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Timothy P. Huffman, Sarah J. Tracy & Ryan S. Bisel

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Beautiful particularity: using phronetic, iterative, and heuristic approaches to a positively deviant case

Timothy P. Huffman^a, Sarah J. Tracy^b and Ryan S. Bisel^c

^aSaint Louis University; ^bArizona State University-Tempe; ^cUniversity of Oklahoma

ABSTRACT

Some events are so important and transformative that it is valuable to understand what led to the event so others may potentially reproduce it. But making claims from single cases has to be done carefully. This paper explains how to draw useful claims out of unique and inspiring cases. It reviews the methodological strategies that drove a case study looking at how hope and compassion changed the outcome of a would-be school shooting. Specifically, this paper demonstrates the value and process of choosing a positively deviant event on which to focus a case study. Further, it outlines how to approach qualitative analysis from a phronetic, iterative, and heuristic stance. Finally, it offers recommendations for how to make claims made from a single case and how to position them in the context of other studies.

KEYWORDS

Positive deviance; qualitative analysis; qualitative methods; compassion; claim making

This essay narrates the methodological choices used to navigate a unique form of qualitative case study. The featured case study analysed the discourse and conversational moves of an interaction that averted a would-be school shooting (Tracy & Huffman, 2016). For the project, we took an iterative, phronetic, and heuristic approach to a case that was chosen due to its positive deviance and its ability to showcase aspects of compassion that may have been previously overlooked. In this essay, we describe these strategies, and demonstrate: 1) the value and process of choosing positively deviant cases that are exemplary and non-normative; 2) how to approach analysis and claim-making from a phronetic, iterative, and heuristic stance; and 3) the process of positioning claims made from a single case. These types of high-quality methodological practices are not only empirically systematic, but also serve to generate knowledge that enables people to imagine and promote societies that are flourishing, fair, and free.

Introduction to the case and project

On 20 August 2013, Michael Hill and Antoinette Tuff met in extreme circumstances at McNair Discovery Learning Academy in DeKalb, Georgia. Armed with an AK-47-type assault rifle, Hill snuck through the school doors behind a parent with the resolve to die that day. There, he came face-to-face with Tuff, who was covering the front office at lunch in her role as school bookkeeper. Hill shot several rounds into the ground and demanded that Tuff call the police. In a captive situation, Tuff complied, called 911, and served as the

go-between for Hill, the 911 operator, and the broader law enforcement institution. Hill fired almost 500 rounds during the event – mostly out the front door aimed at the police (George, 2013). Miraculously, no one was hurt or killed.

The 911 emergency phone call recorded the conversation between Hill, Tuff, and the 911 call-taker and was later made public (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kVpipSXRKA>). In the beginning of the conversation, Hill drives the conversation by making demands that Tuff ask or tell the police various messages. Tuff begins the interaction as a helpful hostage and passes on questions and answers for Hill almost verbatim. But as the conversation evolves, cracks begin to form in the gunman-hostage relationship. Hill admits that he is off his antidepressant medication. Tuff stammers out the possibility of no one needing to die. Not long after, Tuff's demeanour in the situation changes; she begins calling Hill 'Baby' and 'Sweetie,' as she tries to comfort and calm him into surrendering. Once Hill agrees, Tuff carries the requests from the 911 call-taker, and Hill is taken into custody.

In the aftermath of the event, Antoinette Tuff was lauded for her compassionate and courageous response. She received various honours, including being named a CNN Hero (Sloane, 2013) and being a guest of President Barack Obama (Lavender, 2013). In the years since, she wrote a book, developed an array of training and speaking engagements (Keynote Speaker, 2019), and recently was the subject of a Lifetime movie called *Faith Under Fire* (Heyn, 2018). Tuff has cited various influences that prepared her for that fateful interaction, including her ministerial training, Christian faith, and own struggles with depression. She hoped that Hill might receive mercy due to his mental illness. In the trial, Hill's lawyer pressed the judge for a reduced 10-year sentence and characterised the event as an ill-conceived suicide attempt by a boy with a long history of mental illness. In the end, the judge sided with the prosecution's appeal for a harsher penalty and ordered Hill, who pled guilty to aggravated assault, to serve 20 years in prison (Blinder, 2014).

