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Chapter 5
Qualitative Methods in Organizational Communication

Abstract: This chapter identifies key characteristics in qualitative methods such as an abductive iterative logic, gestalt, and bricolage. The chapter highlights markers of quality for qualitative research, such as self-reflexivity, thick description, multivocality, and aesthetic representation. It reviews and provides organizational communication examples of primary qualitative genres including grounded theory, case study, ethnography, phenomenology, participatory action research, narrative, and arts-based approaches. Furthermore, it details key types of data gathering, such as interviews, fieldwork, textual analysis, photo/video elicitation, and diaries, as well as analysis methods such as phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis (PIQDA), narrative, metaphor, and discourse tracing analyses. Throughout the chapter, we provide an original analysis of organizational communication qualitative research published in *Management Communication Quarterly* between 2010 and 2020. Additionally, using this analysis, we overview the subject matters, processes, and behaviors examined in organizational communication qualitative research. The chapter closes by discussing a key challenge and opportunity for organizational communication qualitative research into the future.

Keywords: qualitative, methodology, ethnography, fieldwork, interview, grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative, iterative, rigor, metaphor, discourse, ethics, ethnocentrism

Organizational communication and qualitative research methods have been scholarly companions since the 1980s' interpretive turn in the discipline of communication (Taylor and Trujillo 2001; Tracy and Geist-Martin 2013). The 1981 Alta conference spurred disciplinary conversations regarding the promise of analyzing organizational rituals, scripts, performances, and stories. With critical work in the 1990s and 2000s, researchers increasingly used qualitative methods to understand resistance and ideology (e.g., Ashcraft 2005) among other power-laden phenomena. Since then, organizational scholars continue to lead qualitative research methods, in part because they have questioned, expanded, and pushed back upon normative assumptions (Gist-Mackey and Kingsford 2020; Jensen et al. 2020). The latest published methodological meta-analysis of *Management Communication Quarterly* (MCQ) (Stephens 2017) reveals that approximately two thirds of empirical articles published from 2001 to 2015 used some qualitative methods – becoming the dominant methodological approach in the area of organizational communication.

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The goal of this chapter is to introduce key tenets, contexts, and trends of qualitative research that may be useful to organizational communication scholars. It opens by identifying and defining key characteristics of qualitative scholarship such as an abductive iterative logic, gestalt, and bricolage. The chapter also highlights markers of high-quality qualitative research, such as creating self-reflexivity, thick description, multi-vocality, and aesthetic representation. It reviews and provides examples of primary qualitative genres including grounded theory, case study, ethnography, phenomenology, participatory action research, narrative inquiry, and creative and arts-based approaches, as well as key types of data gathering and analytical approaches. Throughout the chapter, we draw from our original analysis of qualitative organizational communication scholarship published in MCQ between 2010 and 2020 highlighting collective attributes of organizational communication qualitative research. The chapter closes by discussing a key opportunity for future organizational communication qualitative research.

Tracking trends in organizational communication qualitative research, we conducted an analysis of a decade of MCQ publications. We reference this analysis throughout the chapter providing insight into contemporary trends of qualitative organizational communication research. We downloaded and coded 363 files representing all publications in MCQ between 2010 and 2020. Using NVivo qualitative analysis software, we first ran a text query for the word "qualitative", its stem words, and synonyms. Based on this analysis, the data set revealed that 52.3% (n=190) of the published files downloaded from MCQ mention qualitative research. Each of the 190 manuscripts were coded for: (1) year published, (2) qualitative methodology, (3) type of data, (4) type of analysis, (5) type of verification, (6) theories used, and (7) subject matter. Of those 190 files, 142 incorporated some kind of qualitative data (i.e., interviews, field notes, etc.). The remaining 42 mentioned qualitative research as an opportunity for future research, for instance, but were typically either forum publications not incorporating data or quantitative studies. We use MCQ as a proxy for publications in organizational communication and realize this is only one outlet within which qualitative organizational communication scholarship is published, therefore it is an imperfect snapshot, yet remains the closest peer-reviewed journal that is a metaphorical home for organizational communication.

1 Unique Value of Qualitative Scholarship in Organizational Communication

Qualitative research is uniquely valuable to the organizational communication discipline. Through narratives and thick description, qualitative research draws readers into first-person understanding and empathy. Additionally, fieldwork can reveal tacit knowledge participants might not explicitly articulate, yet is evident in patterns, prac-

tices, and ritualized behaviors. Qualitative research is excellent for revealing how processes unfold over time, for example, in terms of employee socialization (e.g., Woo and Myers 2020) and leadership progression (e.g. Dutta 2018). Further, qualitative research is appropriate for research questions asking "what kind", "how", and "why", and for researchers who are drawn to answer questions with thick description, narrative, and rich explanations, that are constructed through texts, interviews, fieldwork, diaries, and arts-based research. Qualitative research is marked by key characteristics which we review below.

