007).

Feeling Corporate, Going Global: Two Trends in Qualitative Communication Research

Before proceeding further, we need to briefly consider two developments that are currently shaping qualitative research in communication. If there is anything that our historical review has demonstrated so far, it is that qualitative research is a sensitive creature that is constantly evolving based on changes in its environment. Throughout our writing of multiple editions of this volume, we have sought to track these kinds of changes.

We label the first trend *neoliberalism and the university*. Here, we are concerned with the fallout created for qualitative research by the dominant belief that economic forces of the "free market" should guide the conduct (and study) of social life. Generally, neoliberal ideology endorses economic policies favoring the reduction of trade and investment barriers, the imposition of fiscal discipline on state operations (principally through tax reduction), the deregulation of structural barriers to corporate competition and profitability, and the reform and privatization of state enterprises traditionally serving "the public interest." Following the end of the Cold War, these policies have grown in influence as corporations and governments have responded to the apparent threats and opportunities of contemporary "globalization" (e.g., the emergence of new and cheaper labor markets).

How do these developments affect academic life and the conduct of qualitative research? Among Western liberal democracies such as the United States, the modern public university is a complex institution that has traditionally served multiple and competing interests (Chaput, 2008). These include socializing citizens into generic "civilized" and distinctive national identities, training future workers to master occupational and professional knowledge, containing young-adult populations whose full employment cannot be accommodated by the economy, and providing private corporations with state-subsidized research and development of science and technology. In this way, the university has never been an innocent institution, despite its frequent dismissal as an "ivory tower" housing irrelevant intellectuals. Indeed, the overall scope of the university's productivity and complicity has earned it the enduring scorn of critics from across the ideological spectrum.

More relevant here, however, is how neoliberalism has affected the structure and culture of the public university. Here, numerous commentators

(Chaput, 2008; Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Heckman, 2009) have observed several disturbing trends, including the general decline of state support for operations, giving rise to drastic cost cutting, curricular reform, and corrosive internal competition among units for increasingly scarce resources; the elimination of stable, tenure-track faculty positions in favor of contracting with cheaper and more contingent labor forces (such as adjunct instructors); the rise of "entrepreneurial" relationships between unit faculty and private-enterprise "clients" intended to develop new "markets" and "profit centers" that generate replacement funds; the privileging of externally funded research over teaching and service in faculty performance evaluation; and finally, the rise of a pernicious "consumer" rhetoric that frames student learning as a commodity exchange between service providers and their paying customers (McMillan & Cheney, 1996).

How does this trend affect qualitative communication research? Several implications are apparent. One is the deepening of malaise among humanists and social scientists, who continue to be institutionally marginalized for their low levels of external funding (e.g., compared to colleagues in the natural sciences and engineering). While this condition of lack has sometimes led to benign neglect (and thus discretionary autonomy), qualitative researchers continue to struggle to justify their activities within rigid neoliberal paradigms. As they increasingly turn (or are driven) toward external sources of funding, their research topics, questions, and findings are often constrained by neoliberal premises of efficiency, productivity, control, and profitability. Denzin and Giardina (2006, 2008) have documented the resurgence among government agencies (particularly in the health and education sectors) of pernicious, pro-positivist campaigns for "science-," "practice-," and "evidence-based" research. These campaigns systematically exclude qualitative research formats. Within the United States, this "methodological fundamentalism" was fueled during the recent Bush administrations by conservative activists who opposed inconvenient evidence implicating the viability of their preferred policies and by a general, post-9/11 climate of militarism and xenophobia.

These developments are certainly worrisome, but we do not view them only with dismay. Renewed debate concerning "the politics of evidence," for example, encourages qualitative researchers not to rest on their laurels and addresses real needs for intellectual coherence and consistency arising from the increasingly discrepant rationales and practices claimed as "qualitative research" (Hammersley, 2008). Further, these trends do not imply that all funding sources share the same interests, that they are actively conspiring to undermine nontraditional research, or that they are immune to influence. Instead, it means that their interests create palpable fields of force that

shape—but do not necessarily determine—the possibilities for qualitative research. As a result, we recommend that researchers vigilantly monitor situations and actively cultivate relationships in order to serve their interests. By adopting a tactical and entrepreneurial orientation toward neoliberal power, qualitative researchers may discover and exploit unexpected opportunities. Goodall (2008), for example, has noted how new university imperatives such as "partner with stakeholders" actually permit qualitative researchers to abandon the self-defeating practice of writing only for each other, to collaborate in developing exciting and rewarding partnerships with diverse groups, and to promote the value of adopting narrative, dialogue, ethics, and reflexivity for producing successful research.

