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Researching workplace relationships: What can we learn from qualitative organizational studies?

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Janie Harden Fritz
Duquesne University, USA

Abstract
The study of workplace relationships is now well established. Although initially conducted with quantitative methods, when the qualitative turn in organizational communication intersected with increased recognition of the value of qualitative/interpretive methods for understanding interpersonal relationships, research on work relationships began to move in a similar direction, resulting in an increasingly rich knowledge base. This article traces the rise of qualitative research on workplace relationships, highlighting exemplary studies and identifying resources that can guide continued qualitative research on workplace relationships.

Keywords
Organizational communication, organizational relationships, qualitative research, work place relationships

Since the late 1970s, research on workplace relationships has grown from initial quantitative studies of communication in supervisor–subordinate dyads to research on mentoring and peer relationships, romantic relationships, and workplace friendships approached from varied methodologies (Sias, 2009). During the last decade, studies of problematic workplace relationships (Fritz & Omdahl, 2006; Hess, 2006; Hess, Omdahl, & Fritz, 2006; Omdahl & Fritz, 2012; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006) and the positive contributions of organizational relationships to work life emerged (e.g., Dutton

Corresponding author:
Janie Harden Fritz, Duquesne University, 600 Forbes Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, USA.
Email: harden@duq.edu

& Ragins, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, & Fletcher, 2011), and much of it was qualitative in nature. Clearly, organizational communication as a disciplinary area continues to embrace qualitative research. In the next pages, I explore how the qualitative turn in organizational communication research has contributed to workplace relationship research, highlighting exemplary studies and available resources to inspire and guide those who seek to conduct qualitative research on workplace relationships across disciplines in the many areas that remain for investigation.

Workplace relationships: A qualitative turn

In a recent comprehensive treatment of organizational relationships, Sias (2009) identified postpositivism, social construction, critical approaches, and structuration as four perspectives guiding research in this area. The methodologies associated with each perspective yield distinctive types of knowing about workplace relationships. The postpositivist approach—given its assumptions about the nature of reality and how reality can be known and its ontological assumptions and accompanying epistemological commitments—is typically associated with quantitative methods (Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Sias, 2009; Tracy, 2013), while the other three offer greater openness to—even demand—qualitative methods.

Most research on workplace relationships has been quantitative (Sias, 2009, p. 4), perhaps because the study of workplace relationships rests at the intersection of interpersonal and organizational communication, both of which have been heavily invested in research from a postpositivist perspective (Knapp & Daly, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Mumby & May, 2005). Since the 1990s, however, researchers have turned increasingly to qualitative methodologies to study interpersonal relationships (Knapp & Daly, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Tracy & Muñoz, 2011). A similar reorientation took place in the field of organizational communication in a qualitative turn heralded by Putnam's (1983) landmark introduction of interpretive approaches to organizational communication scholarship. These reorientations converged and qualitative research on workplace relationships began to appear with greater frequency. A harbinger of this qualitative shift, which also took place in the broader context of organizational and management studies (Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999), was Kram and Isabella's (1985) now-classic study of information, collegial, and special peer relationships in the workplace undertaken by means of grounded theory based on in-depth interviews.

The qualitative turn in organizational communication studies marked an epistemological and ontological sea change, altering the understandings of the very nature of inquiry and reorienting researchers to the organizational phenomena they studied, as documented by Lindlof and Taylor (2011, pp. 24–25). An initial result of this qualitative turn was an understanding of organizations as cultures, inviting interpretive studies of member initiation, conflict, and opposition within organizational subcultures, performance of organizational roles, and metaphors for organizing as symbolic processes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These studies generated "fine-grained and empathic accounts," contributing to new theorizing and eventual adoption of critical perspectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 25).

By this point, experience in organizations was acknowledged as multiperspectival, dependent for meaning on participants' sociocultural standpoint and hierarchical positioning (e.g., Allen, 2011; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003), just as particularity and bias, rather than objectivity, were recognized as integral elements of the knowing subject, defining self-reflexivity as a key coordinate of qualitative research (Tracy, 2013, pp. 2–3). Studies of workplace relationships followed suit. For example, Liu and Buzzanell (2006), working from a feminist perspective, examined the experiences of a pregnant woman with her male supervisor and with coworkers, exploring micro-and macropractices of gendered communication patterns resulting in lack of power through "taken-for-granted procedures, exchanges, and interactions" related to pregnancy in the workplace and empowerment with coworkers through "information sharing and feminine communication patterns" (p. 60).

The qualitative turn in organizational communication studies also heightened awareness of context(s), another coordinate of qualitative research (Tracy, 2013). Studies of less investigated organizational forms, such as nongovernmental organizations and nonprofit institutions, opened new horizons for research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), and the "discursive turn" in organizational communication studies (Ashcraft, 2007, p. 11) highlighted the ways communication constitutes contexts of organizing in everyday practices (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2004). Tracy and Craig (2010), explicating action-implicative discourse analysis, observe that understanding communicative action "requires looking at it in the context in which it occurred" (p. 146). Their qualitative analysis of discourse during a school board meeting, a nontraditional organizational context hosting professional interpersonal relationships, illustrates how persons in a minority position in a group can leverage conversational resources to pose questions and reformulate answers to challenge the majority perspective and, at the same time, display adherence to the group's democratic principles (p. 155).

