

Qualitative Methods: Introduction to the Special Issue

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As we begin this special issue, it is important to note that although its title focuses attention on methodology, a qualitative approach to the study of communication encompasses a broad and diverse range of theoretical perspectives, research strategies, data collection, analysis, and procedures for the evaluation of findings. Accordingly, while the method utilized is often a distinguishing feature of what makes qualitative research qualitative, methodology is but one part of a large and complex system of perspectives and approaches.

Actually defining a qualitative approach to the study of communication, categorizing its components, distinguishing it from quantitative and critical approaches, or arguing its merits is beyond the purpose and scope of this introduction to the special issue.

However, we can address why a special issue would need to be devoted to qualitative methods. Certainly, we would not be likely to come across a special journal issue devoted to quantitative methods.

Quite simply for a host of such reasons as the historical development of the communication discipline, subsequent disciplinary inertia, and the amount of time and complexity necessary to conduct respective studies, qualitative research is not as common in our journals as quantitative research or criticism. Beyond the pervasiveness of these other two approaches in communication journals as a whole, there exist multiple journals specifically devoted to the publication of these two approaches. As of this writing, only a single journal—*Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, published by the Eastern Communication Association—is dedicated to the publication of qualitative approaches in the discipline of communication.

A cursory glance at journals published a few decades ago and at journals published recently will suggest an increased presence of qualitative research in the discipline of communication through the years. However, it is still surpassed in prevalence by other approaches. This difference is in spite of increased acceptance of qualitative research in the discipline as well as an increased recognition of its rigor, quality, and value to the study of communication. Indeed, for many scholars, qualitative research provides the most meaningful answers to questions pertaining to communication.

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The articles included in this special issue represent only a small portion of qualitative approaches to the study of communication, but they are representative of the quality and value of research derived from such approaches.

Kuuluvainen and Isotalus use data derived from personal interviews and a questionnaire to explore Al-Anon members' perceptions of their communication experiences at Al-Anon meetings in relation to their communication with their alcoholic partners.

Among their findings, these authors discover that Al-Anon attendance, through which informational and emotional support are gained, assists in changing communication with alcoholic partners.

Next, Walus and Furstenau utilize ethnographic methods to study a hybrid music culture in Chiang Mai, Thailand, which resulted from a blending of American rock and roll and the local Thai culture. This unique hybrid culture of "rock and roll-ness" favors aural signifiers, promotes collectivism, and eliminates boundaries between musicians and audiences, resulting in a marketable spectacle.

Sellnow-Richmond and his colleagues then explore the social construction of gender identity, specifically as it is influenced by messages from family members. Through in-depth interviews, they examine gender identity-related communication that occurs within families. They also examine how Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual-identifying participants conceptualize their gender identities considering these messages. Finally, they examine family communication patterns in relation to such messages and identity development.

Utilizing Relational Dialectics Theory to frame their study of cohabitation, Thomas and Scharp conduct a contrapuntal analysis of cohabiters' online stories, revealing the existence of three counter-discourses. Each counter-discourse is shown to challenge cultural conceptualizations of cohabitation as an inferior type of relationship.

Finally, Kennerly uses the "mystery method" to offer an autoethnographic piece based on her research with roadside shrines. This piece, in particular, underscores the role of the researcher and the often personal nature of qualitative research.

It is quite possible that a special issue on qualitative methods will no longer be necessary in the coming decades. Although presently overshadowed by quantitative and critical approaches in terms of prevalence in communication journals, as mentioned previously, qualitative approaches to the study of communication are gaining prominence. Further, for increasing numbers of scholars, a qualitative approach is being recognized as the most appropriate way to answer the questions they are asking.

For now and in the meantime, we can enjoy the pieces that are available, appreciating the tremendous insights that they provide the discipline of communication. Furthermore, we can witness the

continued development of qualitative approaches as well as their transformative impact on the discipline of communication.