Our second notable trend is implicit in the first and involves the consequences for qualitative communication research arising from contemporary globalization. "Globalization" is currently one of the most complicated terms in social and cultural theory. At root, this concept is concerned with the growing condition of interdependence existing within and among societies. This condition has been stimulated by recent innovations in transportation and communication technologies (principally the Internet) and by the accelerating exchange of material and symbolic phenomena across traditional boundaries, causing related institutions to tremble, dissolve, and transform (Friedman, 2005; Schwandt, 2007, p. 129). Ensuing debates around globalization engage urgent issues, including the impacts of homogenizing forces on cultural development and democratic governance; the role of transnational corporate power in determining local meanings and practices; the complicity of national governments, military forces, and media systems in abetting that power; and the effectiveness of indigenous resistance movements (de Sousa Santos, 2006; Featherstone, 2006; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Stohl, 2005).

Globalization has generated strong reactions in the communication discipline. For one, it has galvanized neo-Marxist and postcolonial critics to oppose the suffering and deceit associated with the resurgence of capitalist exploitation and the American empire (Hartnett & Stengrim, 2006; Kinchloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 321). Scholars in communication subfields (e.g., Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007) have subsequently reflected on the complicity of "their" theory and research in perpetuating inequality. This ethic exists in tension, however, with postpositivist agendas for the "practical" study of communication "problems" arising from heightened collaboration and conflict in a "converging" world. Those agendas are strengthened by universities seeking to produce "global citizens" who can "effectively manage" difference (Chaput, 2008).

In this process, traditional relationships between the "center" and "periphery" of the communication discipline have become increasingly

unstable. Scholars in the "developed" societies of the North and West have been encouraged to accommodate a range of "new," indigenous voices in their theorizing and research (Gunaratne, 2009; Shome, 2006). As a result, they have relinquished their ethnocentrism and elitism as the presumptive authors and guardians of that scholarship. Depending on one's position, this decentering of authority can be exciting, disorienting, or threatening. For the discipline's newest citizens, however, globalization has created an opportunity to realign communication scholarship with their historical experience and their distinctive interests (Gordon, 2007). What is at stake in this process is the success of our collective understanding about what "communication" is (or should be) and of the institutions that we develop to facilitate its stewardship (Craig, 2008). The next few decades should reveal whether "global" communication scholarship will develop as a weak network of knowledge silos or as a robust, communal enterprise characterized by mutual accountability and transformation.

There are at least three specific implications of globalization for qualitative communication research (Alasuutari, 2004; Gille & O'Riain, 2002). The first involves sharpened reflexivity. Because qualitative research is predisposed to engage matters of difference, globalization implicates not only its superficial content but also its core mythology (e.g., the belief that all cultures should aspire to resemble modern Western societies). In this process, methodological concepts and procedures (e.g., the relevance of geopolitical boundaries for sampling logics) once considered stable and universal seem increasingly contingent and therefore contestable. Murphy and Kraidy (2003, p. 308) offer one list of ensuing questions: "What/where is the research site? What investment does the ethnographer have with the research community? How do the subjects/participants of the research speak through the ethnographic text—what voice do they have?" In responding to these questions, communication researchers must overcome their preferences for safe and familiar use of qualitative methods. Instead, they must use them boldly to link the integrity of everyday life to changing global conditions.

The second implication is suggested by the first question in Murphy and Kraidy's list: contemporary globalization has destabilized qualitative traditions for conceptualizing and engaging research sites. In this era of active networks and intensive "flows," the cultural distinctiveness of those sites is no longer guaranteed. As a result, qualitative researchers are revising their fields as "multi-sited" (Marcus, 1995). Here, the goal is to depict a large-scale phenomenon (e.g., radioactive fallout from nuclear weapons testing) by tracing its interrelated manifestations in multiple locales. This development challenges researchers to adequately configure chosen objects within the multiple and shifting boundaries of their spatial and temporal occurrence. In

this view, the question is no longer how communication occurs "in" places but how it facilitates the process of "place making."

Finally, globalization has stimulated the creation of new publication outlets (e.g., the journals *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*; *Communication, Culture, & Critique*; and *International Review of Qualitative Research*) and the modification of existing outlets (e.g., *Management Communication Quarterly* and *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*) in order to accommodate the evolving ethic of globalized qualitative research. As these journals expand their authorship and readership, this ethic will be realized through the disciplinary practices of manuscript submission and peer review. As a result, rhetorical issues of form, audience, and responsibility will become increasingly important for scholarly publication (e.g., "Who am I writing for?," "How should I address them?," and "Whose interests should I consider in evaluating this study?").

