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Editor's Introduction to the Special Edition on Methodology

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Editor's introduction to the special edition on methodology

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Introduction

Intercultural professional communication (IPC) is a burgeoning research area. New venues have been created to publish work in IPC, including this journal, *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, in 2010 and *connexions* international professional communication journal in 2013. More broadly scoped venues in technical and professional communication also recognize the importance of intercultural work. See, for example, Ding and Savage's special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* on new directions in intercultural professional communication (2013) and the topics of interest for the ATTW Book Series in Technical and Professional Communication, topics which include the globalization of technical and professional communication, intercultural communication, and translation of technical and professional communication (ATTW, 2012). Within IPC, some topics that have garnered recent scholarly attention include technology design and use (McCool, 2010; Sun, 2013; Walton, Yaaqoubi, & Kolko, 2012), risk communication (Ding 2013; Ding, 2012; Frost, 2013), and health communication (Antón, Connor, Lauten, & Balunda, 2013; St. Germaine, 2013; Thatcher, 2013). These topics and others within IPC are important, but to investigate them properly, researchers must be well trained and well equipped with research methods appropriate for intercultural contexts. This special issue of *RPCG* focuses on intercultural research methods, a timely topic for our field.

Research methods for intercultural professional communication

In the last decade, there have been several assessments of technical and professional communication research that identify strengths, gaps, and potential areas of inquiry in an effort to shape the field moving forward (Andersen et al., 2013; Blakeslee & Spilka, 2004; Russell, 2009; Thatcher, 2010). Among the critiques posed in these assessments, leading scholars say the field needs less thinking about research and more doing it (Blakeslee & Spilka, 2004). But doing valid, rigorous research requires a toolbox of research methods and theoretically informed knowledge of how and when to use them appropriately (Thatcher, 2010). One early resource on research methods in technical communication was Patricia Goubil-Gambrell's special issue of

Technical Communication Quarterly, published more than fifteen years ago (1998). Interestingly, the methods-focused pieces of that special issue addressed topics that continue to be of central importance to research in our field today, topics especially relevant in intercultural contexts: e.g., empowerment (Blyler), ethnocentrism (Charney), cultural theory (Longo), and ethics and professional responsibility (Johnson).

Since then, some excellent resources on research methods in technical communication have been produced, several fairly recently: for example, Hughes and Hayhoe's (2008) primer, providing a solid foundation on conducting and using qualitative and quantitative research in technical communication; McKee and DeVoss's (2007) edited collection on conducting research at the intersection of text and digital technologies; and Spinuzzi's (2013) guide to designing and conducting field studies within organizations. Specific to intercultural research, there have been some excellent contributions that speak to research methods, including book-length works on the design and use of technologies (Sun, 2013) and on integrating theory and practice in intercultural rhetoric and professional communication (Thatcher, 2012), as well as shorter pieces on methods well suited to IPC research, such as genre analysis (Kelly, 2013) and fantasy theme analysis (Walton, Price, & Zraly, 2013). These works and others provide a good start in equipping professional communicators for intercultural research, but, given the special challenges of research in intercultural contexts, we see a continued need for additional resources.

For these resources to support ethical work and valid findings, they must root research methods in a theoretically grounded understanding of intercultural contexts. This theoretical grounding is critical for helping researchers to navigate a complex middle ground between two problematic approaches at either end of the spectrum of intercultural communication. Since the 1990s, there has been a pendulum swing in IPC away from early approaches based on what have been rightly criticized as simplistic and static characterizations of culture at the national level (Ding & Savage, 2013; Hunsinger, 2006) to more recent approaches that swing far into the equally problematic territory of local-only focuses (Thatcher, 2010). Regarding the first extreme, we agree with the numerous scholars who complicate the notion of culture to enable more accurate and respectful research: e.g., rejecting of any expectation of cultural "purity" and focusing on the space between cultures (Matsuda & Atkinson, 2008); conducting multi-level analyses considering nation, region, organization, and individual (Thatcher, 2006; Walton, 2013); and transcending national contexts to investigate global phenomena and transcultural communities (Ding, 2013). However, IPC has so vigorously rejected early, problematic definitions of culture and the stereotyping facilitated by a misuse of comparative frameworks that we believe some scholars are in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater (or throwing the house out the window, to use a similar Honduran expression).