Qualitative research tends to be *inductive* or *iterative* in nature. Researchers begin studies with broad questions, such as "what is going on here?" in relation to a social phenomenon. Qualitative researchers also explore specific experiences to elucidate, such as decision-making (e.g., Gist-Mackey and Guy 2019) or bullying (e.g., Tye-Williams and Krone 2015). They do not assume that they know exactly what to be examining or the exact theoretical focus until they listen and learn from the context at hand. Then, over time, qualitative research narrows in focus, as researchers iteratively return to literature, from which they may gather *sensitizing concepts* – ideas and theories that serve as lenses sensitizing them to particular foci (Charmaz 2014). Like a funnel, qualitative researchers begin broad, but after iteratively returning to emergent data, broad research questions narrow and become more connected to theory, subsequently explanations of phenomena begin to emerge.

Qualitative researchers – especially ethnographers – often rely on naturalistic data: stories, behaviors, rituals, and performances that occur naturally during organizing. For example, through his fieldwork with pediatric personnel at a children's hospital, Barley, Treem, and Leonardi (2020) explicated moment-by-moment choices that helped employees stage their work authoritatively – insights only available through naturalistic data and would have been hidden or conflated in post-hoc recollection via surveys or interviews.

These inductive, iterative, and naturalistic characteristics explain why qualitative research also is characterized by notions of *gestalt* and *bricolage*. Qualitative research is richly enmeshed within diverse contexts and provides meaningful explanations of phenomena. Qualitative research aims toward providing a *gestalt* picture of how phenomena occur in relationship to one another, as integrated into a form, shape, or story. *Gestalt* is a German phrase that is loosely translated into the word figure or form. Such a framework suggests that analysis of organizational issues includes attention to the broader context, landscape, or background. For instance, Dougherty and colleagues (2018) examined the phenomenon of food insecurity as a gestalt in relation to the context of unemployment. Often, researchers cannot know from the beginning which aspects of the scene will be needed to create meaningful stories or explanations. As such, they become expert *bricoleurs*; like quilters, they stitch together various strands of data available, making do and interweaving to create useful synthesis and research-based knowledge.

Given these key characteristics of qualitative research – inductive, iterative, gestalt, bricolage – it is natural that sampling plans, data collection procedures, and research questions are emergent, and (re)developed along the way. Foci of qualitative research are influenced by the scene, not just from a priori research interests or theories. Further, there are key markers of quality and meaningfulness in qualitative research.

Many different researchers have created typologies outlining criteria for quality while others have argued preoccupation with rigor is problematic (e.g., Smith and McGannon 2017). Indeed, many seemingly objective guidelines for merit and excellence, when examined closely, privilege Eurocentric, positivist, patriarchal, and Western ways of accomplishing research (Cruz and Sodeke 2021). That said, most researchers seem to agree that qualitative research can be powerful, influential, and trustworthy when scholars engage practices such as self-reflexivity, thick description, multi-vocality, and aesthetic representation.

As discussed in Tracy's (2010) "big-tent" model for qualitative quality *self-reflexivity* asks researchers to carefully consider, thoughtfully engage, and share ways in which their past experiences, viewpoints, identities, and roles influence their research. *Thick description*, a concept developed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, refers to the quality of rich contextual immersive description allowing readers to enter the scene. For example, in field notes researchers might demonstrate *thick description* by showing rather than telling, allowing readers to draw contextually relevant conclusions. Cruz's (2016) rich fieldnotes bring post-conflict Liberia to life; just a short snippet illustrates: "Upon entering the main mud road leading to the market, several young men perched on motorcycles bearing American insignia, haggled passers, offering their taxi services" (p. 220). Such scholarship is also strengthened via hearing about the scene from multiple stakeholders offering viewpoints – a quality known as *multi-vocality*.

Qualitative research is enhanced through *aesthetic*, evocative, and beautiful writing. Indeed, qualitative researchers do not "write up" research any more than artists "paint up" or "sculpt up" art. Rather, through writing, as a method of inquiry (via fieldnotes, analytic memos, and manuscript drafts) scholarship comes into being. Aesthetic writing may be as simple as writing in accessible ways for readers and may use specific literary styles, including evocative storytelling and poetry, helping readers tap into emotions, identities, experiences, and bodies (see Herrmann 2020).

