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Taking the Plunge: A Contextual Approach to Problem-Based Research

Sarah J. Tracy

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I do problem-based research because it helps me answer the "who cares" question, generate novel theoretical insights, and provide a window for practical change. Of course, I am not alone in believing that the communication discipline could be enhanced through a focus on problems and *in situ* communication. I am thankful that my training at the University of Colorado included a problem-based approach, and fortunate to be surrounded with colleagues at Arizona State University who examine communication dilemmas and encourage innovative problem-based research approaches.

Indeed, the need for our scholarship to make a difference is nothing new. More than a decade ago, Craig and Tracy (1995) encouraged scholars to theorize in ways that address "actual problems and requirements of communicative praxis in particular settings" (p. 249). In *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg (2001) delineated a lucid explanation of "phronetic research," the task of which is "to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are" (p. 140). In his presidential address at the 2002 National Communication Association convention, James Applegate urged communication scholars to engage in the kind of use-inspired basic research (Stokes, 1999) that would solve problems and improve lives.

So, why do we continue to have forums like this? Perhaps a problem with fulfilling the call for theorizing communication problems is that people need more information about the challenges of doing problem-based research. In this forum I draw from my past qualitative organizational communication scholarship to discuss several methodological and epistemological issues that have been particularly

Sarah J. Tracy (PhD, University of Colorado) is an Associate Professor and Director of The Project for Wellness and Work-Life at Arizona State University at the Tempe campus. She acknowledeges colleague Angela Trethewey and forum editor Robert Craig for insightful suggestions on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Correspondence to: Sarah J. Tracy, The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, PO Box 871205, Tempe, AZ 85287-1205, USA. E-mail: Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu

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significant and/or challenging in my efforts to engage and make sense of situated communication problems.

Taking the Plunge

Last summer I watched with pleasure as two little girls played in a shallow swimming hole off Lake Coeur D'Alene. The younger girl lingered on the sunny bank, curious but wary, while her older sister sat in the middle of the swirling water. After several longing glances to her little sister, the bigger girl impatiently squealed, "For goodness sakes, sit down and get your butt wet!" The little girl furrowed her brow, and with pudgy cheeks scrunched into courage, she gingerly toddled into the cool water and plopped down. After several seconds of initial wide-eyed shock, the little girl began to splash and giggle. She seemed quite pleased with her courageous decision to take the plunge and "get her butt wet."

The reason I share this story is because it endearingly sums up a tenet central to problem-based research: Engaging a context, complete with the shock and messiness that accompanies the happenstance of concrete social situations, is vital for clarifying moral issues and problems.

Context takes a central role in my research, and a priori theory, a backseat. I'm not criticizing rules, rationality, and theory—only the dominance of deductive theoretical approaches to the exclusion of the inductive and detailed studies of context. According to the most recent comprehensive critical analysis of the organizational communication field (Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004), the examination of spontaneous contextual communication in real organizations is rare. This is unfortunate, because inductive analyses can lead to the most novel and unexpected theoretical extensions. And, as Corman (2006) plainly warns, "If we do not spend significantly more time studying in situ organizational communication, some other discipline will do the job for us" (p. 334). The first step to doing field research, though, is often the most difficult.

Negotiating access to nonpublic contexts requires a mixture of diligence, persuasiveness, credibility, and resilience. Rejection is part of the game. When trying to get into a scene, I use simple rationales such as, "I want to tell correctional officers' stories from their point of view." Pinpointing specific problems up front may not only be misleading, but also can scare gatekeepers (e.g., one manager refused access because he thought my study might "plant the idea of burnout in employees' heads").

Access is eased through having a good network. As an inexperienced graduate student, I got into 911 only because I was working with an established and credible scholar (Tracy & Tracy, 1998). I have also found ease of access to be directly associated with legwork. Getting access to prisons and jails necessitated a painstaking series of informational interviews where one contact led me to the next in a "seven degrees of separation" fashion. I cold-called academics who studied prison life; they put me in touch with other researchers; and they connected me with prison ministry and volunteer coordinators. I waited until I had a hefty list of "friends" in the business before I approached final organizational gatekeepers.

Once I get into the scene, I use sensitizing research questions such as the following: (a) where are we going?; (b) who gains, and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?; (c) is this desirable?; and (d) what should be done? (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 60). While I will never have enough data or wisdom to provide complete answers to the questions, my hope is to open up the scene in an interesting way. During observations, I take detailed scratch notes that include verbatim quotes, nonverbal communication and analytical asides. I get close to the people (sometimes becoming a full or "play" participant myself), focusing on everyday minutia and ambiguity. I also seek out, through analysis of training manuals and interviews with superiors, information about the structural factors that influence employee practices.

Field observations are complemented by in-depth interviews. Participant narratives are crucial for understanding how problems might best be addressed because, as MacIntyre (1981) puts it: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do' if I can answer the prior question of 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (p. 216). For instance, in order to provide suggestions for transforming workplace bullying, it is important to understand the metaphors by which targets frame their abuse—metaphors that fundamentally delimit opportunities for action (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006).