In other words, the effort to avoid stereotyping and simplistic characterizations of culture can lead to a narrowly scoped focus on local context that loses the ability to speak beyond that single research context. This inability is a significant problem, since one of the foundational purposes of research is to produce new knowledge that is useful and applicable beyond the instance of a single study. As Hughes and Hayhoe (2008) acknowledged, this requirement of research is challenging, but, "research must ultimately articulate generalized truths from specific instances" (p. 5). This ability to generalize—to articulate *some* truths across *some* instances to *some*

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degree—is possible because just as no context is completely identical to another (and certainly not just because it involves people from the same country), so no context is completely unique either (even across cultures). A theoretically grounded understanding of intercultural contexts can equip researchers to identify and describe relevant similarities and differences across cultures. Even so, intercultural research poses challenges not just to identifying implications of research findings but also to selecting and implementing research methods, especially in terms of engaging with participants.

In intercultural contexts, researchers have an even heavier responsibility than usual to engage in reflexive, humble, and appropriate ways (Thatcher, 2010). Intercultural researchers must adapt their methods for intercultural contexts, but this is difficult because the intercultural context amplifies common research challenges. As discussed above, it increases the tension related to balancing local appropriateness of methodologies with comparability across global contexts. It also greatly increases the chances of ethnocentrism or orientalism (Said, 1979), of imposing a cultural lens on the intercultural context. Thus, researchers need to be highly reflexive, that is, to understand the cultural constructions of their theories and methods, ensuring that these coordinate and complement the intercultural context. For example, several rhetoric and professional communication scholars have pointed out the danger of making assumptions about the purposes and roles of writing, literacy, and technology that are based on U.S. cultural values but are simply not workable in other cultural traditions (McCool, 2009; Thatcher, 2010).

Researchers must also demonstrate flexibility, especially in their approaches to data collection and analysis. For example, an attempt to show courtesy by taking as little of participants' time as possible can be perceived as rudeness by participants expecting to connect with researchers socially as well as professionally. Researchers must be perceptive and sensitive to cues regarding comfort of participants or meaning behind and within statements. And what is more comfortable for participants may be counterintuitive to (and less convenient for) researchers: for example, instead of interacting with researchers in private (to protect their confidentiality), participants may feel more comfortable engaging in groups, which can make for messier data collection. The methodologies most likely to generate rich, accurate findings in intercultural contexts may require more flexibility than traditional methods: for example, replacing highly structured interviews with conversational approaches or conducting research in homes rather than labs.

Like flexibility, humility is an essential element of intercultural research; it requires humility to understand culturally constructed power relations with participants and to relinquish the role of expert. But power shifts can result in surprising and important findings that are unlikely to have emerged from traditional methods. We believe that these considerations of reflexivity, flexibility, and humility are increasingly important in technical and professional communication research, especially as intercultural contact increases.

Technical and professional communication involves creating and interpreting messages to facilitate understanding across stakeholder groups. In this work, we often serve as a bridge—e.g. between designers and users, between academia and industry, between communities and policy makers. In this sense, our work has always been intercultural. But with globalization, driven in

part by the growth of transnational organizations, international travel, and use of information and communication technologies, professional communication is becoming increasingly intercultural, a trend with important implications for designing, selecting, and implementing research methods.

