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Contents

Qualitative Research in Communication

Mireia FERNÁNDEZ-ARDÈVOL, Corina DABA-BUZOIANU, Loredana IVAN
Qualitative Research in Communication. Introductory remarks / 9

Bryan C. TAYLOR, Thomas R. LINDLOF
Travelling Methods: Tracing the Globalization of Qualitative Communication Research / 11

Liz YEOMANS
Researching emotional labour among Public Relations consultants in the UK: a social phenomenological approach / 31

Valeriu FRUNZARU
Workplace health and safety committees in Romania. The gap between law and reality / 53

Diana-Luiza DUMITRIU
Who is responsible for the team's results? Media framing of sports actors' responsibility in major sports competitions / 65

Mireia FERNÁNDEZ-ARDÈVOL, Loredana IVAN
Older People and Mobile Communication in Two European Contexts / 83

Book review

Ioana SCHIAU
Review of *The Interpersonal Communication Book*, 13th edition, Joseph A. Devito. New York: Pearson, 2012, 432 pages / 101

Call for papers / 105

Sumar

Cercetări calitative în comunicare

Mireia FERNÁNDEZ-ARDÈVOL, Corina DABA-BUZOIANU and Loredana IVAN
Cercetări calitative în comunicare. Introducere / 9

Bryan C. TAYLOR, Thomas R. LINDLOF
Metode în mișcare. Globalizarea cercetării calitative a comunicării / 11

Liz YEOMANS
Studiul muncii emoționale la consultanții de relații publice din Marea Britanie: o abordare socio-fenomenologică / 31

Valeriu FRUNZARU
Comitetele pentru sănătatea și securitatea în muncă din România – între legislație și realitate / 53

Diana-Luiza DUMITRIU
Cine este responsabil de rezultatele echipei? Mecanismele media de atribuire a responsabilității pentru rezultatele din competițiile sportive majore / 65

Mireia FERNÁNDEZ-ARDÈVOL, Loredana IVAN
Vârstnicii și dispozitivele mobile de comunicare. Două contexte europene / 83

Recenzie

Ioana SCHIAU
Recenzia cărții *The Interpersonal Communication Book,* ediția 13-a, Joseph A. Devito. New York: Pearson, 2012, 432 pagini / 101

Call for papers / 105

Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol*
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Loredana Ivan***

Qualitative Research in Communication. Introductory Remarks

Questions regarding communication practices in everyday interactions and how people attribute meanings to the communication acts are issues frequently addressed by social-science researchers and practitioners. Qualitative research may reveal possible answers, as it tends to be concerned with meanings (Willig, 2013). That is, with how people make sense of the world and how people experience events:

> *Qualitative researchers tend to be concerned with the quality and texture of the experience, rather than with the identification of cause-effect relationships. […] The objective of qualitative research is to describe and possibly explain events and experiences, but never to predict.* (ibid, p. 51-52)

This approach can also contribute to addressing social problems from a perspective that might complement other methodological approaches. Not only the academia is interested in qualitative approaches to social problems, but also policy makers and practitioners demand and appreciate them for decision making. It is of most importance, in any case, to guarantee the quality of the research. Particularly, we can identify three specific dimensions that are becoming an increasingly important issue: the quality of methods, the quality of data, and the quality of data analysis (Silverman, 2004).

There are different ways of understanding how, and what, can we know. That is, there are different epistemological approaches that lead to differentiated research objectives, and to the use of different methods and methodologies. In consequence, and as s argued by Denzin & Lincoln (2005), the field of qualitative research is defined primarily by a series of essential tensions and contradictions. These are reflected in the different ways handbooks of qualitative research are designed and organized.

Qualitative inquiry is a multidisciplinary field due to differentiated epistemological approaches. Existing tensions, contradictions and hesitations make worthy to establish appropriate contexts for dialogue and cross fertilization. Under our point of view, the International Conference "Qualitative Research in Communication" (QRC) provided such a context.

This issue gathers a selection of papers presented at the International Conference "Qualitative Research in Communication" celebrated in October 3-4, 2013 at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest. The QRC conference was

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designed to explore qualitative research as a method of inquiry which enriches the understanding of communication and of social phenomena. It also aimed to provide a venue for discussing and assessing theories and methods currently used in qualitative research in communication, as well as future trends likely to impact the work being done in this field. The conference focused on sharing and examining qualitative research methodologies, research topics, questions and applications, with a consistent emphasis on their merits and limitations as inquiry tools deployed in the study of communication. The conference was not limited to methodological aspects, and welcomed studies that focus on the results qualitative research in communication.

