The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Communication

Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods

Third Edition

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CHAPTER 9

Field Research

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It is Monday, December 5, 2005, and my trip's success relies on strangers. Three months after Hurricane Katrina and the flooding that devastated New Orleans, non-recovery workers can book hotel rooms. Once I arrive, I learn that the context awaiting me includes electricity that is still spotty [and] most traffic lights don't work, so temporary stop signs [are] attached to white and orange construction [signs]. Horses are scattered around [the] intersections, abandoned cars swamped out by brackish waters are parked in “higher” areas and never to be retrieved by their original owners. It's a ghost town that's buzzing with activity. Cars crawl through intersections tentatively, and their riders are confronted by mountains of garbage piled up in the medians of boulevards (in New Orleans' speak, “neutral ground”). I find myself playing “where's the water line” while gawking at flood-damaged houses and buildings. The sludgy line lower down means “they were lucky” but when it's up above door and window frames, near the blue plastic roof, I stare, silently, and wonder about the people who once called the ruins “home” or those buildings with countless knocked out windows “work.” (Doerfel, unpublished raw data, 2005)

Over the years, the field of organizational communication has moved away from static, bounded conceptions of organizations as containers in which communication occurs inside physical offices and buildings to notions of communication as constitutive of organizing (Putnam & Krone, 2006; Taylor, Flanagan, Cheney, & Seibold, 2001). Doerfel's (2005) field notes featured in the opening quote reflect the influence of the interpretive movement (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983), which shifted the focus of organizing from topics such as rational models of managerial effectiveness to communication embedded in a value-laden context. In field research, the investigator embodies the role of engaged observer who attends to the constitution of place, space, and communicative interaction. Moreover, driven by workplaces that are becoming increasingly global, flexible, virtual, and multicultural, scholars have expanded their notions of organizations to include both corporate and nonprofit, work and nonwork, and intra- and interorganizational arrangements as well as telework and
virtual work, part-time contingent work, online groups and communities, and other nonstandard forms of organizing (Ballard & Gossett, 2007). The changing nature of organizations calls into question the methods that we use and the contexts that we study.

Organizational communication research is characterized by a variety of methods and approaches, but, as this chapter shows, scholars tend to share a commitment to field research, specifically focusing on communication processes in particular contexts. Data such as the quotation from Doerfel's field journal provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that help scholars understand organizational contexts in ways that other methods cannot. Kerlinger (1986) points out other advantages of field studies; namely, variables become more pronounced, they capture complex influences and processes in more complete ways, and they are helpful in addressing practical questions.

This chapter reviews field research published in organizational communication over the past decade. It does so with an eye to projecting the future that field research holds in organizational communication studies. The chapter is organized as follows. First, we define field research and provide a brief history of its use in organizational communication. Second, we map the topics and methods used by organizational communication field researchers, drawn from an analysis of the published studies. Third, we develop a more nuanced view of fieldness than appears in textbook definitions. For example, Kerlinger (1986) contends that anything outside of a controlled laboratory experiment "counts" as field research: "any scientific studies, large or small, that systematically pursue relations and test hypotheses, that are nonexperimental, and that are done in life situations like communities, schools, factories, organizations, and institutions" (p. 372; emphasis in original). Such a broad definition does little to tease out the quality, advantages, and contributions of field studies. We outline a spectrum of fieldness that ranges from low to high field emphasis. In particular, research that is largely removed from the organizational context (e.g., uses survey methods) anchors the low end, while full-fledged ethnographies anchor the high end of the spectrum. Simply put, not all field research is the same. We use examples from the organizational communication literature to illustrate each type. In this way, the types of scholarly contributions across the spectrum can be explicated, and decisions about research design can be better informed. Fourth, we discuss the core epistemological assumptions of field research, including dilemmas and tradeoffs that investigators must navigate. Finally, we acknowledge the practical challenges that may deter scholars from field studies, including issues of access, data collection, and ethics, and we offer suggestions for handling them. We end the chapter by highlighting the importance of investigating, explicating, interpreting, critiquing, and analyzing organizational spaces, forms, processes, and practices and call for organizational communication scholars to embrace these activities. In doing so, we provide a 21st-century view of organizations as cross-cutting space and time in processes of organizing rather than being confined to a single physical location or bounded entity.