Like many others, we heard of this case via mediated news reports. From our previous research, we were already interested in issues of compassion (e.g., Huffman, 2015, 2017; Way & Tracy, 2012). Although this past research relied on long-term ethnographic immersion, our intuition told us that this case offered special insights to be pursued – ones that might provide extensions to previous theoretical understandings of compassion. What's more, this case came in the wake of the executive vice president of the National Rifle Association in the United States proclaiming, 'The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun' (Memmott, 2012, para., p. 5). About this same time, headlines were being made by George Zimmerman, who fatally shot 17-year-old, unarmed Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was acquitted under Florida's Stand Your Ground law, which allowed people to use deadly force if they believed it was necessary to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm (Justifiable Use of Force, Florida Statutes, 2013). Together, these conversations created an overriding U.S. discourse in 2013 that applauded violence as an effective response to physical threat. We thought the Hill/Tuff case showed that school massacres are not only stopped with violence but may also be ameliorated through compassion.

After choosing the case and recognising it may serve as a profound example of transformative communication, we performed a close transcription of the phone call and engaged in a qualitative case analysis. From those interpretative activities, we crafted a series of claims that evolved through the course of drafting, submitting, and revising. We discuss these methodological processes in detail, but first, we briefly explain the key findings from our analysis.

Primary analytic claims of the case

The most important insights from this case emerged in terms of the ways that compassion might unfold differently when the target of compassion is *not* explicitly requesting care from another. Hill was not asking for care, but Tuff, by the end of their interaction, was providing it anyway. People may not ask for care for various reasons, including anger or depression. The Tuff-Hill case was particularly valuable, in large part, for illuminating and interrogating the successful communication of care when a sufferer is angry, resistant, and potentially violent. To this end, we offered four propositions (Tracy & Huffman, 2016, pp. 15–19):

Proposition 1: Sufferers are more likely to accept compassionate action and perceive compassion when the potential compassion provider engages in:

- (a) Deferential face-enhancing conversational actions.
- (b) Communication convergence/mimicking conversational actions.
 - (i) These increase the likelihood that the provider can enter the emotional world of the target and recognise the target's suffering.
 - (ii) These increase the likelihood that the target will have affinity for the compassion provider.
 - (iii) These increase the likelihood that the target will comply with the actions and requests of compassion provider.
- (c) Conversational actions that will buy time and allow people to cool down from an amygdala-hijacked state. (p. 15)

Proposition 2: Sufferers are more likely to accept compassionate action and perceive compassion when the potential compassion provider(s) co-create(s) a hopeful vision for the future. Hope can be communicatively co-created in the context of compassion through:

- (a) Listening for cynicism and resignation and following up on more hopeful futures.
- (b) Minimising the negativity or severity of the situation.
- (c) Employing positive intensity in language.
- (d) Using terms of endearment that frame the sufferer as respectable and lovable. (p. 17)

Proposition 3: Sufferers are more likely to accept compassionate action and perceive compassion when the potential compassion provider engages in self-disclosure that creates a mutually relatable problem or vulnerability.

- (a) This increases identification and the ability to relate compassionately.
- (b) This increases the probability of a mutual emergence of compassion. (p. 18)

Proposition 4: Potential compassion providers to sufferers who are initially resistant to compassion are more likely to recognise suffering, compassionately relate, and provide compassionate action when they are physically proximal to the sufferer. (p. 19)

It is important to emphasise that these claims were the end result and product of multiple rounds of qualitative analysis and theorising. The propositions are the main contribution of the study, but it took many iterations and a variety of methodological strategies to craft them.

Strategies for positive deviant case selection and qualitative claim-making

These four propositions mark the most important takeaways from the research project. However, paper sections that describe methodology sections do not always trace analytic processes in ways that allow readers to employ methodologies for themselves. To this end, we now turn to two important aspects of the research project, namely, the value and strategy of: (a) selecting cases based on positive deviance and (b) taking a phronetic, iterative, and heuristic approach to qualitative analysis and claim-making.

