

Public Diplomacy and the Need for Rigorous Qualitative Research Methods

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine how qualitative approaches to human-centered inquiry benefit the public diplomacy (PD) field. This article argues that rigorous qualitative methods improve the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and theoretical frameworks that guide PD research. Tendencies for miscommunication permeate the encoding and decoding communication processes in international and intercultural contexts, and PD research often transcends cultural boundaries and national borders. Thus, this article cautions against PD research that assumes conceptual and measurement equivalence of constructs and variables. This article illustrates the value of qualitative methods in discussion with the influence of culture and language on communication. Furthermore, the article explicates how data generated through rigorous qualitative methods contextualize the statistics of quantitative methods and lead to more comprehensive understandings of PD concepts and practices. Using rigorous qualitative methods to improve knowledge about message encoding and decoding, for example, strengthens the validity and reliability of both qualitative and quantitative PD approaches that rely on this communication process.

Keywords: public diplomacy, qualitative methods, intercultural communication

Introduction

This article examines how qualitative research that employs rigorous approaches to human-centered inquiry benefits the public diplomacy (PD) field. Specifically, qualitative research methods such as long interviews, focus groups, and participant observations allow in-depth insight into the encoding and decoding communication process in international and intercultural contexts (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011; Lindlof and Taylor, 2019; McCracken, 1988). First, this article builds upon previous scholarship documenting the benefits qualitative research and reflects on how to conduct such approaches methodically. Second, this article discusses the influence of culture on communication and the implications for PD research, which often assumes conceptual and measurement equivalence of constructs and variables. Third, this article shows how PD scholars can use qualitative methods to uncover a common codex in intercultural and international contexts. Finally, this article illustrates how data generated through well-documented, rigorous qualitative methods contextualize the insights from quantitative methods and lead toward a more comprehensive understanding of PD concepts and practice.

Qualitative Methods in Public Diplomacy Research

Scholars from various disciplines and fields across the social sciences and humanities, such as public relations, international affairs, and international studies, among others, utilize an array of methods to conduct PD research. Many PD scholars situate their research in political science or communication (Sevin, Metzgar, and Hayden, 2019). Political scientists tend to publish research based on quantitative analyses and hypothesis testing more than qualitative data analysis (Oren, 2016). The international relations field, particularly in the United States, has undergone an increase in quantitative training in graduate programs and in quantitative-based publications; moreover, studies using quantitative methods are more likely to be cited than those

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using qualitative methods (Saideman, 2018). The communication field has historically shown similar partiality to quantitative work (Hansen and Machin, 2018).

Although the broader communication and political science fields favor quantitative results, the PD field is more methodologically diverse. Vanc and Fitzpatrick (2016) show that public relations scholars most often publish PD studies that employ conceptual essay, content analysis, case study, survey, interview, and secondary data analysis. Wei (2020) contends that PD practitioners primarily use survey and interview to measure the effects of PD initiatives. While qualitative methods have played a prominent role in PD research, Sommerfeldt and Buhmann (2019) express that PD is increasingly shaped by demands for quantified performance management.

Political scientists and communication scholars often bifurcate qualitative and quantitative methods into distinct philosophical positions and discussions. Qualitative research is often associated with interpretivism and the closely related constructivism, which posit that knowledge is constructed and interpreted with participants rather than researchers solely guiding content during data collection and analysis. This article focuses less on this paradigmatic debate than on practical insights into the usefulness of qualitative work in the PD field. This endeavor is necessary since many PD scholars operate in fields that view qualitative data as less robust and beneficial than quantitative data. Björkman, Weeden, Williams, and Hawkesworth (2019) call for efforts to make qualitative data more legible to scholars who typically work with quantitative data.

The hallmark of qualitative research is the examination of complex social situations in which the researcher is centered in the social world. Denizen and Lincoln (2013) describe the researcher using qualitative methods as a type of *bicoleur*, or one who observes and fits together

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a representation of a complex social world. Qualitative research often asks *how* and *why* questions, including understanding culture and the exchange of cultural symbols (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019). Research utilizing qualitative methods allows for the study of complex social phenomena at a level of latent depth that cannot be accessed as readily by quantitative methods (Liu, 2013).