**History and Definition of Field Research**

The history of field research in communication has its roots in perspectives as diverse as systems theory and cultural anthropology. Drawn from systems thinking, field research has been a part of social scientific organization studies that date back to Taylor's (1911) scientific management, in which he espoused *in situ* experiments to help managers design the best way to structure work. Mayo and his colleagues' research embraced field studies to assess employee productivity in the Hawthorne electrical plant (Mayo, 1945). The goal of these field experiments was to rule out rival hypotheses by finding alternative ways of controlling for changes in the workplace and across different sites.
Along with the interpretive turn in organizational communication (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) came more humanistic approaches that were grounded in cultural anthropology. Organizational communication scholars in the 1980s began to treat organizations as cultures that could be studied through participant observation, interviews, and ethnography. This approach was derived from ethnographers such as Malinowski or Mead, who travelled to distant remote cultures such as the Trobriand Islands or Samoa to become immersed in the context and see life through the eyes of the natives (Geertz, 1973). This movement produced ethnographies of organizations, such as Kunda’s (1992) seminal study of the engineering division of a high-tech firm and its subtle yet pervasive forms of control and commitment. This approach developed ways to conceptualize organizational culture (Martin, 1992) and to provide guidelines for reporting field research (Van Maanen, 1988). It also inspired scholars to broaden their notions of organizations and to conduct fieldwork in such varied sites as factories, restaurants, hospitals, prisons, and schools (Burgess, 1984).

Field research in organizational communication thus has its roots in both social scientific and humanistic approaches that embrace the common goal of understanding communication processes in naturalistic organizational settings. Whether treated as the backdrop, the story, the political environment, the locale, or the broader national culture, field research privileges context. It situates observations in organizations as systems of relationships. Methods as diverse as surveys, interviews, observations, case studies, content analyses, and field experiments are employed as field methods to study naturally occurring organizational phenomena. Thus field research does not fit neatly into an epistemological category such as positivist or constructivist. Moreover, it transcends traditional methodological divides between quantitative versus qualitative approaches. For example, in their edited volume on organizational audits, Hargie and Tourish (2009) feature chapters on methods that range from surveys to critical incident reports as ways to assess communication practices within and across organizations. The case studies in their various chapters detail the contexts that shape communication practices and include studies of health care organizations (e.g., Hargie & Tourish, 2009; Skipper, Hargie, & Tourish, 2009), business entities (e.g., Clampitt & Berk, 2009), a police organization (Quinn, Hargie, & Tourish, 2009), and professional association activities (Downs, Hydeman, & Adrian, 2009). These cases show how organizational communication emerges as something that is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in a controlled environment (e.g., laboratory setting), although crises and naturally occurring events can set the stage for quasi-experimental designs.

The field can be virtual as well; for instance, online communities enabled by message boards and Web 2.0 technologies provide exciting new sites for examining organizing processes. These sites call for new methods, such as cybersnography and the mining of large data sets of server-log behaviors, to detect patterns. They are also well-suited to more traditional survey, content analysis, and network analytic methods. For example, Yuan, Cosley, Welser, Xia, and Gay (2009) found that network features influenced Wikipedia editors’ adoption of a task recommendation tool that fostered an online community. Aakhus and Rumsey (2010) studied a conflict episode in an online cancer support community and explored its implications for community interactions. Such studies extend our notions of the field to online contexts and broaden the ways that organizations are conceptualized.

Field Research From 2001–2011

Field studies published in organizational communication since 2001 span an array of topics, including socialization, change, identity, power, diversity, and groups as well as new technologies, teams, and networked structures. Data collection
methods range from the use of surveys in which qualitative descriptions augment quantitative analyses to ethnographies that develop thick descriptions. Regardless of the particular topic or method, field studies provide rich theoretical understandings of how communication constitutes organizing.

Field research has a strong presence in the discipline. To determine the type of field research published in organizational communication, we sampled the past decade of publications and analyzed a representative group of studies. In the years since the *New Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Jablin & Putnam, 2001) was published, we categorized a total of 181 articles as empirical organizational communication research in seven peer-reviewed journals that routinely publish organizational communication research. Table 9.1 lists the communication journals that were selected, including ones sponsored by the International Communication Association (*Human Communication Research, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Journal of Communication*), the National Communication Association (*Journal of Applied Communication Research, Communication Monographs*), general field journals (*Communication Research*), and ones supported by the International Communication Association/National Communication Association organizational communication divisions (*Management Communication Quarterly*). The table shows the strong presence of field studies; specifically, 103 of the 181 empirical articles (57%) fit along the field research spectrum (see references for the full list of sampled articles).

Of the 103 studies that fit the definition of field research embraced in this chapter, interviews were the most common form of data collection (67%). About one-third of the studies used one or some combination of observations, surveys, and document/content analysis. About 10% used social network analysis, and less than 1% (n=1) used conversation analysis. Interestingly, the list contains very few, if any, explicitly quasi-experimental designs, despite their historical viability in field research (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Kerlinger, 1986). Although more than half of the sites were drawn from English-speaking, American-centered organizations, researchers in countries such as Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, Croatia, India, United Kingdom, Italy, Jamaica, Korea, Malaysia, Norway, New Zealand, and Sweden also employed field studies. Some studies were not located within a particular national context, because they examined online organizing, the virtual activities of particular organizations, networks of organizations, or multinational organizations that spanned multiple countries (e.g., Garcia-Morales, Matías-Reche, & Verdú-Jover, 2011; Shumate & Lipp, 2008).

