Introduction to Qualitative Communication Research

Two Researchers, Two Scenes of Research

READING COMMUNITY IN A POST OFFICE

The people of Burgin, Kentucky, and surrounding countryside pick up their mail, buy their stamps, and send off their parcels at the Burgin post office. But much more goes on there than just post office business. When something unusual or important happens around Burgin, discussion of it usually surfaces there. While Joel was finishing the last three weeks of his study, rumors were flying about a “satanic cult” in the area. A lot of high school students were convinced that some young person in the county was about to be murdered by this group, and many adults thought it was more than just a hoax. Almost every person who came to the post office had something to say about the story. These conversations would overlap as one person left and another came in.

At one point, two of the regular patrons were talking about this “stuff” when Bill arrived. Without telling him what they were talking about, they asked Bill what he knew. He proceeded to tell them about police officers, equipped with K-9s, who had been searching the railroad tracks in front of his house on the previous evening. They were looking for evidence of the cult, Bill reported, but “didn’t find a thing.” On a previous night, however, some satanic paraphernalia had evidently been discovered in a railroad underpass just outside Burgin.

In his final visits to the post office, Joel didn’t hear whether or not this alleged find was ever confirmed; in fact, the cult speculations tailed off
altogether. For a while, post office conversation returned to the usual concerns—the weather, tobacco farming, and the national news. Then one day a woman came in and announced that a member of her family had returned from fighting one of the regional forest fires that were raging that fall. A discussion ensued about marijuana growers being responsible for setting the fires.

THE (DIS-)ORGANIZED UNIVERSITY

The state had just enacted sweeping reform of its public school system, and a massive tax increase had been legislated to pay for it. There was much excitement, and expectations were running high. Educators recognized that these new reforms would be watched closely, both by political insiders who had staked their reputations on success and by those outside the state who had hailed the reforms as a model. It was now up to the educational establishment to make the reforms work, and nowhere was this felt more keenly than at the College of Education at the state’s leading research university.

Recently, Monica had been hired by the college to improve its public relations. She saw this situation as an opportunity to study how it “tells its story” of research and training activities to its external stakeholders. In search of data, she began to scrutinize the flow of information that passed through her work life. Fund-raising materials, video features, bulletins, pamphlets, press releases, and newsletters all became pieces of an organizational puzzle. In trying to assemble these pieces, however, Monica increasingly found the meetings and other events she attended to be unsettling. Officially, she was there as a publicity writer, but she was also trying to understand the ambiguous actions of ambivalent people who sometimes failed, and only occasionally succeeded, in their roles.

One such scene involved the college’s relationship with the media. The university’s public relations officials seemed to define “news” as whatever was timely, or could be made to appear so. They often complained that they didn’t hear from the college about potential stories “in time to do anything about them.” They also seemed to prefer receiving announcements or reporting on media events—the splashier the better. At a small gala hosted by the college, for example, one PR official said to a college faculty member, “Now this is worth more than all those little stories you keep sending us.” On another occasion, a faculty member spoke ruefully about typical coverage of college events: “You have to wait until the provost or the president of the university shows up, and then they’ll get the credit, as usual. You never hear about the people who really do the work.” And later, the education reporter for the local newspaper told Monica that academics used excessive “inside jargon” that he thought muddied issues instead of clarifying them.
Monica found the people she worked with in the college to be remarkable achievers. She concluded in her report that educators and media professionals could collaborate more effectively if they better understood each other's missions. Still, at the end of the study she found it hard not to be a little saddened by it all.

These are glimpses of qualitative communication researchers at work. Joel and Monica were in fact graduate students learning the craft of a particular methodology known as ethnography. Their stories reveal much about how research questions develop, how researchers decide what is significant to observe and report, and how they become implicated in the process of investigation. Both Joel and Monica saw something in their immediate surroundings as an opportunity for study.

Joel resided with his family in Burgin, and noticed that most of the community's citizens participated in informal interactions at a particular site, the local post office. His previous experiences living in villages overseas, and in American towns, had sensitized him to the significance of these performances. This familiarity helped him to understand pretty quickly what was happening: In exploring mysteries in and potential threats to their community, residents indirectly reaffirmed their common beliefs (e.g., in the range of acceptable religious practices) and commitments (e.g., to share information). At the same time, Joel had to develop a level of detachment that balanced this familiarity and allowed him to treat the interactions he witnessed as evidence of particular communication practices. As the study progressed, Joel developed analytic themes about community building, the mediation of news, and the functions of "entertainment" and "being neighborly" in a small town.

Monica had worked as a professional writer before she took the public relations job with the College of Education. She knew firsthand the tensions that can exist between creative workers and the corporate managers and clients who use (and abuse) their work. Like Joel, Monica experienced déjà vu at her research site. She recognized, and probably empathized with, problems faced by the college's administrators, faculty, and staff. As she developed her study, the routine elements of her job became evidence of something more abstract—an organizational culture. As the ending of the passage above indicates, this transformation had some emotional cost: Having conceptualized the problem, Monica confronted her own limitations in solving it.

What about the methods chosen by these researchers? Joel and Monica both struggled to reconcile the competing demands of participation and detachment in their sites, but there are also important differences between
their cases. Joel’s primary approach to data collection involved *participant observation*. As the term implies, researchers using this method become participating members of an existing culture, group, or setting, and typically adopt roles that other members recognize as appropriate and non-threatening. By participating in the activities of the group, researchers gain insight into the obligations, constraints, motivations, and emotions that members experience as they complete everyday actions. Effective participation—in the sense of being able to act, think, and feel as a true participant would—is thought by many qualitative researchers to be a prerequisite to making effective claims about communication. Stated a little differently, observing without participating may inhibit researchers’ ability to adequately understand the complex, lived experience of human beings. Such understanding is one of the defining goals of qualitative research.

In practical terms, the depth and quality of participation can vary widely. As we will explore in Chapter 5, the degree to which an individual is known as a researcher to group members can differ from setting to setting. In Joel’s case, his participant status derived from being a resident (but not a native) of Burgin, the pastor of a Burgin church, a post office patron, and a graduate student taken to “hanging around” that post office in order to do a study. Even in this small community, it is unlikely that all of the people with whom Joel interacted were aware of all these levels of his participation, particularly the last one. As an umbrella term covering several activities that are uniquely combined to meet situational needs, then, *participant observation* is not a single method (Gans, 1999). Instead, it is a strategy of reflexive learning. Its success is dependent on researchers using—and reflecting on—their cognitive and emotional responses to other human beings (Gans, 1982). Only by living an experience—and then describing and interpreting its significance—can a qualitative researcher make that experience useful to a reader.