Positive deviance case selection

Positive deviance case selection (PDCS) is accomplished by researchers when they identify cases for examination that are (a) intentional, (b) non-normative, and (c) honourable. Each of these criteria is established by the researcher via argumentation and reasoning. Cases can be any unit of analysis (e.g., individuals, dyadic relationships, teams, organisations), but the key issue is whether the behaviours under investigation are purposeful and anomalous, yet exemplary, human conduct. The PDCS approach to case selection supplements traditional methods of selecting cases, which can vary. Some traditional strategies include selecting cases because they represent a deductive and naturalistic test of theory (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Likewise, cases can be selected because of their theoretical interest and potential for inductive theory building (Gerring, 2007). Also, admittedly, cases are sometimes selected because an exciting opportunity to gain unique access presents itself, as with Zanin, Hoelscher, and Kramer (2016) study of an all-female rugby team's symbolic convergence. Combinations of the above are also possible.

The method of selecting cases is important because of the resultant knowledge creation that each strategy tends to invite. In other words, case selection matters because it tends to initiate specific kinds of payoffs to the case study investigation. In much of the case study research today, the payoff of building social theory usually occurs through the articulation of analytic generalisations or transferable concepts (Bisel, Barge, Dougherty, Lucas, & Tracy, 2014; Yin, 2014). Analytic generalisations and transferable concepts are powerful (even prophetic, see Christians & Carey, 1989) descriptions of recurring social dynamics that can occur in various contexts. For example, Janis (1971) selected intriguing cases of world events in which otherwise intelligent United States politicians and diplomats made remarkably poor decisions (e.g., Bay of Pigs Invasion). That case selection strategy resulted in Janis's ability to propose the transferrable concept of *groupthink* (i.e., group members' tendency to engage in agreement-seeking at the price of rigorous decision-making).

Scholars and practitioners have been identifying new contexts that can be accurately characterised by the groupthink concept ever since. In other words, Janis's selection of intriguing cases for investigation resulted in a concept that describes poor decision-making in many situations. Groupthink is a social dynamic that team members are smart to avoid. Thus, the basic pattern of case selection and its resultant knowledge creation is

one in which cases of dysfunction were investigated to distil a recommendation for the kinds of communicative conduct to avoid – ultimately, a dysfunction-avoidance recommendation was a payoff of the selection strategy. However, teams can avoid groupthink without ever attaining high levels of desirable processes, such as creativity and innovation, cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness, prosocial benefit and synergy. Without question, groupthink is a powerful and prophetic concept that helps us to avoid dysfunction in team communication and decision-making. Yet, the question becomes, what if we wish to use case study research to support recommendations about conduct that is worthy of imitation (and not merely avoidance)? How do we select cases in order to achieve function-imitation recommendations?

Selecting cases on the basis of honourable non-normativity has the benefit of increasing the likelihood of identifying practices that can foster human excellence. Applied researchers, therapists, and practitioners can feel frustrated upon realising that moving individuals from an unhealthy state to normalcy is certainly arduous, and yet it is still not the same as helping them achieve high levels of flourishing and thriving (Roberts, 2006). Thinkers from fields as diverse as couple's therapy (Gottman, 2014), organisational change management (Barge & Oliver, 2003), and global health initiatives (Singhal, 2014) recognised that prescriptions to avoid dysfunction tend not to be as successful as strategies that involve supplanting dysfunction with practices that are life-giving. To those ends, PDCS provides a systematic starting point from which to identify and gather observations of human excellence. Once identified, those practices can be interrogated and vetted for their potential to be imitated across situations to enhance healthy human relating. Practices can be articulated in terms of analytic generalisations or transferable concepts, which can, in turn, be taught, trained, and recommended.

In the case of the Tuff-Hill event, second author Sarah heard about the case through the news, as it was a well-covered event. At the time, Sarah was keeping a blog related to her life and scholarship and wrote a 1,300-word entry connecting the case to the work of Way and Tracy (2012), Miller (2007), and Huffman (2013). In turn, that blog entry prompted Sarah to reach out to first author Tim to discuss the feasibility of performing a more systematic analysis. At the time, the two saw the value of the case as rooted in the transformation of the situation and the expression of care. Those two dynamics stood out as exemplary and honourable embodiments of compassion. The analysis, as described below, resulted in providing insight on a range of issues related to compassion.