Looking Closer: The Conduct of Qualitative Research in Communication

As we have discussed, communication is a field whose complexity encourages diverse claims about its identity. Much of the day-to-day work in the discipline, however, is organized around *subfields*. That is, while communication scholars may abstractly identify with the field as a whole, they are also connected to specific groups of colleagues who share preferences for a particular theory, research topic, and/or methodological approach. Discussing these groups is useful for several reasons: senior communication scholars socialize students and younger colleagues to affiliate with them; scholars evaluate each others' work as contributing to particular subfield agendas; many scholars configure their identities around simultaneous membership in multiple subfields (although one is usually most important); and big paradigm shifts play out variously within subfields as local matters. To illustrate, we turn now to discuss the manifestation of qualitative research in 11 different subfields. This (alphabetically arranged) list of subfields could be much longer: we emphasize here, however, those with strong and distinctive ties to qualitative methods.

Applied Communication

This subfield includes focused research projects that are undertaken for at least two purposes. The first is to assist individuals and groups in diagnosing and resolving practical problems affecting their ability to achieve communication goals. As Goodall (2004, p. 186) explains, applied researchers

"name, explain, and make improvements in how clients listen, interact, read, write, and mediate messages." Prior to 1990, most of these researchers were involved in corporate consulting, but they have since expanded their focus to include nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations and community coalitions (Frey & SunWolf, 2009). Second, applied researchers view these "naturally occurring" settings as rich opportunities to build and test communication theory. Their studies often combine quantitative and qualitative methods to meet situational needs. They are characterized by collaboration between researchers and clients intended to define problems, set goals, identify contributing factors, formulate strategies, and implement solutions.

Qualitative methods are especially helpful for cultivating the ethical and political dimensions of these projects (Frey, O'Hair, & Kreps, 1990; Seibold, 1995). Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 23) note that applied qualitative research "is the critical site where theory, method, praxis, action, and policy all come together. Qualitative researchers can isolate target populations, show the immediate effects of certain programs on such groups, and isolate the constraints that operate against policy changes in such settings. Action-oriented and clinically oriented qualitative researchers can also create spaces for those who are studied (the other) to speak."

The postpositivist tradition of applied communication research has been significantly affected by recent paradigm shifts. Ellingson's (2009) review of ethnography conducted in this subfield indicates that it currently serves a mix of pragmatic, theoretical, and ideological/political goals, and she encourages researchers to acknowledge the "messiness, imperfections, and mistakes" (p. 146) that pervade their projects. Similarly, Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) challenge applied researchers to represent the authentic "irrationalities" of embodiment, emotion, and contradiction in organizational settings. Goodall (2004) has advocated for the use of narrative ethnography to tell "better" (i.e., more useful and memorable) *stories* about the relationship between communication theory and practice and thus bridge the gulf between professional scholars and popular audiences. Finally, Frey and SunWolf (2009) discuss the distinct "translational" role played by these scholars as they articulate the general resource of existing research with clients' specific needs. Numerous exemplars may be found in volumes of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. One notable recent study is Tillmann's (2009) reflective account of her struggle to avoid resuming bulimic thoughts and behaviors following the trauma of her divorce.

Group Communication

In the mid-1990s, Frey (1994a) argued that interpretivism could stimulate this stagnant field of research. Traditionally, group communication

researchers had used quantitative methods to study zero-history groups of college students in one-time, laboratory events involving the solution of artificial, assigned tasks. Alternately, qualitative methods could be used to expand the range of groups studied, the types of communication studied, and the types of evidence used to support claims. Dollar and Merrigan (2002) subsequently argued that qualitative studies could validate and extend existing group communication theory, generate new theory, recover neglected topics, and problematize conventional wisdom. However, Frey (1994b) noted that using qualitative methods also creates challenges for group researchers, including the need to negotiate agreements with members concerning access, inclusion, confidentiality, and mutually beneficial transactions. Additional trends in this subfield include leveraging qualitative methods to study group members' increasingly global and mediated communication practices and to refine our understanding of the role played by context in shaping those practices (Frey, 2002). A recent exemplar here includes Seddon and Biasutti's (2009) study of spontaneous communication among the members of an Italian string quartet that allowed them to balance artistic creativity with respect for the composers' scores in performing their chosen musical selections.

Health Communication

This subfield represents a distinctive genre of applied research that was founded by postpositivist scholars of interpersonal and mass communication. It has traditionally displayed functionalist concern with assisting health care professionals to identify and overcome perceived communication problems that affect public health and the delivery of related services. These problems can be interpersonal, organizational, media related, and technology related. Typically, health researchers have used quantitative methods such as surveys to assist health care workers in predicting and controlling patient attitudes and behaviors and in designing and assessing interventions to achieve desired outcomes (Freimuth, Massett, & Meltzer, 2006).