In addition to observing others in her work as a staff member, Monica conducted *interviews*. When used in qualitative research, interviews go by several names, each with a slightly different shade of meaning: There are *in-depth, unstructured, semi-structured, intensive, collaborative, and ethnographic* interviews. Generally, these interviews resemble conversations between equals who systematically explore topics of mutual interest. Most of what is said and meant emerges through collaborative interaction. Although the researcher often goes into the interview wanting to cover certain areas, relatively little structure is imposed (e.g., questions are usually open-ended). Qualitative researchers interview people to understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve their experiences from the past, to gain expert insight or information, to obtain descriptions of events that are
normally unavailable for observation, to foster trust, to understand sensitive relationships, and to create a record of discourse that can subsequently be analyzed. As we explore in Chapter 6, more specialized forms of interviewing such as the life history and focus group are also available to fit particular needs.

In completing her study, Monica also collected and analyzed documents and other artifacts. This was because her study examined stories about the college disseminated by the mass media, as well as materials circulated inside the college (e.g., announcements, memoranda, policy statements, minutes of meetings, research reports, and so on). This kind of analysis of artifacts (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966) is typically used in qualitative research to support interviewing and participant observation. In recent years, however, communication scholars have argued that material culture (clothing, architecture, personal memorabilia, and the like) can function as a primary means of symbolic expression and should be “read” accordingly (Goodall, 1991). Moreover, visual media—photographs or video shot by the researcher or group members—can be used to document behavior or capture members’ perspectives on action (LeBaron & Streeck, 1997).

These techniques of participant observation, interviewing, and document and artifact analysis are central concerns in this volume because they permit the kind of flexibility that is necessary for successful qualitative research. While we seek to provide thorough treatment and good advice in these matters, it is ultimately the researcher who decides how and when to utilize these methods. Qualitative inquiry is a uniquely personal and involved activity. If we hope to understand how people choose to express themselves in everyday life, we must come to terms with our own reasons for studying them and with the intellectual traditions that are embedded in these methods. Understanding these elements ensures better decisions.

These snapshots of Monica’s and Joel’s experiences “in the field” convey a sense of the fundamental questions that animate qualitative inquiry: What is going on here? What is the communicative action that is being performed? How do they do it? How does it change over time? Who are “they” (to themselves, and to each other)? Who are “we” to them? How do they evaluate what they do? What does it mean to them? How do they interpret what it means to others? How should we describe and interpret how they act, what they tell us they know, and how they justify their actions? How is this knowledge useful to our agendas as communication scholars and professionals?

For the qualitative researcher, humans infuse their actions—and the worlds that result—with meaning. We are, at root, trying to make sense and get by. In this view, meaning is not a mere accessory to behavior.
Rather, it saturates the performance of social action—from our imagination of possibilities to our reflection on accomplishments. In a world without meaning we would not make choices, because the very concept of choice would not be available to us. Our perceived choices are influenced—but not determined—by a variety of intersecting genetic, biological, and material conditions (Anderson, 1991). We can choose, in other words, but we cannot choose our choices. Out of this mix of influences, cultures develop unique rules and resources that guide members in how to act. Cultures embed that knowledge in their members through the formal and informal practices of socialization that begin in childhood and continue well on through adulthood. In using this knowledge, we construct the self and the other in ways that are culturally patterned. But this does not mean that our actions are uniform. Even the most rigid social structures contain pockets of ambiguity and opportunity in which members improvise and innovate, responding to changing conditions, leveraging the new from the old. In this process, humans conceptualize their actions at different levels of abstraction (e.g., as “common knowledge” vs. “theory”).

These, then, are some of the assumptions that unite an often bewildering variety of research styles organized under the banner of qualitative research. They express what is arguably the defining commitment of the Communication discipline: to study human symbolic action in the various contexts of its performance (Cronkhite, 1986). We signal here our root assumption that qualitative research in communication involves the performances and practices of human communication. By performances, we mean expressive communication whose immediacy and skill transcend the status of “messages” as transparent vehicles of information (Bauman, 1986). Performances are local and unique interaction events. Their execution is collaborative and their significance is negotiable. They emerge in a productive tension between participants’ expectations for good form and content in particular situations and the unpredictable human powers of creativity and improvisation. Practices, however, form the generic, routine, and socially monitored and enforced dimension of communicative acts. They are comparatively abstract and standardized. They form the coherent action that is indexed by the material features of performance, and they are understood by participants as an expression of motive and interest. When performances are ambiguous (e.g., in clichéd action-film dialogue: “Was that a threat?”), practices are invoked as a way of sorting things out (e.g., “No. It’s a promise.”). While individuals author performances, their status as exemplars of practice makes them property of the group. Performances and practices, then, constitute the textures of our everyday life experiences. Through
them we enact the meanings of our relationships in various contexts. Virtually any act of communication can be studied as a kind of performance, which can in turn be viewed as a skillful variation on a practice. Taken together, these elements make the social construction of meaning virtually indistinguishable from “communication.”

In this chapter, we provide a brief review of the intellectual foundations of this assumption. Although it may not be immediately apparent to a novice, research methods form the practical technologies of larger systems of belief about the nature of reality (ontology) and about how that reality may be known (epistemology). Although these beliefs are often only implicit in specific projects, they form an important code by which communication researchers assert their work—and recognize the work of others—as the product of a particular tradition. This recognition generates a cascade of expectations about the form and content of that research. When these expectations are satisfied (or transformed), research is judged to be legitimate and authoritative. It becomes the credible engine of disciplinary evolution. Researchers who ignore the history and philosophy of science use methods at their peril. They usually experience frustration and produce confused, unsatisfactory results.

To avoid those outcomes, we proceed by contrasting three paradigms that have shaped the development of qualitative research. We also distinguish between some key terms that are used to characterize qualitative research. After that, we review the history of qualitative research within Communication, and assess its impact in several subfields. We conclude this chapter by outlining the remainder of the volume.

Postivism, Post-Positivism, and Interpretivism: A Brief History and Survey of Qualitative Communication Research

In 1975, communication historian and theorist James Carey outlined a vision for qualitative research influenced by the tradition of American cultural studies:

To seize upon the interpretations people place on existence and to systematize them so they are more readily available to us. This is a process of making large claims from small matters: studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life. (p. 190)
At the time of its publication, Carey’s vision opposed a long history in which communication research (particularly the social-scientific variety) was dominated by positivist assumptions. These assumptions have been alternately demonized, caricatured, and debated in a variety of forums by speakers using distinct yet related labels (e.g., objectivist, empiricist, and rationalist). At the center of this commotion lie the following interrelated claims (Anderson, 1987, 1996a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- Reality is singular, a priori, and objective (i.e., independent of the knower).
- True knowledge arises from observation of empirical phenomena that form the tangible, material traces of essential reality.
- The concepts and methods of natural science are—with some necessary modification—a legitimate model for the conduct of social science.
- Essential reality constrains the range of possible knowledge claims. Those claims should aspire to exacting correspondence with reality.
- In observation, the complexity of phenomena should be reduced to clarify their underlying structures and isolate the existence of (and relationships between) specific elements.
- The logic of measurement and quantification (e.g., in the use of statistics) is best for formalizing empirical observations (e.g., as amount, frequency, or rate).
- Researchers should search for, and explain, mechanisms of cause and effect.
- Human behavior is determined by such mechanisms. Researchers should facilitate the prediction and control of that behavior.
- Researchers should aggregate subjects (e.g., as population samples) based on their possession of a specified trait, attribute, or performance.
- Theory is best developed deductively and incrementally. Researchers should proceed by systematically proposing and testing explanations based on existing, verified knowledge. Hypotheses inviting confidence are to be added to theory.

