

Method(ologie)s for Conducting Empirical Research in and With Communities

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In her 2014 article on cultural rhetorics methodology, Andrea Riley Mukavetz asserts that “all research that negotiates multiple spaces, knowledge practices, and beliefs is intercultural research.” To navigate these spaces, Riley Mukavetz privileges story as methodology and as theory, highlighting relational accountability as a principle that guides cultural rhetorics research so that scholars “share the space” with participants.

How else can we ensure ethical, theoretically grounded practice when conducting research with communities that differ from our own? I both illustrate and augment the literature by providing examples of methodological interventions from my own work. I conduct research in a retirement community, where I interview older adults age 70+ about their experiences with technology and observe them interacting with their laptops, tablets, smartphones, digital assistants, and more. Working with older adults age 70+ presents unique challenges and opportunities for rhetoricians, particularly regarding storytelling and listening. My work sits at the intersection of feminist research methodology, technical and professional communication through user experience design, and cultural rhetorics—so you’ll see how these fields can enrich each other when thinking about how to conduct research in/with communities. There are four methodological tactics that I’ll offer for consideration:

- gaining access and working with IRB,
- meeting participants where they’re at,
- engaging in reciprocity,
- and incorporating reflexive self- and community care.

I hope that you will find something useful in these anecdotes—a practice, an activity, a consideration—that you might apply to your own work to strengthen their ties with communities, and ensure accurate and faithful representations of participants’ lived experiences.

Gaining Access (May Look Different Than You Think)

Rhetoric and composition scholars have often noted that institutional review boards (IRBs) are ill-prepared to understand or provide appropriate guidance and safeguards for the research that we do. Heidi McKee (2003) notes that “blindly adhering” to the IRB or engaging in mere “compliance” (as the CCCC guidelines for ethical research recommend) does not make space for the type of situated, transformative research that we value as humanists. As McKee notes, IRBs are designed to protect researchers and the institutions that they work for—and their questions can have value in that they help us to practice justifying our research choices and practices—but they can also derail our process.

My most recent trip to Florida to collect data at my research site—a supervised living apartment facility in the state’s fastest growing retirement community—was stuck for a bit in IRB purgatory. This was my second trip to the community, but the IRB at my university insisted on a more rigorous review process than I had been through before, including obtaining an official letter from the director of the community (we can call her Marsha) that gave me permission to conduct research there. I emailed this woman multiple times over the course of two months, sending copies of my work to show her that I was serious, and letting her know that I could talk with her on the phone and answer any questions that she might have—but I didn’t hear anything back from her. I called Marsha’s office phone and it rang off the hook. For a while I was convinced that Marsha wasn’t real, and that I was just never going to be able to get IRB approval to do this work, and I’d have to find a different dissertation project.

When I got to Florida, I went straight to Marsha’s office to see if I could beg her to let me meet with residents, but she was nowhere to be found. The office was empty, except for this very tubby dog. I like dogs, so I got down on the floor and started scratching its ears. He immediately flopped down on the ground and heaved his body over so that I could rub his belly, and I obliged. As I sat on the floor and petted the dog, Marsha emerged and saw me, and told me that she’d sign whatever I wanted her to. I think that maybe meeting me in person, and seeing me treating her furry friend well, showed her that I was a trustworthy person? I had to remember that sometimes we can’t just connect with gatekeepers, informants, or community partners on a bureaucratic level—we have to connect with them on a human one.

What this vignette illustrates is that research should involve continual negotiation of access and consent. I think that it’s appropriate that we use “consent” to discuss both permission for sex and for research—not because your research should involve sex, no funny business here—but because the way that we theorize consent in sexuality should also be the way that we theorize consent for research. Consent, according to Planned Parenthood (2016), should be...

- Freely Given
- Reversible
- Informed
- Enthusiastic
- and Specific

The consent that research participants give should not be coerced, and should be vocal and continuous as well. They should be able to consent to certain acts and refuse to consent to others. And consenting once to research is not consenting to all research. Though I had been to the community before, I needed to re-establish ties and make sure that they were still okay with me collecting data. Research should involve continual negotiation of access and consent—and sometimes that consent looks different than you might expect. Sometimes consent involves working with a gatekeeper... or giving their fat beagle a belly rub.

Meeting Participants Where They’re At

In the *Convivial Toolbox*, design researchers Liz Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers (2012) explain that there are special considerations when conducting research with older adults.

“Elderly participants have a lot to share and have the time for sharing. Plan on sessions with the elderly to take up twice as long as sessions with younger people. It takes some practice to decide when to steer the conversation, and when to let it go its own pace and direction” (pg. 104).

Being conscientious of the idiosyncrasies of the communities and cultures that we research with is critical to building trust with them. This includes understanding their values and norms, so that we can treat them with respect and represent their lived experiences as faithfully as possible. You have to meet community members where they’re at.

In my work, this means integrating myself into the community when I take a trip to gather data. On my first couple of nights in the retirement home, I’ll go to meals and chat with residents around the table. I’ll make an appearance at karaoke night and sing a popular 50s song to show that I understand and value the same cultural icons that they do. I’ll join a team of seniors on trivia night. All of these activities are important to build rapport and gain trust—as well as to recruit participants—but meeting participants where they’re at doesn’t start with recruitment. A few of the folks I have interviewed or observed for this project are elderly widowers who live alone. They were uncomfortable with inviting me (a 20-something woman) into their apartments to watch them work with their computers, so I had to make interventions by conducting research in the front hall with the door open, or relocating them and their laptops to a public sitting area somewhere else in the building. This required that I listen to them, understand their anxieties and the cultural logics (Ratcliffe, 2005) underlying them, so that I could respect their wishes.

