

Making meaning of meaning-making research: Using qualitative research for studies of social and personal relationships

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Abstract

Qualitative research continues to have a larger presence in the interdisciplinary field of relationship studies. This essay presents the basic tenets of interpretive theory, the basis for many qualitative relationship studies, as well as four revelations that can occur from examining data through a qualitative lens. It also introduces the essays included in, “Qualitative studies of relationships: Prevailing norms and exciting innovations,” a special issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Keywords

Interpretive theory, marginalized relationships, relationships as constitutive, sensemaking, voice

Introduction

It is an exciting time to be a qualitative relationship researcher. Less than 5 years ago, one of us noted that,

Undoubtedly, one of the largest explosions of rich and fruitful research findings will come from increased and diversified use of qualitative methods. Relationships researchers are sorely in

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need of research guides and strong educative materials to aid them in finding and using qualitative approaches that allow for deeper understandings of interpersonal interaction and how relationships are constituted through communication. (Manning, 2009, p. vii)

In the short amount of time since then, special issues of journals containing research and tools for qualitative researchers have been released in relationship-oriented disciplines ranging from family studies (see Zvonovic, Sharp, & Radina, 2012) to psychology (see Gemignani, Brinkmann, Benozzo, & Puebla, 2014), and these collections have helped to both advance and demonstrate methods as they can be used in relationship studies.

In addition, theories derived from research generated using qualitative methods continue to be generated (e.g., *language convergence/meaning divergence*, Dougherty, Mobley, & Smith, 2010; or *symbolic boasting*, Manning, 2008, 2012), transformed (e.g., Adams's articulation of *the closet*, 2011; or Duck's take on *rhetorical vision*, 2011), or reinvigorated (e.g., Baxter's second iteration of *relational dialectics theory*, 2011; or the new *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Guides and primers specially created for qualitative researchers have also debuted, both those directly exploring qualitative relationship research studies (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014) and in allied areas where relationship-oriented research is common (e.g., qualitative health research, Morse, 2012). That, of course, is in addition to the work generated by a host of relationship researchers who have been developing and advocating methods of qualitative inquiry for decades, including Leslie Baxter, Art Bochner, Kerry Daly, Steve Duck, Carolyn Ellis, Sandra Faulkner, Kristine Fitch Muñoz, Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, Gerry Philipsen, Chris Poulos, Bill Rawlins, Lisa Tillman, Karen Tracy, Carol Warren, Julia Wood, and, of course, many of the authors who appear in this special issue.

Still, as Suter (2009) recently observed, only 6% of the articles published in the history of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships (JSPR)* use interpretive qualitative methods, with another 13% featuring quantitative–qualitative mixed-method approaches. Qualitative research is even more difficult to find in *JSPR*'s sister journal *Personal Relationships* where a scant 1%—or five total articles—used interpretive qualitative methods and 9% more featured mixed-method approaches. As Braithwaite, Abetz, and Moore (2014) note, one major obstacle to seeing this research published is a lack of literacy about what qualitative research is and what it does. In other words, qualitative research is often being evaluated by the same standards as quantitative work, when the two approaches to research have different philosophies undergirding them as well as different goals and aims.

As such, in this essay we offer an overview of what qualitative relationship research has been, what it is, and what it can be. To begin, we offer an overview of *interpretivism* (Blumer, 1969), a philosophical school of thought that serves as the basis for most qualitative relationship research. Drawing from that interpretivist-theoretical tradition, we point to four revelations qualitative inquiry offers relationship studies before introducing each of the pieces that appears in this special issue.

Interpretive theorizing: A different approach to studying relationships

As relationship scholars have observed (e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Suter, 2009), most relationship studies tend to happen through a postpositive lens aimed at generating

some sort of “truth” about a social world, often measured and articulated by quantitative measures and statistics. Although qualitative data can be analyzed in a postpositive manner, the branch of qualitative studies explored in this special issue—and in most qualitative work in general—involves interpretive theorizing. As Blumer (1969) articulates in his work developing this approach, meaning can be found *across a social scene and the action in it*. Interaction with a social scene is what allows people to make meaning, in terms of both how it is perceived in their minds and how it is reflexively assigned to objects or ideas in that social scene. As such, meaning is always in flux and continuously changing as people interact and exchange ideas. Because of this, interpretive qualitative researchers focus on how people interact *in, with, and to* create a social scene. That differs from postpositive studies that often explore inherent meanings that might be found in a person, object, or idea; or that focus on a person’s interpretation of people, objects, or ideas. Rather, interpretive qualitative research focuses on meaning making as a reflexive, complex, and continuous process.