Critics have noted, however, that such studies can reproduce the hierarchical authority of medical professionals over patients and obscure their experiences. Qualitative methods have thus served to restore the integrity of patient subjectivity and agency in medical encounters. This approach emphasizes the situated performances that form the referent of variables such as "self-efficacy." It also emphasizes the role of gender, class, and racial identities in the co-construction of profound—and often conflicting—cultural meanings for embodied conditions of illness, pain, suffering, and death. Here, researchers have used interviewing, observation, and textual analysis to validate self-reported data otherwise collected from surveys and to foreground the voices of patients and professionals whose relationships

constitute the social life of medicine (Kreps, 2008). These methods are particularly useful in capturing "the ground truth" behind controversial, large-scale change in health care institutions (Gillespie, 2001; Sharf & Street, 1997; Vanderford, Jenks, & Sharf, 1997).

Health communication has also been significantly affected by recent paradigm changes. In their review, Zoller and Kline (2008) identify several trends attributable to researchers' mainstreaming of the interpretivist and critical paradigms. As a result, they argue, their research has become more interdisciplinary and international in its focus, more open to conducting participatory and collaborative studies, and more ethically and politically sophisticated. Generally, they conclude, new paradigms have encouraged researchers to challenge the objectivism that dominates the medical and social sciences and to shift from "a representational view of communication as instrumental in achieving effectiveness to a constitutive view that envisions health, identities and power relations as mutually constructed" (p. 109). A recent example is Ellingson's (2003) study of "backstage" communication performed among the members of an interdisciplinary geriatric oncology team at a cancer center.

Intercultural Communication

Under this umbrella term, researchers influenced by the disciplines of anthropology and sociolinguistics have studied interaction among and between the members of different cultural groups (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). "Functionalist" and postpositivist research in this subfield has affiliated with the "practical" interests of professionals engaged in foreign relations and international business. Generally, this research has conceptualized national culture as a distinctive variable and sought evidence of its causal influence on related communication. Since the late 1980s, however, interpretivist scholars have focused on reciprocal and emergent relationships between communication and culture. Their work has emphasized the social construction of cultural knowledge and identities and researcher accountability for how claims are constructed in overlapping academic, historical, and socioeconomic contexts (Collier, 1998).

Recently, critical scholars have emphasized the potency of ethics and politics in intercultural communication (Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009). These "radical" perspectives urge scholars to confront the legacies of the field's Cold War founding and to view nations not as static entities but as ongoing, precarious accomplishments achieved through the symbolic conceptualization and enforcement of difference. In this process, scholars reflect Western culture's imperial gaze back on itself and subvert its overemphasis

of cultural qualities such as homogeneity, assimilation, rationality, and consensus. Whether focused "at home" or "abroad," this new wave of research emphasizes unequal power relationships; diversity; the significance of ethnic, class, and gender identities; and the dissolution of clear geopolitical boundaries in the context of globalization (Collier, 2000). A recent example is McKinnon's (2008) study of communication between a group of Sudanese refugee "Lost Boys" and the members of the Arizona community where they have resettled.

Interpersonal Communication

This subfield is a traditional stronghold of quantitative and postpositivist research. As a result, it has been slow and cautious in accommodating the interpretivist paradigm (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992). Groundbreaking studies here have treated personal relationships and episodes of interaction as situated accomplishments of speech and nonverbal communication (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Rawlins, 1983). Most of these studies depict personal identities and social realities as products of language use and culture as a central context of interaction. They also develop explanations through the inductive analysis of data generated in intimate observation (Poole & McPhee, 1994). They focus on how people describe their relational bonds and on the dilemmas they encounter in maintaining and transforming them. Recent studies have applied new paradigms to traditional research topics such as understanding, competence, listening, and self-disclosure (Carter & Presnell, 1994), and they have challenged traditional logics for selecting types of relationships to study, sampling populations, and using research methods (Morrill, Snow, & White, 2005). Potentially, "relational ethnography" can focus on cultural contexts, register variation in partners' interdependency, and expand the range of relational sites studied.

A recent exemplar here is Olson's (2003) phenomenological study of conceptions of romantic love developed and expressed among male relational partners.