Many organizational communication qualitative researchers articulate methods of qualitative credibility (Tracy 2010). Disclosing qualitative credibility conveys how the research can be deemed rigorous and trustworthy. In our analysis of MCQ publications between 2010 and 2020, we tracked types of verification scholars used to convey credibility in manuscripts. There were 55 manuscripts that named/described qualitative verification. The most popular verification, described in 20 manuscripts, was *peer debrief* when research teams negotiate findings either among themselves or by bringing in outside readers to vet findings. The second most common approach was *member checks*, also known as member reflections, mentioned in 18 publications,

where researchers shared findings with small subsets of the participants asking them to confirm, provide feedback, or reject findings. The third most popular method was *triangulation*, where researchers corroborated more than one type of data to arrive at findings, described in 16 manuscripts. Other methods of verification included: *negative case analysis*, *thick description*, and *prolonged engagement* in the field. Please note that at times studies reported using multiple methods of verification indicating a desire to demonstrate trustworthiness of the research.

Qualitative research is typically marked by several features that characterize it as unique and meaningful. A number of these features are further exemplified when considering how qualitative research unfolds via specific methodologies or qualitative genres.

2 Genres in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is diverse, and most research cannot be neatly categorized. In this section, we'll discuss foundational qualitative genres (Tracy 2020), sometimes referred to as qualitative methodologies or traditions (Bhattacharya 2017; Creswell and Poth 2018). Some scholars choose a specific genre first, and then design their research with that area's tenets, philosophical assumptions, and criteria. Others move forward with a general research question or topic and then turn to the genres as loose guiding heuristics. We review these genres roughly in the order of those that tend to be more realist and foundational to those more closely associated with interpretive paradigms to those that are more critical in nature. Genres have multiple manifestations, and so this overview should serve as a primer to engage in more focused study for genres that seem salient. Below we give a concise overview of case study, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, participatory action research, narrative, and creative arts-based approaches.

Case studies are in-depth descriptive analyses of naturally occurring phenomena in a specific and bounded contextual scene. The boundaries of case study research can be made regarding, for instance, a specific incident, time period, organization, or group. Researchers turn to case study for four primary reasons: "(1) description, (2) hypothesis generation or theory development, (3) hypothesis and theory testing, and (4) development of normative theory" (Schwandt and Gates 2018: 346). Various research methods can be used to accomplish any one of the goals, including interviews, observation, and even surveys. That said, case studies rely on strategic and carefully considered arguments about the value of the specific boundaries of the case so that its analysis effectively contributes to larger theoretical concerns, a process called *casing* (Ragin 1992). As noted by Stake (2000), "case study is not a methodological *choice*, but a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 435). One quick way to see if case study tenets are useful is to ask what boundaries define the scope of the case.

Grounded theory, which aims toward rigorous theory building from the "ground up", is among the most often cited qualitative research methodologies. Indeed, many people cite grounded theory and Glaser and Strauss (1967) without acknowledging its post-positivist leanings or without closely interrogating the largely impossible original tenet that researchers enter the scene as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate). When most organizational communication scholars today refer to grounded theory, they are actually using a more iterative constructivist approach (Charmaz 2014), characterized by simultaneous data collection and analysis examining dynamic relationships between meaning and action. In our review of qualitative research published in MCQ between 2010 and 2020, grounded theory approaches were cited in 30.2% of qualitative studies that named a specific analytic technique.

Grounded theory is also guided by specific analytic techniques that are thought to lead to rigor such as the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, saturation, and writing analytic memos. It is important to note that several of these analytic techniques have become so common across qualitative research in organizational communication that many scholars use them across different genres and often use constant comparative or analytic memos as signs of rigor even though they were developed and fit most precisely with grounded theory methodology. A good way of knowing whether grounded theory may be useful is to consider this heuristic: does this research study explain *why* and *how* a phenomenon occurs? This is a good heuristic because it reminds scholars that grounded theory is about *explanation*, not solely description.

