Welcome, JIRCD!

Your emergence is a significant and exciting accomplishment. It is also an indicator of healthy growth in the area of qualitative research in communication disorders. Your presence shows that qualitative research in speech-language pathology now has sufficient prestige and viability to have its own journal, its own voice.

But that’s not all. Your dedication to interaction research is also significant. By focusing on interaction, you are challenging our field’s long and constrained tradition of subscribing to the medical model – a tradition that harks back to our very beginnings as a profession. Your emphasis on interaction invites contributors to portray and treat communication disorders in their social/cultural milieu rather than as if they were diseases that are biologically defined and impairment-based. Good for you!

Your gestation period was too long, or so it seems to those of us celebrating your birth. Despite pressures against it, there has been considerable qualitative research over the last 30 years. During this period a number of ethnographic studies have been published in different areas of our field, including aphasia (Le Dorze and Brassard 1995; Parr 1994, 1997), childhood language disorders (Crago and Cole 1991), stuttering (Corcoran and Stewart 1998; St Louis 2001), autism (Ochs and Solomon 2004; Ochs et al. 2004) and hearing impairment...
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One also finds in the last 30 years of our field’s history many qualitative and interactional studies that involve discourse and conversation analysis both in adult (Goodwin 1995; Ferguson 1996; Klippi 1991; Oelschlaeger and Damico 1998; Simmons-Mackie and Damico 1997; Wilkinson 1995, 2007) and childhood language disorders (Conti-Ramsden and Friel Patti 1983). Qualitative studies have also been done to examine the discourse and interactions that take place in particular cultural settings such as school classrooms (Ericks-Brophy and Crago 1994; Mehan 1979; Silliman and Wilkinson 1994; Weiss 1986) and speech clinics (Hengst et al. 2008; Simmons-Mackie et al. 1999).

A third kind of study that gave impetus to your birth were investigations of the life stories of people with communication disabilities. These include stories told by people with disabilities (Hussey 2010; Pound 2004; Robillard 1999) and by professionals who have done case studies and biographies describing the life experiences of their clients (Barrow 2008; Parr 1994, 1997).

Finally, one can find a number of important review articles in the various areas of communication disabilities that have argued the merits of qualitative approaches (Damico and Damico 1997; Damico et al. 1995, 1999a, 1999b; Damico and Simmons-Mackie 2003; Simmons-Mackie and Damico 2003). Omitted, or located in the periphery these reviews, like black sheep relatives, are the slightly older, yet classic language studies that used qualitative (linguistic) analyses to discover the language patterns in the syntax, morphology and phonology of children in the early stages of language development (Berko 1958; Bloom 1971; Ingram 1974).

Knowing about important studies of the past can only give you a sense of your fairly recent history. But you shouldn’t be left with the impression that qualitative research methods emerged, out of the blue, 30 years ago. Rather, these methods were borrowed and adapted from work in the more distant past from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and even history.

Some researchers, especially those who trace the origins of ethnographic methods, look to nineteenth-century scholars, such as Franz Boas. In 1886 Boas began his 50-year study of the Kwakiutl Indians from Northern Vancouver and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia, Canada (Boas 1966). His aim was to discover and represent their culture, from their point of view. His methods involved participant observation, linguistic analyses, and detailed examination of the cultural practices and artifacts.

You also have nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ancestors who used discourse and linguistic analyses in their research. There was, for example, a movement in Europe for doing diary studies wherein researchers recorded and analyzed the speech and language development of their own children.
Influential among them were Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893), a French historian and philosopher, who analyzed his diary entries of his daughter’s acquisition of sounds and first words (Taine 1877). Charles Darwin (1809–1882), intrigued by the work of Taine, reported on his own child’s sound and word acquisition through the infant’s first year (Darwin 1877). And one can trace the origins of today’s qualitative research in story grammars to the analyses of Russian folk tales done by Vladimar Propp (1895–1970) in 1928 (Propp 1928).

Finally, there are some important nineteenth-century case studies of children with disabilities that are an important part of your tradition. In 1801, Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard (1775–1838), a French physician, published his influential study of Victor, who has come to be known as The Wild Boy of Aveyron (Itard 1801/1962) and in 1810, John Thelwall presented several case studies, among which was that of a child, Augusta, who, judging from the description, would be labeled autistic today (Bottomley 2009).

