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# Distinctive Qualities in Communication Research

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REFLECTIONS ON DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES  
IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Donal Carbaugh and Patrice M. Buzzanell

When studying communication, scholars focus on some types of data and do so from some particular point of view. At this moment of our intellectual history, communication data can be generated virtually everywhere including face-to-face encounters, online news and comedy, through a variety of mobile technologies, in linguistic and non-linguistic ways, including visual and acoustical signals. What the most salient data are, how they are identified, and what can be said about them are questions communication scholars, in the course of their studies, raise and address. These are important concerns because, as scholars consider them, their studies gain their toe-hold so-to-speak, through "data," in personal and social realities. While collecting and analyzing data are crucial parts of the research process, there is much more involved than this, or much more surrounding these specific decisions.

From what perspective are data being generated, organized, interpreted, and/or explained? It is possible, of course, to collect, and then account for communication data (such as public reports about smoking, or cancer, or step-families) from a variety of perspectives. For example, data can be utilized as a manifestation of political and economic factors, as an expression of psychological states or traits, or as an outcome of social class or cultural structures. If considered in these ways, these communication phenomena would be explained from the view of political, economic, psychological, sociological, or

anthropological theories, respectively. Each of these disciplinary perspectives would provide important insights and accounts, but each would not be exactly the same as communicational explanations. How does one produce communicational explanations of phenomena? Communication scholars believe that communication has a hand in shaping aspects of human existence and that this process can be studied in its own right and not simply as a means of investigating other phenomena.

For the scholars whose works are assembled here, we note that communication is not only the data of concern, but is also, and moreover, the primary theoretical concern. We note this dual emphasis, on communication data *and* theory, as twin bases on which to begin our reflections about what indeed are some distinctive qualities in their Communication Research. We want to emphasize, initially, that the research reported above, and examined here explores the world not just as communication data. Rather, the research further understands data from the perspective of communication theory. A similar point was introduced long ago, early last century by the Pragmatist William James who noted that communication is a double-barreled term: it is both a practice, but it is moreover a perspective on that practice. We have been working since to understand all the implications of James's double-barreled thought!

Our reflections in this chapter are designed to summarize, generally, five qualities that are distinctive in the communication research discussed in this volume. We organize these as five reflections that elaborate specific concerns of research design: (1) conceptualizing the researcher's concerns as communication concerns; (2) addressing social problems as communication problems; (3) asking research questions about communication; (4) using a methodology that is based upon communication theory and data; and (5) accounting for findings from the perspective of communication practices and theory, that is, demonstrating how communication is formative in structuring, or giving order to, social and cultural lives. In what follows we summarize each of these qualities as reflections upon the communication research assembled here.

In our reflections, we treat each author's work in a summary form, rather than delving into the details of their theories and research as it has been written into their contributions. We note that the authors' works do not, in the whole nor does each of their studies in part, necessarily include all five qualities, but some of their works, here and elsewhere, do. As a result, we introduce an important caveat. We are discussing a range of possibilities in various types of communication

research. Our comments are *not* intended as a requirement that all research has all of the five qualities discussed here. Our purpose is primarily reflective, not legislative! At the same time we would add that all five qualities, if present, can create a robustly designed communication study.

### QUALITY 1, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: CONCEPTUALIZING CONCERNS AS COMMUNICATION

We find it instructive to review how the authors in this book conceptualize their concerns as communication concerns. In other words, we ask: when the authors look upon the world as communication scholars, how do they see, hear, and/or feel it?

Leslie Baxter sees the concerns she researches as the “interactive process of meaning making,” and as an “interdependence of messages.” This process and this interdependence involve at times the “struggle among and between different discourses.” From her approach, she gives special attention to where discourses come from (i.e., their history), how they are being used in present communication events, and what might be said next. Her concerns bring into play multiple discourses, “inter-textual” relationships, and how utterances can play dialectically one with others. As she studies communication, she draws our attention to various personal, social, and cultural concerns, understands these as the interaction of messages which are potentially dense with meanings, potential sites of struggle and difference, all of this being constitutive of our social lives yet open to further negotiation.