Ethnography, a third common genre of qualitative research, is typically characterized by immersive fieldwork and observation into a particular cultural context in which the researcher explores a range of cultural aspects, language use, rituals, norms, and artifacts. Organizational scholars have been leaders in this method within the communication discipline, with researchers pursuing ethnographic studies of gay bars, grassroots organizing, cruise ships, airlines, unemployment agencies, and automotive industries – contexts in which they also served as full or partial participants themselves (e.g., Branton and Compton 2021; Gist-Mackey 2018; Jensen et al. 2020). There are also different types of ethnography, including organizational ethnography, digital ethnography, critical ethnography, and autoethnography among others. It is common to hear organizational researchers use the phrase "ethnographic methods" when employing methods like observation and interviews but focus on specific phenomena rather than entire cultures and may not be immersive participants themselves (e.g., Zanin and Bisel 2018). The 1980s interpretive turn in organizational communication was largely based upon the power of studying organizational performances (Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo 1983) as part of organizational culture, such as Treem's (2016) ethnographic fieldwork that demonstrates how knowledge workers perform organizational expertise.

A strand of ethnography, specific to the discipline of communication, is ethnography of communication, developed by Hymes (1962) in which researchers study a culture's distinctive interactions, speech codes, and contextual decision-making norms

for what can be said, not said, by whom, when, where, and how. Ethnography of communication typically combines fieldwork with close analysis of discourse (Tracy and Robles 2013). As such, researchers not only engage in fieldwork, but often record and closely analyze speech in meetings, phone calls, or doctor's appointments, for instance. In doing so, they emerge with descriptions and interpretations of cultural norms for speech, and explanations for how certain assumed phenomena are talked into being through interactions over time.

Phenomenology, another genre of qualitative research, focuses on richly describing the experiential essence of phenomena elucidating how phenomena are lived in situ. A quick heuristic for knowing if a phenomenological study is appropriate is if the study centralizes the essence or experience of a particular phenomenon, such as "shaking hands, illness, sexual arousal, bullying, or texting" (Tracy 2020: 65). In typical everyday life, phenomenologists (e.g., Heidegger [1927] 1962) would contend that most people experience these and other phenomena in a state of "tranquilized obviousness" or autopilot complacency. In contrast, phenomenological interviews help participants become self-aware. To do this well, researchers are encouraged to "bracket" their everyday assumptions and biases, and work to transcend their habits of seeing so that they may encounter an experience with wonder and child-like curiosity. McAllum (2014) provides an excellent example of phenomenology, which examined the experience of volunteering. Her interviews allowed participants to encounter and make sense of volunteering experiences in explicit and intentional ways, which revealed how volunteering is laden with meanings of freedom and obligation.

As another qualitative genre, participatory action research moves qualitative research from describing phenomena to working collaboratively with research participants (also known as "co-researchers") to address local problems. Researchers in this tradition work toward transformation through activities like: planning and executing strategic plans for change, observing and reflecting on the change process and consequences, and serving and laboring on behalf of participants (Huffman 2013; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Participatory action research in the communication discipline has blossomed at the intersections of organizational and health communication, as researchers work alongside participants moving toward practical solutions addressing, for instance, inequities among rural poor (Dutta and Dutta 2013) or unsheltered populations (Huffman 2013). The goal of this type of research is to honor community wisdom and make use of theoretical knowledge to create practical change and community action.

Narrative, personal narrative, and autoethnography – although all distinct in their own ways – cohere together in their commitment toward the power of storytelling and story-living to explore the texture of human experience. Narrative approaches capture curiosity, conflict, surprise, resolution, and sometimes indecision. Narratives are marked by three characteristics: (1) temporal sequence and plot; (2) an audience (real/imagined); and (3) a complicating action (Goodall 2008). Similar to other qualitative genres, narratives may be based on data gathered through field notes, interviews, textual materials, diaries, or one's own personal memories via autoethnography (Herrmann 2020). Narra-

tive research pays close attention to the ways people talk about themselves and others as actors in scenes – each actor with agency, purpose, striving for coherence and sensemaking, but potentially also grappling with wrenching doubt. One powerful organizational communication narrative analysis revealed how whistleblowers in a Texas Public School System "experience 'the abyss', a dark and looming outer limit of experience characterized by chaos", which led to identifying whistle-blower identities: crusader, citizen, mom, and popularity seeker (Gravley, Richardson, and Allison 2015). Gravely, Richardson, and Allison's (2015) narrative analysis elucidated why whistle-bowers choose to disclose, retaliate, and constitute new identities. In doing so, this and other organizational narratives, especially those in autoethnographic forms, are written in aesthetic ways that often move the "heart and the belly", as well as the "head" (Bochner 2000: 271). Narratives can be transformational and life-giving for the writer (López and Tracy 2020) while leaving readers with increased empathy and identification, feeling like they have also experienced, known, and can better live because of the story told.