In the field of Communication, as in most social sciences, the historical impact of positivism has been manifested in a variety of institutional practices. Principally, these have included a search for external and psychological causes for communication “behavior,” a focus on predicting and controlling that behavior, and the use of objective, quantitative methods in artificial settings (e.g., experiments and surveys). There are numerous examples that could be cited here; research on media “effects” has been especially prominent and resilient. Although positivism is powerful—Anderson (1996) estimates that it is reflected in over one-half of all published communication research—its hegemony has never been total or simple. Communication researchers affiliated with positivism have never been completely unified about the appropriate goals and strategies of research. Further, as a relatively young and interdisciplinary field, Communication has tended toward pluralism and diversity (although this tendency has not been evenly distributed across subfields; Bochner & Eisenberg, 1985; Pearce, 1985; Peters, 1986).
Finally, communication researchers responded in various ways to the critiques of positivism mounted in the postwar era that emerged from innovations in the natural and social sciences. These critiques challenged a number of positivism’s core premises and practices, including the conflation of the discovery of phenomena with the verification of explanations; the premise of “facts” generated independently from theory, values, or terminology; artificial constraints imposed on the goals and purposes of research; and ethical dilemmas arising from a commitment to detachment in the face of human evil and suffering. As a result, many communication researchers affiliated with a post-positivist paradigm based on the following premises (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Miller, 2002, pp. 32-45):

- The physical and social worlds are composed of complex phenomena that exist independently of individual perception (a “realist” ontology). Human beliefs about these phenomena, however, are inevitably multiple, partial, approximate, and imperfect.
- Humans interact in patterned ways. Those patterns “reify” beliefs about phenomena, and infuse them with consequence.
- Knowledge is best created by a search for causal explanations for observed patterns of phenomena. Causes are assumed to be multiple, interactive, and evolving.
- While absolute truth and value-free inquiry are unattainable, the reduction of bias in research (e.g., through peer review) is both attainable and desirable.
- Discovery and verification are equally valued as logics of research.
- The “emic” intentionality and experience of social actors should be preserved in explanations.
- Research conducted in natural settings is useful for documenting contextual influences on social action.
- Both quantitative and qualitative methods are legitimate resources for conducting research.
- The use of multiple methods enhances explanations of complex phenomena (e.g., by “triangulating”—comparing and contrasting—their outcomes).
- Qualitative methods are valued for their contribution to highly structured (and potentially quantitative) analysis. The use of statistics by qualitative researchers, however, is more likely to be basic and descriptive (e.g., frequency counts) than complex and inferential (e.g., regression analysis).

Again, while examples abound, one that is notable includes a research program organized by Brenda Dervin and her associates (Dervin & Clark, 1999) devoted to “sense-making methodology.” Researchers in this program utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to study fundamental practices of expression and interpretation in diverse contexts, such as public communication campaigns, health communication, and religious communication.

A few words are in order about this disciplinary sea change. First, we should emphasize that it is not total or universal. Some elements of classical
positivism—such as a belief in value-free inquiry—persist in a qualified, modified form. And although certain practices of objectivist research—especially the uses of variable-analytic designs and probability statistics—have been challenged (Bochner, 1985; Craig, 1989), they are not defunct. Funding institutions, for example, continue to prefer positivist and post-positivist research formats, thereby sustaining the authority and legitimacy of those formats. In this sense, the potent residues of positivism circulate with the emergent phenomena of interpretive and critical inquiry. This condition is messy, but it is rarely boring, and it forces us to be reflective and explicit about our intellectual commitments.

Second, professional and geopolitical contexts mediate the local occurrences of post-positivism. There may be no bigger tent in the academic world than the field of Communication, which serves as a master-professional identity for multiple, component subfields and interdisciplinary affiliations. And although it is an international field, as one travels between institutions within a single country (where some departments are dominated by humanistic traditions, and others by social-scientific traditions), or between countries, there is both variation and similarity in what counts as “communication studies.” Canadian scholars, for example, are primarily oriented toward media studies, and are rarely accountable to U.S. speech-communication traditions. In Australia, Communication has only recently been formalized as a field, and its curriculum draws uniquely on American traditions and British cultural studies to serve both critical/theoretical and professional/applied interests in a postcolonial cultural context (Putnis, 1993). These examples indicate that it is best to consider occurrences of post-positivism in Communication as diverse, local events shaped as much by intellectual history and institutional politics as by a consistent disciplinary identity. If post-positivism is like a language, it has many dialects. The wise traveler develops a sharp ear.

Finally, we note an aftermath of specialization and fragmentation. Specifically, there is a growing sense that discipline-wide agreement about the goals and epistemology of a communication science may not be achievable. Communication research, whose topical ambition (all symbolic performances, anywhere, anytime) is nothing short of astounding, now accommodates many different theoretical traditions and styles of inquiry. These traditions cohabit in various states of tension and harmony. Some accept this situation reluctantly, others welcome it, but all communication researchers struggle to maintain a comprehensive understanding of, and adequate lingua franca for, the discipline. Gone forever, it seems, are the days when communication “generalist” was a viable career path, and one could proclaim “the state of the field” without risking the appearance of being narrowly read or self-serving. In reviewing recently published qualitative research for this
volume, we have been struck by the increasing centrifugal force of these influences. Perhaps the best that researchers can do under these conditions is to keep up with developments in their major areas of interest, while monitoring the seismic tremors in outlying areas as opportunities for innovation and collaboration (Van Maanen, 1995a).

In regard to qualitative methods, this change occurred largely through the persuasiveness of argument. That is, the pluralism we now see came about by a process of passionate debate among communication scholars. The success of qualitative researchers in this process hinged on two elements. The first was their advocacy of the interpretive paradigm, a strategic punctuation of metatheory that overlaps with related accounts such as the naturalistic paradigm (Anderson, 1987; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and hermeneutic empiricism (Anderson, 1996a, 1996b). As an ontological and epistemological foundation for qualitative methods, the interpretive paradigm developed from the convergence of several 19th- and 20th-century intellectual traditions, including German idealist philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutic philosophy, and American pragmatism (C. Taylor, 1977). We will explore these traditions further in Chapter 2, but for now we can identify the following commitments of interpretive (see Cheney, 2000):

- The “human sciences” concerned with experience and social action are inherently different from the natural sciences.
- Realities are plural, simultaneous, and local phenomena.
- Realities are socially constructed by and between human beings in their expressive and interpretive practices. Meaningful realities are emergent, collaborative, and symbolic in nature.
- Research should privilege deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings. It should illuminate how cultural symbol systems are used to attribute meaning to existence and activity.
- Knowledge of social realities emerges from the interdependence of researcher and researched. The researcher does not use methodological instruments. The researcher is the instrument.
- Knowledge claims are inevitably positioned and partial. As a result, researchers should reflect on and account for the contingencies of their claims.
- True knowledge is gained through prolonged immersion and extensive dialogue practiced in actual social settings. Intimate familiarity with the performance and significance of social practices (e.g., involving membership) is a requirement for adequate explanation.
- Evidence for claims about social action should be recorded and expressed using verbal and narrative means.
- Knowledge claims should preserve the subjective experience and motivations of social actors in their meaningful performances.
- Theory should be developed inductively through the iterative testing of tentative explanations against the experience of ongoing interaction with group members.
Theory should create increasingly “expansionistic” understandings of phenomena within and across the sites of their performance.

