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Crossing Boundaries between Communication Activism Research and Applied Communication Research Discourses

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There is a growing conversation in higher education regarding the relevance and social impact of research for nonacademic communities in the public sphere. Engaged scholarship has emerged as one response to this concern as scholars endeavor to produce theory and research that enable individuals, groups, and communities to respond better to significant social problems and issues (see, e.g., Barreno, Elliott, Madueke, & Sarny, 2013). Several research traditions of engaged communication scholarship have emerged, including applied communication research, collaborative learning, practical theory, and public scholarship (see, e.g., Putnam, 2009; Putnam & Dempsey, 2015; Shockley-Zalabak, Barge, Lewis, & Simpson, forthcoming). Although several strands of engaged scholarship exist, three important ideas tend to cut across them: Engaged scholarship is an approach toward inquiry that (a) focuses on significant ethical, social, and civic problems; (b) involves crafting reflexive research practices that enable collaboration between academic and nonacademic communities of practice; and (c) cocreates and coproduces knowledge through a collaborative research process between academics and nonacademics.

The essay by Carragee and Frey in this Special Section clearly positions communication activism for social justice research (CAR) as a unique form of engaged communication scholarship that is distinct from, or represents a distinct form of (see Frey & SunWolf, 2009), applied communication research (ACR). CAR represents a different mode of inquiry and knowledge production than is pursued typically by ACR, given CAR's explicit commitment to collaboration among researchers, oppressed communities, and activists that seeks transformative change through researchers' interventions that address injustices within political, social, and economic systems. In contrast, a majority of ACR adopts a mode of inquiry that produces publications directed at communication scholars that describe and offer recommendations for managing communication problems. To a much lesser degree, to make academic knowledge socially relevant, ACR adopts a *translational* mode of inquiry, in which academics disseminate accessible research findings to the public. Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008) also identified a form of engaged ACR that involves "bringing members of scholarly and practitioner communities into conversation with one another," to coproduce "robust and useful knowledge" (p. 253; see also Van de Ven, 2007). The unique focus of CAR on using communication theory, research, and/or pedagogy to work with oppressed communities and activists; the social justice nature of the issues that CAR addresses; and the role of researchers as intervention activists clearly differentiate CAR from typical ACR.

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Although the notion that CAR is distinct from typical ACR already has been well established in the literature (Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Putnam, 2009; Putnam & Dempsey, 2015), Carragee and Frey's essay in this Special Section serves a valuable purpose, building on earlier work to articulate more deeply the characteristics of CAR, identifying important issues regarding the design of CAR studies and programs, and demonstrating CAR's legitimacy as a distinct approach within engaged communication scholarship. Moreover, their essay makes an important contribution to the literature by providing a careful comparison of conceptual and practical alliances between CAR and ACR, as opposed to simply noting their disjunctures and differences. I focus my response on viewing CAR and ACR as complementary approaches to engaged communication scholarship as opposed to competitive ones. Using Deetz's (1996) notion of research traditions as "discourses," I illustrate how CAR and ACR can be placed in conversation to take advantage of the research opportunities that each presents and to become more mindful of the design and practice of engaged research, and how these approaches may employ a common set of strategies to create space to conduct research that engages meaningfully with and transforms practice.

Research Traditions as Discourses

To be a member of a community of practice that is informed by a CAR perspective involves designing and conducting research according to a particular set of value commitments. First, CAR is committed to *activism*, using "theories, methods, and applied practices to work with and for oppressed, marginalized, and underresourced groups and communities (hereafter, 'oppressed communities'), as well as with activist groups and organizations (hereafter, 'activists')" (Carragee & Frey, this Special Section). Second, CAR emphasizes *interventions* by researchers that engage and change inequitable and unjust discourses and material conditions to foster social change. CAR is unique in that it emphasizes that interventions are collective accomplishments that are performed by researchers working with members of a community of practice. Third, CAR highlights the importance of *collaboration*, enabling scholars to "use their communication knowledge to create reflective partnerships with oppressed communities and activists that seek social change" (Carragee & Frey, this Special Section). Fourth, CAR emphasizes *reflexivity* in research practices, in which "scholars study their interventions, by planning, documenting, and reporting their purposes, practices, and results" (Carragee & Frey, this Special Section). Fifth, CAR presumes *methodological pluralism*, as any method potentially can be used to conduct such research, depending on the particular circumstances.

