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## Special Issue Introduction: Coming to Terms in the Muddy Waters of Qualitative Inquiry in Communication Studies

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**Special Issue Introduction:  
Coming to Terms in the Muddy Waters of  
Qualitative Inquiry in Communication Studies**

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When we were accepted into graduate school, we were presented with opportunities as well as expectations. These opportunities included chances for making a difference in the lives of others, coming to understand the details of our social worlds a little bit better, and becoming different people through the process. These opportunities were imbued with hopes and desires; that is, opportunities imply accepting expectations. These expectations included teaching, seminar reading, research, and various social-networking activities. These expectations can make navigating academia a daunting task—much like wading through the waters of a muddy pond. We have an idea of where we would like to go, but our progress feels murky and can require more effort than anticipated. Worst of all, it often feels as if we are navigating these muddy waters alone without a friend or mentor to guide us.

When we were invited to write an introduction to this Special Issue of *Kaleidoscope* on the nature of qualitative research, we felt apprehension about the prospect of walking into those murky waters again. Even though Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that the basic function of qualitative research in communication studies is to “study *the performances and practices of human communication*” (p. 4, emphasis in original), we find ourselves caught in a web of opportunities and expectations when we started to write about what constitutes the texture of our research practices. We are presented with an opportunity to define the nature and purpose of qualitative research and accept the expectation that we can capture the complexities that constitute its practice. How do we offer insights into the nature of qualitative inquiry while still respecting the voices of those that have created this space for us?

In this introduction of the Special Issue section, we include three main sections. We first lay out definitions of qualitative research in general and then in the communication field more specifically. Second, we offer two major tenets of qualitative research that we believe constitute the foundation for future scholars to follow in qualitative research. Finally, we conclude this

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essay by offering a preview of the two featured articles in this issue as they serve as apt examples for the understanding of qualitative inquiry we offer.

### **Qualitative Research (in Communication): Definitions and Tenets**

Qualitative research has been discussed widely by scholars within and beyond the communication field. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) offer a generic definition of qualitative research: “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). Similarly, opposing the positivist assumptions and quantitative research, Carey (1975) explains that qualitative research is to “seize upon the interpretations people place on existence and to systematize them so they are more readily available to us. . . . [including] studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths . . .” (p. 190). Within the communication discipline, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) claim that the discipline “has generally institutionalized ‘qualitative research’ as a covering term for scholarship that views the empirical dimensions of symbolic interaction as the raw material for documentation and reflection” (p. 12). Moreover, rather than imposing a given understanding or theory, qualitative communication research attempts “to engage the communication event that centers a study . . . and is responsive to learning and innovations called forth from us, not imposed upon the focal point of the study” (Arnett, 2007, p. 30). It is not our intention to make the list of definitions exhaustive. However, these definitions highlight some of the assumptions of qualitative scholars within our field, which encourages us to build on these explanations as a framework for what we see are two important tenets of qualitative research.

We argue that qualitative inquiry, as a mode of communication research, focuses on communication as *a constitutive process of intersubjective, relational meaning-making*. We believe this understanding of qualitative communication research incorporates the aforementioned definitions and offers greater complexity to notions of performance and practice (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). From our point of view, complexity arises when scholars acknowledge that the performance and practice of research are not isolated, but are both intersubjective and systematically structured. From this starting point, we also contend that our understanding encompasses Littlejohn and Foss’ (2011) notion of inquiry as a “systemic study of experience that leads to understanding, knowledge, and theory” (p. 9) and of humanistic scholarship as an endeavor that seeks “alternative interpretations. . . largely determined by who one is. . . [and] especially well-suited to problems of art, personal experience, and values” (p. 10). Because of the humanistic, intersubjective, and systemic assumptions of these views on qualitative communication research, such approaches are inherently different from quantitative, scientific approaches. Below, we elaborate on the tenets of qualitative communication inquiry as constitutive and intersubjective and relational meaning-making.

## **Communication as Constitutive**

The first tenet we emphasize is that qualitative inquiry in communication studies focuses on communication as a constitutive process. For us, this means that communication is more than representation or a transmission between source and audience. As qualitative researchers, we believe that communication is a process that creates, sustains, and challenges our sense of selves, community, and society (Charland, 1987; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). To note that communication is constitutive is to understand communication as a co-emerging act whereby our performances and practices are produced within, and participate in producing, cultural and political structures.

One way we can see how communication constitutes our social realities is to look to everyday mundane communicative practices of graduate school. In our first few semesters of doctoral studies, the traditional rituals and ways of communication stood out among the various things we encountered; such rituals included ice-breakers, conversations in shared offices, happy hours on Friday, and weekends filled with grading and research. The importance of these performances and practices were not overtly explicated to us. However, through those rituals and communication acts, we gradually learned how we ought to best manage our time and why it was important to get to know our colleagues. In other words, these traditional practices lies in the constitutive process that serves to create, sustain, and challenge our understandings of “proper” graduate student performances. Our simultaneous participation in both general and esoteric discourses about succeeding in graduate school not only shaped our own communication behaviors, but also constrained our program for future colleagues and cohorts.