- Researchers should continuously reflect on the ethical and political dimensions of their research activities.

During the 1980s, one forum for advocacy involved the publication of several compelling “experiments” in the use of qualitative methods. These articles, special journal issues, and edited volumes helped to shape new possibilities for communication research (e.g., Benson, 1985; Dervin, Grossberg, O’Keefe, & Wartella, 1989; Gerbner, 1983). They continued to emerge during the 1990s, penetrating the remaining bastions of quantitative research (Tracy & Gallois, 1997). At their best, these exemplars demonstrated not that objectivist science and quantitative methods were faulty modes of inquiry but that—because they did not value the study of situated and reflexive social action—they were insufficient for those purposes (Deetz & Putnam, 2000; Schwandt, 1989). As they unfolded, these developments were not unique to Communication. In fact, they mirrored (or, more often, followed) similar changes in other fields. Scholars looked outside the behaviorist tradition of American communication science for fresh inspiration: to sociology for its symbolic interactionist and phenomenological traditions; to literary theory for new ideas about the relationship of readers and texts; to feminist and political theory for alternative explanations of power, agency, and social structure; to cultural studies for ways to integrate theory and method in the study of cultural communication.

There were also obstacles on the path. Until recently in the history of Communication, empirical qualitative studies were consigned to the margins of research activity and graduate training (Delia, 1987, pp. 69-73). Qualitative research was viewed by many as soft science, characterized by imprecise instruments, biased observations, and selective reporting of data. In addition, it appeared to practice insufficient controls against random effects (and other threats to internal validity), representative sampling, generalizability, and the falsification of hypotheses.

This is not to say that no qualitative studies were done before the late 1970s, or that a qualitative emphasis was not evident in some types of inquiry. Indeed, Wartella (1987) traces some important, although neglected, field studies of children and media (mostly comic books, radio, and movies) from the first half of this century. Nearly all of those studies, however, were conducted by sociologists and social psychologists, rather than by self-identified communication scholars. In 1984, Anderson’s survey (cited in Anderson, 1987) of published ethnographies in communication journals yielded only 16 examples over the prior five years. Even if we add
to this count work that appears in books and in the journals of other social scientific disciplines, and under descriptors other than ethnography, it is still true that until recently most qualitative communication research was done by a persistent few. Further, because qualitative inquiry did not immediately produce unambiguous benefits, its legitimacy was questioned.

This questioning was often directed to topics of qualitative inquiry associated with organizations, subcultures, families, groups, and individuals. These topics can be selected as much for their relevance for the researcher’s inner world as for sanctioned communication theory. Some topics, such as professional-academic gender inequity, are chosen because they represent problems in the politics of communication. These topics often arouse (sometimes thinly disguised) resistance among the members of groups whose privilege is threatened by such studies (Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994). Other topics attract attention because of their striking—and controversial—cultural character. The topic of fan subcultures whose members use media texts to create oppositional narratives (Jenkins, 1988), for example, seems trivial to some because it concerns an esoteric practice by a small number of seemingly eccentric people. Such research might be judged irrelevant to the development of universal propositions about media effects. As an argument for textual indeterminacy and audience agency, it may also be judged political heresy in the wake of cultural tragedies, such as the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, and other spectacles, such as the appearance of a uniform-clad Star Trek fan in the jury pool for an Arkansas trial involving the president of the United States (Jenkins, 1996, 1999). In these moments, researchers have to swim upstream against the visceral emotion, the search for scapegoats, and the anti-fan bigotry that animate public discourse about media effects. Questions about the potential fitness of topics, then, can add to the notoriety of doing qualitative research.

Within Communication, however, this skepticism has lost much of its edge and energy since the time of Carey’s essay, and sentiment appears to have swung in the other direction. In their recent survey of communication graduate programs, for example, Frey, Anderson, and Friedman (1998) found that—although its rate of offerings lagged behind those for quantitative methods and rhetorical criticism—almost half of the responding departments offered some form of instruction in qualitative methods. They judged this to be a positive indicator for such a recent arrival. Although the definitive study of growth remains to be done, our own experience—and the talk among our colleagues—is that cultural and interpretive research are claiming an increasing share of disciplinary resources. One significant indicator of this trend is journal space allocation: Pardun’s (1999) analysis of a prominent media studies journal between 1978 and 1998 found a publication incidence of
26% for qualitative research articles (although her broadly inclusive criteria may have inflated this figure). Our recent search of one Internet database (ComAbstracts) of articles published in communication journals returned 50 entries for abstracts containing the keyword “ethnography.” It also returned over 200 entries for “qualitative” (although its coverage of journals is only partial, and these figures lump “pure” studies with those using mixed methods and with methodological or theoretical commentaries). Outside of academe, growing interest among corporations and other institutions in the value of qualitative research for product design, program evaluation, and marketing purposes is also fueling its growth (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Baba, 1998). Clearly, the times are (still) changing.

Looking back on the rise of the interpretive paradigm in Communication, at least two key impacts can be identified. First, members of the discipline have gained increased understanding of the purposes and methods of interpretive, cultural, and critical approaches. Most communication scholars now acknowledge that studies of contingent meaning can produce useful insights about the human condition. They also acknowledge that qualitative methods are more suitable than quantitative methods for addressing certain (but not all) questions about culture, interpretation, and power. For these purposes, the flexible and accommodating aspects of qualitative inquiry—its relational style of fieldwork, its inductive mode of analysis, and its resistance to closure—are strong attributes indeed.

Second, qualitative scholars can now publicize their work in an affirmative (as opposed to defensive) tone—even if they do so in many different voices. Although some reactionary sentiment persists (as discussed in Chapter 9), qualitative scholars will not find much sympathy for claims of categorical discrimination. As always, one needs to have access to the resources of communication to be able to say anything, much less be heard. But the boat of qualitative research has been lifted with Communication’s rising tide as a discipline. Although conditions are far from ideal, few would argue that the discipline’s visibility and sophistication have declined in recent years. The institutionalization of qualitative interests appears in various ways. One significant development involves the recent creation of an Ethnography division within the National Communication Association, ensuring conference panel slots for, and specialized discussion of, presentations of qualitative work. An increasing number of journals (some communication-based, some interdisciplinary) either accommodate or prefer qualitative, naturalistic, and cultural studies (see Chapter 3 for a detailed list). Although the receptiveness of a particular journal can vary with the appointment of a specific editor (and is always dependent on the quality of the work submitted), and some journals are traditionally more open than
others, most have continued to display broad perspectives in their editorial policies and review boards. Further, several university and academic-oriented presses have actively sought and published volumes of cultural and critical communication studies. Increasing numbers of bibliographies, reviews, anthologies, and methodological texts also have contributed to this critical mass.

