Practical Aspects of Articulating Engagement:
Negotiating for Resources in Qualitative Research

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Background

For over a decade, I have been engaged in practical research in a number of settings. My dissertation involved a year of participant observation ethnography; since then I've been working for a not-for-profit organization in several research-related capacities—developing an in-house social science research program, and initiating and conducting several social science research projects. Throughout these projects, I have been concerned about opportunities for scholarly publication as well as providing useful results. Based on my experience, I understand engagement to necessitate negotiating an ongoing relationship with those outside of the research team, usually partnering in some fashion with (members of) an organization under study. It is an ongoing process that may have a beginning and an end, but always includes countless opportunities and requirements for communicating in an articulate fashion about the relationship and the resources involved. Writing this position statement serves as an opportunity to summarize some of the lessons I have learned about these situations in hopes that they may benefit other junior scholars.

Articulating Directions and Outcomes of Partnership

This conference's call for participation encourages us to "delve into various meanings of the verb, 'to articulate,' including: to express clearly, to formulate, and to connect or unite." These phrases— "express clearly," "formulate," and "connect or unite" —characterize critical features of the practical aspects of my engaged research over the past decade. Communicative processes are necessary in any kind of partnership. In research partnerships, concerns about control over resources are often closely intermingled in complex ways throughout the relationship: here I separate several that seem key for articulating engaged scholarship in organizational communication. All necessitate careful negotiation with research partners, as the partners are likely to have significant concerns affecting the likelihood and extent of their own engagement in the research. I have found that such articulations are best done explicitly and in advance if at all possible, though it is usually impossible to foresee all the concerns which may be of importance and instead surface as unanticipated stumbling blocks along the way. In this paper I discuss them from the researchers' perspective.

Negotiating Access for Research

The first aspect is *negotiating access*, which is likely to depend upon the nature of the organization, its work, and the timeframe under consideration. There is generally little difficulty in observing public events—it's good to let people know they're being

observed and why (especially when the researcher hopes for opportunities to interview participants at a later time), but generally not regarded as an ethical problem by IRBs. If on the other hand, as is frequently important in the study of organizational communication, researchers would like access inside private organizations or to restricted events, there is a necessity to identify and work through "appropriate channels." For it is a sine qua non that organizational members have different rights and responsibilities than outsiders; for researchers to gain entry to locations and events normally limited to organizational members, there must be some accounting of the cautions and value that can be provided.

In providing these accounts, access depends upon interacting with organizational gatekeepers, and presenting a persuasive rationale. The request for access and supporting rationales may need to be worked "up the chain" of managers and even through potentially-affected external parties before access may be granted. In cases where the researcher has control over their own funding, these matters are likely to be resolved differently than in cases where the researcher is doing action research aka consulting for the organization. Key issues for both types of cases are value, disruption and confidentiality.

Concerns about value: Why should an organization and its members allow researchers entry? Usually a case must be made that some benefit will accrue to the organization for allowing researchers access to that which usually is open only to bona fide organizational members. Sometimes the status and reputation of the researchers as scholars is sufficient; often it is not. For the researcher(s), it may be hard to promise that useful recommendations and/or effective interventions will be forthcoming when entry has not yet been gained—it is impossible to know what might be found or what kind(s) of recommendations could be made. I have found it usually works best to promise a report with specific recommendations, and—at the sponsor's option—a presentation of the findings and/or a workshop (or even series of workshops).

Concerns about disruption: Minimizing *disruption* to people in a work environment where organizational members are under pressure to get their own work done is important, especially in today's work environments of diminishing resources and increasing competition. Concerns about organizational disruption by research team data collection can often be addressed by agreements to:

- send only a small number of researchers at specified agreed-upon times
- remain quietly in the background
- speak with organizational members only when they are not busy
- schedule interviews at the interviewees' convenience
- request documents only when they are offered or seem essential

Concerns about confidentiality are likely to be paramount for the organization and its gatekeepers, who usually have fears about the airing of "dirty laundry" —its effect on individual job security and career advancement as well as organizational reputation. And since scholars need to be able to publish without compromising the results of their findings, negotiating engagement around confidentiality can therefore be especially challenging.

In this regard it seems useful to distinguish confidentiality of individuals from confidentiality of organizations; the former is standard practice for social scientists, to avoid including any identifying information in any published products that would make it

possible to determine the identify of persons mentioned in the research products; using pseudonyms and modifying unique details are recognized scholarly practices in this regard.

In both cases (protecting individual *and* organizational identities) it is usually wise if not essential to allow organizational gatekeepers and participants to review draft products before releasing them to broader audiences or submitting them for publication. This is a standard and vital way to catch and correct the small inaccuracies that creep into researchers' interpretations of data, as well as provide useful feedback for those under study.

Review of Research Products

To the extent that confidentiality is a major concern for the research partner, scholars may find that releasing research products to people outside of the partnership, including but not limited to submitting papers for publication, is likely to be of serious concern to the organizational gatekeepers. Locke and Velamuri (2009) have addressed this issue in some detail. It seems best to submit draft products to organizational members and managers for their review and comment, but to retain control whenever possible over to whom they will eventually be released. This is more possible when the organization under study is not the one funding the research.

Control over Funding, Staffing and Effort

When the research team is independent—both fiscally and staffing-wise—from the studied organization, it is much easier to maintain boundaries around what happens with the results of the research; but of course it can be considerably harder to get access to study the organization or events in the first place. When the researcher is paid directly or indirectly by the organization under study (e.g. in an action research or consulting capacity), gaining access in the first place may be considerably easier as the organization has its own goals for the research; but then it may be much harder to release scholarly products for broader circulation if they do not jibe with the organization's agenda. And especially in large organizations that have major concerns about confidentiality, getting products approved for release outside the research team may consume considerable time and energy, entailing numerous iterations of a review-revise-release cycle repeated across multiple levels of organizational management. When possible, then, it is wise to set a time limit on the review process, to avoid unreasonable delays in publication of results.

Thus there is something of a slippery slope in negotiating the working relationship of engaged scholarship for qualitative research. Articulating—carefully, interactively, and often repetitively, specific concerns and agreements about control over resources—to create and sustain a mutually-beneficial relationship can take considerable time and energy. Funding and staffing issues normally affect the relative balance of power in these negotiations, and it is important for researchers to know when to draw the line on these investments of effort. Well-negotiated engaged scholarship can support many positive outcomes such as co-generative theorizing (Deetz 2008); but when negotiations do not work out well, even the best-intentioned efforts can adversely impact researchers' ability to proceed as engaged scholars (Eschenfelder 2009; Barge & Shockley-Zalabak 2008). Hopefully the practical suggestions articulated here may help some of those efforts succeed.

References

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