Language and Social Interaction

This subfield is a home for international and interdisciplinary researchers who are influenced by various traditions of psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, and the philosophy of language. While this composition is particularly dynamic, Language and Social Interaction (LSI) researchers generally believe that "the smallest of language, gesture, or vocal expressions affect meaning making and can shape socially consequential outcomes" (Tracy &

Haspel, 2004, p. 788). While LSI was originally associated with the subfield of interpersonal communication, this linkage weakened as LSI researchers expanded their focus to study discourse occurring in institutional and public settings such as health clinics and talk radio. Generally, LSI researchers share a commitment to interpretivism and language pragmatics but differ strongly over procedures for gathering and analyzing data and reporting findings. Metaphorically speaking, there are at least four clans in this tribe:

- *Conversation analysts* focus on interactional structure and process as the display of strategies by which speakers reflexively produce, coordinate, and interpret utterances (e.g., Beach, 1996; Hopper, 1992; Peräkylä, 2004).
- *Discourse analysts* are concerned with recording, transcribing, and analyzing oral, written, and visual discourse produced in a variety of contexts. Here, "discourse" may be viewed as either the local manifestation of a broader social formation (such as social class) or as the interactive accomplishment of a particular episode (for example, the employment interview) (Hepburn & Potter, 2007).
- *Ethnographers of communication* focus on cultural codes and rituals that organize characteristic, routine communication among the members of distinctive "speech communities" (e.g., Fitch, 1994a).
- *Microethnographers* practice fine-grained analysis of embodied verbal and nonverbal interaction conducted in particular, physically built environments (LeBaron & Streeck, 1997).

To summarize, LSI researchers share a commitment to precise and detailed study of everyday talk occurring in natural contexts, to recording and documenting that talk (especially through transcription), and to using excerpts of data as empirical evidence for knowledge claims. Recurring topics include how people "do" phenomena such as relationships, power, organization, community, race, and gender on a moment-to-moment, turn-by-turn basis. Although hybrid forms of research are not unknown in this subfield (e.g., Jarmon, 1996; Tracy & Tracy, 1998), LSI researchers typically diverge from ethnographers in favoring a more detached researcher role, in limiting the evidence for claims of contextual influence to emphasize explicit features of recorded interaction, and in glossing the complex biographies and experiences of social actors to foreground interactional features as exemplars of social practice. One recent study here is Tracy's (2007) analysis of "the discourse of crisis" in a local school district coping with the discovery of a large budgetary error.

Media and Technology Studies

Officially, this subfield does not exist—yet. Instead, it represents our heuristic merger of two subfields whose relationship may be likened to gravitation

occurring in a binary star system: distinct bodies orbiting around a common center of mass.

As the first of these subfields, "media studies" was originally known as *mass communication*. This name change came about as researchers shifted from studying the structures, functions, and "effects" of broadcast media to conduct ethnographic research about media audiences. This shift toward "reception studies" resulted from two developments: recognition by European critical theorists of the limits of purely textual and political-economic analysis and dissatisfaction among many U.S. scholars with positivist research traditions. Each group forged its own path toward qualitative research: critical theorists through the development of "cultural studies" influenced by semiotic and poststructuralist theories and U.S. mass communication researchers through their appropriation of social phenomenology (each of these traditions will be discussed further in Chapter 2).

The rapid development of audience studies produced important insights into the social uses of media and emphasized the active interpretation of meanings in mainstream media texts (Anderson & Meyer, 1988; Corner, 1999, pp. 80–92; Geraghty, 1998; Lindlof, 1991; Morley, 1992). It also created significant controversy: the critical turn, for example, produced a rift between empirical researchers who conducted fieldwork and office-bound critics who theorized the politics of ethnographic textuality (Bird, 1992; Murphy, 1999b). Key, in any case, was the naturalistic move to study reception practices in the context of audience members' daily activities. Some researchers conducted "resistance studies" of subcultures whose members creatively deconstructed media texts to serve their unique interests and who appeared to subvert cultural hegemony (Fiske, 1991a; Jenkins, 1992). Others used qualitative methods to challenge ethnocentric assumptions in development communication surrounding the effects of media campaigns (Bourgault, 1992). Still others focused on "interpretive communities," in which media use is a ritual performance through which members maintain their local status. The rise of resistance studies and textual critique in this subfield produced, in turn, a backlash among scholars of political economy who rejected populist celebration of audience opposition as—at best—premature. They also called for a return to studying audiences as the material objects of institutional power (Morley, 1997). Potentially, this agenda is served by a related program of qualitative research that explores the creation of media content in organizational settings such as newsrooms (Lester, 1980; Rodriguez, 1996; Tuchman, 1991) and television program production (Gitlin, 1983; Levine, 2001; Saferstein, 1991).