Doing Problem-Based Analysis—*Not* Three Easy Steps

The contextual problem-based study, rather than being guided by clear gaps in the literature and predeveloped research questions based upon extant theoretical frameworks, is instead marked by an iterative (back and forth) reading of previous research and analysis of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis process is cyclical and layered rather than deductive and linear (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). And, a key part of the process is figuring out an analysis that is *interesting*, *practically important*, and *theoretically significant*. To do so, it is important to diligently pay attention to little questions. As illustrated by Geertz (1973), attention to everyday issues (e.g., cockfights) lends itself to bigger answers (e.g., about the Balinese culture). Likewise, I have found that small actions—such as a correctional officer slamming inmates' doors when dishing up chow—can encapsulate significant meanings of employee identity (Tracy, 2005).

During the analysis process, I read and reread the data, and engage in various prescribed qualitative processes that include line-by-line coding, creating analysis matrices, and using qualitative data analysis software programs such as NVivo. I press the limits of existing theoretical models, and consider various conceptual lenses that might help make sense of what is going on. Hallier and Foirbes (2004) call this "prospective conjecture"—a process that asks researchers to consider novel theoretical juxtapositions and borrow from other fields, models, and assumptions.

Much of this analysis work is intuitive, which becomes challenging to explain when students, editors, and reviewers demand step-by-step, transparent, rule-based descriptions of methods. However, perhaps the most important part of interpretive problem-based data studies—figuring out *what it is* that is interesting—can be an

ineffable process. "The harnessing of instinct, hunch, accumulated experience, and atypical sources of knowledge" (Hallier & Foirbes, 2004, p. 1408) is vital to grounded analyses. Therefore, while I encourage and engage in a range of methodological "best practices," these conventions in no way "guarantee" a strong analysis. Some research projects follow all of the rules, but still come up with ho-hum findings. Interesting analyses of situated field dilemmas require tacit skills that are learned through experience and working with others who do it well. When grounded researchers struggle to fully explain the process by which they came up with their findings, we should realize that this is not necessarily due to laziness or sloppy research. Rather, when experts—academic or otherwise—are forced to externalize their intuitive thinking processes to cognitive rational steps, they can actually make less competent decisions (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gladwell, 2005). If our discipline seriously wants to encourage contextual problem-based analyses, we should avoid the folly of requiring grounded researchers to articulate interpretive analysis steps in a rule-based fashion.

Change and Transformation Necessitate an Understanding of Power

Power is vital for making sense of contextual problems and providing a window for transformation. A critical poststructuralist theoretical lens is useful for scrutinizing the arbitrary and historical nature of institutional structures that appear to be neutral and objective. An examination of the genesis of cruise ship as *destination* rather than as *transportation* (Tracy, 2000), for instance, illuminates how the primacy of emotion labor is not absolutely necessary, but instead is based on power relations, where some individuals (cruise ship management) profit more than others (employees). This, in turn, suggests how normalized practices might be disrupted, altered or changed.

Foucault's (1980) emphasis on the way knowledge and power are intricately intertwined illuminates why it is that some problems are so sedimented and difficult to remedy. With institutional knowledge available to the dominant groups, the knowledge of subordinate members—which may be crucial for understanding a research problem—is often hidden and undermined. The examination of power relations is therefore necessary for making sense of how and why which issues even get "counted as" part of the knowledge that goes into figuring out a certain problem.

Last, a poststructuralist theoretical lens approaches knowledge and power as dispersed, unstable and plural. As such, it highlights occasions for domination and self-subordination (Deetz, 1998) and also indicates avenues for resistance and change (Mumby, 1997).

A Problem-Based Approach Looks Different

Communication scholars should intimately understand the importance of rhetorical presentation. To actually impact problems and promote change, we must not only publish in rigorous scholarly journals, but also present research to various stakeholders in a reader-friendly form, engaging various audiences with multiple texts (Goodall, 2004). This can be achieved in a number of ways, such as: writing

short, catchy and graphically-appealing white papers; publishing in professional trade journals; sharing research with media outlets; and creating evocative performances or texts that engage the audiences' passions and promote movement.

In addition to these issues of representation, we need to structurally consider the potential for problem solving as a central criterion of research excellence. Holding research accountable to the scrutiny of a *voluntary* audience of people who may be directly impacted by the results can only sharpen research skills and diligence. I would like to see a change in our graduate curricula, institutional compositions, and research evaluations, with as much emphasis on phronesis as episteme. Efforts to do so at Arizona State University are reflected in Angela Trethewey's new graduate seminar, entitled "Re-imagining the Research Enterprise," which is guided by the fundamental question: "How can we engage in scholarship that has transformative potential?" Furthermore, I am energized by The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication's strategic initiative reorganization that highlights pressing societal problems (e.g., wellness and work-life, terrorism and national security, health, conflict) as much as theoretical emphasis areas.

I hope that forums like this can inspire various ways of thinking about and carrying out studies of situated communication dilemmas. In summary, in order to take the plunge into theorizing communication problems, I encourage scholars to: (1) engage and immerse oneself in a context, leaving oneself open to emergent dilemmas; (2) iteratively analyze data through prospective conjecture and become comfortable with the often ineffable process of grounded research; (3) be attuned to power relations that camouflage subordinated knowledge (that may provide opportunities for action) and reinscribe extant powerful discourses (that may impede problem solving); and (4) develop research products that are engaging, accessible and able to be evaluated by a variety of audiences.

Using a phronetic approach to analyze emergent field problems is well-poised to extend communication theory, address society's value and moral predicaments, and make our discipline matter. However, "more than anything else, *phronesis* requires *experience*" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 57). In that vein, and in the spirit of those little girls in Coeur D'Alene, I encourage communication scholars to experience the shock, messiness, and delight of plunging into contextual problem-based research.

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