Growing opportunities for intercultural contact

Because people and information cross cultural and national borders, we influence and are influenced by a variety of cultural and rhetorical traditions (Appadurai, 1996; Matsuda & Atkinson, 2008). Intercultural communication and intercultural research are becoming more important to our field because many people's education, work places, technologies, and life experiences increasingly put them into contact with others from a variety of nationalities, cultures, and backgrounds. Consider, for example, the rise in international education at the college level. The most recent annual survey by the Institute of International Education reports that a record number of international students studied at U.S. universities in the 2012-2013 school year: more than 800,000 international students, which was an increase of 7.2 percent (Redden, 2013). Similarly, the number of American students studying abroad increased in the 2011-2012 school year by 3.4 percent and has more than tripled in the last two decades (Redden, 2013). In the short term, this trend creates a more intercultural classroom environment and a more intercultural work environment for university employees who engage with students and parents. In the long term, this trend has implications for shaping communication norms that future professionals draw upon in the workplace, including when graduates work in their country of origin after being educated abroad (Budhwar, Woldu, & Ogbonna, 2008).

International travel is also on the rise, both for business and leisure, further increasing intercultural contact. For example, the first eight months of 2013 showed record high international tourism, a 5-percent increase over the same period in 2012 (UN World Tourism Organization, 2013). This increase is especially significant because 2012 was the first year that more than 1 billion tourists traveled internationally (CNN, 2012). International business travel is also on the rise, with large spending increases projected for outbound international business travel in 2014 in China and the US, the two largest markets (Global Business Travel Association, 2013; Jones, 2013). This international mobility increases intercultural contact not only for the growing numbers of people who travel themselves but also for people whom travelers meet on their home turf, so to speak.

Of course, with technology-mediated communication, one need not physically encounter anyone to have an intercultural exchange. Technology-mediated communication can involve a range of devices (e.g., phones, tablets, laptops), communication media (e.g., images, text, audio, video), modes (e.g., synchronous/asynchronous, unidirectional/dialogic, fixed location/mobile), and genres (e.g., corporate websites, chat rooms, online magazines). Currently, one of the most globally prominent practices of technology-mediated communication is social networking. As of April 2013, almost one in four people on the planet were social network users, and the use of social networks worldwide was projected to increase by 18 percent by the end of 2013 (eMarketer, 2013). Social networking is the most popular online activity worldwide (comScore, 2011), with the greatest number of users in the Asia-Pacific region and second-greatest in Latin America, though Africa and the Middle East (when counted as a single region) is expected to

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soon surpass Latin America in total number of social network users (eMarketer, 2013). Although certain sites are more popular in some regions than others (e.g., Bebo in the UK, Qzone in China), Facebook consistently ranks among the most popular social networking sites nation by nation (MediaMeasurement, 2011), as well as in terms of overall number of users worldwide (Protalkinski, 2013). The example of social networking shows a clear trend of growth in the use of technology-mediated communication by people from a wide range of cultures, backgrounds, and nationalities, and the global prominence of specific online activities and even specific social networking sites illustrates the ease of intercultural contact offered by technology-mediated communication. But as many scholars have pointed out, technology-mediated communication, like all communication, is shaped by cultural and rhetorical traditions (Thatcher, 2010; St.Amant, 2013; Sun, 2013).

Facilitated by technology-mediated communication, workplace trends such as distributed teams, transnational organizations, and cross-organizational projects also create growing opportunities for intercultural contact. The number of multinational corporations has consistently, sharply increased since the end of World War II, and the growth trend for international nongovernmental organizations is even steeper (Mazlish, 2012). In many of these organizations, employees work on virtual or distributed teams, in which team members work in different physical locations, communicate primarily in asynchronous modes, and/or work for distinct components of a parent organization (Ware, 2002). Members of distributed teams tend to have less in common with each other than co-located teams, in terms of both their work lives and home lives (Ware & Grantham, 2009). And unlike in the past, today's work environments are more likely operate as assemblages (temporary collections of people, information, connections, and technologies appropriate to a given task), as opposed to static, structured environments (Spinuzzi, 2007, p. 268). These dynamic, distributed work environments offer increasing intercultural contact, especially for knowledge workers, whose work is becoming less location-specific and more reliant on navigating networks of disparate people and information to distill and craft messages (Spinuzzi & Jakobs, 2013; Ware & Grantham, 2009).