Given these commitments, do CAR and ACR complement one another? The answer depends on whether research typologies, such as Putnam and Dempsey's (2015) faces of engaged scholarship, are viewed as reified paradigms or as action-enabling orientations. Deetz (1996) observed that typically, paradigms construct research typologies as static categorization systems that identify ideal types of research traditions. The assumption is that paradigms are sealed off from one another and that scholars will flock around a prototype of a particular research tradition. Although such clear demarcations among paradigms may be useful for marking conceptually the domain of a particular research tradition, the practice of research is more likely to involve crossing the lines and boundaries among competing research traditions. From this perspective, relatively little overlap between CAR and ACR would be expected, as normally, researchers would either pose questions that align with the commitments espoused by CAR and

ACR, or they would select a specific research tradition to locate themselves within that best fits the question informing a particular research project.

Rather than viewing research typologies as classifying systems to match researchers, research programs, and research studies to particular paradigms, Deetz (1996) argued that these typologies can be viewed as "different discourses to note a way of articulating arguments and engaging in research practices rather than a means of reconstructive self-naming" (p. 198; see also Deetz & Eger, 2014). Research discourses orient researchers to what counts as significant problems, what arguments may be articulated and are valued within a particular discourse, research practices that are regarded highly, and a set of ideas regarding how to approach the constitution of people, events, and situations. Viewing research typologies as living discursive repertoires creates the opportunity for researchers to draw on resources from competing research traditions to frame, design, and execute research that is tailored to questions that are being asked.

From this perspective, and it is one with which I suspect Carragee and Frey may be sympathetic, CAR and ACR can complement one another when conducting engaged communication scholarship. The issue is how these two discourses influence each other; specifically, do researchers ground their work primarily in one discourse, using it as a contextual frame for making decisions regarding how to incorporate research practices from other discourses, or do they give each equal priority? For example, if a communication researcher grounds her or his work primarily in the discourse of CAR but also draws on ACR discourse, the researcher might be open to conducting studies that do not have a community partner or do not necessarily have an interventionist orientation. As a result, the researcher might conduct and publish systematic reviews of literature or theoretical essays, as well as empirical explorations that describe general dynamics of a specific communicative practice. It makes sense to conduct such studies that seemingly go against the values informing CAR discourse if those studies are part of a larger CAR agenda, and if developing in-depth knowledge of a particular practice at one time may prepare a researcher to intervene into a system at a later time. The point is that engaged communication scholars still can operate within a CAR framework at the level of the research approach, but they may incorporate elements from other discourses at the level of the research project.

Conceptualizing research traditions as discourses, thus, permits playing across boundaries. It is more interesting to develop conversations around the practice, utility, and impact of engaged communication scholarship to address important issues by exploring various ways that CAR and ACR intersect, and to foster innovative research practices and social impact, rather than engaging in conversations regarding whether particular researchers or research projects can be categorized as exemplars of CAR or ACR. The former allows researchers to take full advantages of opportunities afforded by CAR and ACR discourses, whereas the latter pigeonholes researchers. The need to take advantage of varied research discourses is particularly important in light of Deetz's (1996) observation that researchers rarely are purists who adhere to a single research tradition, as over the life span of scholars' careers, as well as in their individual research projects, they engage with and mix multiple research traditions.

Design Choices and Research Practices

Carragee and Frey lament how engaged scholarship has become a "purr word" (Hayakawa, 1949, p. 44) that lacks substantive denotative meaning because it refers to a wide variety of interactions between scholars and those outside the academy. In a related but different vein, Deetz (1996) voiced concern that researchers often draw from multiple research traditions without accounting for their research position, which may lead to a nonreflective mixing of concepts and research practices. In both cases, it becomes important for researchers to be more focused in their approach to engaged communication scholarship and to be mindful of choices that they make regarding their research practice; by doing so, it is more likely that they will craft research projects and programs that will have the substantive desired impacts.

Communication as design theory suggests that people can design their preferred forms of interactivity with others (see, e.g., Aakhus, 2007). Building on Carragee and Frey, let me suggest a starting point for research design choices that influence the type, quality, and duration of interactivity between and among academics and research partners. These design choices juxtapose alternatives drawn from CAR and ACR discourses that researchers can select when designing research.

1. *Researcher positionality*: Do researchers position themselves as participants within or observers of social practices? From Carragee and Frey's perspective, the former reflects first-person-perspective research, whereas the latter reflects third-person-perspective research.