The types of organizations that were studied included university residential housing and services (e.g., Ballard & Seibold, 2004a), nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Cooren, 2004; Ganesh, 2003), dot-coms and for-profit entities (e.g., Lynch, 2009; Lyon, 2004), governmental organizations (e.g., Chaput, Brumman, & Cooren, 2011), and high-reliability organizations such as fire stations (Myers, 2005; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006; Tracy & Scott, 2006) in addition to emergent organizational forms characteristic of modern technological affordances. Specifically, websites and general online activity provided data for Bennett, Foot, and Xeno’s (2011) research on the divergence of fair trade networks; for Tateo’s (2005) study on the nature of ties among Italian extreme-right websites; for Gossett and Kilker’s (2006) investigation of dissent and voice in blog activity; and for Yuan et al.’s (2009) project that examined activities among online contributors. Another topic of focus was distributed work, whether by teleworkers (e.g., Fay & Kline, 2011; Hylmæ & Buzzannel, 2002) or employees who shared knowledge for coordinating work (e.g., Quan-Haase, Cothrel, & Wellman, 2005). Theories that field researchers embrace reflect the interdisciplinary nature of organizational communication (e.g., structuration, social network, and transactive memory theories) as well as discipline-specific theoretical advances (e.g., constitutive view of communication, communication
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<th>Journal</th>
<th>Issues Each Year</th>
<th>Approximate Number of Articles per Issue</th>
<th>Number of Organizational Communication Articles From 2001–2011</th>
<th>Number of Field-Based Organizational Communication Articles</th>
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design, stakeholder theory, and sensemaking). Studies that focus on understanding structural influences of organizing are also prevalent across topics. In such work, researchers develop theory to make sense of the tensions and opportunities that various types of structures create, whether organizational (e.g., virtual teams), discursive (e.g., norms, identities, control), social (e.g., diversity, culture, power), or a combination of these. Problem-driven research is also well-represented in the form of such topics as organizational technologies, social networks, groups and teams, interorganizational relationships, communities of practice, online communities, voice and gendered communication, emotional labor, resistance and control, leadership, organizational change, assimilation/socialization, and identification.

Interestingly, these categories typically entail multiple authors and thus show that particular scholars are not driving the state of the field. This collective aura may be a by-product of the extensive time commitment required in field research, since these projects often take several years to pass through conception, funding, access, data collection, and analysis and publication. Regardless, within this 10-year time frame, 10 articles categorized generally as communities of practice were written by 10 different authors or teams of authors. While there are a few topics on which particular scholars published multiple articles (e.g., work on emotional labor by Miller, 2007; Miller & Koesten, 2008), expertise on these topics seems distributed among multiple scholars who collectively build knowledge.

These observations highlight how field research makes contributions to the discipline. A collection of authors who grapple with the same topic reflects the notion of “work built on the shoulders of giants.” These publications from a variety of scholarly perspectives amass knowledge of these topics, support generalizable discovery, and engage in theory building, even though each one may lack the generalizability that is typical of random sample designs. Hence, taken together as a collection of viewpoints on the same communication problem, they develop concepts, integrate knowledge, and build on each other across contexts.

These organizational communication-centered field studies make advances in multidisciplinary theory development as well as discipline-specific arenas. For example, social network research, in general, treats information flows and exchange networks as dichotomous, assuming that either the link between two organizations, groups, or people exists or it does not. This view of a link is, in part, shaped by economists and sociologists who consider links as currency flows. Communication network scholars focus on the content or quality of communication that constitutes these links and examine beyond the abstract representation of communication (e.g., financial exchange). These studies reveal how future networks evolve by examining the ways that communication relationships change over time (e.g., Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Shumate, 2012; Whitbred, Fonti, Steglich, & Contractor, 2011).

In addition to multidisciplinary contributions, field research guides communication theory development. To illustrate, communication scholars have conceptualized virtual teamwork as communicative practices and processes, such as trust, leadership, conflict management, power and control, knowledge sharing, and identification (Gibbs, Nekrassova, Grushina, & Abdul Wahab, 2008). This constitutive approach treats organizations as dialectical and multifaceted, which helps scholars explore the tensions and paradoxes that arise in new forms of organizing, such as telework (Hylmö & Buzzanell, 2002), multinational organizations (Gibbs, 2009; Wieland, 2011), political parties (Chaput et al., 2011), and corporate mergers and acquisitions (Pepper & Larson, 2006). Through their flexibility and depth of analysis, field approaches allow researchers to capture the nuances and complexities inherent in processes of organizing in ways that enrich organizational theory.