Qualitative approaches offer particular value to the PD field, since PD scholarship “offers an international and often cross-cultural vantage point” (Sevin et al., 2019, p. 2819). Some scholars have focused recently on the domestic dimension of PD (Che-Ha, Nguyen, Yahya, Melewar, and Chen, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2010, 2011; Pisarska, 2016). PD, however, traditionally emphasizes policies and strategies to inform and influence *foreign* publics. Thus, empirical PD research tends to investigate phenomena in which researchers and research participants have disparate backgrounds in nationality, culture, and/or language. Data subjects are not only in foreign countries but also often span multiple countries or continents. Such features present challenges to study design and data collection and analysis.

Culture is fundamental to PD research and practice (Kim, 2017), but PD scholars often take cultural elements for granted as assumptions rather than as variables for careful inquiry (Zaharna, 2012). Pogosyan (2017) affirms that “as a system of meaning and shared beliefs, culture provides a framework for our behavioral and affective norms” (para 1). Culture teaches social actors what is familiar and acceptable, and researchers are not immune to the influence of their own cultural perceptions on their research choices.

Qualitative work assists the PD field in both research processes and outcomes. Regarding study design and the iterative process of qualitative data collection and data analysis, qualitative methods allow the researcher to establish trust and to build relationships with populations and

cultural groups that may be hesitant to welcome outsiders and/or to participate in quantitative research (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). Another main benefit of qualitative methods in PD research is intersubjectivity: the meanings of phenomena are initially generated from the position of the researcher, but such findings are then mediated by interactions with other researchers and with informants and participants (Denizen and Lincoln, 2013). Finally, qualitative research methods create an opportunity for more in-depth insight into how culture and language influence perceptions of messages about foreign policy and other PD initiatives, since qualitative methods uncover the multifaceted elements in the relationship between a social actor and a cultural context (Ho, Ho, and Ng, 2006). Qualitative data collection and analysis further explicate how culture and language affect the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral factors that influence message encoding and decoding within PD activities.

Limitations of quantitative approaches

While various methods offer advantages and disadvantages, the diversity in international communication and PD research increases opportunities to confound quantitative approaches. PD research relying primarily on quantitative methods has inherent challenges, since controlling for the wide range of variables affected by cultural and linguistic differences proves difficult.

Statistical equations acknowledge inability to account for such variation. A simple linear regression equation offers food for epistemological thought.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where dependent (Y) and independent (X₁) variables, as well as constants (β₀) and coefficients (β₁) are measurable, the formula acknowledges the ontologically unknowable and/or epistemologically unmeasurable factors impacting the nature of the model, represented simply as error (ε). In such fields as PD and international communication, both manifest and latent

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elements of culture, such as language and identity, go largely unmeasurable by quantitative means alone. While statistical approaches can offer insights, the utility of such knowledge is directly dependent on the size of error (ϵ) explained.

Furthermore, quantitative approaches train researchers to test or refine existing ideas. While such methodology is appropriate in certain cases, Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) argue that “advances in knowledge that are too strongly rooted in what we already know delimit what we can know” (p. 15). PD research that employs quantitative methods and is guided by preexisting theory and deductive reasoning can be useful, but can also be constraining (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Qualitative research in PD allows for inductive reasoning by which data are collected, codes are identified in the data, codes are grouped into concepts, and concepts become categories that allow for theory development (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019).

Additionally, the streetlight effect, or the phenomenon in which researchers look for evidence where it is easiest to look, hampers quantitative approaches (Freedman, 2010). The streetlight effect and the tendency toward progressing the known rather than innovating the unknown are particularly problematic in international and intercultural PD research since cultural phenomena are often implicit rather than explicit and are not always easy to realize or understand. That is, PD researchers do not know what they do not know when it comes to deeply rooted cultural norms, values, and perceptions.

One intercultural communication theory often applied in PD research is Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, e.g., power distance, collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, and indulgence/restraint (Hofstede, 2001). These cultural dimensions were developed based on quantitative scales. Even Hofstede (2001)

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acknowledged the limits of quantitative research in cross-cultural and intercultural contexts, for cultures fluctuate and transcend political boundaries.

Moreover, PD research using quantitative methods is limited by its focus on generalizability. Mook (1983) claims that too much quality research is ignored because it fails the external validity test. PD researchers who use quantitative methods often try to isolate a variable and seek predictive control and generalizability. PD research, however, does not always require generalizability; sometimes the objective is to understand the meaning of a message or symbol that has significance to one target audience, or within a particular bilateral agreement, and such understandings cannot, nor should not, be applied to other contexts.

Social science is not the same as natural science, and thus, quantitative methods are not always suitable for human-centered PD research. Social actors are not always rational, but rather act in creative and unpredictable ways. Cultures and linguistic relativity are even further complex, and variables cannot always be easily isolated. Moreover, a variable that is present and impactful in one culture may not be present and impactful in another culture. PD involves the exchange of messages and symbols between individuals or groups of divergent cultures, and qualitative research is concerned with meaning embedded in symbols.