2. *Research purpose*: Do researchers perceive the end-in-view of their research as representation or intervention? As Dempsey and Barge (2014) observed, representation describes and reflects on a practice, whereas intervention creates resources to generate new practice and build the capacity of a community to develop new patterns of meaning making and action. The latter draws particular attention to ways that researchers reflect on practice, to enable researchers and community members to take stock of their practice, and to decide what changes or adaptations to make.

3. *Temporality*: Do researchers focus on short-term or long-term social impact? The answer to this question influences the length of time spent in the field. As Carragee and Frey observe, CAR assumes that unjust human systems should be changed; hence, the question is how to document effects of researchers' interventions over time and for what time period.

4. *Level of change*: Are researchers focused on individual change, systemic change, or both? CAR is concerned with fostering change in structures, systems, and institutions (e.g., ending the death penalty), typically, via a focus on individual interventions (see, e.g., the death penalty cases by Asenas, McCann, Feyh, & Cloud, 2012; McHale, 2007), whereas ACR focuses on individual change, systemic change, or both, depending on the research project.

5. *Change model*: Do researchers employ deficit or appreciative change models when working with human systems? The literature on community and organizational change has suggested that a deficit approach to change in human systems identifies problems that inform a community of practice and develops actions to solve those problems, whereas an appreciative approach to change builds on core values, resources, strengths, and assets of a human system (see, e.g., Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The deficit change model identifies the scope, scale, and causes of problems; establishes evaluation criteria; and then selects among competing options to reduce the gap between the existing and the desired states. The appreciative change model, in contrast, begins by identifying core values that give life to a human system, as well as the system's strengths and assets, and engages in actions that build and grow these capacities. Each change model carries with it a different logic of action for how researchers engage human systems. Although CAR and ACR both appear to use, primarily, deficit models of change and critique, recent work on relational constructionist approaches to inquiry has emphasized appreciation and valuation (e.g., McNamee & Hosking, 2012).

It is important to recognize that researchers can emphasize one of the alternatives identified above or place them in a constructive tension with one another, thereby keeping both alternatives alive during the research process. Moreover, if researchers take seriously the notions that they draw on multiple discourses to pose questions and that they try to craft research designs that fit questions they pose, as well as the unique character of the research site, they need to choose designs that align their value commitments with their research practices. CAR and ACR discourses, thus, highlight a set of crucial design choices that influence strongly pathways for social impact.

Creating the Space for Engaged Communication Scholarship

As Carragee and Frey observed:

> Another challenge for CAR within universities, similar to other engaged communication research, is that it often takes much longer to conduct compared with other research (e.g., survey research), which poses a problem for meeting traditional tenure and promotion (T&P) requirements that privilege the amount of research produced rather than its quality and significance, and almost never its impacts on people. (this Special Section)

This problem is not unique to CAR, as it is equally relevant to other engaged communication scholarship approaches conducted within the academy, such as ACR, as it takes time to establish relationships with partners, conduct fieldwork, analyze data and provide feedback to partners, and simultaneously navigate T&P systems that undervalue such scholarship. It is not surprising, therefore, that some scholars contend that engaged scholarship is best undertaken post-tenure (e.g., Anderson, 2014).

Although I agree with Carragee and Frey that faculty members need to take collective action to create space for CAR and ACR to be valued, it also is possible to make wise choices regarding how engaged scholars position and present their research by giving attention to how they manage the tension between engaging in research that has academic and social impact. Many universities use academic impact as a criterion for T&P decisions, believing that faculty members should become *thought leaders* in their discipline, whose scholarship is viewed as being not only of high quality but also is used by their academic peers. *Thought leadership* involves showing that one's research is regarded well by being published in highly selective journals and shaping the scholarly conversation in the discipline, as evidenced by high citation counts, such as robust H-indexes and i-10 indexes, with the researcher being perceived as a subject matter expert, as evidenced by academic awards; being selected by peers to serve in disciplinary gatekeeping roles, such as on journal editorial boards; and earning external research funding from leading agencies, such as the National Science Foundation.

In contrast, social impact emphasizes faculty members becoming *organizational and community capacity builders*, by generating useful knowledge about, for, and with organizations and communities that addresses significant problems and improves practice. Indicators of social impact tend to cluster around three themes. One indicator emphasizes disseminating research to shape the public's understanding of issues and problems; it is reflected in indicators that include faculty publishing in nonacademic venues (e.g., public research reports and trade magazines, as well as providing commentary in popular media outlets) and giving testimony to governmental agencies. Second, collaborative research and program development indicators of social impact include the development of research initiatives with community partners; the creation of academic–practitioner colloquia, conferences, and other collaborations; and the establishment of projects, centers, and institutes. Third, indicators of developing new practice models include the establishment of new policies, procedures, and activities in communities of practice, and demonstrating effects of these changes in practice.