Opportunities for intercultural contact among disadvantaged populations

While acknowledging the growth of opportunities for intercultural contact, it is important to note that factors related to power and equality (e.g., gender, race, socio-economic status) play a key role in the availability and likelihood of certain opportunities for intercultural contact. For example, international education is on the rise, but 63 percent of international students at U.S. universities are funded primarily by personal or family support (Redden, 2013). Students who lack such resources are less likely to experience this opportunity for intercultural contact. As for U.S. university students studying abroad, they are disproportionately likely to be white: of study-abroad students in the 2010-2011 school year, 78 percent were white, 7.9 percent were Asian, 6.9 percent were Hispanic, and 4.8 percent were African-American (Sand, 2013). International opportunities in the workplace show similar homogenous trends. A 2013 survey on global relocation reports that international work assignments are widely believed to have a positive impact on one's career, but only 21 percent of employees transferred internationally were female (Cartus, 2013).

Many disadvantaged populations are similarly constrained in opportunities for technology-mediated intercultural communication. For example, significantly lower proportions of the population are online in developing countries (about 20 percent, per the International Telecommunication Union's 2013 report), compared to the proportion of the general population in developed countries that uses the Internet (about 75 percent, per the same report). Within the US, race, age, income, and education level continue to be significantly related to likelihood of Internet use (Pew Research Center, 2013). Populations with "near universal" Internet use included young adults 18-29 years, college graduates, and members of households annually earning \$75,000 or more, while groups who were less likely to go online included Hispanics, members of households annually earning less than \$30,000, and those who have not earned a high school diploma, among others (Pew Research Center, 2013). In a related finding, Pew reported that people who mostly use mobile phones to access the Internet include young people, minorities, less-affluent people, and people with lower education (Sankin, 2013). In other words, many members of disadvantaged populations who do get online do so through mobile phones, which can constrain their ability to access certain kinds of content and the types of online tasks in which they can engage.

These facts do not mean that disadvantaged populations do not engage in any intercultural communication but rather suggest that the range of intercultural contact they experience may be more narrowly constrained and more likely to involve wider disparities in power distribution among communicators. I think about, for example, a recent research trip to South America, where our research team sought to learn about the work practices of people who had been identified by their peers as particularly strong and effective humanitarian practitioners. They were the experts; we sought to learn from them. In working for an international humanitarian organization, these practitioners (who included both employees and volunteers) had engaged in intercultural communication before. But these intercultural exchanges typically involved either program evaluation (in which foreigners evaluate their work and make recommendations for improvement) or donor interactions (in which foreigners are making decisions about whether to fund or continue funding their work).

This relatively narrow range of typical experiences created strong expectations that shaped our interactions even after discussing the purpose of the research project (to better support the work of the humanitarian organization), why they were being invited to participate (they were particularly strong practitioners with expertise recognized by their peers), and our respective roles (we researchers had much to learn from their expertise). We communicated this message in formal presentations to groups of practitioners, preceding each individual interview, and in informal conversations with participants and their colleagues. Even so, practitioners continued to ask us if they were doing a good job and if we would let people know about the need for additional funding. One of the South American members of our research team explained that human subjects research is very rare in that region and that what we were doing may seem, well, weird. We were seeking to engage in intercultural communication with a reversed dynamic of expertise, an interaction that differed in many ways from the relatively narrow range of intercultural contact that many of our participants had experienced.

This interaction highlights one of the special considerations of conducting research in intercultural contexts and especially when working across cultures with disadvantaged populations. We see a need for more resources in intercultural professional communication speaking to these considerations, particularly in terms of research methods.