This was the first of a biannual series of conferences co-organized by the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, Romania (via the Center for Research in Communication), and by the University of Lower Silesia in Wroclaw, Poland (via the Academic Counseling Studies Society) and gathered 43 peer-reviewed, high level contributions.

The reader will find a set of different perspectives in this issue. First, Bryan C. Taylor and Thomas R. Lindlof explore the globalization of qualitative communication research methods by analyzing them as artefacts of globalization. Second, Liz Yeomans develops a phenomenological approach to research emotional labour in a given context, public relations consultants in the UK. Third and still in the labour environment, Valeriu Frunzaru approaches to tensions and contradictions regarding workplace health and safety committees in Romania by means of in-depth interviews. Fourth, Diana-Luiza Dumitriu conducted textual and visual discourse analyses to bring new empirical evidences on how mass media frame sport actors' responsibility by focusing on the Romanian women handball team. Finally, Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol and Loredana Ivan focused on interpersonal communication and, by means of semi-structured interviews, analyzed the relationship older people have with and through mobile communication in two different European contexts.

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Bryan C. Taylor*
Thomas R. Lindlof**

Travelling Methods: Tracing the Globalization of Qualitative Communication Research

Abstract

Existing discussion of the relationships between globalization, communication research, and qualitative methods emphasizes two images: the challenges posed by globalization to existing communication theory and research methods, and the impact of post-colonial politics and ethics on qualitative research. We draw in this paper on a third image – qualitative research methods as artifacts of globalization – to explore the globalization of qualitative communication research methods. Following a review of literature which tentatively models this process, we discuss two case studies of qualitative research in the disciplinary subfields of intercultural communication and media audience studies. These cases elaborate the forces which influence the articulation of national, disciplinary, and methodological identities which mediate the globalization of qualitative communication research methods.

Keywords: Globalization; Qualitative research methods; Communication discipline.

Qualitative researchers currently work in an era of self-conscious 'globalization.' Like all humans, they are affected by recent transformations (e.g., the 'compression' and 'flattening') of space-time relationships in international politics, economics, and society attributable to technological innovation and neo-liberal hegemony. Uniquely, however, these phenomena encourage qualitative researchers to understand and perform their work *differently.* Our purpose in this essay is to better understand how these differences affect qualitative *communication* researchers. We begin by identifying three discourses which configure the relationships between qualitative research and globalization.

1. Globalization as a topic of qualitative research

Conventionally, qualitative researchers orient to globalization as a confluence of changing conditions which affect their chosen objects of study, and which provoke the revision of existing theory and methodology (Brown & Labonte, 2011; Featherstone, 2006; Gille & O'Riain, 2002; Quilgars, et al., 2009; Ramabrahmam &Hariharan, 2005; Sreberny, 2008). These conditions include the increasingly fluid movement of material and symbolic phenomena (e.g., bodies and information) within and across national borders, the erosion of the regulatory state by multi-national corporations and international regimes of aid and development,

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the use of new media by cultural members to expand their social networks, the acceleration of transactions created by the increased access of cultural members to shared information sources, and an increasingly-standardized global landscape of (predominantly Western, but increasingly hybrid) cultural meanings and artifacts created by converging media corporations.

In this discourse, globalization is depicted as a complex and urgent phenomenon, one whose material, symbolic, and cognitive components are to be explained. Three issues have been especially salient for qualitative researchers. The first involves the types, amounts, and effectiveness of influence exerted by interdependent actors engaged in international exchange (e.g., categorized as causality, co-constitution, and/or indeterminate 'flow'). A second issue involves the tendencies towards integration / homogeneity and differentiation / heterogeneity that are experienced by groups subject to the forces of contemporary globalization. A third issue involves the rise of international social movements challenging neo-liberal hegemony.

Here, successfully-adapted qualitative research is depicted as uniquely capable of capturing the granular integrity of subtle, complex, and local activities conducted in relation to contemporary globalization. Cultural subjects are viewed as mobilizing their available resources to interpret their increasingly jagged and fluid forms of experience. Those resources enable them to conceptualize and interact with changing conditions (Burawoy, 2001), and to forge specific forms of connection and disconnection which serve their situations. As a result, qualitative methods are held to generate inductive knowledge which usefully complicates the macro-level abstractions and universalism of dominant globalization discourses.

