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Dawn O. Braithwaite

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, dbraithwaite1@unl.edu

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“Opening the Door”: The History and Future of Qualitative Scholarship in Interpersonal Communication

Dawn O. Braithwaite

Dawn O. Braithwaite is Willa Cather Professor and Department Chair in the Department of Communication Studies at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Correspondence: 430 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0329, USA; email dbraithwaite@unl.edu

I was fortunate to start college during the earlier days of interpersonal communication classes being taught. From the first class, I was hooked. One of the best things about working in this area is being able to teach and study concepts and practices that make a difference in people’s lives. The theme guiding my work was adapted from a phrase Wayne Brockriede used—helping people expand their repertoire of communicative choices. This is the great joy and challenge of being an interpersonal communication (IPC) scholar.

I am honored to share this forum with such outstanding scholars. My article represents a personal reflection on my experiences navigating the waters of IPC research for 30 years. Given the brief nature of this article, I cannot review much literature; however, I will advance two arguments. First, to fathom the present and future of IPC, we must understand our historical roots. Second, to best address the challenges confronting us, IPC needs to open the doors to the breadth of perspectives and scholars.

Understanding Our Roots

I long wondered how we came to study IPC as we do. As I studied disciplinary history, many pieces fell into place. I’ll provide some brief perspective here (see Braithwaite, 2010; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008; Delia, 1987). I trace the study of IPC to the 1940s and 1950s, while IPC classes entered college curricula in the 1970s and beyond. To understand the development of IPC, one needs to look back to the start of the discipline, which for our purposes, I’ll identify as the beginning of the National Communication Association. A group of faculty members

teaching public speaking in English departments believed there was something unique about oral communication when most in English departments did not. They broke away from the English association and in 1914 formed the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (Cohen, 1994; O'Neill, 1989). From the beginning, teaching and studying speech was a very practical endeavor. Strong disagreements arose concerning whether we should be a discipline of teachers or should undertake research (see Cohen's narrative on these debates). Research advocates believed it was the only way to achieve academic respectability. Charles Woolbert and others were forceful as they argued for research. However, early members of the new discipline did not have research experience or doctoral degrees. The conflict between two schools of thought—the Midwest School, dedicated to social science approaches, and the Cornell School, dedicated to rhetorical and humanities approaches—ragged on (Pearce & Foss, 1990). Given the backgrounds of the founders, the new discipline was built on borrowed theories and methods.

IPC developed in the cultural context of post-WWII, following the path of the Midwest School. Social scientists from psychology, sociology, political science, and mass communication took root in speech departments (Bormann, 1989; Delia, 1987). In the 1960s, IPC also developed within the social contexts of the civil rights and women's movements, along with cultural shifts in personal and family relationships. IPC scholars embraced post-positive (quantitative) research methods of psychology and adapted theories from allied disciplines. They soon began to develop IPC theories (Delia, 1987).

There were battles in some speech (later communication) departments between scholars representing humanities and social science traditions. This was not surprising as most understood and studied communication in foundationally different and seemingly incompatible ways. In a few programs, social science grew strong to the detriment of rhetoric, which was, in my own mind, wasteful and tragic. However, there were other programs in which appreciation for work across humanities and social sciences flourished. I was fortunate to grow up in departments like these and the integration of different perspectives on communication is a hallmark of my present department at Nebraska.

Throughout everything, the practical reasons for wanting to understand IPC persisted and, as Gerald Miller (1976) explained, "students themselves began to demand answers about how to relate communicatively with their acquaintances and close friends, and romantic partners" (p. 10). IPC classes grew in American universities, and IPC divisions developed in the national, international, and regional associations. It was an exciting time to be a student and study something as relevant and exciting as IPC.

Tackling Challenges by Opening the Doors

I pursued my interest in IPC from the beginning and was so fortunate to be exposed to professors in rhetoric and small group communication. Understanding my IPC interest, rhetorician Wayne Brockriede introduced me to symbolic interaction and social construction, as much as my undergraduate brain could absorb. When I was a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota, Ernest Bormann was undertaking case studies and observations of small groups rather than laboratory or survey research. I also became an admirer of ethnography

of communication. These influences helped shape my approach to research. I knew I wanted to study IPC but not via experiments or surveys. In my own naïve thinking, it seemed the best way to know what people think and experience was to *talk with them!* And so I did. I did not realize the roadblocks awaiting those studying communication within the interpretive paradigm.¹

Even though my scholarship has received a good reception when people hear it presented or read it, dealing with challenges of publishing interpretive work in many of the communication or personal relationships journals or submitting to IPC divisions for conferences have been career-long challenges for me and other scholars. K. Tracy and Muñoz (2011) talk about the struggles over the value of qualitative research as in the past in IPC. I wish I could agree. I believe the situation is more challenging for those of us submitting scholarship to traditional IPC social science outlets. The small knot of those of us doing interpretive IPC scholarship in the early days found more openness to our work in allied divisions developing at NCA, including family, health, intercultural, and organizational communication. Qualitative scholars abandoned IPC for these other divisions and many never returned.