The second "star" in this subfield is "information and communication technology" (ICT). This term is itself somewhat arbitrary: we use it here to encompass related programs of "computer-mediated communication" (CMC), "Internet," "web," and "new media" research (N. Baym, personal

communication, July 4, 2009; Schneider & Foot, 2004). We have previously reviewed the ascent of this subfield in qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 247–278). One distinctive feature is that its membership is highly interdisciplinary, containing not only the usual cast of communication scholars but also natural scientists and engineers whose research questions have led them to social and cultural theory as a fresh source of answers. Collectively, these scholars study meanings and practices surrounding the convergence of three different platforms: mass/broadcast media, computing, and telecommunications. In this process, they analyze the rapidly evolving development and increasingly popular use of digital, interactive multimedia technologies. Their research topics include artifacts (e.g., "smartphones"), programs (e.g., web browsers), infrastructures (e.g., server farms), platforms (e.g., social networking sites), user groups (e.g., bloggers), activity genres (e.g., online gaming), regulatory regimes (e.g., the Internet Engineering Task Force), zeitgeists (e.g., "cyberculture"), and intersubjective states (e.g., virtuality). While these phenomena are historically recent, the questions they pose for researchers are not unfamiliar: How do humans utilize technology as communication media to symbolically perform their identities, relationships, and communities? How do they adapt existing meanings and practices to engage the form and content of "new" media? How do those practices negotiate between constraints exerted on—and opportunities existing for—innovation?

Here, in a by-now familiar pattern, communication scholars moved from a narrow concern with facilitating "effective" adoption of new technologies to more broadly interpreting and critiquing that process (Nocera, 2002). As a result, they have made valuable contributions by challenging industry hyperbole and popular misconception, by informing government regulation, and by refining theory. Each of these gains, however, has necessitated the adaptation of traditional qualitative methodology to accommodate increased speed of technology development cycles, breadth of technological diffusion, and complexity of theory (Beaulieu, 2004; Broad & Joos, 2004; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Markham & Baym, 2009). Because the use of new media is increasingly integrated into the practices of everyday life, we will discuss related methodological issues throughout this volume and not separately. For an example of the convergence of qualitative studies of media audiences and technology usage, see the recent study by Clark (2009) of discursive strategies developed in low-income families to define and enforce "appropriate" use of digital media by their teenaged members.

Organizational Communication

Researchers in this subfield embraced interpretivism during the 1980s, partly out of frustration with the ethical and political barrenness of functionalism

(Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). They learned from their colleagues in management (and also from popular authors and their own experiences as paid consultants) that organizations can be likened to cultures (Prasad & Prasad, 2002). Organizations ritually initiate members and sometimes expel them; they develop and perform stories designed to inspire and terrorize members; they cultivate the flowering of difference and opposition in subcultures; and they conduct their relationships with external entities through both commerce and superstition. Groundbreaking qualitative studies in this subfield focused on topics such as the performance of organizational roles, metaphors used by organizations to express their identity, management efforts to induce the identification of workers, and generally, the absurdity and tragedy that lies beneath the gleaming surface of the corporate machine (e.g., Goodall, 1991; Kelly, 1985; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Smircich & Calas, 1987). Generally, these studies produced fine-grained and empathic accounts of organizational symbol use (Schwartzman, 1993). Their findings contributed to theorizing about topics such as socialization, commitment, leadership, ethics, technology, diversity, and innovation. Potentially, this knowledge helps organizational members to identify and resolve pressing problems, reflect on the premises that guide their sensemaking, and develop cultures that successfully balance the tensions between individual and organizational goals (Herndon & Kreps, 2001). In the wake of the interpretivist turn, organizational communication adopted a variety of critical theories concerned with politicizing organizational power and control and with transforming conventional understandings of "organization" and how it should be studied (Deetz, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

Recent trends in qualitative research here include studying nontraditional sites such as nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (Lewis, 2005); recovering the materiality of work as a situated, embodied practice (Barley & Kunda, 2001); revising "organizational communication" to include the discursive performance of occupational and professional identities (Ashcraft, 2007; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007); utilizing postcolonial theory to critique the interaction of corporate globalization and resistance movements (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005); and experimenting with personal narrative to document contemporary organizational subjectivity (Fine, Morrill, & Surianarain, 2009). One recent example is Lyon's (2004) use of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory to conceptualize organizational knowledge in a dot-com start-up as "cultural capital."

Performance Studies

Critical-cultural scholar Dwight Conquergood (1991, p. 187) once argued that "performance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and

method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history. The performance paradigm insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. It situates ethnographers within the delicately negotiated and fragile 'face-work' that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life."

This definition signals scholars' exquisitely reflexive use in this subfield of the performance paradigm. On the one hand, it designates the modes of styles and expressive practice that form their object of study. The scope of these practices encompasses not only formal and professional systems of art, dance, play, sport, religion, food, music, and theatre, but also our informal and everyday rituals of romance, education, fashion, and commerce. The focus here is on how performers in these contexts interpret culturally authored scripts, how they artfully influence and collaborate with audiences in constructing cultural identities, and how the stylized repetition of even mundane communicative acts accomplishes that construction. Additionally, these scholars are concerned with the unique ability of performance to publicly suspend, clarify, elaborate, interrogate, and revise the templates of thinking, feeling, and acting that underwrite oppressive cultural politics (Alexander, 2005).