**Coming to Terms**

Having won the battle for legitimacy, then, qualitative research in Communication has now entered a period in which it can enjoy the associated fruits. In this process, however, it also assumes the responsibility of maintaining its legitimacy by producing perceived benefits. Shortly, we will explore various trajectories of research that have emerged in key disciplinary subfields. First, however, we conclude this section by drawing distinctions between three terms that are commonly used to describe methodologies that derive from the interpretive paradigm: *naturalistic inquiry, ethnography*, and *qualitative research*. These terms are often used interchangeably, producing confusion among both advocates and critics (Potter, 1996). While we cannot resolve confusion in the literature, our distinctions signal how these terms will be used in this volume.

**Naturalistic Inquiry**

The term *naturalistic inquiry* is often used interchangeably with *naturalism*, which takes cultural description as its primary objective. Naturalism proposes that the indigenous behaviors and meanings of a people can be understood only through a close analysis of “natural” settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, pp. 6-9). Natural settings are the customary arenas of activity for those being studied (e.g., shopping malls for teens engaged in “hanging out”). According to Denzin (1977), “Naturalism implies a profound respect for the character of the empirical world. It demands that the investigator take his [or her] theories and methods to that world” (p. 31).

The naturalist’s injunction that social actions be studied in their own contexts does not mean that all contrived situations, such as interviews, are to be avoided. On the contrary, many data-gathering techniques are used in naturalistic study, including informant interviews, maps of settings, and artifact analysis. The naturalistic researcher combines different techniques to compensate for the limitations of each individual technique.
However, in their quest for “ecological validity,” naturalists sometimes ignore the effects of research itself on outcomes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, pp. 10-14). They try to document what is going on “out there,” but the “there-ness” inevitably includes their own research presence. Even in naturalistic inquiry, the researcher cannot claim a privileged position separate from the phenomena being studied. It is to the credit of interpretive forms of inquiry that this reflexivity is accepted explicitly. The practice of reflexive analysis—accounting for the researcher’s own role in social action—sensitizes the researcher to the different orders of reality in a scene (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982). As we will discuss in Chapter 5, this mode of qualitative research is becoming increasingly popular. Naturalism’s success, then, may be measured in its assimilation as an implicit premise in qualitative research. Its importance is increasingly historical and—for researchers reluctant to leave the laboratory but curious about alternatives—conceptual.

Ethnography

The term ethnography does not imply any single method or type of data analysis, although participant observation is a strategy that nearly all ethnographers employ. Nor do ethnographers (particularly the post-positivist variety) disavow the use of quantification. On the contrary, they often use surveys and statistical procedures to analyze patterns, determine who or what to sample, and triangulate findings (e.g., Silverman, 1985). Ethnographers also sometimes employ diagnostic tests, personality inventories, and other measurement tools (Pelto & Pelto, 1978). Basically, ethnographers will turn to any method that will help them to achieve success.

Typically, that success involves describing and interpreting observed relationships between social practices and the systems of meaning in a particular cultural milieu. This commitment is encoded in the term’s roots, ethno-(people) and -graphy (describing). Ethnography usually involves a holistic description of cultural membership. As such, it differs from ethnology, which involves the more abstract comparison and classification of cultures (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). Traditionally, ethnography is also holistic in that it tries to describe all (or at least most) relevant aspects of a culture’s material existence and meaning systems. “Thick” description—specifically, of the contextual significance of actions for their performers—is a key attribute of ethnography (Geertz, 1973). The more detail that goes into the description, the richer our understanding, and the more value the account holds for the reader.

Although ethnography descends from centuries of imperial exploration and colonization of “primitive” life-worlds (a tainted heritage whose
consequences we explore in Chapter 2), its academic institutionalization dates to the 1920s, when anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski conducted a number of studies of the Trobriand islanders. As a result of Malinowski's pioneering studies, ethnography became identified with "living intimately and for a prolonged period of time within a single native community whose language [the researcher] had mastered" (Wax, 1972, p. 7). Prolonged engagement of the researcher with a culture, culminating in the production of a lengthy written account addressing the theoretical significance of observations, became not only the norm but the *sine qua non* of ethnographic fieldwork. Subsequent generations of anthropologists dutifully traveled to far-off locales to undergo the same disciplinary baptism through fieldwork.

In sociology, however, ethnographic practice is more commonly described as "participant observation," which similarly connotes intensive, long-term immersion in a social scene. Sociologists have been less concerned with exotic sites of global diversity, however, and more focused on domestic folk, urban, and deviant subcultures, as well as social movements. Typically, sociologists focus on the consequences for these life-worlds created by the social, political, and economic changes associated with modernism and postmodernism (e.g., immigration, urbanization, the rise of the mass media, and consumerism). Also, sociology and anthropology have traditionally been concerned with matters of social structure and function. Although these traditions have been disrupted by the paradigm shifts described earlier in this chapter, they nonetheless form a legacy that distinguishes, in comparison, Communication's use of ethnography to *directly* focus on symbolic practices (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Sanday, 1983; Vidich & Lyman, 2000).

Like Malinowski before them, ethnographers live intimately inside the life space of the cultural members. Within that space, they must decide on the appropriate mix of perspectives through which cultural phenomena are studied. However, these decisions must be made *with* (not for) cultural members, because it is they who admit the ethnographer into their midst and risk the consequences of scrutiny. Ultimately, the documentation of social life can be realized only through negotiation with the people being studied.

Finally, in ethnography, process and product are joined closely. Ethnography is textual in the dual sense that (a) writing is a key activity in all phases of field research, and (b) writing "fixes" cultural analysis within the dialectic of field relations worked out between researcher and cultural members. What is left in and what is left out, whose point of view is represented, and how the scenes of social life are depicted become very important matters for assessing the "poetics and politics" of the ethnographic text (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). These issues are central to our discussion of writing and reading qualitative research in Chapter 9.
Qualitative Research

Fundamentally, qualitative researchers seek to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations. Actual talk, gesture, and so on are the raw materials of analysis. This distinctiveness is often muddied, however, by a tendency for scholars to define qualitative research by what it is not (i.e., quantitative and statistical; Anderson & Meyer, 1988, p. 247) and as an “umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1983, p. 9). The term “qualitative research” vexes those with a low tolerance for ambiguity (Potter, 1996) because it crosscuts disciplines, it contains ambiguous phenomena that bridge theory and method, it has no particular defining method, and its meanings have changed dramatically over three centuries of practice and debate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Because referential precision is not one of this term’s virtues, we focus pragmatically on how this term is used, and by whom.