Field researchers have also analyzed communication process and content together rather than separating them in reductive operational measures. Aakhus (2001), for example, conducted
individual and group interviews with meeting facilitators to advance theory about the interdependent nature of content, action, and interaction of this practice (facilitation). His work went beyond the efficacy of communication practice by examining the moral and interpretive dimensions of this process. Field research also highlights the importance of cultural and historical contexts for organizational communication practices. For example, the finding that gender and ethnicity of a leader moderates the “appropriateness” of his or her communication style (e.g., competitive orientation, feminist orientation; Parker, 2001; Perriton, 2009) draws on cultural context that interfaces with communication practices.

### Degrees of Fieldness

Across these contributions, themes of complexity, richness, and context play an integral part in revealing how and why communication processes emerge and the forms that organizational structure takes as a result of them. Although field-based scholarship values context, the intensity with which a study emphasizes context varies. Some field research treats organizations largely as containers in which communication occurs, while other studies value the nuances and interplay between communication and organization. Field research is not a simple dichotomy in that studies are either field based or they are not. Rather, we contend that field research exists on a continuum that ranges from low to high field emphasis. In particular, we outline a continuum and provide specific examples of field studies that vary on three points on this spectrum.

### Nominal Field Studies

This type of research ranks relatively low on the spectrum, because it is field research in name only. Nominal field studies offer a paragraph or brief overview of the organization or environment and then use measures that are observational (e.g., surveys) rather than participative engagement. As long as the study takes place in an organization or with a particular sector of professionals, any study could nominally be considered field research. This type of investigation does not delve into granular aspects of the context. In addition, nominal field studies often treat organizations as physical containers in which communication functions as message exchange or information flow (Axley, 1984). Research has continued in this vein, even though it came under wide scrutiny during the interpretive turn in the 1980s with the advent of constitutive views of communication (Putnam & Krone, 2006). As an example of nominal field research, McCann and Giles (2006) examined cultural and generational differences in communication accommodation behaviors among younger and older managerial and nonmanagerial bankers in Thailand and the United States. Although their research was tailored to the banking industry, the organizations served mainly as containers for the communication accommodation processes. Interpersonal and intercultural rather than organizational processes provided explanatory mechanisms for their findings.

Other studies that embrace a container view may use surveys or interviews with individuals from a variety of different organizations, sometimes recruited by students in a communication class who distribute surveys to working adults, or content analysis of public data available from online communities or social media applications such as Twitter and Facebook. These approaches may provide useful findings for communication scholars but without additional data, they decontextualize the communities of study and produce limited insights about particular organizations. Research that falls into the container view exhibits low field research emphasis; since it remains largely decontextualized from the organizational phenomena under study. Although decontextualized studies often adopt a container view, they can lead to studies that can generalize to a variety.
of organizational contexts but without providing insights into particular organizational processes. To increase the field value of such work, researchers could add site visits, preliminary or follow-up interviews, focus groups, or artifacts (such as memos and handbooks) that could improve the validity of observational tools such as surveys in which the researcher is kept distant from the context (Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004).

**Middle-Ground Field Studies**

Other studies take a middle-ground approach that situates the researcher within a given context while avoiding a specialized focus. To illustrate, Waldeck, Seibold, and Flanagan (2004) surveyed 405 employees from four organizations (i.e., two hotels, a bank, and a professional association of realtors) on their uses of advanced communication and information technologies (ACITs), such as e-mail, Internet, instant messaging, and mobile phones. They conducted preliminary interviews and did extensive pilot testing to refine their survey questions, which included contextualized scenarios of organizational assimilation experiences. Their study exemplified a middle-ground position, because it provided insights about particular organizational contexts while showing how different organizations collectively produced generalizable findings regarding the influence of communication media on the organizational assimilation experience.

Moving further up the middle-ground stage of the continuum, Tracy et al. (2006) conducted a comparative ethnographic study of the use of humor among human service workers from four different organizations and three professions (e.g., correctional officers, 911 call-takers, and firefighters) using observations, ethnographic field interviews, and in-depth formal interviews. The data from the various organizations, which totaled 325 research hours and 1,000 pages of single-spaced transcripts, were collected separately but were merged to yield comparative insights. Their analysis revealed that humor served important functions for human service workers by helping them engage in sensemaking about their work and allowing them to manage their identities during difficult work situations. Even though during data collection, the researchers were fully immersed in their respective research contexts, this study fits a middle-ground field approach, since their analytical procedure relied on “etic-level categories based on extant literature and more specific emic issues that emerged from the data and participants’ voices” (Tracy et al., 2006, p. 290). In addition, their comparison across contexts was aimed at producing generalizable findings regarding humor among human service workers.