Finally, another genre of qualitative research is arts-based research (ABR) or creative approaches. One strand of this research is performance and ethnotheatre (Saldaña 2011). ABR has often used actual theater and film as a method to represent qualitative research, such as the film *The Acoustics of Care* (Harter, Quinlan, and Shaw 2016), which shows how performance artists transform hospital practices into healing spaces. Another strand of ABR occurs through data collection through asking participants to draw, sculpt, take photography, or engage in collage-making. For example, in her research on a transgender outreach center, Eger (2021) led a focus group where participants made sense of their indigenous trans identities through collage-making. ABR emphasizes artistic practice as a way of exploring, knowing, and representing (Barone and Eisner 2012). Artistic approaches of data collection are especially useful for those who are not able or willing to tell their story in a verbal and linear way (or conversely, are so over-rehearsed with practiced scripts that new meaning is unlikely to emerge without encouraging people to new imaginings through art) (Tracy and Malvini Redden 2016).

The trends regarding most common methodologies used in MCQ publications between 2010 and 2020 provide insight into qualitative organizational communication research. Our analysis revealed that qualitative articles in organizational communication are dominant; nearly 40% of all published manuscripts in MCQ between 2010 and 2020 contained at least some qualitative approaches. In regard to methodology, the majority of qualitative studies published in MCQ over the past decade did not identify a single specific qualitative genre or methodology. The top five methodologies mentioned were case study (n=15), ethnography (n=13), mixed methods (n=10), narrative (n=7), and content analysis (n=5). However, a number of other qualitative methodologies were also used less frequently, including, but not limited to: interpretive, discourse analysis, participatory research, phronetic iterative, language/message production, rhetorical, phenomenological, and grounded theory. Interestingly enough, these categories are not mutually

exclusive. Often publications combine methodologies, like ethnographic case study (e.g., Kopaneva and Cheney 2019).

Further, our analysis did point to compelling observations. For example, there were no narrative studies published between 2018 and 2020 in MCQ and no phenomenological studies published between 2015 and 2020. Further, our findings reveal that only 60 publications in MCQ (out of 142 qualitative manuscripts) identified their scholarship as aligned with a particular qualitative genre/methodology. This may demonstrate that the salience of naming a methodology may no longer be integral to contemporary qualitative training throughout the discipline of organizational communication, or that people increasingly use umbrella approaches such as phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis (Tracy, Gist-Mackey, and Dehnert, 2024). It certainly indicates that naming one's methodology is not required for publishing qualitative work. This diminishing trend however, in no way indicates a decline in the use of qualitative methods in organizational communication or in the quality of qualitative scholarship. Many manuscripts using the qualitative genres reviewed here, often incorporate multiple types of qualitative data; next we review commonplace data gathering and analysis methods.

3 Common Data Gathering and Analysis Methods

Qualitative researchers gather and analyze data in a variety of manners. Each method reviewed below could be paired with many of the qualitative methodologies named above. Here we review dominant approaches, including interviews, fieldwork (also manifest as participation, observation, or witnessing), textual/artifact analysis, photo/video elicitation, and diaries. We then explore how researchers make meaning from qualitative data, through analysis practices including phronetic iterative, grounded, narrative, thematic, metaphor, and discourse tracing.

The trends regarding most common data type used in MCQ publications between 2010 and 2020 are highlighted in Table 1. Interviews continue to be the most common form of data collection, followed by observation/fieldwork, then textual/artifact data, and open-ended written responses (see Table 1). Of the manuscripts published in MCQ between 2010 and 2020, 39% (n=142) of publications in MCQ over the past decade incorporated qualitative data. The types of qualitative data included interviews (n=92), fieldwork/observation (n=46), textual/artifact data (e.g., documents, artifacts) (n=37), open-ended written responses (e.g., essays, message creation) (n=11), transcripts of public social interaction (n=5), photo/video data (n=4), social media content (n=4), personal autoethnographic narratives (n=2). Interview and fieldwork/observation data were the most consistently used across the decade being published every single year between 2010 and 2020. These trends point to potentially underused methods of data collection like diary/journal-based data collection, as well as more artistic data like photography, collage, or illustration/drawing.

Table 1: Qualitative Scholarship in *Management Communication Quarterly* between 2010 and 2020.