Barnett and Lee (2002) suggest that researchers begin with qualitative methods before turning to quantitative approaches for theoretical confirmation. This may be appropriate for some research questions, but Hall (2014) avows qualitative research can be research in and of itself. It is not always exploratory; it is not always merely descriptive; it can provide explanations of complex cultural phenomena. Fundamentally, quantifying human communication is a close-ended process: Quantitative measures do not explore beyond the scope of inquiry, or that which what they intend to quantify. Qualitative methods, rather, facilitate an open-ended process that

allows data to lead the discovery process or to guide the researcher in the discovery of new knowledge.

Qualitative research methods

The goal of qualitative research is “thick description” by procuring “the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers” (Geertz, 1973, p. 16).

While quantitative research methods allow scholars to assess PD more broadly and to test the salience of new variables and theories, qualitative approaches provide an in-depth understanding of stakeholder perceptions and feelings and procure unobservable details about PD initiatives. Furthermore, by identifying points of divergence in conceptualizing and measuring constructs and variables within international and intercultural research, qualitative approaches are a means toward reducing unexplained variation (or error) within statistics-based research and increasing the utility of quantitative studies.

Qualitative research methods include interview, participant observation, case study, focus group, content analysis, textual analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and conversation analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019). Two primary methods for collecting qualitative data are interviews and participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011; McCracken, 1988).

Interviews are particularly useful in PD research because they unearth cultural phenomena, allow for phenomena to be explored in depth, and build intimacy and trust between the researcher and participant (McCracken, 1988). For example, Sommerfeldt and Buhmann (2019) conducted in-depth expert interviews with a saturated sample of U.S. Department of State PD practitioners. Their qualitative approach provides rigorous investigation and data analysis, and their insights and conclusions are highly prone to be accurate (validity) and consistent (reliability). Participant-directed interviews in international and intercultural contexts are important so that participants

can describe their experiences, perspectives, values, and emotions without prior categories and without constraint (Holliday, 2011).

Furthermore, ethnography based on participant observations reveals a deeper understanding of culture in a naturalistic setting and allows the PD researcher to witness everyday occurrences and cultural rituals and practices (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). Interviews and participant observations combined into one study allow the PD researcher to walk in the shoes of the participants and to probe with questions for better understanding (Patton, 2002). For example, Bier (2017) triangulated participant observations and in-depth interviews; the former allowed direct observation of how citizen diplomats communicate with foreigners about the constructs associated with country identity, while the latter procured unobservable details about country identity and the experience of being a cultural mediator. PD scholars can use various strategies to demonstrate rigor in this type of qualitative research (e.g., Gioia et al., 2012) such as specifying the research question, employing multiple data sources, and engaging key informants.

Principally, qualitative research centers on the encoding and decoding path i.e., the functional connection between message senders and message receivers. Research findings generated from qualitative data offer interpretive and inferential insights into the encoding and decoding processes that facilitate intercultural and international communication during PD practice.

Roles of Culture and Language in Public Diplomacy Research

PD research involves not only international communication but also *intercultural* communication since PD practice crosses not only national borders but also cultural boundaries. PD scholars often fail to account sufficiently for the nuanced, yet fundamental, impacts of

culture when studying PD-based communication. One cultural factor substantively affecting such scholarship is language.

Language drives both culture and cultural identity (Noels, Yashima, and Zhang, 2012; Zaharna, 2010). Situated at the nexus of interpersonal and mass communication, language influences the study of international communication as much as the practice of it. While language is the lens through which humans interpret the world (Refier and Xu, 2017), it is not universal. Language is an association of symbols formed as the byproduct of communal human engagement; different communities, therefore, develop different languages (Jandt, 2017).

Ethnic and regional variations permeate even the same language. For example, the Hispanophone world originates from Spain, but modern linguistic variations characterize numerous Spanish dialects spanning Europe, the Atlantic, Central and South America, and parts of Africa (Gallego, 2019). As another example, the German language is densely situated in ethnic German communities in central Europe, but the dialectic distinction of German varies widely across Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Liechtenstein (Kehrein, 2020).

While ministries of foreign affairs train hundreds and thousands of diplomats in a range of dialectical languages, the significantly fewer resources available to PD scholars tend to limit the scope of language fluency and familiarity. Thus, linguistic relativity poses potential methodological limitations in PD research.