Phronetic, iterative, and heuristic claim-making in qualitative research

Having selected the case, we turned to a phronetic, iterative, and heuristic approach to analysis and claim-making (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Huffman & Tracy, 2018; Tracy, *in press*). We were motivated to use a phronetic (i.e., practically wise) approach because we wanted to present the case in a way that helped invite people into *being* compassionate as opposed to just *understanding* compassion. We used an iterative approach because we find it is the most generative (as opposed to a purely a priori or grounded one). Finally, we used heuristic devices (meta-cognitive strategies that spur creativity and inventive thinking) to create claims because doing so helps close the space between coding and writing. We also had to adapt our analysis to the fact that we were arguing from a single case with many existing media interpretations. We discuss each of these aspects to claim-making in what follows.

Taking an iterative approach to analysis

An iteration is a cycle that repeats. An iterative approach to qualitative research is neither fully grounded nor fully a priori. In a fully grounded approach, the researcher builds the conceptual model out of the data itself. This is not to say that grounded approaches eschew existing theory at all. To be sure, theory helps sensitise researchers as they move through the field and data. That said, a purely inductive grounded approach – like that introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) tend to use more positivist methodological prescriptions such as using a technical set of coding, memoing, and analytic procedures to describe, situate, and assemble ideas from the text in theory-generative ways (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A priori approaches, on the other hand, start with a conceptual framework and then move into the analytic process with these theories as the principle analytic frame (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

An iterative approach draws from the most recent versions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), moving abductively between inductive data analysis and deductive considerations of existing theory (see Figure 1). The researcher spends some time engaging the data on its own terms but then turns to scholarly literature in search of related notions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Using these tools, the researcher returns to the data examining for fit and lack of fit. In this way, the iterative qualitative researcher both applies and tests theory while letting data speak on its own terms to broader scholarly literature. Below, we repeat the basic questions of an iterative analysis (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 78) followed by examples in our own words:

Q1: What are the data telling me? (Explicitly engaging with theoretical, subjective, ontological, epistemological, and field understandings)

EX: Closely studying the transcript of the Tuff-Hill conversational interaction

Q2: What is it I want to know? (According to research objectives, questions, and theoretical points of interest)

EX: Examining the compassion theory for unanswered questions or dilemmas

Q3: What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know? (Refining the focus and linking back to research questions)

EX: Identifying that an analysis of the Tuff-Hill conversation can valuably attend to how to best communicate compassion to a person who is angry or violent

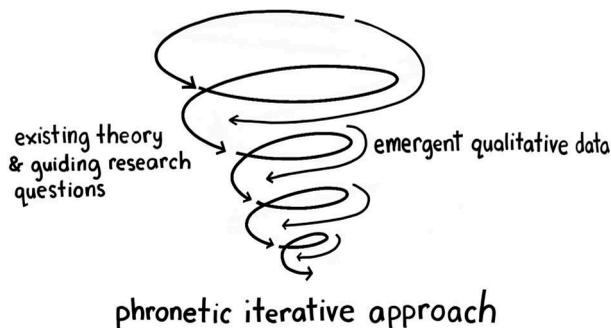


Figure 1. A phronetic iterative approach alternates between considering existing theories and research questions on the one hand, and emergent qualitative data on the other. Adapted from *Qualitative Research Methods* (p. XX), by Sarah J. Tracy, *in press*, Hoboken, NJ; Wiley. Copyright 2019.

In the Tuff-Hill case, we began with an open read of the data and then, through discussion, selected a set of compassion-related concepts as the initial coding scheme. Both authors were familiar with various compassion theories, so this was a relatively simple process. We noticed, however, that most of Tuff's social support and compassionate communication took place in the second half of the 24-minute 911 phone call recording. As such, our guiding theoretical frame only helped elucidate the second half of the conversation.