Central here are the nonnecessary relationships between qualitative research, naturalistic inquiry, and interpretivist epistemology. That is, qualitative methods are often—but not always—employed in the service of interpretive and naturalistic premises. Observation of interaction, for example, may be conducted for the purpose of validating a deductively derived coding scheme. The link between epistemology and methods is also conditioned by the history of a particular discipline. As described above, ethnographers practicing in anthropology and sociology have traditionally affiliated with positivist and post-positivist projects (Potter, 1996, p. 34). Unlike naturalistic inquiry, qualitative research is not always carried out in the habitat of cultural members. For instance, many qualitative studies eschew participant observation and are based solely on interview data (Kleinman, Stenross, & McMahon, 1994). Unlike ethnography, qualitative research does not always immerse the researcher in the scene for a prolonged period, adopt a holistic view of social practices, or broadly consider their cultural and historical contexts (Press, 1989). In fact, studies using qualitative methods often focus only on a partial set of relationships in a scene. Whether this is specificity or reductionism becomes a matter of debate.

Despite these differences, qualitative research has a great deal in common with both interpretivism and naturalistic inquiry. Most communication scholars, for example, consider *qualitative research* to be the broadest and most inclusive term for these phenomena (Frey et al., 1998), and so it is
the default term that we use throughout this volume. Two perspectives help to clarify this resonance. The first, offered by Lofland (1971), defines qualitative inquiry in terms of the kinds of questions it asks:

What kinds of things are going on here? What are the forms of this phenomenon? What variations do we find in this phenomenon? That is, qualitative analysis is addressed to the task of delineating forms, kinds and types of social phenomena; of documenting in loving detail the things that exist. (p. 13)

This definition emphasizes empirical and descriptive elements of qualitative inquiry that are consistent with—but not exclusive to—interpretivism. Denzin and Lincoln (2000), however, emphasize the distinctiveness of craft employed in qualitative research. They liken qualitative researchers to *bricoleurs*—workers who assemble useful and valuable forms from available, fragmentary resources to meet situational needs. This process—as those of quilt makers and jazz musicians—is as much creative, intuitive, and improvisational as it is systematic. Qualitative researchers, they argue, commonly use the aesthetic forms of *montage* (in which images of social life are juxtaposed to create a larger narrative) and *pentimento* (in which obscured elements of social life are restored for consideration). Again, these practices may be employed in natural settings to serve the goals and premises of interpretivism—but not necessarily.

These characteristics—a logic of discovery and attention to the diverse forms and details of social life—are shared by nearly all qualitative approaches that are interested in human understanding. These approaches converge on issues of how humans articulate and interpret their social and personal interests. For the purposes of this book, then, qualitative research is understood to be an approach that subsumes most of what goes by the names of interpretive, ethnographic, and naturalistic inquiry.

**Looking Closer: The Conduct of Qualitative Research in Communication**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Communication is a complex field whose diversity encourages multiple and competing claims about its identity. Much of the day-to-day work in the discipline is organized around subfields. That is, although scholars may identify with the discipline as a whole, that identification is more abstract (and potentially weaker) than the bonds developed between colleagues who share a particular research topic or a methodological or theoretical approach. Discussion of these contexts is
useful for several reasons: Senior communication scholars typically socialize junior scholars to develop primary affiliations; scholars evaluate each other’s work as contributing to particular subfield agendas; and epistemological shifts ultimately get played out within subfields as matters of local relevance. Further, this last process is not uniform. Different subfields have different histories and cultures that mediate the outcomes. To illustrate this, we provide a brief survey of qualitative research conducted in nine subfields, with a list of associated exemplars. The first six subfields are identified by the context of communication studied (interpersonal communication, language and social interaction, group communication, organizational communication, intercultural communication, and media and cultural studies) and the last three subfields are identified by topic and genre (performance studies, applied communication, and health communication). Our discussion focuses on the themes and issues that characterize the impact of qualitative research in each subfield. The exemplars listed illustrate, but do not exhaust, the scope and depth of qualitative research conducted in each category. In reading, we encourage you to note the opportunities and challenges that characterize not only your own subfield(s) but also those of your colleagues. This broader understanding can form the spark of innovation and collaboration.

Interpersonal Communication

As a traditional bastion of quantitative and positivist and post-positivist research, this subfield has been relatively slow and cautious in accommodating interpretive epistemology (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992). Groundbreaking qualitative studies have treated personal relationships (e.g., family and friendship) and episodes of interaction (e.g., conflict) as situated accomplishments of speech and nonverbal (Ray, 1987) communication (e.g., Jorgenson, 1989; Rawlins, 1983, 1989). In their premises and practices, most of these studies reflect the influence of social-constructionism, “conventional” explanation, and “grounded theory.” Personal identities and social realities are viewed as constructions of language use, culture is treated as a central context of interaction, and explanations are developed through the inductive analysis of data generated in intimate observation (Poole & McPhee, 1994). Interest often centers on the ways in which people describe their relational bonds, and the dilemmas (e.g., dialectics created by incompatible goals) they encounter in maintaining and transforming them. Somewhat more elaborately, the contributors to a recent edited volume (Carter & Presnell, 1994) bring idealist, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and critical perspectives to traditional topics of research, such as understanding, competence, listening,
and self-disclosure. The contributors to another volume (Morrill & Snow, 2003) argue that mainstream research on personal relationships has been too narrow in selecting types of relationships (e.g., emotionally invested, highly interdependent, enduring, and “private”), in sampling populations, and in using methods. They advocate a form of “relational ethnography” that focuses on cultural contexts, registers variation in interdependency, and expands the range of relational types and sites studied. Exemplars include Arnold (1995), Bochner and Ellis (1992), Bruess and Pearson (1997), Sabourin and Stamp (1995), and Stamp (1999).

Language and Social Interaction

This term describes a “diverse, squabbling family” (Tracy, 2001) of communication researchers influenced by the traditions of psychology, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology. They share a general commitment to interpretive social science, but they differ strongly over procedures for gathering and analyzing data and for reporting findings. At least four groups are represented:

- **Conversation analysts** focused on conversational structure as the display of strategies by which speakers coordinate and interpret utterances
- **Discourse analysts** concerned with analyzing oral, written, and visual texts produced in a variety of contexts
- **Ethnographers of communication** focused on cultural codes and rituals (e.g., for places, times, and styles of appropriate speech) that organize characteristic, routine communication between the members of “speech communities” (e.g., Carbaugh, 1988a; Philipsen, 1975; Sigman, 1986)
- **Microethnographers** practicing fine-grained analysis of both verbal and nonverbal practices to create holistic portraits of embodied, situated interaction

Generally, language and social interaction (LSI) researchers are committed to precise and detailed study of everyday talk occurring in natural contexts, recording and documenting that talk (e.g., through transcription), and using excerpts as evidence for knowledge claims. Although hybrid forms of research are not unknown among this group (e.g., Jarmon, 1996; Tracy & Tracy, 1998), LSI researchers typically diverge from ethnographers in favoring a more detached researcher role, limiting evidence for claims of contextual influence to explicit features of recorded interaction, and “glossing” the biographical complexity of actors to foreground the material features of interaction as exemplars of social practice. Exemplars include Beach (1996), Buttny (1997), Fitch (1994a), Hopper (1992), and LeBaron and Streeck (1997).
Group Communication