Methodological practice	**Number of papers 2010–2020 / Percentage of manuscripts published**
Manuscripts that incorporated some type of qualitative data out of all manuscripts published in MCQ from 2010 to 2020	142/363 39%
Of the qualitative scholarship published in MCQ, manuscripts that used **interviewing** (dyadic or group) data alone or in combination with other method(s)	96/142 67%
Of the qualitative scholarship published in MCQ, manuscripts that used some type of **fieldwork or observation** on own or in combination with other method(s)	46/142 32%
Of the qualitative scholarship published in MCQ, manuscripts that used some type of **textual/artifact analysis** on own or in combination with other method(s)	37/142 26%

Note: Numbers of published manuscripts that included some type of qualitative data in *Management Communication Quarterly* between 2010 and 2020.

Interviews are the most commonly used source of qualitative data across multiple disciplines, including organizational communication. According to our analysis, a range of six to thirteen publications using interviews were published annually over the last decade in MCQ. Interviews can be dyadic or groups – and are characterized by a guided conversation or "inter-change of views [. . .] conversing on a theme of mutual interest" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015: 4). Interviews are valuable for providing participant accounts, explanations, and stories in a targeted manner (Tracy 2020). An example of an interview study in the field of organizational communication is titled, *The Mutual Constitution of Social Media Use and Status Hierarchies in Global Organizing*. In this study, Kim (2018) analyzed 32 interviews and over 1,000 enterprise social media posts to provide an account of the mutual constitution of technology use and status hierarchies in a global organization.

Organizational communication scholars have been disciplinary leaders in fieldwork methods, observing interaction in real time and witnessing daily organizational routines. Fieldworkers may have a number of roles, from being full members of the group they study to being complete observers. No matter the role, it is important to realize that fieldwork is an act of witnessing, complete with the powerful effects of watching and being watched (Tracy 2020). Fieldwork is an effective method for ground-up research, elucidating actions and behaviors that organizational members may not otherwise discuss or purposefully reflect upon. For example, in Cooper and Shumate's (2012) study, they used ethnographic observation in tandem with interviews and social network analysis to study an interorganizational collaboration

among gender-based violence non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Zambia. Cooper served as an unpaid intern in the NGO observing employees, many of whom were interviewed, at events and meetings in real time.

Textual/artifact analysis is another popular method of data gathering. Texts such as speech transcripts, social media posts, news stories, newsletters, mission statements, corporate social responsibility web pages, websites, performance scripts, or advertisements as well as artifacts such as computer equipment, artwork, fashion, or furniture can be studied qualitatively. Textual/artifact analysis is often associated with rhetorical analysis and cultural studies; with the blossoming area of participatory critical rhetoric questioning how texts reify or resist ideologies in specific historical, political, and cultural moments (McKinnon et al. 2016). For example, Fredriksson and Edwards (2019) conducted a textual analysis of 357 policy and strategy documents from 188 Swedish national public agencies to explore, "how transparency and consistency coexist, but are translated into local settings in divergent ways" (p. 548).

Earlier in this chapter we introduced arts-based research (ABR) as a key qualitative genre. Here we want to highlight visuals and arts as empirical materials. Working with artistic materials – whether those include clay, collage materials, paints, or LEGO blocks – provides participants with accessible ways to collaborate, share power, and co-create knowledge (Tracy and Malvini Redden 2016). Asking participants to take photos or videos of their experience provides a first-hand (*verstehen*) understanding of organizational life. Wilhoit Larson (2020), for example, combined photo-elicitation and interview methods to "allow for multiple meanings to exist and invite self-expression" (p. 305) in the study of workspaces.

Finally, diaries can be a powerful qualitative research method, especially when examining synchronous interaction via interviews or observation is impossible. Researchers can prompt participants with intermittent emails, text messages, and social media posts, and participants can respond with written entries, photographs, or video diaries. In a study of workplace gossip in healthcare organizations, Waddington (2012) used diaries to explore gossip among nurses. However, a word of caution: crafting materials for asynchronous diaries requires significant participant motivation, which may be accomplished through material research incentives, intrinsic interest, or feelings of loyalty toward the research(er) (Tracy 2020). Despite these important concerns, diaries can be a rich way to access experiences and are an underutilized method of data collection.

As we have discussed so far in this section, qualitative organizational communication researchers rely on a range of data types and analysis methods. If researchers know their qualitative genre from the outset, it can provide a good map for data analysis choices (Creswell and Poth 2018). However, many people enter a qualitative study without knowing immediately whether their study will be best poised to develop grounded theory, elucidate phenomenological experience, or tell a story.