So, we have a number of DNA traces of your origins into the nineteenth century. But we shouldn’t stop there. You can learn, for example, from a much-cited history of ethnographic methods by Vidich and Lyman (2000) about the oppressive use of ethnographic methods by the British in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to justify their colonial hold over other peoples whom they considered to be ‘less civilized’ than themselves (Vidich and Lyman 2000: 40–42). These uses of qualitative research to justify ethnic superiority were exported to America during in the post-Darwinian period. Eugenicists of nineteenth-century America used qualitative (and quantitative) studies to argue for the inferiority of non-whites, women, criminals, and people with disabilities. For example, Henry H. Goddard (1912) used (doctored) photographic artifacts as evidence for the mental inferiority of one branch of a family in order to make a case for the heritability of inferiority (Elks 2005).

Returning to the middle ages, you may be surprised to known that ethnographic methods were used even then. For example, Abu Rayhan Biruni (973–1048), a Persian scientist, carried out extensive investigations of the peoples, customs and religions of those living in India, the Middle East, and South Asia. Biruni’s methods included participant observation, qualitative language studies, and detailed textual analyses of the religious writings of the people from the different cultures (Biruni 2006).

Not surprisingly, biographies have been an integral part of the research enterprise, beginning with the very first historians who left written records of the accomplishments of their leaders for posterity. More formal histories, such as that of Herodotus (484–424 bc), the first Greek historian, included biographic information in their portrayals of historic events. Herodotus tucked his biographies into his history of the wars between Ancient Persia and Greece. One such report was about Battos who had a speech problem. He went
to the priestess Pythia at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece for advice for how to cure his problem. The priestess ignored his request and sent him off to Libya to found a Greek colony there (Herodotus 2007: 345–7). Herodotus provides us with Pythia’s response:

Battos, you have come here for speech,  
And here is the speech of Lord Phoibos Apollo.  
He sends you to Libya, feeder of flocks, to found a colony. (Herodotus 2007: 345)

Well, enough about your past. Obviously there is much more information to be gathered about your roots, but its up to you to provide a place for your future contributors to publish their historic work. Let me turn now to some thoughts I have about your future.

I encourage you to fight against what your Greek ancestors called hubris. What they meant is that mere humans should not overstep their boundaries and think they have power that rightfully belongs to the gods. What I am recommending instead is that you be bold and adventurous but not with the goal of deifying what you take to be established methods. This may seem ironic, since your very existence has involved clashes with an establishment that favors quantitative and highly controlled research methods over those that you represent. But now that you have your own place, I hope you will learn from your experience of being excluded and be open to accept innovation and outsider views. That will mean you should take a critical and reflective stance toward what you consider to be well-established, God-given methods.

In this critical vein, I would invite you to embrace research portraying the subjective as well as the objective sides of the experiences associated with communication disabilities. I recommend, for example, that you be open to publishing first person accounts of clients, family members, service providers, and researchers. And that you welcome studies that venture beyond description into less obvious and more abstract explanatory territory. I would encourage, for instance, that you publish interpretative and reflective studies involving what Clifford Geertz might have called thick description (Geertz 1973: 5–6, 9–10) or what Sigmund Freud did in his interpretations of dreams (Freud 1911), or what Jerome Bruner called ‘going beyond the information given’ (Bruner 1973).

I recommend further that you encourage work that has political ramifications, as do the qualitative and interactional studies using critical theory and critical action research (Weiner 1989; Tripp 1990; Kovarsky 2008). That is, I hope that you will be willing to challenge the status quo and publish work that is designed to effect social change. In this regard, I recommend including
among your advisors, reviewers and contributors those who are part of the disability movement.

So, JIRCD (can I call you JIR for short?) I wish you the very best in your new adventure and look forward to seeing how you grow and develop. Here’s hoping you live to a ripe old age!

About the author

Judith Felson Duchan is Emeritus Professor from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She has published widely in language pathology. Her particular emphases have been on autism, pragmatics, childhood language and aphasia. She has recently been researching the ramifications of the social model of clinical practice as an alternative to traditionally based medical model approaches. She has also been using qualitative approaches to analyze different aspects of the history of speech-language pathology from ancient times to the present. Her vita, outlining her specific publications and activities, can be found on her website at: http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~duchan/

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References


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