If you seek evidence for my claims about the narrowness of research paradigms in IPC, Braithwaite and Baxter (2008) analyzed meta-theoretical commitments of 958 IPC studies from 1990–2005. We found 83.2% of the studies were embedded in a post-positivist discourse, 13.9% interpretive, and just 2.9% represented a critical perspective. Kristen Carr did an excellent update of the study through 2012 for the second edition of the IPC theories book (Braithwaite & Schrodt, in press). Unfortunately, these data reflect little change in the landscape.

The paradigmatic dominance of post-positivism has been difficult to overcome at times. Please understand that I am not a critic of this approach. I share K. Tracy and Muñoz's (2011) perspective on the importance of embracing post-positive research from "the qualitative side of the river" (p. 78). There is important work done by quantitative scholars, me included, when it addresses our research questions. And I have experienced a great appreciation of interpretive research from many scholars in IPC.

I would be less than honest if I did not say that many interpretive scholars find the publication process a protracted and sometimes discouraging effort. I regularly find myself needing to argue for the contributions of interpretive work in IPC, to defend why I do not have intercoder reliability scores, to explain why I would be irresponsible to address between-group differences in my results, and to emphasize that there are different functions and evaluation criteria for interpretive research and theories. Realizing this would be an uphill battle early on, I am still caught by surprise when I receive a review that indicates "I need the numbers before I will buy anything" or being asked to supplement my study "with empirical work" (both quotes from recent journal reviews).

To be fair, I believe some scholars make things harder as they have little or poor training in qualitative methods, do not understand qualitative data analysis well or do not know how to argue well from this analysis. I am gratified to see recent volumes in our discipline that help with that training (e.g., Davis, 2014; Ellingson, 2009; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; S. Tracy, 2013). At the same time, I thought that we'd be further along by now, and I especially hate to see younger IPC scholars burdened with ongoing legitimacy tasks.

Besides making life challenging for interpretive scholars at times, you would be right to ask, why should we care that most IPC scholarship is post-positivist? Braithwaite and Baxter (2008) argued that opening the paradigmatic doors to post-positivist, interpretive, and critical researchers will benefit the field and its scholarship: "We contend that our ability as a field to shed light on some of the most important issues in the lives of humans rests in our ability to embrace and apply multiple perspectives and methods to capture the complexity that is interpersonal communication" (p. 15). Sarah Tracy (2013) summarized contributions of qualitative work as a focus on self-reflexivity, deep context, and thick description. We need to see a more representative offering of work in IPC at our conferences and in our journals.

Second, I am very concerned about who is not in the room when the paradigmatic doors are closed. One will see too little diversity represented in the room when we gather. This is a problem, as IPC needs to be understood across cultural contexts within which interaction is embedded. Make no mistake, scholars studying communication as contextually bound are doing this work; they are not submitting to IPC divisions and journals that they perceive, often rightfully, to be unreceptive to their work. In the end, there is not enough IPC scholarship representing diverse experiences. We need it and IPC is losing out.

If things have been difficult for interpretive scholars, they have been more challenging for scholars who take critical perspectives on IPC. For some in IPC, critical work seems especially threatening rather than a positive addition. Baxter and Asbury (in press) argue for the importance of understanding IPC within larger cultural systems in which discourses are embedded. Critical scholars believe in the importance of understanding which discourses are centered and marginalized in a particular culture, as relationships and selves are constituted in talk (Baxter, 2011). I cannot do the arguments justice here. While critical scholarship has been embraced in health, intercultural, and organizational communication, IPC has been more than resistant.

Excluding interpretive or critical scholarship adds up to missed opportunities and narrowness in terms of the research and the scholars at IPC's table. It is also unwelcoming to younger scholars, many of whom are quite comfortable moving between paradigms. By narrowing the focus of IPC, we are also depriving students in our classrooms of opportunities to understand and effectively negotiate the complex and diverse world in which they live. In short, *I advocate that IPC open the doors to a wide variety of perspectives, people, and research methods*. If we don't do this, IPC, which started out so responsive to lived experience, will diminish. Scholars will seek out divisions more welcoming. Last, I fear and already see evidence of schisms between social science, particularly IPC, and critical scholars in some communication doctoral programs. To me, this is wasted effort and opportunity. We will be stronger as a discipline when we look for reasons to stick together and complement each other's perspectives and research. This is not only possible but important for IPC and the discipline as a whole.

In the end, I am arguing that it is incumbent on IPC to be open, welcoming, and relevant. There is so much about human communication we need to know. We need all excellent minds, research, and teaching of interpersonal communication to make a difference. If we can do this, I believe our future is bright indeed.

Note

- [1] As my goal is to speak to the contributions of both interpretive and critical work, I have titled the article using the term “qualitative.” Generally, I believe we are best served to think about data as qualitative and analyses as interpretive and critical (see Braithwaite, Moore, & Stephenson Abetz, 2014).

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