This focus on context and on the communicative constitution of organizing resonated with dialectical and qualitative approaches to interpersonal communication focused on meaning and action as constitutive of relationships (Baxter, 1988; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Rawlins, 1989; Tracy, 2013). Qualitative research was recognized as ideal for revealing constructions of the meaning of work relationships and negotiation of lived relational experience within the organizational context. Bridge and Baxter's (1992) analytic inductive study of dialectical tensions in workplace friendships, Sias and Odden's (1996) joint conversation reconstruction method for examining how coworkers constructed differential treatment in the workplace, Ashcraft's (2000) ethnographic study of professional relationships in a feminist organization, and Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, and Fix's (2004) analysis of narratives of workplace relationship deterioration illustrate this focus. Fay's (2011) thematic analysis of informal talk in telecommuters' workplace relationships illustrates how remotely located workers make sense of their work experience and relationships with others, offering insights relevant to newly emerging contexts of work.

The qualitative turn in organizational communication studies emphasized rich analysis of social action, a third coordinate of qualitative research (Tracy, 2013). Social action must be tied to context for its meaning (Tracy, 2013, p. 3), just as relationships are (Duck, 1993). When we read workers' stories of positive emotions they felt from a peer's appreciative word (Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, & Fletcher, 2011), witness an employee's explanation for engaging in "poppy clipper" behavior through gossip and

backbiting (Mancl & Penington, 2011, p. 83), see pictures drawn by study participants of how bullying feels and read metaphors generated from their own experience (Tracy et al., 2006), and read participants' accounts of experiences of coworker deception in their own words (Bryant & Sias, 2011), we learn a great deal about the meaning of workplace relationships in their contexts as it emerges with qualitative richness. Dohrman, Arendt, Buzzanell, and Litera's (2014) exploration of women engineers' sensemaking processes that employed crystallization, a way of working with "diverse data and analytic lenses to understand a complex communication phenomenon in the workplace" (p. 185), yielded findings that were then presented through performance, an inspiring and creative approach to sharing meanings derived from qualitative studies with external audiences in ways that can be seen and heard.

Qualitative studies of workplace relationships are now beginning to generate meaning-centered theories of communication. Dougherty, Kramer, Klatzke, and Rogers (2010) undertook a grounded theory approach to identify the language convergence/meaning divergence theory, which emerged as the researchers noticed that common, or converging, language and words may mask quite divergent meaning systems (p. 21). Participants' stories of flirting and sexual harassment uncovered divergent meanings for these terms, offering insights for misunderstanding and conflict in work relationships and pointing the way to further studies.

Future directions for qualitative studies of workplace relationships

The workplace as a context for understanding personal and social relationships offers enormous potential for qualitative scholars who have at their disposal many excellent resources for guidance. Sias (2009) suggests specific topics for further research from social construction, critical theory, and structuration theory approaches, while Manning and Kunkel's (2014) volume on qualitative research in interpersonal relationships and Tracy's (2013) treatment of qualitative communication research, laced with examples of studies in organizational contexts, offer invaluable guidance for conducting and publishing qualitative studies of workplace relationships. Examples of specific areas of work relationship research in need of qualitative investigation include microprocesses of work relationships contributing to stress and social support; constructions of race and class in work relationships; and studies of work relationships in diverse occupations and institutional settings.

Tracy (2009) notes that we need "thick descriptions of those little arrows" that connect the various "boxes"—"individual causes, organizational factors, buffering variables, and consequences"—in models of stress and burnout, as well as the "the types of interactions, feelings, and communication that *construct* the boxes," and processes that happen "*in between* the boxes," through narratives of employee experiences (p. 94). We need to learn how social support manifests itself and the communicative nature of effective and ineffective social support available from qualitative studies of social support conversations among peers (Sias, 2009). Such narratives and conversations are reflected in Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts' (2006) exploration of metaphors for workplace bullying and Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, and Fletcher's (2011) documentation of employees' positive emotional experiences at work, studies that serve as models for further research.

Qualitative research on work relationships can shed light on how meanings of work and work relationships are discursively co-constructed with others both similar to and different from oneself. Studies of the raced nature and classed nature of occupational and professional identities (Ashcraft, 2007; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003) as these identities are enacted in organizational relationships are lacking. We need studies of how work relationships are constructed and experienced by workers from nontraditional organizational settings, such as gangs, voluntary organizations, and community associations (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003). The work of Dougherty et al. (2010) is a helpful guide for uncovering divergent meaning structures that may lead to conflict related to diversity in work relationships (Millhous, 2012). Qualitative studies of processes of ostracism (Sias, 2012) and tokenism (Collins, Gill, & Mease, 2012) would add important insights to processes of interpersonal justice in workplace relationships.

What we currently know and what we have yet to learn about qualitative studies of workplace relationships can invite human thriving in workplace contexts. As Tracy (2013) reminds us, our findings have import beyond academic journals as we offer what we learn to the world. Manning and Kunkel (2014) note that qualitative research can change how people think about their experience, extending Tracy and Craig's (2010) argument that qualitative research's insights into normative practices provokes reflection on our actions. Qualitative studies of workplace relationships offer resources for us and for the wider public to think and act wisely at work.

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