The essence of middle-ground field studies is that they sample from multiple sites; hence, they sacrifice some of the contextualization that comes from full immersion in a single site. In this sense, they provide more richness about organizational contexts than do nominal studies, while they maintain some distance from the site in order to generalize across contexts. They often draw on multiple methods, such as observation and interviews or interviews and surveys, to add validity to singular methods.

**Intertwined and Inseparable Field Studies**

At the high end of the spectrum are investigations in which an organization’s context is intertwined and inseparable from the communication processes under study. This approach treats communicating as the core organizing process; that is, it views communication and organizations as inseparable and communication as constituting organizations and organizing (Putnam & Nicoteria, 2008; Weick, 1979). To illustrate this type, Leonardi (2009) used insider observational methods to study a major automotive company, conducted ethnographic fieldwork on technology and organizational change, and employed both qualitative (e.g., shadowing workers, recording conversations and meetings, etc.) and quantitative methods, such as surveys and focus groups.
for human service work in sensemaking through them to manage work situations. In addition, the research in their respective settings fit a middle-ground analytical procedure based on extant commentaries and studies of organizational change. Full-blown ethnographies are not the only type of field investigations that typify this category. In another longitudinal study of organizational change, Kuhn and Corman (2003) relied on a combination of interviews at three points in time, observation, and a network-based discourse-processing technique to study a division of labor in a large municipal government that was going through a planned change. Through this mixed-method approach, they found that members' knowledge structures diverged in some ways but converged in others, due to the change initiative and to anticipated organizational events, such as a workgroup clash.

The social networks perspective also considers the context fully with generally quantitative methods. Social network scholars examine the context of an organization at multiple levels simultaneously (Monge & Contractor, 2000). Put another way, researchers intertwine individual-level communication data with the broad network of communication processes. For example, Doerfel and Taylor (2004; Taylor & Doerfel, 2011) used longitudinal data that spanned a four-year period to develop a model of cooperation in the context of civil society. They gathered interorganizational network data from organizations in the city of Zagreb, Croatia, and from civil society partners in interorganizational networks.

Their findings emerged from the interconnectedness of individual organizations' experiences as well as from the historical backdrop of the political transformation of the country. This research then incorporated data from the broad context of an interorganizational network, data that cannot exist apart from the actions and interactions of its members.

Field research at the high end of the spectrum tells the story of communicating and organizing. These stories are shaped by empirical choices (e.g., observations, artifacts, surveys, interviews), quantitative and/or qualitative data analyses, and a recognition that discoveries should be tempered by specific as opposed to broad, generalizable claims. Some studies in this category, however, provide for generalizability (e.g., Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011; Doerfel, Lai, & Chewning, 2010; Whitbread et al., 2011) while others are case-specific (e.g., Kuhn & Corman, 2003; Leonardi, 2009; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). Field studies that describe the context qualitatively offer rich details about the politics of the organization or the nature of work within which organizational activities take place. On the surface, context may appear to be a stable, unchanging environment that shapes what is being studied with empirical observation techniques. Most field research, however, acknowledges (either implicitly or explicitly) that the interplay of communication at various levels of analysis is being shaped by and shaping the context (e.g., the interplay of individual, group, and organizational processes; concerns with agency versus structure; and multilevel/multitheoretical points of view). The interplay of various structures and relationships and the constitutive nature of communication and organization are the driving forces for this research.

**Epistemological Assumptions of Field Research**

Ways of knowing or understanding communication (epistemology) and the nature of particular views of communication (ontology) are complementary philosophies that help shape scholarship. As Littlejohn (1999) asserts, “actually, epistemology and ontology go hand in hand because our ideas about knowledge depend in part on our ideas about reality” (p. 33). Field research may be characterized by a variety of methods and degrees of fieldness, but researchers share several key epistemological and ontological assumptions that drive their investigations.

A common feature of recent field research is an emphasis on interaction and in-context organizational discourses. Given the focus on
interaction and context, research findings often support middle-range ontologies by capturing individual (micro-level) acts within a context that influences and is influenced by environmental (macro) factors. For example, in their study of the evolution of the children's media sector, Bryant and Monge (2008) showed how a particular organization's communication ties changed as the competitive environment grew over time. This type of field research emphasizes states of being as dynamic (e.g., longitudinal data collection), context sensitive, and social. As with all types of research, the investigators' choices involve trade-offs that have both advantages and disadvantages and require careful consideration.

Validity Versus Control

Field research tends to privilege validity over control. Whereas controlled contexts such as laboratories are useful for isolating variables and testing for specific effects, fieldwork conducted in organizations is messy and hard to control. As open systems theorists have recognized (e.g., Baehre, 1990; von Bertalanffy, 1968), most organizational activity is complex and interdependent and is not subject to simple causal explanations. Researchers often collaborate with managers and other organizational members to design and conduct studies that are consistent with organizational policies and provide minimal disruption to organizational practices—which explains why controlled experiments are rare. The lack of control, however, is mitigated by researcher knowledge of the setting, which provides greater confidence in what is being studied.