Stan Deetz states a similar view of “communication as constitutive of identities, difference, [and] power relations.” He argues that some of the social problems of our day—including the problems of difference and social interdependence—can benefit from such a conceptualization. His treatment of the constitutive role of communication argues that the social process of communication precedes the personal sense of the world. This view renders knowledge, facts, and perception not as prior to communication, but as social outcomes of communication systems, even though these may be experienced as “presocial realities.” Deetz argues similarly that subjective states are also outcomes of communication processes as one sees and experiences in ways that are tutored, *a priori*, by a communication order. One of the tasks of this conceptualization, then, according to Deetz and kindred others, is uncovering just how communication has indeed led to this ordering of knowledge and experience in social and subjective lives. Through discussions of Habermas, Deetz elaborates his critical view that political,

or class-based dynamics are co-existent with these processes since power is “ever-present” in them. Positive developments are needed, Deetz argues, which embrace positive social relations through unveiling various communicative sites of discursive contestation, freeing them for scrutiny and change.

Michael Hecht discusses his view of “communication as culturally situated message design and interpretation.” He focuses upon culturally-based message design and its effects. Hecht is particularly concerned not just with the nature of message design, but moreover with the specific forms possible for the design of the message. Possibilities are indeed multiple in any one occasion for the “forming” of messages and it is the study of this variety, and the tailoring of it for a particular social and cultural context that are of concern in his large-scale studies. The narrative form of communication, as well as personal stories, plays a special role in his approach. While all people tell stories, Hecht recognizes that their ingredients, the characters, the plot lines, the dramatic actions, their resolution, and so on are situationally managed and culturally distinct. His approach then draws attention to local practices, identities, taken-for-granted knowledge, dynamics of belonging, inter-group dynamics, various cross-cultural dimensions of each, with each, when explored in context, helping to target messages about health to specific peoples and contexts.

Joseph Cappella and Robert Hornik take communication to be “a practical science of messages and their specific consequences.” Their goal is to isolate specific abstract features of messages and their consequences. The approach they adopt is deeply theory-driven, directed to isolating abstract dimensions of messages and asking why they have the specific consequences that they do. Conducting research in this way enables the investigators to provide practical, and a-cultural knowledge about communication, how it works generally, as well as how it can best be designed for specific purposes and effects. In their studies, they address several important social problems which we will examine in more detail below. They seek to create practical communicative action which can meet three general criteria: It is a practice that reaches targeted populations, effectively achieves its desired objectives (in form and content), and does so efficiently (providing maximum benefit at the lowest cost). Cappella and Hornik’s approach offers a highly productive conceptualization of communication as a practical and general “science of messages and their specific consequences.”

Gerry Philipsen conceptualizes “communication as culturally distinctive means and meanings.” His focus is on the ethnographic discovery of local means of communication including any available means being

used by community members; the concern is also with explicating the meanings these means of communication have to participants themselves. Traditionally ethnographers of communication, as Philipsen discusses, have understood the social world as a set of communication events, communication situations, or ways of speaking. Out of these conceptualizations have been developed additional concepts that explore and explain communication as a variety of speech codes and cultural discourses. Philipsen reviews a network of scholars' works that demonstrate a variety of ethnographic concerns such as the cultural uses and meanings of pronouns, the cultural drama of sojourner and diasporic identity, and the cultural conception and treatment of health. Each demonstrates the philosophical commitment to discovering "local means and meanings of communication," yet does so through a general, developing theoretical perspective that is being used and developed by this network of scholars. A goal of the network is accumulating a body of work that is available for consultation, and heuristically employed in their subsequent cooperative, collaborative, and cross-cultural research.

What makes communication research distinctive? One response is this: It is the conceptualization brought to its study. The conceptualizations of the above authors treat personal, social, and cultural lives, respectively, as communication processes of meaning-making, as formative of identities (differences and power relations), as culturally situated message design and interpretation, as a practical science of messages and their specific consequences, or as culturally distinctive means and meanings of expression. The world can and has been studied as such, as grandly complex communication phenomena, with some real—practical and theoretical—benefit, which we turn to next.