Linguistic relativity posits that an individual's perception of the world is a product of the language that person uses to interpret and communicate their experiences (Sharifian, 2017). For example, the English language delineates seasons with four categories (autumn, winter, spring, summer), while standard Japanese identifies 24 unique seasons, a respective six sub-seasons per

each primary season identified in English. The Anglophone world identifies winter as spanning “cold months,” while Japanese identifies six respective types of cold: *Rittō* (立冬) as “beginning of winter,” *Shōsetsu* (小雪) as “small snow,” *Taisetsu* (大雪) as “large snow,” *Tōji* (冬至) as “winter solstice,” *Shōkan* (小寒) as “small cold,” and *Daikan* (大寒) as “major cold” (Jandt, 2017).

What implications might such linguistic relativity hold for a Japanese scholar utilizing quantitative methods to assess the nation branding impact of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics on South Korea’s national brand? Furthermore, how might such linguistic relativity impact the translation of a survey, for example, provided to respondents in parts of the world unfamiliar with extensive winters? How might a scholar convey seasonal meaning to survey respondents or experimental participants in such countries as East Timor or Venezuela?

One of the authors herein offers a personal experience to exemplify potential limitations of culture-based linguistic relativity on international communication scholarship. The author, an American, worked with a Chinese colleague to conduct a content analysis of visual international news coverage. One variable was the presence or absence of smiles within the pictures. Despite a robust codebook and extensive coder training, they were unable to reach inter-coder reliability on the smiling variable.

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Upon investigation, both authors knew the meaning of the term “smile,” yet the relative understanding of the concept was disconnected based on Asian-centric vs. Euro-centric cultural values and worldviews. The American coded smiles that showed substantial muscle pull in the corners of the mouth, often with the subject showing some extent of teeth. To the contrary, the Chinese coder flagged a much broader range of smiles, spanning very moderate smiles to the more overt characteristics flagged by the American. Although both held doctoral degrees in communication and had advanced knowledge in PD and international communication, the coders required months of intense discussion and debate to reach a conceptual compromise on how to code reliably something as simple as a smile.

Tsai et al. (2016) suggests *ideal affect* dictates how smiles are interpreted per relative cultural values. Variations in facial expressions between former U.S. President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe exemplify this concept. While such smiles are relative equals across the United States and Japan, an American person would likely find Abe to be passive and even possibly lackluster while a Japanese person may find Obama to be overzealous.



In reality, these differences stem from cultural expectations of calm versus excitement (Parker, 2016).

Culture and language and their inevitable limiting effects in international communication and intercultural communication have implications for quantitative methods in PD research. When conducting surveys, content analyses, experimental designs, and network analyses, the researcher has little to no interaction with the human subjects or institutions of study. This limits or even eliminates opportunities to contextualize the language relativity and cultural worldviews that comprise scholarly tools for measurement.

For example, surveys contain inherent biases (Zaharna, 2012). If a Brazilian scholar develops a quantitative survey to assess public opinion of Brazil's PD efforts in France, Russia, India, China, and Saudi Arabia, how might the scholar ensure conceptual equivalence when surveying respondents in said countries? While a researcher can assess scale reliability of the independent measures via statistical testing such as Cronbach's α , evaluating the accuracy of translations into the various languages and whether respondents understand the survey as intended by the researcher proves more challenging (and the cost of hiring professional research firms versed in overcoming such barriers may be cost prohibitive, especially for underfunded academic scholars). Even when establishing conceptual equivalency through the back-translation process that acknowledges the intrinsic cultural distinctions embedded in language (Harzing, Reiche, and Pudelko, 2013), a quantitative survey measures constructs according to the operational definitions of the researcher, not the research participants.

One of the authors herein, for example, employed the Country Reputation Index (CRI) by Passow, Fehlmann, and Grahlow (2005) to measure Vietnam's country identity. The CRI scales had been used in numerous PD and place branding studies in North American, European, and

Asian countries (e.g., Che-Ha et al., 2016; Kemp, Williams, and Bordelon, 2012; Yousaf and Li, 2015), but the author herein conducted in-depth interviews in addition to the quantitative survey component. The qualitative data revealed that Vietnamese citizens think differently about certain country reputation constructs. During interviews with the author, who is an American citizen, Vietnamese citizens emphasized the importance of family in Vietnam's heritage and culture, yet the CRI did not include a family variable in the scale to measure the heritage and culture construct. Similarly, interview participants emphasized work ethic as the core unique ability of Vietnamese people, but work ethic was not a variable in the human capital construct.