But performance is not only the *object* of study for these scholars; it is also its *mode*. That is, they appropriate performance as an allegory in which corresponding elements of *the qualitative research process* are reframed as performer, audience, script, theater, and so on. Viewed through this lens, the researcher's presentation of self is central, fieldwork dialogue is both prescripted and improvised in the moment, and knowledge emerges from the contingencies of situated, collaborative interaction. This allegory culminates in the conversion of qualitative research findings into aesthetic multimedia formats of public performance: poems, short stories, personal narratives, multimedia websites, and even staged productions (Welker & Goodall, 1997). These performances vividly clarify for their audiences that cultural meanings are inherently precarious and are preserved through embodied acts of will and skill (Denzin, 1997, pp. 90–125).

Perhaps more than any other subfield reviewed in this section, Performance Studies has been influenced by critical theories emphasizing the contingency of "researcher" and other cultural identities and the persistence of both subtle and brute forms of oppression. These theories celebrate the role of performance in creating beautiful, powerful, controversial, and transcendent events in which the often-marginalized truths of individual and group experience can be evoked to disrupt dominant ideologies (Bell, 2008; Madison, 2005). These perspectives break from traditional dramaturgy in foregrounding paradox, conflict, ambiguity, and instability over coherence,

structure, and consensus as the conditions of cultural communication. Additionally, qualitative researchers in performance studies have distinctively embraced the use of reflective, personal narrative (discussed as "autoethnography" in Chapter 9). The subsequent "performance of possibilities" in these narratives (Alexander, 2005, p. 431) depicts the moral, sensuous, and emotional integrity of performers' lived experiences and also seeks to stimulate dialogue and debate in the service of a "radical democratic politics" (Holman-Jones, 2005, p. 763).

A recent exemplar here includes Vignes' scripting of—and reflection on—her performance (2008a, 2008b) depicting the voices of Hurricane Katrina survivors in her home parish of Chalmette, Louisiana.

Rhetoric

The rise of cultural (and particularly media audience) studies has affected this venerable "cousin" of the communication discipline, which traces its roots to ancient Greek philosophy and which has traditionally conducted humanistic theorizing and critique of strategic discourse developed for the purpose of persuading public audiences. Within the past two decades, the theoretical commitments of rhetorical and cultural studies have increasingly converged around the critique of media, institutions, and discourses that constitute and govern public culture (Rosteck, 1999). While many postwar rhetorical scholars (and also those in related disciplines of writing and composition) favored formalist critique of texts (e.g., of public address), their generation has now been surpassed by others embracing critical theories that emphasize cultural politics, indeterminate textuality, and active audiences.

As a result, rhetorical scholars have revised several of their traditions to incorporate the epistemologies and methods of qualitative research (Hess, 2008). They have endorsed the empirical (and particularly, critical-ethnographic) study of "vernacular" (Hauser, 1999) and "everyday" (Cintron, 1997) discourses performed among the members of civil society and also among its marginalized and "out-law" (Sloop & Ono, 1997) groups. They have expanded their conception of rhetorical sites to include significant forums of cultural narrative production and collaborative rhetorical *invention* (Katriel, 1994). They have incorporated the local knowledge of cultural members in their development and use of criteria for evaluating textuality. As a result, they have been inspired to critique the cultural contingency (and thus plurality) of foundational concepts such as "reason." They have actively constructed critical objects from ongoing streams of interactive practices. They have used participant observation and interviewing to document claims of rhetorical

effects, rather than inferring their potential from textual materials (Stromer-Galley & Schiappa, 1998). And finally, they have proposed collaborating with the members of textual communities as advocates of their interests.

A groundbreaking study here is Blair and Michel's (1999) narrative of "accidentally" discovering qualitative methods in their study of the U.S. astronauts' memorial located at NASA's Kennedy Space Center near Orlando, Florida.

Strategic Communication

The subfield of organizational communication broadly studies corporate life as constituted through discursive processes such as conflict, teamwork, and leadership. Other related subfields, however, are devoted to narrower and more official corporate concerns of informing and influencing "stakeholders." Some of these subfields are famous and longstanding—such as public relations, advertising, and marketing communication (Daymon & Holloway, 2002)—while others (such as design) are somewhat newer and less well-known among the general public. While there are important differences among these subfields, they share two similarities. The first is that they blur traditional distinctions between "academic" and "professional" groups and their related interests: here, the roles of academic "researcher" and industry "consultant" are frequently combined, as scholars collaborate with clients to design focused projects that answer pressing questions about cultural trends affecting consumer behavior or about the design and conduct of specific campaigns. The second similarity is that these groups are increasingly turning to qualitative research methods to produce timely and accurate information enabling them to communicate with key audiences and to successfully create products and services.