### QUALITIES 2-3, PROBLEMS AND PROBES: SOCIAL ISSUES AND ASKING ABOUT COMMUNICATION

What kinds of social problems are the authors addressing? What and how do they pose research questions about those problems?

Reflecting upon the scholars' works included here takes us into explorations of many of the important social problems and issues of our age. Yet for each, it is not just the specific significance of the problem being raised that is important, nor its prominence as a social problem, but how it is probed that distinguishes the works gathered here as communication research. The research questions posed and pursued are crucially important to reflect upon. So we ask: what problems are being addressed, and how are questions being posed about that problem?

Consider Leslie Baxter's works. In her studies, among other concerns, she asks us to think carefully about step-families, teen pregnancy, and alcohol use. She suggests a range of important questions about these by asking how people talk about alcohol use and teen pregnancy, and how discourse is structuring life in step-families. Note that these questions are posed not only to explore the topic of teen pregnancy and the like, but to create knowledge about the role of communication in structuring that topic, identities, and social relations. By so asking, she positions her studies to reveal discourses that create dialectical dynamics concerning, for example, pregnancy and alcohol use. In this way of probing, communication does not simply *reflect* relational dynamics, but is *openly constitutive* of people's relations as they deal with issues such as pregnancy and alcohol use.

Stan Deetz raises concerns about diversity and differences in the life of a society; he advocates inquiry about the role of power relations in understanding and addressing those concerns. Questions are suggested about how communication is practiced in a way such that some groups are being disadvantaged, or ethnic differences are being communicatively cast as negative rather than positive, or capitalist organizations are interactionally naturalized rather than problematized, or psychological states are treated expressively as given rather than being socially constituted. Deetz demonstrates how social problems of power and preference can and should be probed through questions like these, about communication as formative of differences, relations of dominance, and the like.

Michael Hecht addresses crucially important large-scale social problems surrounding health care and education. He asks how communication plays a role in portraying health in a particular way, for example, how smoking is expressed among teens in a city. He asks further, after knowing this, how communication can be designed to decrease the rate of teen smoking in such a community. The questions posed address crucial social problems, yet they do so in a theoretically focused, systematic, and large-scale way. Hecht's investigations, in other words, not only probe important social health problems, but do so by asking how communication is being structured to conceive of, interpret, and address those problems.

Joseph Cappella and Robert Hornik ask also about specific health concerns such as smoking, obesity, and the ways genetic health risks are discussed. Their approach is focused on specific yet abstract rather than cultural features of messages. These aspects of messages, they argue, have specific and traceable consequences. Their approach asks questions of "why and how" these features of messages work exactly as

they do. The objective is creating propositions which “represent causal claims that have a truth value well beyond their context and historical period of application.” For example, it is crucial to know, according to Cappella and Hornik, exactly whether specific outcomes co-vary with a “loss frame” and a “gain frame” in health messages, and whether these frames are being mediated by emotional processes such as anxiety, fear, and/or apprehension. Asking about specific features of messages, how they co-vary with others, and why they work as they do provides propositional knowledge about messages, and their consequences. These probes are crucial to pose not only for advancing our understanding of health issues such as smoking and genetic health risks, but also for developing a scientific and practical knowledge of how communication can be designed more effectively and efficiently for specific target populations.

Gerry Philipsen asks about the local means, and the meanings of communicating in specific human communities. He reviews a range of studies that address important social problems from levels of solidarity and intimacy within communities, to managing identity across cultural scenes, to basic interpretations of health and its treatment. Philipsen discusses two ongoing large-scale ethnographic research projects that are addressing issues of community security in Ghana, Nepal, and elsewhere, and the conduct of science among nano-scientists—and whether scientists say ethics should be included in their talk about their science. The ethnographic studies raise crucial social issues of difference, identity, health, security, science, and ethics while also generating an understanding of the ways communication locally structures the means and meanings of communicating about them in specific scenes.

