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The Toxic and Mythical Combination of a Deductive Writing Logic for Inductive Qualitative Research

Sarah J. Tracy

In this article, I make a case for how the conventional deductive writing style common in top impact mainstream journals affects what we can know, how we can learn, and the extent to which qualitative methods are valued. Using case examples, I demonstrate how a deductive logic perpetuates a myth that is ethically and pedagogically problematic, constrains theory building, and invites inappropriate benchmarks for quality. Further, articulating qualitative analysis methods in a formulaic manner can actually overshadow and discourage the artistic insight of grounded analyses. The article closes with a discussion of how communication scholars are well equipped to help transform publication conventions so that qualitative methods may be presented in more flexible and expansive literary styles.

Keywords: writing, publication, pedagogy, deductive versus inductive, criteria, grounded methods

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Dear Mainstream Journal Gatekeeper:

Have you ever felt challenged about how to best foster the publication of research from a variety of methodologies and paradigmatic frameworks?

Have you ever wondered why researchers using qualitative methodologies and interpretive, critical, postmodern, performance, and narrative epistemologies face more difficulties in terms of fitting essays within typical journal writing conventions?

Are you amenable to facilitating the publication of research that uses these approaches?

Are you interested in data analyses that are well poised to illustrate not only "knowing what*" or "knowing* that*" but also "knowing* what something feels like*?"*

Are you attracted to research that builds, interconnects and transcends current theories, even when doing so outshines theoretical confirmation or falsification?

Dear Qualitative Researcher:

Have you ever felt challenged in writing a grounded, qualitative, or narrative analysis in the conventional journal article literary style?

After analyzing your data, have you ever reworked research questions and placed them in the literature review as if they guided the analysis from the beginning?

Have you ever felt frustrated about how to write research questions so they effectively anticipate findings, yet avoid suggesting that you "went into the study looking for" them?

Have you ever written a conceptual review that implied a careful consideration of all related issues, controversies, and gaps before *you gathered the data—even when such considerations came much later?*

Have reviewers asked you to justify a sample or context based on your research questions and conceptual review, when the questions and review emerged following *the analysis?*

If so, this article is for you.

And, given that I answer a resounding YES to all the above questions, this article is also, unabashedly, for me.

This essay demonstrates the significant harm of forcing inductive qualitative research into the deductive logic implicit in conventional journal article literary formats. This shape-shifting is like being forced to wear the wrong size shoe, and therefore hobbling along less than optimally—always a few steps

behind those whose shoes seem to fit perfectly. Wearing these shoes feels like a required uniform for access to academic gold—in the form of high impact journals. However, in many cases, this conventional shoe does not fit the inductive qualitative analyses that characterize interpretive, grounded, performance, and narrative approaches.

Many qualitative researchers have suffered silently and individually, doing our best to comply with the conventional writing style and teaching our students and other budding researchers to do the same. Nonetheless, doing so is prickly from an ethical standpoint, hurts pedagogy, constrains theory building, and invites inappropriate yardsticks for quality.

My hope is that the discussion below may: (a) provide qualitative researchers with rationale, support and guidance as they write and publish their research and (b) help those in journal leadership positions to facilitate a variety of writing styles that, in turn, invite an expansion of what those articles can accomplish pedagogically and epistemologically.

Thanks, and cheers, Sarah

The Challenges of a Deductive Writing Style and Inductive Qualitative Research

Over the last 20 years, the communication discipline has become increasingly receptive to qualitative research. Academic journals—even those with a history of preferring quantitative research—have appointed editors who have widened editorial policies and published qualitatively rich articles that emerge from interpretive, critical, and even postmodern epistemologies. These include mainstream communication journals boasting the highest "impact factor" (as determined by Web of Science's Journal Citation Reports, retrieved August, 2011), including *Communication Monographs*, with a #1 communication impact factor of 2.029, *Journal of Communication* with a #2 communication impact factor of 2.026, and *Human Communication Research* with a #8 communication impact factor of 1.8.[1]

Communication researchers who use methods such as ethnography, personal narrative, interviews, focus groups, and internet observation are also featured in qualitative or fieldwork journals, such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Research Reports*, and *Human Relations*. Furthermore, qualitative

work often finds a home in communication journals such as *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Journal of Health Communication*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, and *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (Tillmann, 2009b, found 36 articles in Communication and Mass Media Complete that referenced ethnography or autoethnography). The acceptance and visibility of this work has led to important methodological developments, more courses and conferences that focus on qualitative data collection and analysis, and specialized journals, such as this one.

Despite the gradual acceptance of qualitative *methods* in communication research, a scan of the articles published in high impact generalist journals suggests that most reviewers and editors still expect grounded, interpretive, or iterative research articles to proceed in roughly the same format as quantitative and postpositive empirical analyses. We are not alone in such a challenge. Qualitative researchers in cultural anthropology and sociology have faced these same battles, and worked diligently to provide rationales and new forms for "writing culture" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Nonetheless, a deductive logic remains implicit in journal article literary conventions (Goodall, 2000). As noted by Hallier and Forbes (2004):

> It is customary for the early review sections of any grounded article to be treated no differently from any other type of empirical study. Using existing theory and empirical evidence, a deductive rationale is presented that justifies the assumptions that will guide the analysis of the researcher's data. In this respect, deductive reviews of relevant theory serve to set up the purpose of the empirical analysis to follow. (p. 1385)

With few exceptions (e.g., Browning, 1978; Stamp, 1999; Tillmann, 2009a), empirical articles appearing in our top-tier journals use existing theory and empirical evidence to provide a priori rationales that justify the assumptions guiding the research questions and data analysis. The article unfolds in a "four-act play" writing style that includes, in this order: an introduction and literature review, methods, findings/discussion, and conclusion (Lindlof, 2001).[2] Within the methods section, the procedures for collecting and analyzing data are often written in an efficient, formulaic, and rule-based fashion—suggesting that such procedures progressed in a linear rational manner and could be replicated by other researchers if desired.