The good news is that qualitative research design can be emergent and analytic choices can be made along the way. Phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis, also

known as PIQDA, (Tracy 2018, 2020; Tracy, Gist-Mackey, and Dehnert, 2024) provides an umbrella analytic technique that draws from, but is distinct from grounded analysis techniques (Charmaz 2014). It can be used on its own or in combination with other qualitative genres and analytic approaches. *Phronesis* is focused on creating practical wisdom. *Iterative* is a concept that refers to an abductive approach, back and forth between emergent data and reflections on one hand, and consideration of a priori theories and research concerns on the other (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009). PIQDA (see Tracy 2018: 74–75) overlaps with and draws from grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2003), and coding (Saldaña 2016). Between 2010 and 2020, 26 qualitative studies published in MCQ incorporated a phronetic iterative approach to analysis and this approach seems to be increasing in use over time (2010–2013 n=5; 2014–2017 n=7; 2018–2020 n=14). PIQDA serves as a good base for more specific analysis techniques, several of which we discuss next, such as narrative inquiry, metaphor analysis, and discourse tracing.

Narrative analysis examines stories – whether that be stories of a person or group, an organization, experience, or phenomenon. Using narrative inquiry typically includes techniques such as identifying the story's complicating factor, plot-line, purpose, characters, context/setting, moral, and resolution (Labov and Waletzky 1997). Tye-Williams and Krone (2015) analyzed the narratives of targets of workplace bullying and identified three different narrative types: chaos, report, and quest narratives. Their research provides insight into how coworkers can better listen to and support targets of workplace bullying.

Metaphor analysis is an intrinsically communicative approach in which researchers examine how participants compare one thing (e.g., an organization) to another (e.g., a machine, a family). Most people regularly use metaphors without thinking about it, but in their identification and reflection, researchers can access the frames and lenses through which people are understanding or living through certain phenomena. Malvini Redden and colleagues (2019), for example, examined the metaphors used by team members as they made sense of a planned organizational change process. By tracing how members likened the change to "lipstick on a pig" (p. 509) and "bureaucratic bullshit" (p. 516), researchers were able to identify how feelings of resiliency, success, and identification differed among various teams and how framings changed over time.

Discourse tracing is a complex analytic technique that draws from case study, critical theory, and discourse from the micro, meso, and macro levels. Discourse tracers choose a particular case in which a change process unfolds (e.g., a policy change, or organizational turning point), and then examine data chronologically, looking for ways different levels of discourse interact with and influence one another over time. Examples include LeGreco's (2012) research where she studied how policy about a local school lunch program interacted with children's lunchroom behavior and media stories about healthy eating.

In our analysis of MCQ publications between 2010 and 2020, 35.5% (n=130) of the publications clearly identified a specific approach to qualitative analysis. It is important to note that a small number of manuscripts (n=12), which identified types of qualitative data collected, did not articulate how data was analyzed. Of the essays that named an analysis approach, the following analysis types were most common: constant comparative/grounded analysis (n=39), computer-assisted analysis (n=30), thematic analysis (n=27), iterative analysis (n=26). Other types of analysis used with less frequency included: narrative, critical, discourse, textual, conversation analysis. Please note these frequencies are not mutually exclusive. For instance, computer-assisted analysis was used with various analytical approaches including, but not limited to content analysis, thematic analysis, and phronetic iterative analysis, among others. The most common computer-aided analysis programs named were Atlas.ti and NVivo.

In this section, we reviewed powerful ways to collect and analyze qualitative data. There is no one correct combination. Researchers must take inventory of personal proclivities (e.g., do they find fieldwork exhilarating/anxiety-laden?; should they tell stories and/or offer thick description?), assess availability of emergent data (e.g., what empirical materials are available for this topic?), and most importantly, consider which data and analysis processes are best poised to answer research question(s).

4 Contours of Current Organizational Communication Qualitative Research

Qualitative organizational communication research is robust, exploring an intellectually diverse array of communication subject matter, behaviors, and processes. The contours of contemporary qualitative organizational communication research are complicated given the breadth and depth of the field. We realize MCQ is but one outlet, but we do believe our analysis measures the metaphorical pulse of the contours of the organizational communication discipline and how scholars have conducted qualitative research within our academic community.

We coded 61 unique subject areas that were explored qualitatively in organizational communication research between 2010 and 2020 in MCQ publications indicating that the discipline has a great amount of breadth in its subject matter. Please note that many manuscripts address more than one subject matter area, so the numbers reported here are not mutually exclusive, but do provide heuristic insight. Subject matter that only appeared in one manuscript includes topics such as temporality, spatiality, violence, memorable messages, mentoring, and organizational justice among others, indicating perhaps such subjects are published in other outlets or are understudied.