What is distinctive, then, as communication research across these cases? Coupled with an impressive attentiveness to prominent social problems today, are the ways each can be probed. These scholars see communication as having a hand in forming conceptions of the social problem itself, as the process which gives it particularity in shape and meaning. They open the door to understanding how communication itself structures the public meanings of the social matter, and thus ask about each as not only an end product but as a result of a process of communication. Doing so deeply grounds investigations of these social problems in communication. As a result, and adding this point to the first quality above, social problems of our day are coupled not only with scholarly probes about, but theoretical perspectives of communication. Together, this helps contribute a communicational view to researching the matters at hand.

#### QUALITY 4, PROCEDURES: METHODOLOGY AND INQUIRING ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Our authors vary about whether methodology generally carries any particular accent when done in the context of communication research. Leslie Baxter, Michael Hecht, and others suggest that other researchers in other fields also do scientific study, qualitative research, field research, and/or ethnography as do communication scholars. In some sense, then, a particular method, like interviewing, may not be distinctive at a general level. But then, how the interviewing is designed, about what, may indeed be distinctive as part of a larger methodology. Along this line of thought, Michael Hecht suggests that perhaps a synthetic attentiveness to concerns which others tend to keep separate, such as designing methods attentive to communication and culture, may give communication scholars a distinctive accent in their design of research methodologies.

We want to suggest that research methodology is for some deeply tied to theoretical concerns. In this sense, if one has conceptualized concerns of study as communication concerns, for example, as the process of message design and interpretation, and if one is asking in one's research about communication practices, processes, or principles, then in some sense, at another level, the methodology one employs is itself distinctive as communication scholarship. If one is theorizing a dynamic of health delivery as “interactional message design,” then one's methodology includes data that are, in some sense, or should be, “interactional.” Or, if one is asking about discourses of power, then one's basic data should include a systematic examination of discursive data that exhibits, and systematically examines, power.

To reiterate, if a scholar is conceptualizing a phenomenon and developing research questions about it as communication, then one's data, the variety of data needed, and procedures for analyzing it will be somewhat distinctive as communication. Qualitative research, in particular, can examine what indeed are local, or salient events and processes of communication, as well as how these are related to a problem of investigation; probes can address how each communication event is the same as well as different from other events and processes. Quantitative research, in particular, can ask about the frequency and distribution, for example, of events and processes; how does each vary across sample and target populations? Each methodology, when turned to questions of communication has a distinctive role as it asks about communication phenomena and explores their nature, functions, and meanings, in theory and methodology.

Michael Hecht pushes a bit further, as do several others' discussions of collaborative group- and team-research. From the view of communication, an additional, reflexive dimension is possible. In other words, a communication researcher may not only explore the topic at hand such as security and teen pregnancy, but moreover can reflect upon the social process of conducting the research itself—as a communication process. Reflecting in this way can add further understanding to the social aspects of the research process itself. Researchers may ask: How are “we” researching this together, and how is this process an affordance and/or a hindrance to our study? This reflexive methodology is part of what may be offered by communication specialists to the process of doing research in teams, for the research is not only about communication but through a social process of communication itself. Research processes, then, can be understood in this way, as an additional subject for reflexive inquiry, the results of the reflection being used in the construction of further methodology, and thus benefiting from these insights about the conduct of the research team itself.

What makes a methodology distinctive as communication research? It is conceptualized to study communication, generates data that are communication, and formulates procedures for analyzing data as communication—possibly reflecting upon the research itself—as part of a complex communication process.

### QUALITY 5, EXPLANATIONS: POSITING COMMUNICATION AS FORMATIVE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

One reading of the above might suggest, as Kenneth Burke, William James, Susanne Langer, and Edward Sapir did long ago, that communication is understood as a primary social process, as the raw stuff of making more than the mere revealing of society. But can studying it help us interpret or explain anything? The authors here respond with a resounding “yes!”