Certainly, much valuable qualitative research has been published through this conventional form. However, as I describe in this article, forcing a deductive writing logic onto an inductive qualitative study can result in toxic consequences. These include ethical angst (especially for newcomers to the field), pedagogical confusion, constrained theory building, and the invitation of inappropriate indices for determining research quality. Further, categorically asking researchers to articulate their methods in a formulaic rule-based fashion has the potential to blunt the ephemeral art of interpretive data analysis—thereby decreasing the value of such insight.

Some have suggested that to deal with these problems we need to "build a different house" in the form of separate conferences and publication venues with different criteria for scholarly quality (Denzin, 2009, 2010). I applaud the construction of additional houses and centers, and admire those who courageously get up and leave the mainstream venues, despite the repercussions. That said, I believe there are many ways to resist, and that there is also good reason to work within yet push the boundaries of powerful and dominant publication norms. A stellar example of doing so is Tillmann's (2009a) layered personal narrative of bulimia and divorce—the first squarely autoethnographic scholarly article published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research.* With an increasing technological ease for calculating citation rates and impact factors, and institutions' growing reliance on these factors to assess the excellence of research (and researchers) (Goodall, 2008), qualitative scholars can usefully push the borders and take leadership roles in (re)constructing the powerful regimes of mainstream, high-impact publication venues.

Change is made through large revolutions and also through micro acts of resistance. Even slight differences in tone, language, and behavior can result in significant change over time. For far too long, qualitative scholars have felt pushed to engage in "guerilla scholarship," where the cost of admission to preferred disciplinary audiences requires the adoption of traditional social scientific journal conventions (Ellingson, 2011; Rawlins, 2007). This article explains the problematic consequences of the conventional writing style for inductive analyses and offers ideas for how we might transform literary expectations so they may be more expansive, flexible, and amenable to qualitative research.

A Required Deductive Writing Style Can Result in Ethical and Pedagogical Challenges

Two key markers of quality in qualitative research are transparency and sincerity—meaning that qualitative researchers are to be honest with themselves, their coauthors, and their readers about their methodological processes, biases, goals, and foibles. Richardson (2000a) names self-reflexivity as one of five primary criteria for qualitative monographs, asking, "How did the author come to write this text?" (p. 254). Tracy (2010) names sincerity as one of eight "big-tent" criteria for qualitative research, explaining that ethnographers "should report their own voice in relation to others and explicate *how* they claim to know what they know" (p. 842). In short, reflexivity means that ethnographers understand and write notes about their research journey, including their interactions with other researchers, the setting, and actors (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Along the way, they should interrogate their physical, ideological and emotional position within the text (Scarduzio, Giannini, & Geist-Martin, 2011).

In spite of these goals of honesty and transparency, the linear deductive writing style expected by many journals is less than transparent about the inductive artistic process of qualitative research. Certainly, many qualitative researchers enter the field with sensitizing concepts and preliminary guiding research questions, such as "what is going on here?" However, most qualitative researchers schooled in interpretive, grounded, or iterative methodologies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1998) begin living, collecting and analyzing data long before they know the focus of their study or what level of data access they will be able to negotiate. They begin with a life experience and/or a rough idea of topic; they gather data, analyze data along the way, and tag back and forth to the literature to reframe and redirect their study. This process travels through multiple cycles as the availability of research participants, data sources, and researcher energy deteriorates or expands.

In short, many researchers do not know the specific issues they will write about until they are well into data collection, analysis, and writing. Nonetheless, editors, reviewers, and teachers often ask researchers to devise research questions and insert them in the literature review. Although those who are themselves trained in qualitative

methods may understand that these questions were devised well *after* data analysis, to those unfamiliar with or new to an interpretive perspective, this placement and their wording can suggest that the research questions were developed prior to sample and site selection, data collection, and analysis.

I remember the angst I felt in writing multiple versions of my first empirical qualitative articles (Tracy & Tracy, 1998; Tracy, 2000). The first (unpublished) drafts of these articles included literature reviews that framed the forthcoming analyses. In the spirit of the way the grounded research progressed, I previewed my findings in the literature review, and included statements such as, "As will be demonstrated in the findings...." I did not create focused research questions because the findings that I decided to report were those that emerged, after data collection, as most interesting. I figured, if the findings did not emerge due to an a priori research question, why would I suggest that was the case? In line with my inductive approach, in those early manuscripts I framed the forthcoming analyses in terms of themes that I had decided, post-hoc, to be theoretically or practically significant.

Upon moving these manuscripts through the publication process, I unfortunately learned that this intuitive writing format that fit the grounded method was somehow inappropriate. I received comments from conference respondents, reviewers, and editors that essentially said things like, "Don't leak any of the findings in the literature review, or else the findings don't have any punch," and "You need to include specific research questions early on that indicate the key areas of theoretical contribution." Following these responses, I struggled over how to write more focused research questions that anticipated the findings but did not suggest I already knew their answers (even though I did). I found the phrase, "it would be interesting to know…," to be quite helpful. However, I secretly believed I lacked a certain something—a "research question gene" (Goodall, 2000, p. 51)—that would help me to structure my essay perfectly.

In short, the conventional writing expectations can result in some creative literary mythmaking. Qualitative scholars want to write their rationales, literature reviews, and research questions in ways that accord with publication expectations. However, they face challenges in doing so transparently. On the one hand, they want to avoid suggesting that post-hoc research questions framed the study from

the get-go. On the other hand, they want to avoid creating research questions that reviewers and editors read as evidence of "searching" for specific findings that were actually emergent. I believe this myth-making is constructed within the confluence of best intentions (like the road to hell) and powerfully sedimented publication expectations. Editors, reviewers, and many readers desire articles that are commonly structured, familiar, and easy to follow. Researchers do their best to comply.