When investigating other cultures, researchers sometimes erroneously assume that constructs from one cultural perspective will transfer seamlessly to another or that individuals across cultures will share similar perspectives and feelings toward research participation (Holliday, 2011). For example, a British scholar examining the effects of the 2018 Jamal Khashoggi killing on Saudi Arabia's national brand among Middle Eastern countries may make study design decisions rooted in British cultural norms. Middle Eastern countries, however, tend to be more collectivist than Great Britain and with societies higher on the Power Distance Index (Hofstede, 2001). Middle Eastern survey respondents may be less likely to express concerns or criticisms outside of personal networks. Such self-censorship can arise from fear of retaliation and/or dedication to a cultural upbringing. A survey instrument presents limited mechanisms to assess these manifest, or otherwise latent, tendencies, but qualitative methods such as focus groups provide opportunities for hesitant individuals to build trust and express their ideas in a more comfortable environment.

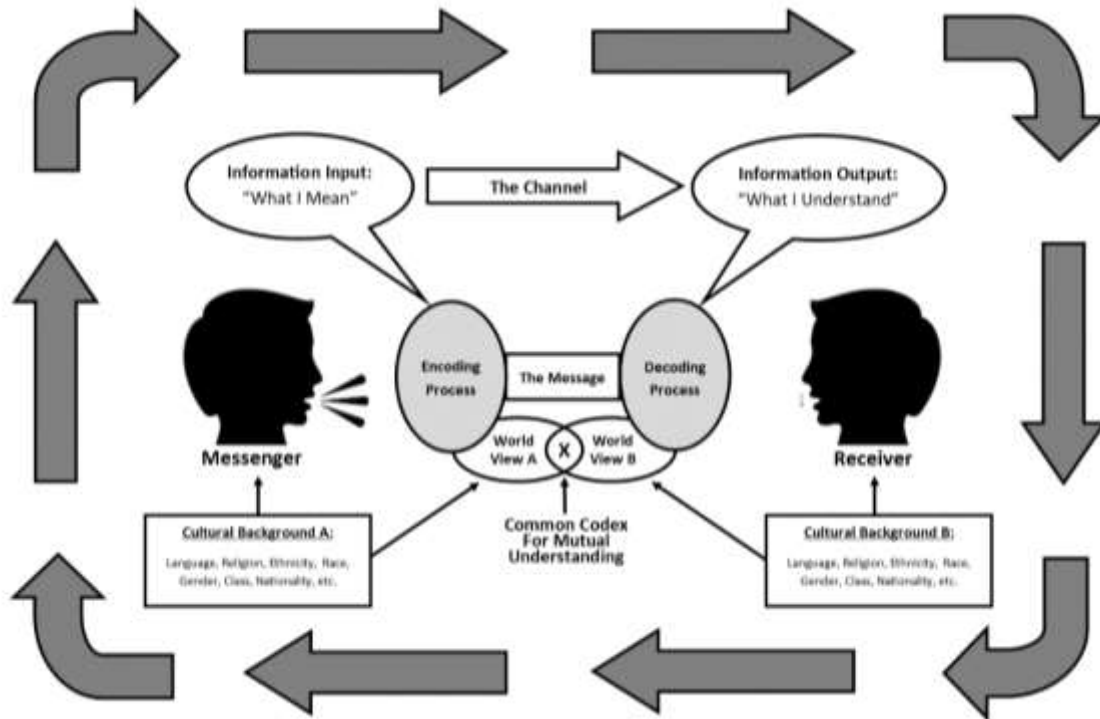
Beyond such cultural values, linguistic differences and conceptual equivalence between English and Arabic challenge standard, close-ended quantitative survey responses:

When an Arab says yes, it means maybe. When an Arab says maybe, it means no. An Arab seldom says no because it may be considered impolite and close off options. Instead of no, an Arab may say *inshallah*, or “if God is willing” ... To mean yes, one must be both repetitive and emphatic. (Jandt, 2017, p. 137)

The lack of shared meaning across translations, even for simple responses to closed questions, has implications for PD inquiry e.g., how to conduct a content analysis of PD texts, a network analysis of public discourse, or a survey or experiment with cross-cultural participants. Researchers need to consider and account for conceptual variances systematically and epistemologically in *yes*, *no*, and *undecided* responses and in Likert scale phrasing with careful attention to semantic differential. For example, previous research indicates East Asian samples avoid selecting “always” and “never” options; thus, “usually” and “rarely” are preferable Likert scale anchors to elicit responses about how frequently a behavior occurs (Lee, Jones, Mineyama, and Zhang, 2002). Other studies confirm that cultural dimensions influence how cross-cultural samples respond to the same quantitative measures (e.g., Choi and Choi, 2002; Hamamura, Heine, and Paulhus, 2008; Harzing, 2006; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, and Hou, 2004).