Therefore, we turned back to the data without any specific conceptual frame. We noticed conversational particulars that were markedly different from the rest. We took great care in articulating and documenting those differences. These manifested in various ways:

- In the first half of the interaction, Tuff is deferential by calling Hill 'Sir.' Halfway through, she switches to sweet and diminutive terms for Hill like 'Baby' and 'Sweetie.'
- In the first half of the interaction, Tuff is repeating Hill's statements verbatim, but then she begins modifying them – slightly at first, in order to put emphasis on a word. Then later, she reworded Hill's statements altogether.
- Tuff speaks with little hesitation or verbal disfluency when she is mirroring Hill's speech. And, in the second half of the call, she also speaks confidently and without many disfluencies. However, halfway through, there is one significant utterance that demonstrates marked increases of disfluencies as she struggles to articulate an alternate future vision for how this situation may conclude.
- Tuff and Hill use volume and tone to create both negative and positive intensity.

Using these markers, we broadened our literature search significantly. We reviewed literature on communication accommodation, mirroring, mirror neurons, hostage negotiation, face threat, communal coping, and hope (see Tracy & Huffman, 2013, for citations to specific literature). From this review, we compiled new codes and reanalysed the data.

Following the new coding scheme, we began a process of memoing – short analytic asides – to help develop our interpretations (Charmaz, 2014). As we offered explanations of how the conversation unfolded, we found ourselves bumping up against the question, 'B might have led to C, but did Tuff do that strategically or did it just happen?' Although we reached out to Tuff and Hill to query them about their intentions during the interaction, neither responded to be interviewed. Also, in watching news interviews of Tuff, it was clear that her memory of the event did not always match perfectly with the audio transcript. This dynamic of memory is not at all surprising, given the highly stressful nature of the event. To discipline our interpretations – and given our inability to assess the motives or strategies of the actors – we embraced the frame offered by action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 1995). This framework calls researchers to attend explicitly to the *consequences* of turns in talk, not the *intentions* of the talk. This move enabled us to redirect our attention away from strategy and motive questions and focus on the conversational outcomes.

Armed with this conceptual frame, the initial compassion coding, our search for new literatures, and the secondary cycle coding, we analysed how the codes were arrayed in relation to each other. Seeing which codes hang together or immediately precede and follow each other can provide insight. Based on this analysis, we noticed that there were striking clusters of codes. For instance, although there were many examples of direct tonal mirroring, all acts of mirroring occurred in the first 10 minutes of the 24-minute call.

Noting the coding clusters, we were able to break the conversation into six phases, which also allowed us to attend to transitional points that moved between phases. Armed with a new phasic interpretation of the conversation, we were able to see how what the media had focused on as the ‘big news’ – Tuff’s vulnerable and overt expressions of compassion near the end of the conversation – occurred only after Tuff and Hill had mutually constructed rapport and a hopeful future in earlier conversational turns. A core argument of the paper, therefore, became the idea that building hope is a key part of communicating compassion when interacting with people who are suffering and hopeless.

Taking a phronetic approach

Phronesis is considered to be the practical wisdom of encouraging, practicing, and discerning virtuous activity and excellence of character. Phronesis is unabashedly normative in nature and requires the study of improvisational behaviour in context (Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). Taking a phronetic approach to qualitative research is less about how data and concepts are used and more about the kind of conceptual and theoretical contributions a scholar is trying to make. Phronesis is one of three Aristotelian frameworks of knowledge (the other two being episteme and techne, see Flyvbjerg, 2004). People can say they know something because they have a generalisable, theoretical understanding of it (i.e., episteme). Alternately, people can say they know something because they have a technical ‘know how’ regarding the subject (i.e., techne). Finally, people can say they know something because they can make wise choices based on contextual cues and triggers (i.e., phronesis; for more information see Flyvbjerg, 2004). Qualitative research has bearing on all three kinds of knowledge and can be used to generate intellectual tools that are epistemic, technical, and phronetic. That said, this project focused most on making a phronetic contribution, which is to say that it was principally concerned with helping readers and audiences connect to the experiences in the case and shape their judgement by it (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010).