Not only is this shape-shifting ethically burdensome but it also does a disservice to pedagogy. A scan of qualitative texts and syllabi suggests that students often learn qualitative methodology in the following order: (a) find a context, life experience or sample of people that may shed light on several broad issues or problems of interest; (b) collect and compile data, in the form of fieldnotes, journals, interviews, and documents; (c) analyze data; and (d) write a research report that highlights how the findings speak to theoretical and practical issues, problems, or controversies.

While students are *practicing* this inductive approach, they are usually simultaneously *reading* published qualitative exemplars—many of which read as if the researchers already knew and were able to predict in advance of their data collection several specific contributions, and develop narrow research questions that anticipated these issues. Then, as readers move into the methods section, they find that the author magically received access to the perfect context to study these questions and convince a perfect sample population to engage in the interviews. Learning research methods is hard enough on its own. Reading examples of inductive qualitative research that suggest a deductive logic can lead to confusion and anxiety—especially for those new to the craft. Readers of deductive accounts of inductive practice may view their own practice as unstructured and irrational compared to the published exemplars. They are also left to deal with tricky issues that emerge from this mismatch on their own, with little published guidance.

I recently worked with a qualitative doctoral student as she submitted her first article, drawn from an inductive qualitative study, to a high impact generalist communication journal. A reviewer asked, "Why did you select these particular sites for your study? What made them more interesting than other organizations? Please explain." The

truth of the matter was, similar to most qualitative studies, this student initially chose a broad area of interest and negotiated access with various contexts and people, finally settling upon the sources and sites that were amenable to her participant observation and interviews. In typical interpretive form, she analyzed the findings, clarified focus on those that seemed most interesting and significant by iteratively returning to various literatures, and only then developed the conceptual review. In qualitative practice like this, the data and sample come first. As such, the question, "Why are the data and sample appropriate for your research questions?" would be better asked as, "Why is this a good conceptual review or set of research questions given the sample?" However, in conventional journal writing styles, the readers (and reviewers) consider the literature and research questions *before* they read about the context and sample of study in the methods section. This chronology, in turn, invites the question of, "Why is this an appropriate context or sample given the research questions?" A different chronology—where the context and sample, as well as a brief overview of the findings, came early in the article—would help mitigate this issue.

So, what is an author to do when asked questions like these? The shortest path toward publication is often to "simply answer the question." And, indeed, many researchers, myself among them, have created post-hoc research questions and after-the-fact rationales for their sample—although these explanations, in the actual article, may sound as though they came before the data collection rather than after. This leads to pedagogical confusion for students reading these articles who, in qualitative methods courses, typically choose their context or sample first.

A Deductive Logic Can Constrain Theory and Invite Inappropriate Quality Criteria

A great strength of qualitative research is its in-depth descriptions of context and people. Indeed, "rich rigor" (Tracy, 2010) and "requisite variety" of contextual cues (Weick, 2007) serve as important criteria for excellent qualitative research. For example, through thick description of the Balinese culture, Geertz (1973) illustrated how cockfighting is an example of the culture's power and status relations. By unpacking

the complexity and uncertainty surrounding firefighter behavior during the Mann Gulch forest fire, Weick (1993) created a compelling analysis of the collapse of sensemaking during disaster. In both of these cases, the data and contextual specifics drove the analyses and, in turn, led to influential and significant theoretical contributions. In terms of literary construction, they each open with abundant data, and only after the presentation of these rich particulars are the data analyzed and connected to various theoretical literatures.

Unfortunately, a deductive logic can prevent interpretive, narrative, and iterative analyses from being as smart and richly complex as they could be. The traditional journal article is rooted in a paradigmatic preference for *argument over story* (Goodall, 2000). This closes off potential for a type of knowledge that is different than knowledge constructed from more traditional approaches of knowing *what* and knowing *how*. "Narrative knowledge" (Worth, 2005), something that qualitative data are perfect for constructing, provides the reader with empathy, a "knowing what *it is like*" (p. 1, italics added).

> When we engage in writing or telling a story, we create alternative pathways to meaning that are imaginative *and* analytical; that are guided by a narrative (rather than propositional) rationality; and that are relational. … The very act of writing a story…changes not so much how or what we know (although telling a good story well can certainly do that), *it alters the way we think about* what we know and how we know it. (Goodall, 2008, p. 14)

The traditional writing format also constrains inductive knowledge building because, when we begin with generalized theory, authors and readers are less likely to pay close attention to contextually specific explanatory clues for behavior, and instead view the data through the outlined literature and theory. As Hallier and Forbes (2004) explain, a deductive literary style

> may actually serve to close off the empirical analysis from its core aim of growing theory. This is because the conventional deductive theoretical review is likely to elicit a highly selective examination… that constrains the definition of the empirical problem to easily verifiable propositions. Rather than informing the empirical analysis with a prior interrogation of the inadequacies of existing theory the

> pursuit of verification assumes that what is needed is a deductive examination of theory largely on its existing terms. (p. 1385)

In other words, the deductive style limits and focuses analysis to existing knowledge. Meanwhile, ethnography is specifically designed for complex, expansionistic depiction and theory building (Gonzalez, 2000). It is adaptive, integrative, holistic, and creative, accomplished via a general blueprint rather than a set of sequential decisions (Scarduzio et al., 2011). Let me reflect on one of my own research projects to illustrate.

