

Chapter 9

Adapting and Advancing Organizational Communication Research Methods: Balancing Methodological Diversity and Depth, While Creating Methodological Curiosity

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ABSTRACT

Organizational Communication scholars have a rich history of encouraging multiple approaches to data collection and analysis. In this chapter, I provide examples from our recent history that illustrate how we have developed our broad perspective on research methods. I also disclose the struggles I had when trying to decide how to represent the trends in published methods found in Management Communication Quarterly between 2000 and 2015. My analysis revealed that approximately two thirds of the papers published in MCQ used a qualitative approach to data collection. Mixed methods were rare, while using multiple methods was more common and has been stable over time. The chapter ends by highlighting pedagogical issues surrounding our field's acceptance of methodological diversity. I argue that as teachers, we must not lose the value of educating the next generation to be methodologically deep in some research approaches. However, we must also encourage methodological curiosity; a mindset that will allow our students to continue learning methods well beyond their graduate education.

INTRODUCTION

It is a great time to be an organizational communication scholar. We have moved beyond our discipline's early arguments privileging either qualitative or quantitative methods (e.g., Doerfel & Gibbs, 2014; Myers, 2014; Putnam, 2014), and we have methodological flexibility. Now, organizational communication

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methodology is more entwined with theory and not dictated by strict ontology or epistemology. The papers in the Research Methods Track of the *Organizational Communication Traditions, Transitions, and Transformation Conference* reflect our methodological flexibility and push us to consider the future of our research methods. The papers also make us stop and think about what we need to teach our next generation of scholars so they can read and participate in continuing to expand our acceptance of diverse methods.

In this paper, I embrace the conference theme by examining the traditions and transitions of our methods as represented by our published research. I suggest that as we continue to transform and build organizational communication, we face some distinct challenges. Those challenges center on how we continue to embrace methodological diversity, while simultaneously developing methodological depth. I challenge our field to openly discuss our pedagogy/andragogy and how we teach our next generation to be methodologically curious.

But before I begin, in honoring our commitment to researcher reflexivity and acknowledgment of research bias, I confess ... I am a research methods junkie. Having been trained as an analytical chemist, I spent the first decade of my working career living in a post-positivist world. I knew no other reality, but I realized that real humans, in actual organizations, did not always behave in predictable ways. I entered graduate school to become a social scientist and get the tools I needed to better understand organizational life. I often tell my graduate students that my only regret in graduate school is that I did not take even more methods courses. I did a qualitative master's thesis and a mixed methods dissertation. I fully embrace the view that using different methods gives us tools to answer more complex questions.

With my confession as a backdrop, let me share the structure of this chapter. To ground the research presented in this chapter, I first review the recent research method publications produced by scholars in our field. Next, I share the research design decisions I made to address two research questions concerning the methods and trends of publishing in organizational communication. While I present numerical counts of published work that demonstrate the types of methodological approaches often used, there are also qualitative examples included. These findings raise some important issues in how we approach pedagogy and andragogy concerning research methods.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS ON RESEARCH METHODS USED IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Organizational communication scholars are establishing our expertise by writing books that explain and describe research practices and methodological approaches. Sarah Tracy's (2012) book, *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*, does a nice job describing a range of approaches and practices. She also accurately argues that qualitative researchers are often forced to comply with traditional journal formats and expectations for research publications. Peter Monge and Nosh Contractor's book, *Theories of communication networks*, is another example of how our scholars are establishing our methodological expertise and demonstrating how theory is tightly tied into method. Finally, scholars regularly publish communication methods textbooks that are broadly used throughout the field of communication (e.g. Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Keyton, 2015)

The most recent *Sage Handbook of Organizational Communication* edited by Linda Putnam & Dennis Mumby (2014) breaks from traditions in our field and has no clear demarcation of chapters labeled quantitative and qualitative research. While one chapter, Organizational Ethnography and Qualitative

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