Content validity refers to the representativeness of a sample and thus the extent to which the research captures various meanings within the study (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Kerlinger, 1986). Content validity depends on how the researcher gathers data (e.g., in-depth interviews versus surveys), but having field-specific information enhances the validity of measures, which increases ecological validity, or a researcher's ability to approximate the phenomena of study (Bradburn et al., 2004). Indeed, having deep knowledge of the context is one way to assess convergent or divergent construct validity (that is, how well constructs and measures represent the concepts under study). If data gathered through conventional methods such as surveys do not fit with insights from participation in the field, the researcher can show validity by relying on thick description of the data (Geertz, 1973) or by triangulating different data sources gathered from the field. Most prominent is the use of member checks to ascertain the extent to which participants deem measures meaningful and/or representative of their experiences. Gathering data within the organizational context gives the researcher the advantage of being close to one's participants while they participate in data collection.

Engagement Versus Objectivity

A second trade-off involves researcher engagement versus objectivity. Engaged scholarship refers to a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the community (i.e., a researcher-community partnership) as opposed to the investigator playing the role of a detached observer. Even though notions of engaged scholarship entered communication discussions only recently (Cheney, Wilhelmsen, & Zorn, 2002; Lewis, 2011; Van de Ven, 2007), field research has a history of connecting theory to practice and demanding closeness to rather than distance from one's research site. Waldron (2007) regards engaged scholarship as a practice of building virtuous relationships with research partners in the community. This practice requires the investigator to engage with organizational members in active ways and to view them as collaborative partners who participate in knowledge co-creation, rather than human subjects.

Engagement departs from the traditional positivist view, developed in the physical sciences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), which aimed for a
“complete separation between the investigator and the subject of the investigation” (Miller, 2001, p. 139). In the traditional view, the researcher was distant and detached from the object of study to avoid unduly influencing it. This view has given way to a post-positivist position that recognizes that complete objectivity is impossible because of human judgment and values that enter into the research process. Complete separation has been replaced by the notion of objectivity as a “regulatory ideal” in which the researcher strives to avoid bias as much as possible (Miller, 2001). Interpretive and critical scholars tend to acknowledge the inevitability of subjectivity in their designs and findings, even though research in this vein varies in degrees of engagement with the communities of study.


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Objectivity

As discussed above, field research privileges particular context-based insights generated from case studies in contrast to generalizable findings drawn from random samples or experimental methods. For example, Wieland (2011) draws on rich ethnographic and interview data from a single Swedish organization to examine how the dialectic of control and resistance is conditioned by cultural norms about work-life balance. Even though field researchers aim to generate thick descriptions and meaningful understandings, this approach is not devoid of explanations aimed at theory building. The immersive and time-consuming nature of field studies, especially ethnographies that require a year or more in the field, makes it difficult to publish many studies on the same topic and to replicate research findings. Having a breadth of scholarship across contexts may increase generalizability through collective or aggregated knowledge produced by a critical mass of scholars who research the same topic in various ways, which Miller (2001) describes as a “healthy eclecticism” (p. 137). Even quantitative methods, which are presumed to be objective, rely on “the critical

scrutiny of a community of scholars to safeguard objectivity and maximize the growth of social scientific knowledg (Miller, 2001, p. 139). This practice of critical scrutiny of a community of scholars applies to field research as well. In short, field research supports the explanatory aspect of theory development (why) and does so in a generalizable way.

In sum, the philosophy of field research is driven by the figure-ground interplay of actors, their environments, and the mutual influences of micro and macro levels of communication as process and product of organizing. Field research values real-world contexts while teasing out particular aspects of communication and behavior. It can be used to develop and test theory, but it emphasizes discovery over prediction. Regardless of the goals of particular studies, field research supports theory development and offers the potential to uncover the granular details of why an organization functions as it does. Field research may be either qualitative (e.g., ethnography, interviews) or quantitative (e.g., surveys, content analysis, field experiments) or both, but either way, it grounds its discoveries in context-sensitive information.

Practical Issues and Challenges in Field Research

Although field research develops understandings of complex naturalistic organizations, investigators often face practical issues in gaining access to organizations and/or their communities, executing the fieldwork itself, and managing the unintended consequences that research can have on participants. This section details some of these challenges, provides examples of these experiences, and suggests ways of overcoming them.