I spent a year researching and studying correctional officers—using participant observation and interviews—in order to better understand their emotional highs and lows. My dissertation (Tracy, 2000) and first empirical conference paper to emerge from the study (Tracy, 2001) focused on the emotional environment, emotion norms/rules, and day-to-day emotion work of correctional officers. Among about 50 themes that emerged as potentially theoretically salient in this study were: (a) that correctional officers felt powerless, (b) they enjoyed few opportunities for interaction with one another, and (c) the most successful correctional officers seemed to view the job as just a job, and were not strongly identified with it.

In an initial publication submission, I reported many of the emergent themes and, in a detailed analysis at the end of the article, linked these themes to the theories about the ease of emotional labor, extending and complicating existing assumptions about why emotion work is difficult. In short, the description came first, and the theoretical expansion and contribution came second. However, in response to reviewer and editor requests, this format transformed dramatically over the course of nine formal versions, more than 100 drafts, and five years of (re)submission, revision and rejection at three different journals. A version of the manuscript was finally published in *Communication Monographs* (Tracy, 2005). This version sports a deductive literature review that pinpoints the pain or difficulty of emotional labor as a point of interest in the opening. The reader could easily assume that this was an area of focus from the onset of the study. The article then provides data to illustrate the theoretical extension previewed in the literature review—namely, that the pain of emotion work is not just due to "emotive dissonance" (Hochschild, 1983) but instead is due to organizational contextual issues (e.g., low status, lack of interaction

with others, and working in a job where "success" is paradoxical). All of these were descriptive themes that I identified in the data long before I had linked them to theory. However, in the final published version, my findings are framed as though they came as a *result* of my being curious about structural issues that might exacerbate the pain of emotional labor.

This feat of creative literary mythmaking took years to configure. And, ironically, if I had been asked by my dissertation mentors to write the literature review deductively from the outset, it seems likely that I would not have identified the study's most theoretically valuable findings. Through my early inductive practice—practice that was mirrored and encouraged through my initial work—I was able to focus on issues of organizational context, without knowing exactly why or how they would be useful. Through my inductive writing, analyses, and literature linking practices, the complex specifics of the scene—such as the total institution environment and lonely working conditions—emerged as integral for the theoretical expansion. However, I was only able to recognize this expansion after considering and *writing* the data.

Indeed, writing is not just a representation of knowledge, but a form of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Viramontes, 2008). Writing thickly and richly about context is one of the most valuable aspects of qualitative research—yet it is cast aside as secondary in conventional journal article formats. In the case of my dissertation, a deductive logic would have focused me, from the beginning, on the existing, primarily psychological and individual, theories for explaining emotional labor discomfort, such as Hochschild's (1983) *emotive dissonance* and Rafaeli and Sutton's (1989) *faking in bad faith*. This, in turn, would have encouraged analyzing the data through the lens of these two existing concepts, either confirming or disconfirming them. Such a process would have discouraged an analysis of larger structural, organizational, or societal issues for the pain of emotional labor. Again, I turn to Hallier and Forbes (2004) who elucidate how deductive conventions can damage interpretive theoretical development:

> Conventional theoretical treatments … affirm the relevance of component concepts … that display most theoretical adequacy. … Deductive conceptual reviews then impose restrictions on how the grounded data can be analysed. The danger here is that the grounded

> data analysis that follows is correspondingly likely to be restricted to those existing aspects of models that the data can most easily illuminate or substantiate. … Under the pull of these conventions social context in many grounded studies may prove to be the least compelling aspect of the account. (p. 1388)

In short, a deductive writing process distracts both author and reader from the context, among the most salient and important parts of an inductive ethnographic study. Further, such a format leads to inappropriate expectations on behalf of the readers and reviewers about the role of the context in building theory. Indeed, explanation through analytical induction (Katz, 2001) is most likely when we *first* consider the range of varied and rich data, and only then try to explain it. When we begin with theory, or even gaps in that theory, we are more likely to consider only the subset of data that comes out of the existing literature. However, confirming or falsifying existing conceptual components of theory are not primary goals or quality criteria for most qualitative and naturalistic studies.

Readers who are unaware of the criteria for rigor in qualitative research are cued in conventionally formatted accounts to examine grounded work that "looks" the same as quantitative studies, but then does not "measure up" as they are accustomed. For instance, "the sample is too small," "you knew what you wanted to find before you went into the study," or "your findings seem too subjective." And, when a deductive writing style marginalizes the importance of context, readers will also cast aside the value of an in-depth analysis where meaning and context are intertwined.

Those familiar with qualitative research understand that the criteria for qualitative quality are quite different than validity criteria for quantitative studies (Ellingson, 2009; Scarduzio, 2011). Among other differences, qualitative studies are judged not by their ability to be statistically generalizable, but rather on their "resonance"—the ability of the research study to reverberate, influence, affect, or move a variety of audiences (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Resonance is achieved, qualitatively, in texts that are aesthetically evocative, transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), dialogic and relatable—"capturing conversation within the scenes in ways that readers identify with the characters and the sites under study" (Scarduzio et al., 2011, p. 461). Nonetheless, when the deductive literature review marginalizes the importance of context,

it is easy to understand why those unfamiliar with the practices for achieving qualitative resonance and naturalistic generalization (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) might instead question the worth of the piece when it does not fulfill expectations for statistical generalization.

In short, a conventional literary format encourages a deductive logic that, in turn, can limit theory building, marginalize the importance of context, and encourage inappropriate yardsticks for quality. This can lead to dismissiveness of qualitative studies, exacerbate methodological silos, and discourage multi-methodological approaches. The lack of familiarity and shortage of cross pollination between methodological camps inhibit theory building for all sides. Concepts, theories, and approaches, therefore, develop in separate domains in a system that is not loosely coupled but rather closed and self-referencing. Neither side truly benefits from the scrutiny and constructive theoretical tension the other can provide.