The revelations of qualitative relationship studies

To help unpack how interpretive qualitative research differs from postpositive approaches to relationship studies, here we articulate four revelations made possible by qualitative relationship studies. Although these do not capture the full benefits and possibilities of what interpretive qualitative research can do, they do point to four key aspects that will likely be of interest to relationship researchers.

Qualitative relationship studies offer a view of meaning making in action. The meanings people often hold about relationships are often paradoxical and contradictory (Baxter, 2011) as well as value laden (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). That is true in terms both of an individual in a social scene and for different combinations of individuals as they come together and interact as part of that social scene. Qualitative relationship research allows researchers an opportunity to see those seemingly contradictory elements at play, assess how different ideas or actions come to the forefront depending on situation and context, and consider how they might change or evolve across time. Moreover, many qualitative methods allow for natural observation of how people are working through such meaning making in their day-to-day lives. Research of this nature can allow rich insights into processes, practices, and/or cultural rituals (Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

Qualitative relationship studies allow for marginalized voices to emerge. As Gemignani et al. note, “Qualitative inquiries often result in complex and nuanced accounts of realities and experiences that, differently from dominant or hegemonic discourses or statistical significance, acknowledge both the center and the margins” (2014, p. 112). As that indicates, qualitative relationship research is also an excellent outlet to make sense of understudied relationships and the people in them. It is especially helpful for research involving those with marginalized identities (e.g., Adams, 2011), relationships (e.g., Childs, 2005), or practices (e.g., Manning, 2013) as it allows for richer and, ideally, participant-driven understandings of how they might navigate their social worlds. Although it is probably shortsighted and even irresponsible for a qualitative researcher

to assume he/she is speaking for the participants, enacting validity checks where participants can ensure their voices are being honored can allow a stronger sense of representation for those who might not otherwise receive it.

Qualitative relationship studies evoke senses of feeling, emotion, experience, and latitude. The voices of participants also allow a sense of emotion, feelings, and an understanding of experiences that other forms of research do not allow as the “warmth of an interpretive lens” (Manning, 2007, p. 430) focuses on participants’ actions and articulations. This exploration of feeling, emotion, and subjectivity can also help bring ideas or concepts into focus that might otherwise elude researchers. For example, Clair and Kunkel (1998) used narratives gathered from teachers during interviews about suspected child abuse to understand how the aesthetics of their stories not only reflected but created their emotional responses. Reading vignettes from those narratives allows the reader to *feel* the emotions articulated by the teachers, *visualize* their experiences, and have an overall *sense* of their troubling situation. The nature of qualitative data also makes it open to forms of dissemination beyond research manuscripts, including documentary, playwriting and performance, or other artistic forms of expression (Ellingson, 2009).

Qualitative relationship studies serve as a constitutive form of sensemaking across interaction levels and methods of inquiry. Interpretive approaches to relationship studies are distinct in that they assume relationships are *constituted* through interaction (Baxter, 2004; Manning, 2014). In other words, a focus on *the relationship in the interaction* is just as valid as a focus on *the interaction in the relationship*. In one sense that helps dispel the notion of the monadic individual actor because, as Baxter frames it, “the selves in communication are not preformed, autonomous entities but instead are constituted in communication” (2011, p. 12). Although her viewpoint is clearly communicative in nature, the idea of the imaginary “individual person with individual meaning” can be applied to all relationship studies in that a relationship is always embedded in its culture and, as such, is embedded in that culture’s assumptions, values, histories, and artifacts. Those elements of culture can be explored in conjunction with qualitative data to look for connections that might not otherwise be intelligible without a rich, open-ended data source.