Using Qualitative Methods To Uncover a Common Codex in Intercultural Contexts

Understanding the link between rigorous qualitative approaches and PD research requires understanding the nature of human communication. Lasswell (1948) asserts communication as a function of *who* says *what*, through which *channel*, to *whom*, and with what *effect*. Subsequent thinking has produced models for linear communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949), interactive or bi-directional communication (Schramm, 1997), and transactional communication (Barlund, 1970). Such models represent conceptual birds-eye thinking on how humans communicate to and with each other but lack the nuance in human interaction in the cases of intercultural communication that result in PD research and practice. The authors herein offer the following as a model for communication specific to intercultural contexts.



While standard models of communication accept the premise that a person encodes a message and sends it via a medium to be received and decoded by another person, this offers no context for how miscommunication (i.e., a highly common mediating phenomenon) affects the process. Humans are products of their cultural upbringing and deeply latent variables shape an individual’s worldview and, ultimately, the way they communicate with others. The process of message encoding is saturated with linguistic cues and heuristics that are unique cultural byproducts. Likewise, the process of message decoding is equally manifest with linguistic cues and heuristics that are cultural byproducts.

For meaning to transverse this encoding and decoding bridge, a mutual cognitive framework must exist i.e., related vantage points that orient the messenger and receiver to a common schema for creating (encoding) and processing (decoding) meaning. This commonality is the extent to which the cultural backgrounds or worldviews of the participants overlap. This

overlap is a *common codex*, which is produced by the unique relationship between each member of the communication process. Humans require some kind of cognitive instruction manual on how to both mechanically and socially communicate. The extent to which two people share these instructions allows for meaning to be more symmetrically or accurately encoded and then decoded. Thus, the greater the overlap in worldview (common codex), the more the information output (what the receiver understands) corresponds to the information input (what the messenger means).

The science fiction series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* illustrates the common codex concept and offers an unexpected but relevant context for PD analysis that is rife with intercultural communication. In “Darmok” (Season 5, Episode 2), the Enterprise crew fails to make meaningful contact with the Tamarians. Each side understands the words each is using. However, they lack of common framework for meaning, which prevents any semblance of meaning from transmitting across the encoding-decoding bridge. While the Enterprise crew communicate in descriptive prose, a function of their cultural background, the Tamarians communicate in literary poetry with relativistic metaphor to convey meaning, as per their own cultural background. The inability of the two to communicate meaningfully was the byproduct of a small common codex, i.e., such little overlap in cultural background that information inputs were substantially unrelated to information outputs.

Not only does this example showcase an inability to communicate effectively based on minimal overlap in cultural background and worldview, but the episode’s solution to the problem also models application of the qualitative research process. Incapable of communicating with each other, the captains of the two ships set out on an epic poetry-type quest to slay a beast. The Tamarians refer to the journey as “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra,” a reference to a historical

event in the Star Trek universe where two men develop a bond of friendship and mutual understanding through a shared challenge.

Through intense, constant interaction spanning multiple days (e.g., a shared experience) the two captains develop a mutual framework in which they grasp the basic concepts of each other's speech, simplistically albeit. This embodies what rigorous qualitative methods offer PD scholarship: extensive, direct, open-ended human interaction through shared experiences (interviews, focus groups, ethnography, etc.) that provide mutually constructed context that allows for the formation of a common codex from which effective communication is possible. This intimate link between the researcher and the data field or subject situates an encoding-decoding bridge on a more solid and nuanced foundation than existed before. This makes the encoding and decoding of person-to-person communication across the bridge more accurate (validity) and consistent (reliability).

This common codex is latent, a theoretically articulated concept that reflects the extent of overlap between the cultural backgrounds and worldviews of the messenger and receiver. While such an overlap can be discovered and understood ontologically from the perspective of a researcher, close-ended quantitative methodologies (content analysis, network analysis, close-ended survey, experiment, etc.) that offer minimal or no human-to-human interaction lack the epistemological framework for the construction of the shared context necessary to explore and map the boundaries of this overlap. Similarly, qualitative approaches that lack extensive or substantive personal human interaction (case study, open-ended survey, thematic discourse, narrative analysis, etc.) fail to offer the opportunity for a researcher and participants to forge a common contextual foundation. While such methods can map some essence of the boundaries of

overlap, these epistemological tools are not as fine-tuned toward nurturing the shared experience and common contextual framework.