Articles in this special issue

This special issue of *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization* addresses this increasing need for resources on intercultural research methodologies in professional communication. Looking across the pieces in this issue, a common theme is apparent: equipping scholars who conduct intercultural research with methods-related tools. These tools include foundational concepts to guide research approaches (such as Jones' reflexivity and flexibility and Riley Mukavetz's there-ness and relationality), promising methods such as digital ethnography (Madson) and engaged design (Getto), keys to helping new scholars develop cultural competence (Price, Walton, & Peterson), and more reflexive approaches to classic modes of intercultural inquiry (Cummings). In contrast to a typical research article structure in which methods frame the central focus of the piece (findings and implications), the articles in this special issue foreground method throughout—both to inform approaches to IPC research and to facilitate discussion of research methods in the field.

Each piece uniquely contributes to the special issue, but there are some shared emphases and considerations for intercultural research highlighted across the articles. For example, three articles that reflect upon particular research projects emphasize the value of time spent onsite in research locations and/or with research participants when activities are flexible and shaped by participants (Jones; Price, Walton, & Petersen; Riley Mukavetz). These articles provide concrete illustrations of operationalizing flexibility and humility, concepts identified as key to intercultural research (Thatcher, 2010). One of the central debates in intercultural research is emic approaches versus etic approaches versus a combination thereof (Ding & Savage, 2013; Thatcher, 2010). Contributing to this conversation, articles in this special issue address how dynamic and complex conceptions of culture can inform research methods (Cummings; Getto; Jones; Madson), how intercultural theory can inform the hands-on practice of research (Jones; Price, Walton, & Petersen; Riley Mukavetz), and how emic/etic considerations shape contemporary approaches to research methods (Cummings; Madson). Below we individually introduce each of these excellent pieces.

Natasha Jones's article uses an intercultural lens to reflect upon an ethnographic research study she conducted of an activist organization. Arguing that organizations are cultures, Jones conveys findings about the process and practice of studying organizational culture. She proposes two concepts, reflexivity and flexibility, as key to the study of organizational culture, illustrating these concepts with experiences from her own research.

Guiseppe Getto productively combines concepts from participatory design and intercultural research to propose a research methodology called engaged design. Using this methodology, Getto focuses on communication infrastructure, which he argues has been largely overlooked in intercultural communication research but has promise for facilitating a research-based approach

to design that can account for the culturally informed values and communication practices of designers and users.

Michael Madson seeks to encourage methods-related discussions in the field with his article on how digital ethnography could contribute to intercultural professional communication. This article serves as an excellent resource for IPC scholars with its extensive literature review, succinct summaries of digital ethnography's strengths and weaknesses, and three principles for best practice of digital ethnography that are relevant to our field.

Ryan Price, Rebecca Walton, and Matthew Petersen contribute an article about equipping new scholars to design and conduct intercultural research. They reflect upon an intercultural pilot study to highlight lessons learned with implications for helping scholars to develop cultural competence. These lessons include operationalizing aspects of intercultural rhetorical theory during recruitment and data collection and working with interpreters as culture brokers throughout the research process.

Andrea Riley Mukavetz introduces two practices, there-ness and relationality, to inform a cultural rhetorics methodology—an intercultural research approach that enacts the values of respect, reciprocity, and accountability. In this piece, she tells stories from her research with Odawa women to share how she enacted these practices and to illustrate the potential of a cultural rhetorics methodology for making visible the relationships at the core of intercultural research.

Lance Cummings rearticulates the classic approach of cultural comparison to enable more reflexive and fluid intercultural inquiries. In this updated take, Cummings includes within comparative inquiry the act of comparison itself, prompting a level of reflexivity in which researchers acknowledge that comparisons are rhetorical practices informed by context, much like any other communicative practice. To concretize this conception of cultural comparison, Cummings illustrates his points with examples from his experiences teaching writing to intercultural classes.

It was a great pleasure to edit this special issue of *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization* on intercultural research methods, and we look forward to seeing the contributions of the articles in this issue play out in informing future professional communication research across cultures. In closing, we would like to thank the authors who contributed their work to this special issue and to the reviewers of these pieces for their prompt, thorough, and thoughtful feedback.

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