Frey (1994c) has argued that interpretivism may help to revive a somewhat stagnant field of research that has traditionally used quantitative methods to study zero-history groups of college students in one-time, laboratory events involving the solution of artificial tasks assigned by researchers. Alternatively, qualitative methods can be used to expand the range of groups studied (e.g., bona fide groups characterized by extensive history, shifting boundaries, and interdependencies with other groups; Putnam & Stohl, 1990), the types of communication studied (e.g., the construction of group identity), and the types of evidence used to support claims (e.g., exemplars derived from fieldnotes and long-term observation). In addition, Dollar and Merrigan (2001) argue that qualitative studies can validate and extend existing group communication theory (e.g., by clarifying its boundary conditions), generate new theory (e.g., concerning the dialectic between individual and collective interests experienced by group members), redress traditional neglect of topics (e.g., meaning construction), and problematize conventional wisdom (e.g., surrounding the necessity of shared goals for group status). In addition to these benefits, however, Frey (1994a) notes that qualitative research also creates dilemmas involving negotiation with group members of agreements concerning access, inclusion, confidentiality, and mutually beneficial transactions. Exemplars include C. Braithwaite (1997), Conquergood (1994), Croft (1999), Della-Piana and Anderson (1995), and Lesch (1994).

Organizational Communication

Researchers in this subfield turned to interpretive models and philosophies in the early 1980s, partly out of frustration with the barrenness of rationalist and functionalist explanations (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). They learned from their colleagues in management (as well as from popular authors and their own experiences as paid consultants) that organizations can be likened to cultures: they ritually initiate members and sometimes expel them; they create and share evocative stories designed to inspire and terrify members; they carefully manage the flowering of difference and opposition in subcultures; and they relate to external entities through both mundane commerce and imaginative superstition. Researchers’ initial studies focused on topics such as the scripted and performative dimensions of organizational roles, the metaphors used by organizations to represent their identity and cultivate productivity and commitment, and the messy, nonrational practices underlying the gleaming face of the corporate machine (e.g., Goodall, 1991; Kelly, 1985; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Smircich & Calas, 1987).
Generally, qualitative methods were valued as a means for creating fine-grained and preservationistic accounts of organizational symbol use (Schwartzman, 1993). These findings contributed to theoretical knowledge about a variety of topics, including employee socialization, commitment and identification, leadership, ethics, implementation of new technologies, diversity, and organizational innovation. Potentially, this knowledge helps organizational members to identify and resolve pressing problems, reflect on the premises that guide their sensemaking, and develop cultures that successfully balance the tension between individual and organizational goals (Kreps & Herndon, 2001). In addition to embracing interpretivism, organizational communication has recently adopted a variety of “critical” and “postmodern” theories concerned with politicizing organizational power and control, and with transforming conventional understandings of “organization” and how it should be studied (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). Exemplars include Bantz (2001), Eisenberg, Murphy, and Andrews (1998), Ruud (2000), Taylor (1999), and Wendt (1995).

Intercultural Communication

Under this umbrella term, researchers are variously concerned with interaction among and between the members of different cultural groups (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Traditionally “functionalist” research in this subfield has been affiliated with the practical interests of foreign relations and international business. Related research has conceptualized national culture as relatively coherent and stable, and sought evidence of its causal influence on communication (e.g., as reflecting “individualist” and “collectivist” traits). Since the late 1980s, intercultural communication has been a fertile ground for interpretive research grounded in the traditions of anthropology and sociolinguistics; significant overlap exists between members of this subfield and ethnographers of communication. Interpretive research here focuses on reciprocal and emergent relationships between communication and culture. It emphasizes the social construction of cultural knowledge and identities (e.g., membership is a performance not a trait), and the importance of researcher accountability for how claims are constructed in overlapping academic, historical, and socioeconomic contexts. An exemplary research program involves the use of focus group interviews by Mary Jane Collier (1998) and her associates to develop “cultural identity theory.” Related studies examine the relationship between respondents’ self-identified affiliation with national, racial, and ethnic groups, and the extent to which respondents share such
identity patterns as in-group norms, experiences with out-group discrimination and prejudice, and constitutive ideas and strategies for managing conflict. (Collier, 1998, p. 139)

This subfield has recently been influenced by postmodern and critical perspectives (most notably feminism and postcolonialism), in which scholars reflect Western culture’s often imperial gaze back on itself and subvert its conventional wisdom regarding homogeneity, assimilation, rationality, and consensus. Whether focused “at home” or “abroad,” this research emphasizes unequal power relationships; diversity; the simultaneity and partiality of ethnic, class, and gender identities; and the dissolution of clear geopolitical boundaries (e.g., within and between nations) in the context of globalization (Collier, 2000). Recent exemplars include Bailey (2000), Bradford, Meyers, and Kane (1999), Gareis (1995), Lindsley (1999), and Starosta and Hannon (1997).

Media and Cultural Studies

In this subfield (formerly known as “mass communication”), audience ethnography attained prominence mainly as a result of two different events: the recognition by critical theorists of the limits of purely textual and political-economic analysis and the dissatisfaction of many American communication scholars with the limits of empiricist models of audience research. Both communities found their own paths to the discovery of qualitative inquiry: critical theorists through what is called cultural studies (heavily influenced by semiotic and poststructuralist theories), and American mass communication researchers through social phenomenology and other interpretive social science approaches (this is a simplistic account, because both communities borrowed from each other’s ideas). The rapid development of audience ethnography has produced insights into the social uses and rules of media and the interpretation of meanings in mainstream media texts (Anderson & Meyer, 1988; Corner, 1999, pp. 80-92; Geraghty, 1998; Lindlof, 1991; Morley, 1992). Murphy (1999b) notes, however, that the postmodernist turn has produced excessive critique of ethnographic textuality by scholars who do not themselves practice fieldwork. Less charitably, Bird (1992) describes this scholarship as “narcissism.” Central here, in any event, has been the naturalistic move to study actual reception practices (e.g., television viewing) in the context of audience members’ daily activities (e.g., the domestic routines of home-based women). Some researchers have conducted “resistance studies” of specialized subcultures (e.g., fans) whose members appropriate media texts to serve local needs and motives (Fiske, 1991a;
Jenkins, 1992). Others have focused on “interpretive communities” in which media-use is a ritual performance through which users maintain their status and membership (e.g., in performing interpretations of content that conform to communal mythology). The rise of resistance studies and textualist critique has in turn produced a backlash that rejects populist celebration of audience opposition as—at best—premature, and calls for more grounded study of audiences as the material objects of institutional knowledge and power (Morley, 1997).

The rise of media audience studies has also affected an ancient and venerable subfield in Communication—rhetorical studies. As the fields of rhetorical criticism and cultural studies increasingly overlap (Rosteck, 1999), the former now struggles to revise its tradition of *speculating* about textual influence on audiences. That is, cultural studies challenge rhetorical criticism to *document* that influence by participating in and observing its actuality (Blair & Michel, 1999; Stromer-Galley & Schiappa, 1998).