PD scholarship is a complex arena inclusive of intercultural, human-to-human communication that requires numerous angles of analysis to understand and comprehend perceptions and behaviors within PD activities. Quantitative methods and less personal qualitative approaches no doubt add value to the PD field with particular emphasis on case studies (Snow, 2016), comparative analysis (Pamment, 2012), discourse analysis (Golan, Arceneaux, and Soule, 2018), narrative analysis (Golan, Manor, and Arceneaux, 2019), and historiography (Cull, 2008). These methods, however, sometimes result in findings that are highly situational i.e., descriptive rather than inferential and generalizable as well as normative rather than realist and grounded (Kim, 2017).

Methods such as interviews and focus groups have the unique opportunity to foster the transmission of information through the encoding-decoding bridge while considering culture as a mediating or moderating variable. This reduces the capacity for unexplained error (ϵ), increases accuracy and consistency in the insights and contributions made by PD research, and increases generalizability through a lineage of theoretical and conceptual consistency.

Applying qualitative methods in PD research does not necessitate shifting paradigms or replacing existing preferred methods. Rather, this article proposes returning the PD field to the philosophical basics to (re)consider the role of qualitative methods in social science. Such consideration requires robust discussion about the merits of employing diverse research methods from ontological, epistemological, and axiological viewpoints – alongside thinkers such as Popper (1935), Kuhn (2012), McLuhan (1964), Chaffee and Berger (1987) among others. Collaboration among PD practitioners and scholars from diverse fields could make PD

scholarship incorporating qualitative methods more holistically scientific i.e., empirical, systematic, cumulative, and self-correcting (Wimmer and Dominick, 2014).

Discussion and Recommendations for Moving Forward in Public Diplomacy Research

Since its inception, the PD field has vied for credibility from and acceptance among mainstream political science, communication, and legal scholars (Snow, 2020). Some critique the PD field as theoretically deficient by borrowing theories from other fields when not operating solely on the conceptual basis of soft power (Cowan and Arsenault, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Gilboa, 2008). With scholars spanning across several continents, institutions, and topics of interest, PD research lacks a unifying lens through which to pursue a crystalized field of inquiry. Methodology offers an avenue for PD scholarship to promote its status. PD scholars are advancing the field with quantitative meta-research and cutting-edge approaches such as computational methods (Albishri et al., 2019; Buhmann, 2016; Sevin et al., 2019; Sevin and Manor, 2019; Vanc and Fitzpatrick, 2016). Qualitative methods now need methodological revitalization based on social scientific rigor, and the PD field has the opportunity to lead this endeavor – and to heighten simultaneously the positions of PD scholarship and qualitative methods in communication and political science, fields that historically favor quantitative methods.

Employing rigor in qualitative methods in public diplomacy research

PD researchers who utilize qualitative methods are not monolithic. Some, operating from an interpretive paradigm, rely on meaning rather than measurement to investigate phenomena in a naturalistic setting. Others pursue a constructivism paradigm and allow research participants to actively construct knowledge, including direct involvement in data collection and analysis. Still

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others integrate empirical qualitative data into a study design to contextualize statistical analyses and to provide greater depth to numerical representation.

No matter the paradigmatic approach, the PD field benefits from qualitative methods that are executed in a rigorous, systematic manner. Qualitative rigor will make PD research more efficient and impactful across the diverse fields in which PD scholars situate their studies. Transparency has become central to the open science movement and applies to ensuring rigor in the qualitative research process (Dienlin et al., 2020). Transparency involves providing clear and explicit information about the researcher(s), the application of theory (*a priori* or *posteriori*), the strategies employed for data collection, and the interpretation and evaluation of evidence.

While credibility is a marker of quality within both quantitative and qualitative methods, scholars consider data collection via qualitative methods more personal, which warrants engaging in reflexivity, or transparency about the relationship between a researcher's identity and how they conduct research. For example, PD researchers could write reflexivity statements that incorporate bracketing and bridling. Bracketing involves a commitment to suspend any pre-understanding or assumptions about the phenomenon so as not to limit researching openness (Jackson, Drummond, and Camara, 2007; Vagle, 2009). While bracketing is backward-looking, bridling is forward-looking: Through bridling the researcher curbs their own agency, scrutinizes their involvement with the phenomenon, and continually reflects upon how findings come to be (Vagle, 2009).