This is how I meet older adults where they’re at, but this practice is critical in all intercultural work. Trust and rapport can be built in a variety of ways. If you’re an adult who’s worked with kids, you know that you should get on their level to help them feel comfortable. Working with certain religious traditions might involve dressing more conservatively than you’re used to, or learning how to participate in prayers or rituals. Considering body language, vocal cues, and nonverbal communication can be important for working with participants who have disabilities: not rushing folks who stutter or speak slowly, respecting participants who may be uncomfortable making eye contact

Engaging in Reciprocal Practice

To return to the conversation about IRB, some compliance boards do not recognize humanities research as *research* because they claim that it does not provide “tangible benefits” to participants (McKee, 2003, pg. 491). Benefits can be very material (like monetary compensation) or more symbolic (like time or listening), but it’s clear that practice should be reciprocal: that is, participants should get something out of it, just as we do as researchers.

In her recent dissertation, Heather Noel Turner (2018) highlights reciprocity—along with advocacy—as a key practice of social justice research. In her study, she defined reciprocity as “...structur[ing] opportunities to exchange knowledge, labor, and resources with participants and related peoples, communities, organizations, and influencers” (pg. 71). This can mean

helping community partners to build capacity in their organizations, engaging in advocacy in local communities, and compensating research partners for their labor.

I mentioned before that, in my own research, I sometimes show up at karaoke night at the retirement community and take requests. Certainly, this can be an example of giving back to the community, but I recognize that we're not all singers. But we all do teach, and teaching is one way that we can thank participants for their time and their energy. Offering lessons, leading workshops, or creating video tutorials are all ways to leverage our expertise to help the communities we work with. For me, this often involves providing tech support. During my last trip, I asked elders to complete a series of tasks on the computer: things like searching for directions, changing their desktop background, and creating an account on a social media site. After this process, I'd ask them if there was anything they'd like to learn, or any other questions they had about how to use technology. In this post-mortem period after the research, I did all of the following...

- Set up a new illuminated magnifying glass that a woman bought to use while crafting, but couldn't figure out how to install batteries in
- Taught a man how to use keyboard shortcuts to change the display size on his laptop, and to create email lists to contact participants in the two different support groups he managed
- Sketched out documentation on paper, explaining the steps to send a Facebook message
- Helped walk a woman through using her doctor's new online patient check-in portal
- Taught a woman how to identify sponsored content in search results, so she could differentiate between bullshit advertising and legitimate websites

These might seem simple, but to the research participants, they provide solutions that they had been searching for to persistent problems. As Cindy Selfe (1999) has said, "small, potent gestures" can make a world of difference.

Caring for Your Community and for Yourself (through Reflexivity)

Feminist researchers cite the importance of self-reflection on one's subject position, as well as on one's position within their research, to better understand how knowledge gets made (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Our subject positions both enable and constrain analysis. By understanding how we are situated within our work, we can better care for ourselves and for our communities—especially when our research is linked with marginalization, or trauma.

Three years ago, I started a private Facebook group for grad students starting their PhD programs in rhet/comp. The group is a place where 30+ PhD students share stories about teaching, research, and grad life, often seeking out resources or advice from others who are going through similar experiences. A few weeks ago, a friend posted that she was struggling with a phenomenon that I had been thinking about for a while: the death of research participants. "I'm working with users in an online community for chronic illness," she wrote, "and the people I'm interviewing keep dying. What do I do?"

When you're working with folks who are 70- and 80- and 90-somethings, death is also frequent. Not only have four of my participants died since I began this work in 2016—but death and dying also infuse the conversations that I have with members of the community still. Widows and widowers think back to the time when their spouses helped them to use computers, and how they had to learn to find answers to their questions once their partner passed and they were alone. They wonder what will happen to their emails and Facebook accounts when they're gone: who will message their friends to let them know?

There isn't much rhetorical scholarship on age and aging, and there's even less on death. We don't really have models for how to process this type of research quandary. Interpersonal communication research has demonstrated that the most effective strategy for processing and dealing with grief is emotion-sharing with somebody who has had the same experience. Creating networks for teacher/scholars who encounter the same issues—of research participant morbidity and mortality—can help us to emotion-share with each other, as well as to build resources for addressing death in our work.

We might look to journalism for a model for how to do this work of theory- and capacity-building. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma was created in 1991 to advocate for ethical reporting on trauma, specifically giving collaborative resources for journalists to develop strategies for reporting on violence and tragedy, as well as educating on the science and psychology of trauma and its implications for news coverage (Dart Center, 2018). In addition to adapting their resources, we might construct some of our own. Developing a rhetorical thanatology—the study of death—could help aid researchers who work with aging, chronically ill, and other vulnerable populations. Theorizing the “practice of everyday death” could involve considering the different frames by which we consider dying, the genres of do not resuscitate (DNR) orders or other technical medical documents that codify individuals' dying wishes (as well as living wills or testaments, advance directives, etc.)

Death and dying are integral components of the cultural rhetorics of older adults, and need to be considered by researchers conducting work in settings like retirement communities, nursing homes, assisted or supervised living facilities, and advocacy centers that work with populations over the age of 60. If we are keepers or custodians of people's stories, as cultural rhetorics theory suggests, then we need to do some work around theorizing death—and what happens to the story once the storyteller is gone.

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