Finally, two other areas of research may be mentioned here. The first is development communication, in which ethnography is seen as an approach that can study local realities and needs without imposing the value assumptions of traditional media effects research (Bourgault, 1992). The second is the production of content in media organizations. Here, participant observation work has examined the social construction of news in the routines of journalists and newsrooms (Lester, 1980; Rodriguez, 1996; Tuchman, 1991) and in the processes of producing entertainment programs (Gitlin, 1983; Levine, 2001; Saferstein, 1991). Other exemplars of qualitative research in this subfield include Beck (1995), Geiser-Getz (1998), Huesca (1995), Ling, Nilsen, and Granhaug (1999), and Rockler (1999).

**Performance Studies**

Conquergood (1991) argues that performance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history. The performance paradigm insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. It situates ethnographers within the delicately negotiated and fragile “face-work” that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life. (p. 187)

This definition signals the exquisitely reflexive use of the performance paradigm by scholars in this subfield. It designates sites and modes of expressive practice that form the object of study: dance, play, sport, food, ritual, ceremony, music, theater, and so on. The focus here is on how performers
interpret culturally authored scripts and on how they artfully collaborate with audiences in the construction of cultural identities. The unique move that follows is to appropriate performance as an epistemological allegory in which corresponding elements of the research process are reconfigured as performer, audience, script, and theater. In this view, performance is not merely the object of research, it is also the mode of research, in which the presentation of self (e.g., by the researcher to the group) is central, interaction is semi-scripted but also improvised, and knowledge emerges from the contingencies of situated, collaborative interaction. This allegory culminates in the conversion of qualitative research findings into aesthetic formats of public, oral, and written performance: poems, short stories, personal narratives, and even staged productions (Welker & Goodall, 1997). These performances vividly clarify for audiences that social meanings are inherently precarious (e.g., immigrant folkways threatened by assimilation) and are preserved through embodied acts of will and skill (Denzin, 1997, pp. 90-125). Perhaps more than any other subfield described here, performance studies has been influenced by feminist and postmodern theories emphasizing the contingency of cultural identity, the persistence of both subtle and brute forms of oppression, and the role of performance in creating spaces and moments in which authentic experience can be creatively asserted against dominant ideologies (e.g., through irony, parody, carnival, etc.). These perspectives break from traditional dramaturgy in emphasizing paradox, conflict, ambiguity, and instability over coherence, structure, and consensus. Exemplars include Bell and Forbes (1994), S. H. Jones (1999), Shue and Beck (2001), and Valentine and Matsumoto (2001).

Applied Communication

This subfield includes highly motivated and focused research projects, which are undertaken for at least two purposes. The first purpose is to assist real-world individuals and groups in the diagnosis and solution of practical problems hindering their ability to achieve communication goals. The second purpose is to use these opportunities to build and test communication theory. These studies potentially combine quantitative (e.g., surveys and experiments), qualitative (e.g., interviewing), and textual-critical methods to meet situational needs. They are uniquely characterized by collaboration between researchers and clients intended to define problems, set goals, identify contributing factors, formulate methodological strategies, and implement solutions. One example of such research is the growing employment of qualitative researchers by marketers and product designers to intimately observe consumers in the “fields” of their homes and
workplaces (Osborne, 2002)—an alternate career path that is proving increasingly attractive to academics addicted to the ethnographic life (Thornton, 1999).

Qualitative methods are especially helpful in managing the naturalistic elements of these projects (Frey, O’Hair, & Kreps, 1990; Seibold, 1995). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note that applied qualitative research is the critical site where theory, method, praxis, action, and policy all come together. Qualitative researchers can isolate target populations, show the immediate effects of certain programs on such groups, and isolate the constraints that operate against policy changes in such settings. Action-oriented and clinically-oriented qualitative researchers can also create spaces for those who are studied (the other) to speak. (p. 23)

Exemplars may be found in volumes of the eponymous *Journal of Applied Communication Research*.

**Health Communication**

This subfield provides a distinctive exemplar of applied qualitative research. It has traditionally been dominated by a functionalist focus on assisting health care professionals to identify and overcome perceived communication problems. These problems are variously interpersonal (e.g., the presentation of diagnoses to patients), organizational (e.g., inadequate training of staff), and media related (e.g., the assimilation of telemedicine systems) and affect the delivery and quality of services. Health communication researchers have used both quantitative and qualitative methods to help professionals predict and control patient attitudes and behaviors (e.g., their conformity to treatment regimens) and to achieve preferred outcomes (e.g., reduction in rates of illness). Arguably, however, this focus has reproduced the hierarchical authority of medical professionals over patients and obscured patients’ experiences. Qualitative methods have recently been used to restore the integrity of patient experience and action in medical encounters (e.g., by redefining “effective outcomes” in patient-centered terms such as quality of life, respect, and advocacy). This research emphasizes the situated performances that form the referent of variables such as “self-efficacy.” It also focuses on the importance of gender, class, and racial identities in the co-construction of often-competing meanings for pain, discomfort, health and illness, the body, mind and spirit, and mortality. Researchers have used methods of interviewing, observation, and textual analysis to foreground the voices of patients (e.g., personal narratives of illness) and professionals engaged in the profoundly challenging and
rewarding encounters that constitute the social life of medicine. These methods are particularly useful in capturing “the ground truth” behind controversial, large-scale change in health care institutions, such as that currently surrounding “managed care” (Gillespie, 2001; Sharf & Street, 1997; Vanderford, Jenks, & Sharf, 1997). Exemplars include Ellingson and Buzzanell (1999), Geist and Gates (1996), Hirschmann (1999), Orbe and King (2000), and Whitten, Sypher, and Patterson (2000).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reviewed some key commitments of interpretivism that underlie much of what we recognize as qualitative research in Communication and compared them with those of positivism and post-positivism. We’ve had our first look at some specific procedures that logically derive from interpretivism and noted the fact that these methods may also be made to serve positivist and post-positivist purposes. It should by now be crystal-clear that what distinguishes qualitative research is not so much the particular methods employed as the epistemological purposes to which they are put. These relationships between method and epistemology are not easy to articulate (at least not at first), but novices become experts when they work at increasing their precision and fluency in these accounts. Qualitative researchers at any career stage who ignore this responsibility risk the loss of credibility. Finally, we’ve taken a quick spin around the large city known as “qualitative research in Communication.” We’ve looked in on some different neighborhoods (we hope yours included) and seen some important differences in how qualitative research is used to serve local interests. Along with those differences, though, we also saw central arteries that cut across and connect these neighborhoods: rich, detailed descriptions of human experience, dialogic encounters between the self and other, and the inductive development of theory from intimate knowledge of situated practice. In the next chapter, we continue the orientation begun here by exploring the theoretical traditions that energize qualitative communication research (particularly critical theories that we have so far only mentioned in passing). As we will see, these theories form “scientific” and “professional” narratives adopted by the members of disciplinary subfields to legitimate their qualitative research.