Strategic qualitative research developed momentum during the 1980s around the convergence of three trends (Ante, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2005; Kane, 2007; Osborne, 2002; Suchman, 2007; Thornton, 1999; Walsh, 2001). The first involved postpositivist research conducted by industrial anthropologists on the cultures of workplace "tribes." The second trend occurred as other social scientists joined with corporate entities such as Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center to study human interaction with "new" information and communication technology. Because of the rapid cycling and high cost of technology development, corporations soon realized that qualitative data collected from observation and focus group interviews were not only valuable for marketing existing products, but could also be incorporated into earlier phases of product development. The third trend involved a general shift of corporate sensibility in which organizations detached from

traditional models of presumptuous, unilateral influence to engage in *dialogue* with their stakeholders that permitted mutual curiosity, greater understanding of values and motives, and the discovery of opportunities for collaboration. These three trends led to increased corporate employment of qualitative researchers, both as occasional consultants and regular staff. This led in turn to an explosion of private consulting firms, the development of an alternate career track for PhDs, an accumulation of successful product "hits," and the development of conferences where academic and corporate researchers could explore their shared interests.

As a result, strategic communication researchers now practice under many names, and some continue to fight the persistence of positivism among corporate executives. What unites them, however, is the recognition that qualitative methods are a flexible, potent resource. Used properly, they can provide designers, marketers, public-relations figures, and advertisers with important information about how customers engage products in the context of everyday meanings and practices, thus helping to demystify concepts such as "brand loyalty." An exemplary figure here is Eric Dishman, a former graduate student in communication, who has gone on to serve as general manager of the Intel Corporation's Digital Health Group, global director of product research innovation, and a noted Intel Fellow (see http://www.intel.com/pressroom/kits/bios/edishman.htm).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reviewed the four paradigms that have influenced the development of what we recognize as qualitative research in communication. We started out by considering the characteristic procedures used by qualitative researchers. By now, it should be clear that what distinguishes this work is not so much the particular methods that are used but the ways of knowing that they serve. These connections between methodology and epistemology are not easy to articulate at first, but novice scholars grow by rehearsing their explanation. Qualitative researchers at any career stage who ignore this responsibility risk the loss of credibility. After reviewing two current trends affecting the use of qualitative methods in communication research, we surveyed the use of their history in different disciplinary subfields (hopefully, yours included). This review indicated some differences among these subfields but also some recurring commitments, including rich, detailed descriptions of human experience, dialogic encounters between the self and other, sensitivity to ethical and political issues, and the inductive development of theory from intimate knowledge of situated practices. In the

next chapter, we continue your orientation to qualitative communication research by exploring its *theoretical* traditions. As we will see, these traditions offer distinctive narratives that are used by communication researchers to guide their development of qualitative studies.

Exercises

1. 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 Table 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?

Table 1.1 Heuristic Questions for Distinguishing Communication Research Paradigms

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

	Positivism	Postpositivism	Interpretivism	Critical Theory
According to this perspective, how should I study this phenomenon? For example, 1. What research methods should I use? 2. How should I use them? 3. How would I know if I was using these methods correctly?				
What values (if any) should I consider in studying this phenomenon? For example, 1. Whose interests should I take into account in planning the study? 2. What ethical conflicts might arise in conducting this study? 3. Whose interests should I prioritize in resolving these conflicts?				

2. Choose one of the communication subfields described in this chapter (e.g., Interpersonal Communication) based on your identification with its professional interests. First, summarize the chapter's argument about the historical impact of qualitative methods on the research conducted in this subfield. Next, locate a qualitative study published by researchers affiliated with this subfield (e.g., an academic journal article or a final report prepared by an organizational consultant). You can find academic examples for this exercise by consulting the references cited in that subfield section or by searching other sources such as Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com).

Undergraduate students may wish to consider translations of communication research published in the online magazine *Communication Currents* (http://www.communicationcurrents.com). Once you have selected and read this example, analyze it by answering the following three questions:

- How does this study demonstrate the premises of one of the research paradigms discussed in this chapter?
- Does this study seem to reflect the chapter's argument about the historical impact of qualitative research in this subfield? If so, how? If not, how should that argument be updated or revised?
- Finally, what lessons about conducting qualitative research does this study offer as you start to think about your own project?