Our phronetic approach manifested in various ways. First, we tried to account for the situated context of the case, so readers could consider how similar actions may or not be successful in other contexts. For instance, we do not claim that Tuff’s communication activities would be an effective intervention in all active-shooter scenarios. Indeed, trying to make those kinds of non-contextual generalisations is an effort to build epistemic knowledge. Rather, we show and interpret how the communication event unfolded in the context. The resulting rich description and focus on conversational particularities make the findings transferable rather than statistically generalisable, and in this way, they have resonance (Tracy, 2010).

Second, we encouraged people to listen to the recorded audio themselves. We note this in the published piece; we include the YouTube link when writing about it online; and we play the audio when giving presentations on the case. Those listening often have emotional and visceral reactions to the audio and tell us that they experience intense and vivid reflections on the case because of it. Presenting the ideas in this format helps audiences connect to the compassionate, hopeful, and vulnerable phenomena in ways that allow them to know about compassion, hope, and vulnerability. Said another way, it offers not only epistemic insight but also phenomenological/experiential insight about how to enact compassion, hope and vulnerability.

Taking a heuristic approach to claim-making

One of the most intellectually difficult parts of analysis is moving from the stage of analytic coding to the stage of writing the research report. To ease this transition, we advocate for an intermediate step, namely, a claim-making process, wherein researchers craft sample claims and then abductively return to the data to add precision to those claims. Claims are hybrid. They are analytic, in that they explain and make sense of data. But claims are also heuristic, in that they lay out an argument explicitly that future researchers may apply, complicate, critique, or extend. A well-made claim (or set of claims) can serve as the foundational thesis statement or theoretical contribution that undergirds the rest of the writing and focuses final analysis.

Original claims do not make themselves; researchers do not simply identify interpretive claims from the past literature or lift them out of the existing empirical materials. Rather, using their interpretive creativity and logic, researchers *craft* claims. Unfortunately, claim-making is too often ‘blackboxed’ in the methodological pedagogy, which is to say that methodologies explain what to do before and after claim-making, but leave claim-making unexplained or under-interrogated. Sometimes people speak about eureka moments, or a ‘poignant organizing episode,’ in which various strains of analysis come together in an ‘elegant manner at the opportune time’ (DeGooyer, 2003, n.p.) to transform the direction of the analysis. Although one cannot force creativity, certain heuristic practices foster it.

Indeed, heuristic devices are generative frameworks that enable creativity and cognitive invention, enabling researchers to think in new and valuable ways (Abbot, 2004; Hellawell, 2006). Huffman & Tracy (2018) synthesise a range of heuristic devices that are especially useful for crafting claims through a phronetic iterative approach of qualitative research. The heuristic device that served the most critical role in the analytic process in this particular piece was conjecturing claims through abductive reasoning (Huffman & Tracy, 2018). Abductive reasoning is the logic of guessing (Peirce, 1903), wherein the thinker postulates plausible explanations for what might have led something to be the case (Huffman, 2013; Huffman & Tracy, 2018; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Charles Sanders Peirce (1903) was particularly concerned with how humans experienced knowledge and moved through the idea generative space. For Peirce, surprise served as the spark of abductive reasoning. When humans are faced with a surprising fact, they search for what circumstances may have triggered the surprising phenomena to take place. Drawing on the formal logic of abduction, we use the following framework to guide abductive reasoning

- (a) Find a surprising fact in the data (e.g., Dad freaked out after being asked a simple question).
- (b) Conjecture a claim that, if it were true, the surprising fact would be a matter of course (e.g., Maybe Dad freaked out because he had not eaten lunch, and it was not really about the question).
- (c) Try to articulate how the claim would actually lead to the surprising fact. If it does, there is reason to suspect that it is true (e.g., Not eating recently causes Dad’s blood sugar to be lower, which can make him grumpy).
- (d) Look for other support (e.g., Let’s ask Dad if he had lunch, wait until he eats, ask our question again, and see how he reacts). (Huffman & Tracy, 2018, p. 562)

In [Table 1](#), we lay out an abductive reasoning cycle that we engaged in the Tuff-Hill case.

Table 1. Abductive reasoning exercise regarding mirroring his speech.