One of the hallmark characteristics of quality science is reproducibility, and opportunities for reproducibility exist for PD researchers employing qualitative methods. The importance of reproducibility remains the same for qualitative research as for quantitative research – PD scholars working collaboratively to promote intellectually-robust research findings and to offer

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PD insights and quality solutions based on evidence. Yin (2018) posits that scholars can decrease error and increase consistency and reproducibility in qualitative research by publishing documentation of protocols and by conducting research as though someone were looking over your shoulder. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) similarly call for audit trails with researchers publishing detailed descriptions of the research design, data, codes, coding strategies, changes in codes, and application of codes to data.

Collaboration among PD scholars when collecting and analyzing qualitative data would further increase quality (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Ruggiano and Perry, 2019). For example, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) contend that including several observers increases the reliability of findings based on qualitative data. Making qualitative research protocols and analytical schemes (e.g., the codes resulting in patterns used as evidence) available would allow other scholars to assess the quality of the findings and insights. Moreover, Harpaz (2003) stresses the importance of multinational research teams when researching international or intercultural phenomena.

For PD research involving qualitative methods, using theory in study design increases the reliability of findings (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011) and seeking falsification, not verification, increases the scientific value of the resulting qualitative evidence (Flyvberg, 2013). PD researchers should continually reexamine qualitative data to look for cases that challenge conclusions (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). Bernard (2017) calls for validity checks within qualitative research by utilizing multiple data sources, welcoming evidence that does not fit the pattern, and reexamining data for alternate explanations. Corbin and Strauss (2014) avow that finding a negative case does not necessarily negate the qualitative findings but rather often represents a dimensional extreme or variation on the conceptualization of data.

Finally, as both society and research further digitizes, PD scholarship will adopt increasingly more sophisticated quantitative approaches using innovative technology. Qualitative research can also move toward using more technology for data collection and analysis and for transparency. For example, platforms like Zoom and Skype can facilitate interpersonal and cross-national interviews and focus groups. Software programs such as NVivo, ATLAS.ti, Dedoose, and Provalis offer transcription and data analysis and data visualization for qualitative research. PD scholars can also harness technology to foster collaboration and increase transparency through a preregistration process (Hartman, Kern, and Mellor, 2018) by “putting the study design and plan on an open platform for the (scientific) community to scrutinize” (Haven and Van Grootel, 2019, p. 236).

Using mixed methods approaches in public diplomacy research

Scholars have long debated the paradigmatic compatibility of quantitative and qualitative methods and the viability of mixed methods research. Morgan (2018) calls for social scientists to recognize the two methods’ respective data types, purposes, and strengths and to engage in mixed methods research. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) assert that “the most effective research includes a number of methods that can be used to investigate different aspects of the phenomenon and to improve the likelihood of accuracy” (p. 110). Yin (2018) avows that mixed methods allow for a “richer and stronger array of evidence” (p. 66).

Mixed methods are multidimensional and useful for situating statistical analyses in the appropriate intercultural and/or international context (Banks, 2011; Creswell and Clark, 2011; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014). For example, Bier (2017) applied a qualitative approach to establish pragmatic implications about the value of citizen diplomacy and promoting the nation brand to domestic publics. The same study utilized a quantitative survey to assess country

identity more broadly from the perspective of cultural mediators engaged in citizen diplomacy, to test the salience of new variables related to country identity, and to expand the country identity theoretical framework to investigate predictors of communication about country identity during citizen diplomacy. The study results contextualized the quantitative data in the qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of country identity and the relational approach to public diplomacy.

A mixed methods research design is suitable for investigating many PD phenomena and for maximizing findings about the relations aspects of PD (Wei, 2020), including crossing the encoding-decoding bridge. Harzing et al. (2013) contend the complexity of researching in an international context benefits from combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Banks (2011) avows that in PD research, “a mixed methods approach, incorporating the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, produces the truest and best evaluations” (p. 30).

Conclusion

There is no single best method for PD research: The research question(s) should always determine the research method(s). Culture and language, however, are core to PD research and practice. Thus, this article summons PD scholars to consider rigorous qualitative research to address the encoding and decoding bridge inherent to intercultural contexts. Such application will improve the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and theoretical frameworks that guide PD research. Further, improving knowledge about encoding and decoding will strengthen the validity and reliability of quantitative approaches that rely on the communication process as a base assumption. Studies incorporating rigorous qualitative methods will elevate both quantitative and qualitative PD scholarship.

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