Access and Participant Feedback

Gaining access to an organization or a community of organizations can be challenging if the
researcher does not have an inside contact. Through reputation and referrals, some researchers are invited into an organization by its leaders. For example, Gibbs was invited to do a small class project in a global software team at a large high-tech corporation and got access to it through a former student of her advisor. Two years later, she reapproached the organization and was able to regain access for her dissertation study. In such cases, the challenges of access are diminished but are still present in contacting particular groups or collecting particular types of data. In an organizational audit of a local government municipality (Liberman & Doerfel, 2012), the town manager and mayor approached the researchers for help in analyzing the municipality’s communication problems. Within the first week of the study, the researchers discovered that the employees deeply distrusted the town manager and disliked his projects. Most employees distinguished the field project from the manager, especially as the researchers became more familiar after several months of work in the organization. On the one hand, the researchers’ physical presence afforded opportunities for more casual conversation, such as explaining what organizational problems interested scholars and the ways in which research offers insights into organizational processes and relationships. On the other hand, one branch of the municipality did not participate in the study because of issues with organizational power and politics. One informant revealed that his/her manager directly ordered employees not to participate in any research projects.

Personal contacts are helpful in securing access to organizations, but researchers need to have the right contact, especially in larger companies. For instance, global teams in the multinational corporation that Gibbs (2009) studied were fragmented into many divisions, departments, and units. Gaining access to an organizational context as specific as global teams required making contact with a person who worked in or supervised a global team and who ranked high enough in the organization’s hierarchy to approve the study. Identifying this person may be difficult. Further, initial enthusiasm by organizational leaders for a study may dwindle as requests to conduct the project move up through the management chain. Enthusiasm for the study may ultimately fizzle due to lack of time or interest in the project or concerns about the security and confidentiality of the data.

Finally, research relationships often change over time as key organizational stakeholders leave or get transferred to other parts of the company, and these changes affect the level of support for a research project. For example, Gibbs and her colleagues (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006) initially began with one director who valued the research and championed their project, but after several years of a productive relationship, this individual left the company and the researchers were referred to new contacts who were suspicious of the study and the way that it could potentially harm the company’s reputation. They stonewalled the project, and the research partnership eventually came to a halt. This example underscores the need for field researchers to cultivate and maintain good relationships with organizational partners and to identify contacts who are likely to support their projects and who have the authority to do so. These particular experiences suggest the need for a checklist or a how-to guide for the novice field researcher. In some ways, the researcher is similar to a politician—a hand-shaker, a trust-builder, and a vote-getter (“Participate in my study, please!”). Yet being too slick, lacking authenticity and concern, or engaging in organizational politics may undermine the study in overt ways (e.g., low participation) and in covert ones (e.g., subversion, participants’ lack of candor).

From Hawthorne Effect to Panopticon Effect

Field researchers have traditionally grappled with a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect. Stemming from the classic Hawthorne studies, this effect suggests that simply attending
to participants in a research project can change their behaviors. Investigators in the Hawthorne studies manipulated various types of material conditions to see which would influence employees' productivity, only to find that participation and interaction itself shaped productivity rates (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Even though such findings were later discredited (Miller & Monge, 1986), they gave birth to the human relations school and led to an increase in studies on worker participation in decision making. They also highlighted that participants may behave differently when they know researchers are present. Realizing that researchers can affect their own studies might suggest that scholars should maintain distance and be detached from their participants, as described in the section on engagement versus objectivity. However, we argue that the Hawthorne Effect is becoming less of an issue in modern organizations due to the rise of a concept known as the Panopticon Effect.

Foucault's (1977) critique of surveillance systems in prisons as an additional form of managerial power (Panopticism) is readily apparent in modern organizations in which perpetual monitoring has become commonplace, in the forms of open office environments created by cubicles, information and communication technologies (ICTs) that record phone calls ("This call may be recorded for customer service training") and track work activity and worker status, e-mail surveillance, and monitoring of employee attitudes through satisfaction and feedback surveys (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). This practice may lead to the Panopticon Effect, in which employees' awareness of the potential to be under constant surveillance transforms the way they self-police and regulate their behaviors in line with organizational norms. In this sense, the gap between how employees act when they know they are being watched versus how they "normally" act may be reduced, in that they could act as though they are being watched all the time. This finding is consistent with research on unobtrusive control (Barker, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), which finds that control in modern organizations is more internalized and subtle. In this sense, the Panopticon Effect may actually render the Hawthorne effect less of an issue, because employees are becoming impervious to the researcher's presence, since they are already constantly monitored. The ongoing tracking of employees, however, may pose new challenges to fieldwork as concerns about employee research fatigue and information overload make managers more reluctant to engage in academic research. Indeed, some companies restrict the degree to which their employees may be surveyed internally as well as externally.