2. Globalization as a transformation of the ethical and political contexts of qualitative research

This second discourse addresses the consequences for qualitative research generated by what de Sousa Santos (2006, p. 397) has termed "insurgent cosmopolitanism. " de Sousa Santos defines this condition as resistance practiced by "social organizations and movements representing those classes and social groups victimized by hegemonic globalization and united in concrete struggles against exclusion, subordinate inclusion, destruction of livelihoods, and ecological destruction, political oppressions, or cultural suppression . . . "

These consequences are also tied to the post-colonial atonement of cultural anthropology (with its attendant "crisis in representation") famously performed in landmark volumes authored by Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Marcus and Fischer (1986). This discourse emphasizes the historical complicity of qualitative researchers in facilitating the global hegemony of Western culture and modern institutions (e.g., urbanization and industrialization). Specifically, their work presumptuously objectified the manifold cultural Other as primitive and exotic, depriving it of its rightful agency and voice (Sullivan & Brockington, 2004). As a result, qualitative research has been hoisted on the petard of its espoused values of empathy (*verstehen*) and diversity. Practitioners and participants alike have recounted the irony of how, in practice, those ideals contribute to ethnocentric knowledge which inhibits their very fulfillment. One example here involves the dependence of the ethnographic interview on distinctly Western, liberal-democratic assumptions concerning the inherently 'private' individuality of speakers, their related existence in separate 'publics', and their subsequent possession of relevant 'opinions' and 'attitudes' (Gobo, 2011, pp. 423-427).

This discourse expresses the mixture of anger, sadness, resolve – and also cautious optimism – felt among indigenous peoples and their scholarly advocates, as the former seek to move beyond their historical experience of degradation and exploitation under imperialism, and to develop distinctively *de*-colonizing structures of critical qualitative research. Jointly enacted with sympathetic researchers, those structures may realize a constellation of alternative values, including: *spirituality, embodiment, openness, equality, accountability, respect, collaboration,* and *empowerment*. Two prominent exemplars here include Smith's (2005) and Bishop's (2005) manifestos for qualitative research of/with the Maori people of Arotearoa / New Zealand, based on master principles such as *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination) and *whakawhanaungatanga* (extended family-like relationships, based on consistent displays of cultural appropriateness and shared commitment to mutual well-being).

Depicted in this discourse, researchers use qualitative methods to engage distinctively local inflections of counter-hegemonic and post-colonial discourses. These inflections manifest as, for example, participants' vernacular conceptions of cultural performances and research ethics which they have deemed sufficient to honor – and perhaps recover – what has been compromised and displaced by the twin juggernauts of modernism and (neo-) imperialism (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005, pp. 1118-1121). Here, qualitative researchers must develop improvisational skills required to negotiate emergent challenges posed by cultural members even to their ethically- and politically-sensitized positions [e.g., in fieldwork conducted among groups who have been historically victimized by a researcher's home culture (Uddin, 2011)].

Qualitative research methods as artifacts of globalization

Our third discourse is also concerned with global change and post-colonial politics. Distinctively, however, it depicts qualitative research methods as *a commodity circulating in a global geography of knowledge flows* (Alasuutari, 2004). This condensed image requires some unpacking.

First, it establishes that qualitative methods possess material status as artifacts fashioned and exchanged in particular international economies. Commentary here establishes the local heritage of qualitative methods as 'inventions' produced during the 19th and 20th centuries by British, Western European, and North American scholars. Although these methods were originally intended to solve particular problems faced by those scholars, they have nonetheless been "exported" to other nations and cultures, where their use has constrained the potential for cultivating plural and mutually-implicating systems of cultural knowledge (Gobo, 2011).

Second, this image politicizes the forces of supply and demand which structure this international knowledge economy. Here, commentary underscores the hierarchies of legitimacy and authority which have privileged the import of Western-based theory and methods to develop scholarly institutions in the nations of the global East and South.

These structures have produced several undesirable outcomes, which disadvantage non-Western scholars seeking to access and influence the mainstream institutions of contemporary social science (Liu, 2011; Ryen & Gobo, 2011; "World Social Science Report – Summary," 2010). Six outcomes are especially relevant. The first involves the normalization of Western epistemologies which universalize culturally-specific qualities of human subjectivity and agency (e.g., of rationality, individualism, separation, competitiveness, and strategic calculation). A second outcome involves the centralization of advanced academic training among institutions of higher education located in North America and Western Europe.