What is a surprising fact in the data?	It is surprising that Tuff mirrors Hill's words and tone of voice.
What might be true that would make that fact a matter of course?	Mirroring communicates compassion in intense situations.
How does the conjectured claim lead to the surprising fact?	Through mirroring, Tuff calms herself/Hill, establishes rapport, and moves towards converging perceptions with Hill.
Is there other support?	Yes. Research on mirror neurons shows that mirroring leads to shared perception. Research on communication shows that mirroring often results in higher rapport and likeability. What's more, research on the fight or flight response suggests that 'buying time' (which was accomplished in this case through mirroring) is important before having a higher-level complex conversation (e.g., negotiating with someone to surrender).

While this initial conjecture played an important role in shaping our early thinking, it was rejected and modified through a process of negative case analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Huffman & Tracy, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Negative case analysis uses data from the case to bring counterevidence against the claim. It involves asking questions like:

- What evidence in my data disproves or nuances my claim? Are there data I could collect that would challenge it?
- Should I throw out my claim?
- Or can I nuance or tighten my claim so that it incorporates and accounts for the new data?

In this case, we discovered some counterevidence in terms of timeline. All the mirroring behaviour happens early on – in the first 10 minutes of interaction. Around minute 13, Tuff begins modifying the mirrored expressions slightly to put her own emphasis on utterances to shape their interpretation. Only after Tuff and Hill begin to establish the possibility of an alternate future where no one has to die does the compassionate interaction (like her telling him that she cares for him) begin. Based on this chronology, we amended the claim from: 'Mirroring communicates compassion in intense situations' to 'Mirroring can help establish the conditions for compassionate and nonviolent communication to flourish.'

Analysing a single case highly covered by media outlets

The last aspect of the case that posed challenges and opportunities was the fact that in essence, our data were mediated and the product of journalistic institutions. Neither of the researchers were present to the event, and despite an effort to reach out to Tuff and Hill, neither responded to our inquiries. Arguing from a single, mediated case posed both practical and philosophical advantages and disadvantages.

Representing findings from a single case

One of the great challenges of case studies is how to best represent the interpretations from a single case. That said, qualitative research is powerful precisely because of its indexical inclination, which is to say the contextually situated nature of the data. Although case studies do not provide the kind of sweeping data necessary to assert acontextual and statistically generalisable claims, they can provide complex and textured data that can be read in conversation with generalised claims (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Consider the famous example from the philosophy of science, ‘All ravens are black’ (Hempel, 2009; Maher, 1999). To build support for this claim, researchers could choose to use inductive logic and observe a large sample of randomly selected ravens. However, a single case study can enhance the claim. By carefully selecting and closely investigating a single raven, a researcher might notice that its head feathers and wing feathers have different degrees of gloss, that its eyes have shades of brown in them, that parts of its beak are sometimes white, and on the inside, the raven has organs that are white, brown, red, and other colours. Treated as a single instance of data that may support or refute a broader claim, one raven is a data point in support of the blackness of the species. But taken as an in-depth case, in-depth observation of a single raven provides sufficiently complex data that provides helpful conceptual frames for seeing ravens in nuanced ways and also speaks to prior accounts of the birds’ colour.

Carrying the metaphor forward, in the Tuff-Hill case, we were able to see the careful working parts of the conversation that defied the more general accounts of compassionate communication developed in previous research. By focusing on the situated details, we could see how compassion theories failed to account for early conversational and nonverbal moves that set the stage for the communication of care to emerge in the first place. Although we do not have the ability to support a claim like ‘Compassion always requires X,’ we did have the empirical support to claim ‘Compassion theorising seems to have missed X.’ The following elucidates.

In our first writing of the article, although we did not make sweeping generalisations, we conjectured why interactional moves, such as staying present or mirroring, worked in the case and how these actions stood as a counter case to extant compassion theorising (which say little about these issues). Coming from our phonetic framework, we stood by this account. However, some of our reviewers were not persuaded. Likely, the reviewers came from a more post-positivist tradition. As such, we considered carefully how to respond to their epistemological concerns while still remaining true to our philosophical commitments. In the end, we settled on framing our interpretations as propositions that could be further explored by researchers using a range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Specifically, we tied each general theme in the data to broader literature and invited further study. In the end, we believe this reframe made our study valuable to a broad audience of researchers who assume a variety of paradigmatic lenses.