To summarize this tenet, qualitative research in communication studies takes a constitutive view of discursive interactions and iterations. As qualitative researchers, we believe that our communication and social worlds are co-constitutive; they shape and constrain possibilities, and thus, communication can be used to both create and undermine powerful social practices. This is to say that the forms and methods we use to communicate, even about communication, can help us to better understand and articulate the social systems we are a part of while also to aid us when thinking about ways to alter those systems might serve to suppress and dominate alternative forms and methods of communication. Through studying communication as a constitutive process, qualitative communication researchers can attempt to make their social worlds more just places to live.

## **Communication as Intersubjective and Relational Meaning-making**

In addition to the constitutive nature of communication, qualitative communication researchers also focus on “who” and “what” is constituted. Hence, we focus both on the process of communication as well as the subjects

and context of a communication event when we seek to better understand the intersubjective and relational nature of meaning-making. Brummett (1976) argues that all social reality and meaning is intersubjectively experienced and produced. Building on this notion, Cherwitz and Darwin (1995) stress that meaning is best understood as “the confluence of relationships within, between, and among bodies. . . . ‘[B]odies’ include such phenomena as language, objects, rhetors, and auditors” (p. 20). The implication of this tenet is that social meaning has the propensity to constantly change as people relate differently with one another. Thus, qualitative communication researchers concentrate on how communication is used to build, sustain, and challenge the intersubjective performances and practices that constitute our social realities. Valuing these multiple and alternative understandings rather than seeking a unified and quantifiable explanation, qualitative communication research is particularly apt at highlighting processes and meanings of social realities and human communication.

As qualitative communication researchers, we seek out the moments when these multiple and alternative understandings encounter each other. Through our practices of relating through research, we develop intersubjective relationships with countless fellow graduate students, conference attendees, faculty members, and so on, that serve to produce, sustain, and challenge the academic identities we wish to craft and the academy in which we wish to participate. Understanding communication as intersubjective and relational meaning-making enables us to embrace the murkiness of the academy and find agency in the choices we make amidst the otherwise cloudy surroundings. Locating intersubjective and relational meanings between ourselves, others, and the systems we participate in, qualitative communication research helps us to explain our constantly changing social worlds more holistically and from multiple perspectives. Through these explanations, we hope to have shown why qualitative inquiry in communication studies focuses on communication as a constitutive process of intersubjective and relational meaning-making and why qualitative communication researchers ought to continue focusing on such processes, in the hope of creating a more holistically understanding of the building blocks of social reality.

### **Special Issue on Methods of Qualitative Inquiry**

This Special Issue on methods of qualitative inquiry features two unique approaches to qualitative research in communication studies. The first article challenges the concept of aesthetics in performance studies. Building on presence and absence within aesthetic discourses as a method of performance criticism, Mapes (2014) introduces the concept of supplemental aesthetics. Adapting Derrida’s notion of supplement, Mapes (2014) acknowledges the constitutive notions of supplemental aesthetics by encouraging “a dialectic understanding of aesthetics: we make meaning by the simultaneous experience

of reading what is present *and* what is absent on stage” (p. 79). What is more, supplemental aesthetics also methodologically advances performance criticism by embracing an intersubjective and relational understanding of performance “as it forces recognition of the unoriginality of ideas, asking a performer to be held accountable for the traces or supplements draw on and from in a performance” (p. 81). The second article pushes the Bakhtinian perspective of carnivalesque into the arena of organizational communication. Pointing to the constitutive nature of such a perspective, Kolodziej-Smith (2014) writes, “The Bakhtinian concept of carnival integrates these two approaches, Goffman’s descriptions of social interactions between people and Burkean interpretation of their discourse” (p. 87). The carnivalesque perspective, posited by Bakhtin and extended by Kolodziej-Smith (2014), points us toward understanding how organizational communication also can be understood through a constitutive and relational worldview. Together, these articles exemplify the value of understanding communication as a constitutive process of intersubjective and relational meaning-making for qualitative research in communication studies due to its focus on the subjects and practices that build, sustain, and challenge previous understandings about these particular theoretical systems.

In conclusion, we have explicated the general definitions of qualitative research and then delved into the two major tenets of how we understand such inquiry in communication studies. Communication as a constitutive process and intersubjective and relational meaning-making are two tenets that have guided our ways when navigating the qualitative communication research. In two of the subsequent essays in this Special Issue, Mapes (2014) and Kolodziej-Smith (2014) both echo our tenets of qualitative inquiry in communication studies and provide great examples of such tenets. The waters of qualitative inquiry might just always be murky and difficult to navigate, especially as they ebb and flow with the changes offered by researchers, new and old; however, it is because those waters are changed through our actions that we must continue accepting new and challenging opportunities. In doing so, we accept the expectations that our changes open new and hopefully more just ways of moving through these complex social systems for ourselves and future graduate students alike.

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