Leslie Baxter uses the concept of discourse to account for various personal and social arrangements among families, teens, and tense moments. The latter are accounted for by formulating different and possibly contesting discourses, each positioning utterances and users in particular ways. Explaining the dynamics in this way, places them in a realm to be scrutinized, thus available for reflection and possible revision. The concept, discourse, and dialectics, help not only account for structure but also variation in personal and social lives. It offers further, from Baxter's view, an open space for reflection and possible changes.

Stan Deetz argues that communication generally, organizational and mass communication specifically, can be understood as deeply constitutive of social and personal lives. Conceived at the nexus of power and social construction, communication itself can explain received views of knowledge, of truth, of political structure. Through communication, such phenomena from knowledge to politics have been created, and unveiling the intricacies of this process offers a communicative explanation of knowledge, politics, and various other concerns.

Michael Hecht is able to explain the efficacy, or lack thereof, of large-scale health campaigns by positing culturally based views of message design, interpretation, and their effects. If an anti-smoking campaign succeeds, or fails, Hecht is able to identify cultural elements in, for example, the message form, or extant narratives, as reasons for this effect. In the process, communication has some explanatory power in the understanding and creation of health care and education. Cappella and Hornik examine health as well, but do so by formulating more general principles, focused on specific abstract features of messages, and the ways these co-vary, as principled explanations of messages' effectiveness in target populations.

Gerry Philipsen's ethnographic studies suggest interpretive accounts, and explanations through other concepts. A community's means and meanings of communication may reveal a code, or codes, through which a specific configuration of beliefs and values are active. The code may be active in communication events, or processes, and when so creates and presupposes certain meanings about social and cultural life. Of course, codes can be contested, and negotiated, situated or unsettled, as the drama of sojourner identity exhibits, but in any case when there is communication, according to this view, there are traces of culture that are active in that communication. Formulating a communication code, codes, or cultural discourses, is a way of describing, interpreting, and/or explaining through what means, and with what meanings communication is locally active.

So, what is distinctive as a communicative explanation? Each author, as others, has developed a technical vocabulary that is used for descriptive and explanatory purposes. As the latter, accounts are developed for interpreting, and explaining phenomena as the consequence of a communication process. In this way, various accounts are offered about important social phenomena such as stepfamilies, teens and alcohol, differences and power relations, health campaigns, obesity and smoking, security and science. Something significant and important can be said about each not merely as a topic for discussion, but as the result of communication practices, of a discourse, of a discursive struggle, of a

culturally situated message, of means and meanings of a community's communication, of a culturally discursive speech code. Each conceptual framework, then, as each program of research, offers not just a way of understanding a phenomenon in the world, but offers a way of accounting for that phenomenon. In this way, communication is not just the topic of concern, or a description of a social and cultural process, but offers a way of accounting for that concern and those processes.

### BY WAY OF CONCLUDING

The study of communication of course has many varieties and flavors. We think this is a good and productive sign. We lament not being able to offer a fuller menu of offerings here for there are many worthy candidates. As mentioned in our Introduction, certainly there are other approaches and scholars which deserve as careful consideration as those we have discussed here. And for sure there are many who warrant as serious consideration as those discussed in detail here. Nonetheless, in the five programs of research we reflected upon, we find at least five distinctive qualities in communication research. These involve conceptualizing personal and social lives as discourses, pursuing crucial social problems as communication phenomena, probing those phenomena, including health, in large-scale data-based research studies, employing a methodology which keeps communication in view when designing information campaigns, and formulating accounts of cultural codes as resulting from communication itself.

We have deliberately *not* discussed these qualities as a quick recipe, or a necessity, or a requirement, or a legislative dictate for all communication studies. We seek not to impose a rigid stamp on the field. We do seek to reflect upon what makes communication research distinctive. The field is of course wide with many rows, several types of soil, each yielding its own plants, and other forms of vibrant life. And there are other fields! Again, we have reflected on just what might be distinctive about our research as *communication* research. We hope the contributions we have gathered here, and our reflections, contribute to a discussion of such concerns. What we have done simply is present five dimensions, a pentad with a purpose, that is, a set of possible topoi for saying what is distinctive in our communication research, as communication research.

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