A Formulaic Articulation of Method Clashes with Inductive Interpretative Insight

Most empirical articles in our mainstream journals are characterized by methods sections that describe data collection and analysis practices in a linear, step-by-step fashion. However, describing qualitative methodology as a rational and easily replicable formula does not capture the ephemeral artistic qualities that are hallmarks of good qualitative research—and, as I'll explain below, can actually limit the potential of such methods.

The research on human learning shows a substantial gap between *competent* and *expert* levels of performance (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1988). *Experts* exhibit thinking and behavior that are rapid, intuitive, holistic, interpretive, and visual. Watch a round of speed chess, for instance, and it quickly becomes evident that expert chess players make their moves intuitively; they describe their hand as moving without conscious thought. This is much different from the slow, analytical moves made by merely *competent* chess players (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The same is true of the highest expertise in any interpretive art, whether chess, dance, tennis, cooking, cheese-making, or qualitative data analysis (Tracy, 2010). The most substantive conceptual and creative developments are often intuitive and holistic, occurring in a state of flow that transcends rationale articulation (Csikszentmihalyi,

1990). As a creative and interpretive art, inductive qualitative data analysis is often not amenable to formalization and, by design, unique to the scene and researcher(s). As such, these practices are impossible to neatly replicate—at another time or by another (set of) researcher(s). Even when qualitative scholars diligently learn and follow best practices of rigor, the ephemeral moments that periodically characterize data analysis are nearly impossible to put in words.

Let me provide another example to illustrate. A magical moment of data analysis came in the process of analyzing a huge set of interview and participant observation transcripts related to humor use among 911 call-takers, firefighters, and correctional officers. My coauthors, Karen Myers and Cliff Scott, and I had read and reread the more than one thousand pages of fieldnotes and interview transcripts, extracted all excerpts connected to humor, and studied past research related to humor in organizations. From these activities, we developed a coding scheme and collectively coded the data (with inter-coder reliability checks along the way). Several months into the focused analysis process, the three of us met to discuss how we could move the coding to an insightful interpretation. Something in our guts told us that the carefully crafted coding scheme was not capturing the most significant and interesting meanings in the data. During that meeting, we decided to re-immerse ourselves in some of the exemplars (pieces of the data that were heavily saturated with codes) (Atkinson, 1990). We filled the chalk boards with notes, passed excerpts of data back and forth to each other across the table, and paced the room. We pressed the limits of existing theoretical models from the literature, and considered theories from other fields that might expand our scope of what was going on.

Somewhere in this discussion, Cliff Scott—who was in the midst of taking a management class on identity in organizations—suggested that the humor we saw in our data may be serving as a type of organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Karen and I stopped in our tracks, and listened carefully as Cliff tentatively explained the connection. Our eyes widened, and we smiled. We began sifting through our exemplars to see whether and how this theoretical connection illuminated our data in a way that captured our intuitive sense about the data's most significant meaning—what had been lingering, thus far, unarticulated, and unexplained by the current humor theories and our

resulting coding scheme. Eureka! In that meeting, we were able to do two things. First, we connected the conceptual scheme of sensemaking to the humor data. Second, we were able to develop theoretical propositions that might help revise and extend prevailing theoretical knowledge about sensemaking.

This series of analysis and brainstorm activities might best be described by Hallier and Forbes's (2004) concepts of "theorizing forward" and "prospective conjecture" (p. 1389). During these activities, researchers consider novel theoretical juxtapositions and borrow from other fields, models, and assumptions. They harness their instincts and hunches. Through such practices, they construct what Dan DeGooyer (2003) calls a "poignant organizing episode"—ephemeral interpretive moments in which various strains of analysis come together to transform and direct the interpretation. The theoretical products that emerge from this practice are different from explanations resulting from conventional deductive analyses that examine data in terms of predefined theoretical constructs or gaps. Theory building is less about confirmation and falsifiability and more about extending, transcending, and connecting.

When it came to writing the method's section for this article, we found it difficult to describe the inductive process that led us to the sensemaking lens in a step-by-step, "transparent" or replicable manner. The article went through a series of six submissions and resubmissions with two different journals over the course of four years. The rejections and requests for revisions were due to a variety of issues. However, one significant challenge came in explaining the theoretical contribution and inductive analysis approach in a format that fit the conventional writing expectations.

Initially, we wrote the study in the conventional format common to our target management publication. We placed the sensemaking literature and a research question about humor as sensemaking before the method section, and we illustrated in the subsequent findings section how humor served as a type of organizational sensemaking. The editor and reviewers found the article problematic, in part, because the article's literary chronology led them to believe that we went into the study looking for sensemaking from the beginning. Of course, my coauthors and I knew that sensemaking did not emerge as significant until long after the data collection and primary coding cycles.

However, the conventions of explaining the relevant literature in the first half of the article, when ideas from this literature did not emerge until later in the analysis process, inadvertently misled the reviewers. We worked with the reviewers and editor, resubmitted to this management journal, then resubmitted a third time. And, finally, the piece was rejected.

We went back to square one with a high impact generalist communication journal as our publication target. We rewrote the piece in a layered nontraditional fashion that explained sequentially how the inductive analysis played out. Certainly, none of us were experts at writing this way, and we had no models published in our target journal for how to do so. We drew guidance from models in qualitative journals. We knew writing in this inductive, layered manner was a risk for the target venue. But, we felt the months of rewriting were worth the opportunity to explain our methodological process transparently. The following excerpt describes how the paper proceeded:

> The article opens with a discussion of the data sets from which the topic of humor first emerged as potentially salient. We then review literature in humor and organizations and detail the first stage of data analysis, which was guided by a coding process developed through consideration of existing theory as well as data. In the process of conducting the first stage of analysis, the authors saw that the field data were pushing beyond what the initial coding scheme or extant research could characterize. Humorous exchanges seemed to emerge in situations that members regarded as identity threatening and appeared to aid members in constructing (intersubjectively) identity-affirming interpretations of troublesome events. Through a collective process of "theorizing forward" in which researchers consider evidence from adjacent investigations and insights from a wider contextualized knowledge of theory (Hallier & Forbes, 2004), the authors began to understand the ways in which humor may be serving as a type of collective sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 1995, 2001).
>
> Given this methodological process, the article's findings are laid out in two parts. The first findings section details the various ways that humor served the identity needs of participants. The second opens with a review of Weick's (1979, 1995, 2001) organizational sensemaking process of enactment, selection, and retention and provides in-depth exemplars of the ways in which humor enabled

> employees to collectively make sense of their organizational duties and validate their organizational roles in identity-affirming ways. We include both findings sections not only to honestly represent the grounded analysis process, but also because the first section provides background that is essential for understanding the theoretical extension presented in the second section. The paper closes with a discussion of implications.

So, what was the response to this layered inductive version of the paper? The reviewers and editor liked the rich description, but felt as though the theoretical contribution needed to be clarified earlier in the paper. They were not fans of the writing style. As noted by the editor:

> The current organization of the manuscript is awkward and inefficient—it foregrounds method over ideas and takes too long to come to the point. I understand that you are trying to present an alternative model for how to organize a research article: one that is more compatible with grounded research. However, I have to side with [reviewer] "B" that the model doesn't work well in this instance and with [reviewer] "A" that the contribution of the methodological approach isn't distinctive enough to deserve the emphasis it receives. There is a bit too much self-narrative for my taste. Further, it should be possible to raise theoretical issues up front and still accurately describe the iterative process through which these issues evolved when you turn to the analysis. Thus, I suggest that you restrain the process comments and place these after the literature review (aside from an initial preview). If you want to comment at greater length about the process involved in doing this sort of work, save it for a book chapter.

Additionally, the reviewers said the methods section sounded "self-congratulatory" and asked us to limit the "excessive methodological comment and group biography." The editor raised questions about the ephemeral "poignant organizing episode" (DeGooyer, 2003) and said our process instead sounded like an "imposition of an a priori scheme, even if the scheme did not occur to the group until well into the analysis."

After several weeks of soul-searching, sensemaking and head-shaking, we collectively decided to let the layered piece go. We were novices in this writing style, and we agreed that the article was in no

way perfectly well-written. Perhaps the editor was right that we rambled at times or overstated the value of our approach. Exhausted after years of rewriting, eager to publish the article, and hopeful that we could attend to the reviewers' other requests, we rewrote the article in the conventional form and resubmitted it. This revised version (similar in literary form to the version we had first submitted to the management journal three years earlier) worked for the reviewers and editor—likely, in part, because they had already read about our *actual* iterative data analysis in the initial submission. As such, when they received the conventionally written resubmission (with the sensemaking literature up front), they were able to appreciate how and why the theory fit the data. They also knew (from the earlier version) that sensemaking did not emerge as significant until late into the study. Unlike the original management reviewers, they knew from the first submission that we did not cherry pick our data or frame our analysis with the a priori goal to find humor as a form of sensemaking.

The irony, of course, is that the reviewers' knowledge of the inductive approach significantly aided their understanding the paper's contributions, yet they wanted the article rewritten in the conventional format (which, in turn, masked this knowledge from future readers). For better or worse, after one more set of constructively positive reviews, and one more slight revision, the piece was eventually and gratefully published (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). I still have mixed feelings about that article. After years of writing and rewriting, I am glad it finally found a home. On the other hand, the piece as published does not exemplify our actual messy, layered, and iterative analysis process. This is unfortunate because *it was in those very moments more than any other that we were rigorously practicing the art of interpretive data analysis*. It is moments like these that provide evidence that supports the notion that

> researchers do not need to be able to formulate rules for their skills in order to practice them with success. There is nothing which indicates that researchers at the expert level…use context-independent rules in their best scientific performances, even though they might depict it as such when they get around to writing their scholarly articles or memoirs. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 34)

Indeed, people in the interpretive arts can actually make *less competent* decisions when forced to explain their creative or artistic practices. For example, tennis pro and coach Vic Braden has worked with thousands of professional athletes, and he has never come across a player who is consistent in knowing and explaining how they hit the tennis ball a certain way. It is something they just *do* tacitly and can't explicate in words. "While people are very willing and very good at volunteering information explaining their actions, those explanations, particularly when it comes to the kinds of spontaneous opinions and decisions that arise out of the unconscious, aren't necessarily correct" (Gladwell, 2005, p. 155).

With a logic problem or a deductive empirical analysis, asking people to explain their steps for coming up with their answer or reason does not impair their ability to come up with the answer. However, analyses that require creative interpretation—complete with flow activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) or poignant organizing moments (DeGooyer, 2003)—operate by different standards that are more often tacit than explicit. When people are asked to externalize these activities, doing so can displace and disrupt the expert knowledge in practice, a phenomenon called verbal overshadowing (Schooler & Engstler-Schooler, 1990). In situations that require flashes of insight or creative artistic conclusions, externalizing one's rationale (e.g., in the form of step-by-step methods) can essentially blunt the key interpretive processes that led to the findings.[3]

Transforming Writing Expectations

Despite many qualitative methodological advances in the communication discipline, our high impact mainstream journals publish primarily articles that are written in a conventional linear manner that suggests a deductive logic. Forcing inductive analyses of qualitative data into this format can result in problematic ethical and pedagogical consequences, constrain theory building, and invite inappropriate standards for quality. Furthermore, expressing qualitative analysis methods in a formulaic manner may limit the insight emerging from the ephemeral art of interpretive data analysis. So, what should we do?

Communication scholars are well poised to transform the writing style, narration, and publication expectations of qualitative research.