Data Collection and Rights of Research Subjects

Related to these issues are ethical concerns that occur because field research, by definition, enters into people's lives. Specifically, the research itself could put participants at risk on the job. For example, analyses might highlight ineffective or problematic employees or departments that could incur layoffs. Designing research that addresses these ethical concerns is one way to protect participants. Yet risks also occur when participants feel pressured to participate in the project, either from management or from the researchers. Field research involves politicking to recruit participants, and it is far easier to do this in face-to-face settings than to convince individuals to complete a survey. Thus training researchers to recognize the ethical issues that arise in recruiting participants is important.

Field research is a good option when recruiting participants is difficult. Challenges arise from a variety of reasons ranging from workplace politics to busy professionals who cannot carve out time to participate. So while online surveys are easy and attractive, they also yield low response rates (Tuten, Urban, & Bosnjak, 2002; Watt, 1999). In Doerfel's study in New Orleans (Doerfel et al., 2010), she recruited senior-level managers, owners, and executives through face-to-face networking and received a
nearly 100% response rate, despite participants' busy schedules. Returning to the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Doerfel was fully aware of the difficulties of being in New Orleans in the time after Hurricane Katrina. From her conversations with participants, she discovered that they wanted to tell their stories and would not have been so eager to fill out a survey. Moreover, the participants valued Doerfel being with them so that she could see, firsthand, what they were facing.

Similarly, in Gibb's (2009) experience, her position as an intern/consultant gave her increased access to participants, since she had a company badge and was on site several days a week. Because she was viewed as an insider, she established greater rapport with company employees than she would have as an outsider. She found that her insider status influenced the response rate and the quality of her data. She noticed a marked difference between her initial class study, in which her interviews portrayed the company in a superficially positive light, and her subsequent dissertation research, in which she delved deeper and gained greater understanding of the tensions and complexities of global organizing. Her immersion in the field allowed for rich and nuanced insights to emerge from her research. Insider access also facilitated her ability to schedule impromptu interviews with busy managers by stopping by their offices or arranging a follow-up time to return. In both Doerfel's and Gibb's experiences, busy managers were more open to a 30-minute (or longer) conversation than to filling out a short survey. In comparing these experiences, response rates would have likely been lower if we had used surveys. Immersion brought us closer to participants who were eager to talk about their professional experiences. This immersion stands in contrast to organizational surveys that rely on high response rates and the support of managers (at various levels) to communicate the importance of the project to their employees.

As with any investigation of human subjects, field research has its opportunities and challenges. For example, an informed consent letter seems daunting when it is rife with legalistic phrasing and details, yet those same details can serve as a point of relief to other participants. Informed consent forms convey that the researchers are ethical and concerned about the participants' well-being. In this way, informed consent forms and letters serve as a recruiting tool, not just a legal document.

Conclusion

Field research is an integral part of scholarship in organizational communication. It privileges organizational context, and it represents a spectrum of studies that range from treating organizations as little more than containers to conducting rich, ethnographic fieldwork in which context is inseparable from the phenomena of study. It is used to study a broad range of organizational communication topics. Field research generates and enriches theories as well as addresses practical organizational problems. Although scholars employ a number of methods, such as the ones in studies published from 2001–2011, we see further opportunity to use quasi-experimental methods to develop predictive models of communication behavior.

We encourage field researchers to consider these methods to the extent that they are viable in particular field settings. Field research has expanded beyond bounded physical organizations to examine new sites, such as telework (Hylmö, 2006), online support groups and communities (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010; Yuan et al., 2009), professional communities of practice (Vaast, 2004), virtual network organizations (Shumate & Pike, 2006), and nongovernmental organization hyperlink networks (Shumate & Lipp, 2008). We see opportunities for scholars to investigate new e-fields enabled by the Internet and social media technology through both traditional (content analysis, surveys, interviews) and new (cyberethnography, hyperlink analysis, big data server-log analysis) methods.
Organizational communication scholars also need to attend to 21st-century issues. Because of the regular use of digital tracking, employee assessments, and ongoing evaluations, employees are becoming accustomed to being observed. Hence, overt observations of work behavior may no longer cause a Hawthorne Effect; but instead, modern field scholars and practitioners may need to grapple with a Panopticon Effect. Indeed, the Panopticon Effect could become a new direction for theory development in field studies. Finally, we recognize the ongoing challenges of securing access to organizations, yet we encourage scholars to conduct immersive field research rather than opt for methods such as student samples or decontextualized surveys, which are much less costly to obtain but also less likely to yield in-depth insights about the organizational contexts that shape communication processes. We also appeal to the organizational communication community to continue to capture the complexity of organizational experiences through collaborative field research. We believe that it is the collective body of scholars that enables discoveries in the field to be aggregated into generalizable theories of communicating and organizing.

References


Notes

1. The authors wish to thank Sean Kl for his assistance with the literature review and analysis for this chapter.

2. Articles noted with an asterisk were part of the analysis presented in this chapter.

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