The challenge for researchers who engage in CAR and ACR is that there is relatively little overlap between academic and social impact indicators. Although changes in T&P systems to incorporate indicators of social impact have been undertaken at some universities, such as Michigan State University, University of Colorado–Colorado Springs, and North Carolina State University, a majority of academic institutions do not address fully issues of social impact in their T&P documents. Therefore, it is important to extend Carragee and Frey's concern with T&P policies to develop individual-level strategies to help faculty members better navigate their university's existing T&P system and simultaneously engage in research that makes the desired social impact. There are a number of strategies that engaged scholars can use to manage the tension between achieving academic and social impact (Barge, 2016), but three examples illustrate how faculty members can create research projects and programs that maintain their passion for engaged research that makes a difference in society and simultaneously meet the requirements of their academic institution.

First, faculty can develop the ability to engage in *triple translation*. Fitting within academic communities requires scholars to situate their research within language games associated with particular theoretical or philosophical traditions, as well as topic-relevant research literature; to be relevant to nonacademic audiences, scholars need to situate their research within the language of practice and policy.

Triple translation, therefore, means translating scholarship into the language of theory, research, and practice. By engaging in triple translation, scholars can make more informed judgments about whether a research project is most likely to make meaningful contributions to theory, research, and/or practice, which not only determines whether they pursue a particular research project but also shapes decisions regarding the best venues for sharing their work.

Second, engaged scholarship takes time to negotiate access with community partners and to collect data; therefore, it is important for scholars to "go big" when designing their research and collecting data, to ensure that they have large, robust data sets that can generate multiple research essays and other artifacts, such as white papers and training materials. "Going big" might mean employing multiple theoretical perspectives, models, and methods to study the problem, as well as to pose big questions about important problems (Van de Ven, 2007). Embracing multiplicity allows scholars to explore competing explanations and to discern critically which explanations are more useful. "Going big" also can mean entering the field for an extended duration, which leads researchers not only to learn more about the uniqueness of people and communities with which they work but also to develop longitudinal research to explore how phenomena evolve and change over time. Using multiple frameworks and entering the field for an extended time to "go big" allows scholars to acquire data sets that can be mined in a variety of ways to produce work for both academic and nonacademic audiences.

Third, scholars need to engage in *research on the go* by producing work over the duration of a longitudinal research project. The time that it takes to build relationships and networks to gain access to communities and organizations, and to collect data can be intensive, which may lead engaged academic scholars to conduct fewer research projects (compared with other scholars), which then fuels a fear that they will not achieve a sufficient number of publications placed in the "right" venues necessary for them to be tenured and promoted. Such a fear stems from an idea that nothing can be published from a particular project until it is completed. Rather than succumb to this fear, engaged scholars need to recognize that various artifacts, empirical and nonempirical, can be produced for academic and nonacademic audiences as a research project unfolds. For instance, toward the beginning of a particular project, a researcher could write a systematic review of literature or a theoretical essay that articulates a new communication framework for the phenomenon being studied. If a researcher collects interactional data regarding a particular practice during an early phase in a project that is intended to frame a subsequent survey, before the project enters the next phase, a journal article could be generated from the linguistic data produced by this early formative research that examines interactional challenges associated with that phenomenon. Scholars, thus, do not need to wait until a long-term data-collection process is completed to publish work or to produce other artifacts; it is possible to conceptualize a large project as consisting of smaller stages that allow scholars to conduct research on the go.

Resonances and Reflections

There are multiple pathways to pursue in engaged communication research, including communication activism research and applied communication research. Rather than focusing on conceptual oppositions between these pathways, I explored conceptual and practical complementarities, alliances, and overlaps between these two forms of engaged communication research. Carragee and Frey

certainly demonstrate convincingly that communication activism research represents a distinct engaged research tradition. However, advancing engaged communication research demands articulating better how to play across boundaries of various research traditions in a reflective, intentional way; how to design engaged research that aligns with particular research positions; and how to create space to do the work about which communication scholars feel passionate and meets the needs of both academic and nonacademic audiences.

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