That also means there are multiple ways to analyze and theorize from a single data set. Those evaluating qualitative research might give pause when tempted to critique that the manuscript went in a different direction rather than explore an avenue of interest to the reader. Because qualitative research data are open to multiple possibilities based on multiple analytic approaches applied to a given data set, it might be that another manuscript exists that makes that exploration. As that suggests, the different findings associated with one analytic approach to a data set might also call for the use of different theories or theoretical concepts. In some qualitative studies, theory is generated from the data in an iterative process. It might also be that while inductively analyzing the data, an existing theory is called upon to serve as a heuristic for better understanding the meaning making at play. This heuristic approach to analysis (Manning & Kunkel, 2014) also points to the flexible and constitutive nature of interpretive qualitative work, as a theory developed in another research paradigm can be interpretively considered with qualitative data as part of a sensemaking process that illuminates both the data and the theory. That

means interpretive qualitative studies can also help to explore connections between seemingly disparate areas of relationship research.

Moving forward

As the field of relationship studies continues to become more diverse and interdisciplinary, research methods will continue to evolve in line with the multiple paradigmatic views that the philosophies and epistemologies of multiple disciplines will bring. This special issue of *JSPR* offers what we see as a step forward in doing that. Consisting of two sections, “Qualitative studies of relationships: Prevailing norms and exciting innovations” first provides a forum including multiple conversations about qualitative approaches to relationship research. Second, we offer four empirical research articles that utilize qualitative research methods.

For the forum pieces, we asked the authors to make their essays accessible to those who might be new to qualitative relationship research while still offering advances in thinking and methodology. The authors were successful in this endeavor, offering “think pieces” that address multiple issues and topics facing the field of relationship studies as it continues to embrace qualitative research practices.

To begin, Laura L. Ellingson’s opening essay, “‘The truth must dazzle gradually’: Enriching relationship research using a crystallization framework” explores the concept of *crystallization*. As her essay explains, a crystallization framework allows scholars to consider how their research can be designed across a continuum or spectrum of epistemological approaches. Moreover, it also answers questions about how quantitative and qualitative paradigms might work together, ways we can make our research more accessible to nonacademic audiences, and both the ethical and practical aspects of relationship studies. Ellingson’s essay is followed by Lawrence Ganong and Mairlyn Coleman’s “Qualitative research on family relationships” and Janie Harden Fritz’s “Researching workplace relationships: What can we learn from qualitative organizational studies?” These essays present some of the outstanding work that has been done in both family and workplace relationship contexts, respectfully, offering not only a treasure trove of methodological approaches for qualitative relationship researchers in those areas but also insight for researchers in other contexts who might want to look at how they can gain traction in their own area of relationship studies.

We next turn to considerations about diversity in qualitative work. Glenn Adams offers considerations about how colonization might play a role in relationship research practices and how qualitative inquiry, in particular, might help to decolonize methodology in his essay, “Decolonizing methods: African studies and qualitative research.” Adams’s essay is followed by Mark McCormack’s observations about recruitment practices when it comes to marginalized sexual identities in his essay, “Innovative sampling and participant recruitment in sexuality research.” Each of these essays also helps to demonstrate qualitative research’s connection to interdisciplinary studies, with Adams drawing from cross-disciplinary discussions of *coloniality of knowledge* (Mignolo, 2009) and McCormack highlighting feminist research practices.

Kelly R. Rossetto then asks important questions about the nature of the research method probably used most by qualitative relationship researchers in “Qualitative

research interviews: Assessing the therapeutic value and challenges.” Inspired by work from researchers such as Pennebaker (1997) and Manning (2010) who examine the power of people sharing their stories through qualitative work, Rossetto makes a compelling argument about how we might look at qualitative interviews and the ethics associated with the relationship between the researcher and other participants. Finally, Dawn O. Braithwaite, Julia Moore, and Jenna Stephenson Abetz invite a dialogue about why qualitative research is often misunderstood in their essay “‘I need numbers before I will buy it’: Reading and writing qualitative scholarship on close relationships.” This essay offers relationship scholars, especially those who do not do qualitative research, some considerations they might make as they read qualitative work. Additionally, it offers suggestions to those writing or presenting qualitative research that might help their work to be better understood.