Analysing alongside media interpretations

We would like to offer a short note about engaging a case that has been significantly covered by media outlets. The story of Antoinette Tuff and Michael Hill was told on many news platforms and she was interviewed and lauded in many ways (Blinder, 2014; Lavender, 2013; Sloane, 2013). This public acclaim provided both opportunities and challenges.

Speaking to the advantages, the media coverage piqued our curiosity in the first place and helped provide larger context of the case. Although we were not able to interview Tuff ourselves, we were able to listen to her answers to others’ interview questions. Unlike ethnography, which involves the researcher going to the site in person, we were analysing a recently historic and archived case. The media reports served to ‘build the scene’ of the potential school shooting. Photos, descriptions, audio, and video media gave us insight into how the event unfolded. These materials provided helpful context for the 911 audio and allowed us to paint a broader picture of the actors involved.

Those advantages aside, most news reports offered interpretations of the event. For instance, dozens of articles cited Tuff's telling Hill the following: 'I just want you to know that I love you, though, OK? And I'm proud of you.' The statement is striking, of course. A hostage telling a gunman that she loves him and is proud of him is (in this case, quite literally) disarming and serves as a counter case to be sure. Despite this being the most frequently cited line from the phone call in the media reporting, our analysis found that, although the line might characterise Tuff's ultimate loving approach, the statement was not responsible for Hill laying down his weapons. This statement occurs in minute 19:37 of a 24-minute call. More to the point, when this statement was made, Hill had already disarmed himself and was lying face down on the ground waiting for the police to enter the building. In essence, the statement functions to comfort Hill so he does not change his surrender plans.

So, we had to push past the media's interpretation by using close analysis of the entire conversation. This enabled us to pinpoint various turning points in the interaction. If we had to pick a moment that indicates a change of the situation, we would select Hill's admission that he should have gone to the hospital because he was off his medications and Tuff's disfluent response where she begins to articulate a peaceful possibility: 'Well, do you want me try (.) I can help you. Want me try - I - we (.) do you want to talk to them? Want me to talk to them and try ...' Admittedly, it is a much less quotable moment, but it marks Tuff's departure from being Hill's hostage to being Hill's caretaker - a new subject positioning evident in both her language and paralanguage.

In summary, the many media accounts gave us a valuable vantage for interpreting the event beyond the audio data. However, accessing those media accounts had to be done with a grain of interpretative salt (or 'systematized doubt,' see Keyton, Bisel, & Ozley, 2009). Looking back, in some ways our original interpretation was in line with the journalistic account; we looked for compassionate phenomena in our first coding effort. But we had to push past this frame to see the critical conversational turns that set the stage for compassion in a situation of violence.

Conclusion

Many social scientific methods - including experiments, surveys, interviews, and focus groups - design the study before the empirical materials that will be the focus of the study exist or come into being. In this essay, we show how researchers can build a study, even if that means identifying the case as positively deviant after the fact. Such cases, because of their depth and rich description, are memorable, persuasive, and influential - going beyond helping others epistemologically 'learn about' certain areas of literature but also to provide phenomenological access to valued ways of being, such as compassion. What's more, by using the framework of positive deviance to select cases and situating the analytic work using an iterative, phronetic, and heuristic approach, scholars can build compelling arguments that critique and extend current knowledge.

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Notes on contributors

Timothy P. Huffman (Ph.D., Arizona State University) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Saint Louis University. His scholarship and activism engages the intersection of homelessness, social justice, community, organizing, compassion, and socially transformative inquiry.

Sarah J. Tracy (Ph.D., University of Colorado) is a Professor and Director of The Transformation Project in The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University-Tempe. Her scholarship focuses on qualitative research methods, organizational communication, compassion, emotion, and conversation.

Ryan S. Bisel (Ph.D., University of Kansas) is Professor of Organizational Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma. His research interests include leadership communication, culture change, and behavioral ethics.

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