We understand and do research within theoretical perspectives that include social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), structuration (Giddens, 1984), narrative (Goodall, 2010), communication as constitutive (Craig, 1999), and discursive approaches (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). All of these approaches have in common the notion that communication is not just a mirror or representation of reality. Rather, our language—both in the words used, and the ways these words are structured and sutured together—constructs what we are able to talk about. As such, the way we write our empirical reports fundamentally constitutes our disciplinary knowledge.

Through providing alternative writing and language formats and holding a more flexible range of literary expectations, communication scholars can help facilitate and better narrate the knowledge(s) emerging from our research. As Richardson (1995) suggests, "People make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories…. New narratives offer the patterns for new lives" (p. 213). More flexible narrative conventions offer the patterns for a more sincere, more enjoyable, and more impactful research experience.

A first step that may encourage this transformation is to collect and systematically analyze articles that have been successfully written and published in more inductive manners. Although most articles in mainstream communication journals are conventionally written, there are some exceptions. Tillmann's (2009a) autoethnographic account in *Journal of Applied Communication Research* opens with a rich narrative that instantly transports the reader to Tillmann's conversation with a student who is troubled by her dormitory's culture of bulimia. The article transitions into a page and a half of literature review about eating disorders. The heart of the piece is devoted to seven "narrative snapshots" which viscerally communicate the tactics of emotional purging and idealized feminine performance in a variety of contexts. The article concludes with a synthesis of practical and political implications related to pedagogy, health and gendered performance.

If we go back a number of years, we can also find some exceptions to the deductive format. *Communication Monographs* published an article from Larry Browning's (1978) dissertation research that is opposite in format from the journal's norm. Browning used a grounded method, and his article delved straight into the method and emergent

categorical findings after a two paragraph introduction. *Human Communication Research* published a grounded qualitative analysis of interpersonal communication articles developed by Stamp (1999). The first four pages of the article introduce the topic and discuss the grounded methods. Five pages describe the emergent themes, and seven pages build a model from these themes. Certainly, a systematic analysis of mainstream journals would likely turn up additional exceptions such as these.

In addition, layered and inductive accounts authored by communication scholars have found (and built) homes in other houses (Denzin, 2010), such as specialty communication journals (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Holman-Jones, 2005) and interdisciplinary qualitative journals (e.g., Jago, 2002; The Ethnogs, the FemNogs, & Rip Tupp, 2011; Tracy, 2004). Finally, we may draw on empirical articles from other disciplines that open with the data (e.g., Martin, 1990; Weick, 1993). By analyzing the commonalities and literary strategies of these pieces, we may begin to draw together guidelines or suggestions for how an inductively written piece may best proceed or be formatted. In turn, we can better help tomorrow's qualitative researchers learn how to write competently in inductive formats.

Second, those of us who hold leadership positions in the discipline should accept and encourage articles that are written in a more layered and messy fashion (and educate and encourage our colleagues likewise). A wealth of information by qualitative researchers provides insight and rationale on writing qualitative research in a variety of formats (e.g., Ellingson, 2009; Goodall, 2000, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), and I would encourage mainstream journal gatekeepers to learn more about these approaches. Certainly, some editors are more open to inductive literary approaches than others. In an article my colleagues and I published in *Management Communication Quarterly* on the metaphors of workplace bullying (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2007), editor Jim Barker explicitly encouraged us to include two different renditions of our research question and a layered discussion of the literature. This format exemplifies the actual layered process we went through in analyzing the data and explicitly shows that we only decided to take up a metaphor framework after a first layer of data analysis. Furthermore, a colleague and I did something similar in an article extending the conceptualization of compassion,

accepted for publication in *Communication Monographs* (Way & Tracy, in press). The initial reviewer responses to the approach were mixed, but we stood firm and the piece will be published with the layered approach intact.

Finally, we might provide more detailed discussions in textbooks and other resources that are read by a range of audiences in various paradigmatic and methodological homes about how qualitative articles may unfold in a more layered or inductive format. Such a format can

> convey how our thinking is developing at various points in the analysis. In this sense, one of the means by which laddered thought trials can enhance the plausibility of our explanations is in providing a transparent presentation of the way insights surface and develop. Such an approach stimulates explanations that are life-like, coherent and above all recognizable, therefore, because the presentation of the analysis, the means of its interpretation, and the nature of the transition process under investigation are all in sync with the inductive aspirations. (Hallier & Forbes, 2004, p. 1408)

The transformation in writing need not be radical. One simple change could be that, rather than a four-act play (Lindlof, 2001), the inductive qualitative article instead is characterized by several methods and findings sections. For example, such a report may unfold as follows:

1. Opening Literature and Rationale

   This section explains an initial motivating topic or problem for the study, and provides a very broad guiding research question.

   a. For example: The literature review could detail why studying humor among human service workers is important given their frequent use of dark humor and feeling as though they are stigmatized and "dirty." The review would also discuss current humor research.

   b. Guiding research questions: "What does humor look and sound like in this population? When does it arise? What are its roles and functions?"

2. Data Gathering Methods and Primary Cycle Coding Procedures

This section is very similar to current qualitative methods sections, with data sources, researcher role, and description of primary cycle analysis practices.

3. Findings, Shallow and Broad

   Overview of emergent findings from data resulting from the guiding research question(s) and presentation of data from the primary cycle(s) of analysis. This section could foreshadow the study's most significant contributions.

   a. For example: Provide a thematic overview of humor, largely derived through consideration of past literature and primary cycle coding themes.
   b. Also foreshadow how the data suggests a new theoretical contribution—for example, that humor is a vehicle for organizational sensemaking.