As noted above, in addition to offering a forum to discuss qualitative relationship research, we also wanted to present some work that demonstrates qualitative research in action. Thus, the second half of this special issue provides four empirical research studies. To start, Erin Sahlstein Parcell and Katheryn C. Maguire offer an analysis of 50 qualitative interviews with active-duty Army or Army National Guard wives in “Comfort, cliques, and clashes: Family readiness groups as dilemmatic sites of relating during wartime.” This research study provides an in-depth analysis of how these women’s lives were supported, yet simultaneously marginalized or constrained, by family readiness groups. Thus, the findings of this study indicate that the readiness groups offered both a sense of comfort/coping that was confirming and useful to the women and a sense of stress that was frustrating and disconfirming to the women.

Second, Nicole B. Ellison, D. Yvette Wohn, and Christine Greenhow use a social capital framework in “Adolescents’ visions of their future careers, educational plans, and life pathways: The role of bridging and bonding social capital experiences.” Ellison et al. use in-depth interviewing to examine how 43 young individuals (i.e., adolescents) talk about their future professional and educational goals as well as their life aspirations. Ellison et al. explore how these young individuals are influenced by online and off-line experiences, such as online gaming (Xbox), social media (e.g., Facebook), and study abroad (e.g., being educated in a different country). Ellison et al.’s findings suggest that adolescents who were exposed to unique or diverse experiences were more likely to have a broader range of life paths, along with more enhanced life aspirations and/or goals. Interestingly, they also found that exposure to online social media was both expansive and enabling, while also constrictive and constraining. While some adolescents were able to use the online experiences to enhance and broaden their worldviews, others felt pressure to have their online and off-line experiences matchup, which dampened or narrowed their worldviews.

Third, Kyung-Hee Lee and Anisa M. Zvonkovic utilize a grounded theoretical approach in “Journeys to remain childless: A grounded theory examination of decision-making processes among voluntarily childless couples” to examine how heterosexual couples negotiate and navigate the decision not to have a child. Lee and Zvonkovic based their analysis on conjoint interviews with 20 married couples. They identified three decision-making types: mutual early articulator couples, mutual postponer couples, and nonmutual couples. The processes that these types of decision makers used involved three phases: (a) agreement, (b) acceptance, and (c) closing of the door. In addition, Lee and

Zvonkovic's analysis revealed that two forces impacted the decision-making process and involved the strength of the couple's conviction in their decision as well as the importance they placed on their personal relationship. Thus, via grounded theory methods, Lee and Zvonkovic discovered that the important decision about whether or not to have a child is impacted by both dyadic and temporal processes.

Finally, Karla Bergen and M. Chad McBride, in "Voices of women in commuter marriages: A site of discursive struggle," examine the challenges of married individuals involved in a type of long-distance relationship, the commuter marriage (which essentially involves spouses living in different locations during the workweek). Fifty interviews with wives were analyzed using contrapuntal analysis techniques (Baxter, 2011). Bergen and McBride found that wives essentially deal with two types of competing discourses or struggles: (a) struggles of integration (which involve presence vs. absence and independence vs. dependence) and (b) struggles of conventionality (which involve choice vs. no choice in the commuting arrangement, and shared residence vs. dual residence). While undoubtedly challenging, and nonnormative in U.S. culture, wives in commuter marriages reframed or reappraised their relationships as potentially better than noncommuter marriages (e.g., as they felt that the sometimes separate residences facilitated more individual freedom, enhanced happiness, and a greater appreciation of time spent together).

Combined, we hope the two sections of this special issue, both the forum and the research studies, offer a complex and forward-thinking conversation about where qualitative relationship research methods have been and where they are going. The international lineup of authors who contributed to this special issue include some of the best qualitative relationship researchers from academic disciplines including psychology, communication, sociology, family studies, nursing, human behavior, information studies, management, and women's/gender studies. We have also taken special care to ensure that topics cover many different kinds of relationships as well as a variety of methods and analytical techniques. Needless to say, we still have a way to go. For example, reviewers for this special issue were reluctant to embrace autoethnography (e.g., Ellis, 2004), approaches that were ostensibly critical (e.g., Madison, 2011), or more creative or art-based approaches (e.g., Faulkner, 2009), demonstrating a reluctance to involve more progressive methods. Still, we feel this issue offers a much-needed step forward for embracing qualitative relationship research. We hope there are many steps yet to come.

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