By far the most popular subject studied was related to identity/identification. Thirty different manuscripts engaged identity/identification as central to their research. These studies included exploring organizational identity (e.g., Ban 2017), professional identities

(e.g., Garcia and Barbour 2018), underrepresented identities (Shenoy-Packer 2015), and volunteer identities (Meisenbach and Kramer 2014) among others. The second most popular subject matter studied was assimilation/socialization with nine manuscripts exploring, for instance, the experiences of organizational members in human service organizations (Jensen and Meisenbach 2015) and zoos (Kramer and Danielson 2016). The third most popular subject was emotions, a topic appearing in eight manuscripts examining, for instance, experiences of emotional taint (e.g., Rivera 2015).

We also analyzed theories. Many qualitative manuscripts used more than one theoretical framework, so the numbers reported here are not mutually exclusive, but do provide heuristic insight. The most popular theoretical framework was the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) perspective, used in 18 unique manuscripts. CCO research incorporated the four flows model, sociomateriality, and ventriloquism among other CCO concepts. Identity/identification theories were the second most popular theoretical frameworks used in 17 manuscripts. These included, but were not limited to: social identity theory, self-categorization theory, communication theory of identity, identity work/negotiation theories, and place identity theory among others. Coming in third with 13 manuscripts were critical theories, which we coded to include feminist and postcolonial theories. These theoretical foci are unsurprising given their interpretive and critical leanings, which lend themselves to qualitative research.

Analyzing types of organizational contexts studied in MCQ was challenging. Many studies simply recruited workers/employees as participants not specifying a particular profession/industry given the focus and scope of particular research studies. These studies were simply coded under 'workplaces' while specific types of workplaces studied were captured under subordinate codes, such as multinational corporations, consulting firms, and dirty work, which together accounted for 38 manuscripts. The second most popular context was non-profits, appearing in 22 manuscripts, for instance human service organizations (e.g., McNamee and Petersen 2014) and policy non-profits (e.g., Mitra 2018) among others. Educational contexts were third most popular with 15 manuscripts, including studies that exclusively recruited students as participants and those that studied educational enterprises (e.g., Deline 2019) and institutions of higher education (e.g., Dempsey 2010) among others. Other organizational contexts included governmental contexts, terrorist organizations, housing/residential communities, social organizations, and athletics/sports organizations, for example. Qualitative organizational communication scholars tend to gravitate toward work and non-profit contexts more than other contexts (perhaps due to access); workplace and non-profit contexts were published every year in MCQ between 2010 and 2020.

5 Looking toward the Future

Linking from the prior sections, key opportunities for future research include increased focus using data, theories or contexts that are currently underrepresented in the field, in general. That said, we want to especially highlight another key opportunity. Namely, our analysis of MCQ publications from 2010 to 2020 revealed a range of cultural contexts represented in the literature including, but not limited to, scholarship in African, Asian, Caribbean, European, and South American organizational contexts. However, the prevailing cultural context is still situated in North America, and predominantly in the United States. Thus, organizational communication research is still privileging Western and Eurocentric experiences. Organizational communication has much to offer in terms of "debunking eurocentrism" (Cruz and Sodeke 2021) and in decolonial ways of knowing (Pal et al. 2022). Focusing on decolonial approaches will mean breaking down epistemological strongholds. Given this opportunity, organizational communication is well-positioned to shift the paradigm since critical, feminist, and postcolonial theories were the third most used frameworks in our analysis of MCQ publications between 2010 and 2020. In fact, studies using critical qualitative studies were published nearly every year between 2010 and 2020, except 2014 and 2019. Leaning into this opportunity will also require organizational communication qualitative researchers to harness ethical sensitivity even more regarding procedural, situational, cultural, and relational ethics (Tracy 2020). We will need to be more mindful about representation, voice, equity, and justice as we work to better understand and dismantle hegemonic systems and structures, as well as amplifying the voices and experiences of those who are marginalized. This will require a new era of training in qualitative methods seminars across the globe. Further, scholars will benefit from studying a range of international contexts, which is an exciting opportunity on which to embark. This could also open up a host of collaborative opportunities where scholars across continents are co-authoring and collaborating with one another yielding global insights and community.

6 Conclusion

This chapter addressed key tenets, contexts, examples, and trends of qualitative research in organizational communication aiming to demonstrate where the field has been and where it can potentially be in the future. Throughout, we share an original analysis of qualitative organizational communication scholarship published over the last decade highlighting popular subject matter, theories, methodologies, and methods. In closing, we hope this chapter has provided a metaphorical map and identified key opportunities for future organizational communication qualitative research.

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