4. Prospective Conjecture and Secondary Cycle Coding Practices

   Description of prospective conjecture and secondary data analysis practices. Given that these practices are ephemeral and require interpretive artistic practices difficult to put into words, this section would be a brief narration rather than a step-by-step delineation of research methods.

   a. For example: Discuss how, through additional cycles of coding, (re)reading the humor literature, and considering other related literature, the authors connected to the sensemaking literature and how it illuminated significant humor functions.

5. Focused Literature and Rationale

   Explanation of how the findings from this study provide significant theoretical and practical extensions to the literature. Review relevant theoretical literatures and concepts, the gaps and controversies, and pose more specific research question(s) that frame specific contributions of the study.

   a. For example: Review literature on organizational sensemaking and explain how building theory in sensemaking fits with the data at hand.

   b. Present a more focused research question such as: How does humor serve as a vehicle for organizational sensemaking among service workers?

6. Findings, Narrow and In-Depth

   Thick description that connects to the specific research question(s). This heart of the article stories the most significant contributions. Without the earlier shallow and broad overview, the value of these contributions, and the methods by which they emerged as salient, are not apparent.

   a. For example: Provide exemplars of data and analysis that show how humor among service workers is a method of organizational sensemaking in the face of identity-threatening dirty work.

7. Conclusions and Implications

   Similar to other articles.

This framework—one of a number of potential options—provides an inductive logical structure for qualitative analyses that may be helpful to those who want to publish (or facilitate the publishing of) qualitative research. In writing this way, authors may more transparently represent their methodological practices (allowing readers to better understand them) yet still maintain a format recognizable by a range of readers. Most importantly, such a writing process encourages a fuller potential of knowledge expansion that is uniquely emergent from inductive qualitative research.

Parting Thoughts

In this article I have made a case for the importance of flexibility and moving beyond a conventional deductive literary format for inductive qualitative research. That said, my comments should not be taken to mean that all inductive studies must be written in a layered style. Certainly, many of us trained in qualitative analyses have approached studies with an inductive logic but written them in a more conventional manner. As noted by Leslie Baxter, a reviewer of this manuscript, "Qualitative researchers need to appreciate that there are multiple ways to do valid qualitative research, and we need

to be vigilant in writing in ways that are sensitive to this issue." I agree. What I am trying to express are several dangers with a forced deductive writing convention, and how we might promote more flexibility.

I would also note that there are no clear heroes or villains in this story. Authors, including myself, perpetuate the writing expectations. Over the last 15 years, I have learned, practiced, and become competent (definitely not expert) at writing inductive research in deductive literary form. Doing so, unfortunately and paradoxically, has functioned to strengthen the normative power of conventional social scientific form.[4] The editors and reviewers who provide hours of service to our journals are overworked, underpaid, and must sift through hundreds of essays trying their best to use uniform and fair acceptance criteria. Standard writing conventions become familiar, friendly, and a hallmark of certain journals. Instructors tend to teach the most commonly accepted literary styles. Mentors want to help advisees find an efficacious route toward publication—and this is often the tried, true, and conventional.

This shape-shifting, though, is not without consequence. As demonstrated in this essay, it can result in ethical uncertainty and pedagogical confusion. Furthermore, a deductive literature review focuses the author and reader on using existing theory, rather than the complex specificity of the scene, to develop and understand research questions and contributions. This marginalizes the importance of rich contextual description—in which inductive qualitative research is especially well-suited—for building, extending, and complicating theory. Finally, when inductive research is cloaked in deductive writing conventions or step-by-step methods sections, the style may summon inappropriate validity criteria. The writing style invites questions about statistical generalizability, rationale of context based on the literature (rather than vice versa), replicability, and sample size—inappropriate indices for determining quality in qualitative research, and therefore, ones against which qualitative research will unsurprisingly pale.

My hope is that this discussion may help transform writing expectations so that high impact journals are more receptive to publishing inductive studies written in a variety of manners. This essay may also launch a conversation about the extent to which such expectations are appropriate for a variety of research methods. Certainly,

many experimental and quantitative studies are much more inductive than they appear in their final published form. Communication scholars are uniquely qualified to lead the way in a discussion of writing expectations, as we know that the *way* we communicate and the *way* we write affects *what* we can know and *how* we can learn.

Notes

1 Recent examples of qualitative research in Communication Monographs include Becker, Ellevold, & Stamp (2008); Canary (2010); Dougherty, Kramer, Klatzke, & Rogers (2009); Ganesh & Stohl (2010); Jian, (2007); Larson & Tompkins (2005); Lutgen-Sandvik (2006); Meisenbach, Remke, Buzzanell, & Liu (2008); Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman (2009); Scarduzio & Geist-Martin (2008); and Tracy, Myers, & Scott (2006). Examples in Journal of Communication include Kramer (2005) and Witteborn (2007). Examples in Human Communication Research include Basu & Dutta, (2009); Doerfel, Lai & Chewing (2010); and Robinson (2009).

2 Lindlof uses this theatre metaphor as a model providing pragmatic advice to beginning scholars about "How to Publish." However, his discussion of various writing methods in Lindlof & Taylor (2011) clearly suggests that he does not believe the four-act play is the only, or necessarily the best, way to structure a qualitative essay.

3 Among other experiments (in which rationalizing one's decisions impaired one's ability to recognize faces and remember the taste of wine), Schooler and his colleagues found the problem of verbal overshadowing evident in a study where students rated the taste of several different fruit jams. When students tasted and rated the jam, without giving reasons for their ratings, their ratings were similar to those of jam experts. However, when the students were asked to articulate reasons for their ratings—deductively enumerating why they preferred one jam to another—they turned into "jam idiots" (Gladwell, 2005, p. 181).

4 Early in my career, Lindlof (2001) analyzed Tracy & Tracy (1998) in a chapter he wrote on "how to publish your qualitative communication research." The fact that Lindlof chose it as an exemplar impressed upon me, at the time, that its four-act play deductive format must be the right way to write and publish.

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