

## THE RELATIONAL FOUNDATION OF RESEARCH: AN UNDERAPPRECIATED DIMENSION OF INTERESTING RESEARCH

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Some research projects draw you in. They touch you on multiple levels, expanding, stretching, and teaching you. Our research project on the Port Authority (PA) of New York and New Jersey and its struggle with the homelessness issue did all of that to us as researchers. In the resulting research paper (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), we argued that the PA's identity and image shaped how organizational members interpreted and subsequently responded to this emotionally charged issue. We are delighted the final published product has had sustained interest for others.

Our purpose in this essay is to try to answer the question, How might researchers think more broadly about doing interesting research that expands, stretches, and teaches the researchers and those who are exposed to their output? Our answer, based on our experience with the Port Authority paper, relates to an aspect of research that all researchers know about, but often do not honor in how they construe or design research processes. Our answer looks to the relational foundation of a research project as key to understanding how interesting and significant the project can become.

By *relational foundation*, we mean the set of interaction partners whom one encounters during the course of doing research. Interaction partners can include co-members of a research team, people whom one is studying, and individuals who are neither the researchers nor the participants, but who, through their direct or indirect contributions to the research, affect research quality. Our essay will suggest that the quality of the connections that

researchers form with each other and with others who enable and contribute to the research (research participants, journal reviewers, etc.) is key to developing and sustaining interesting research.<sup>1</sup> We believe that fostering more interesting research means that researchers should pay more attention to, and spend more time learning about, effective relational practice. By *relational practice*, we mean the skilled ways of interrelating that create connections between people. Scholars of relational practice remind us that relational practice is skilled work, yet it is often invisible or devalued in organizational settings (Fletcher, 1999; Fletcher & Jacques, 2000). Similarly, we believe it is essential but often underappreciated work in the domain of research practice.

We unpack and illustrate this claim in four steps. First, we provide three stories from our research project that illustrate different ways that our research was relational. Second, we use the stories to identify particular challenges that mark the relational domains of many research projects. Third, we draw on these relational challenges to unearth a set of relational practices that contribute to building and sustaining the quality of connections underlying interesting research. Fourth, we offer a theoretical perspective on high-quality connections that suggests why these relational practices are so helpful in fueling and sustaining the possibility of interesting research.

### Three Stories about the Relational Foundations of Research

**Story 1: Access.** It was the mid 1980s. Jane rode each morning on the Path Train from Westfield, New Jersey, into Newark, then on into New York

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<sup>1</sup> We focus on just three of the many possible interaction partners who shape research. A more complete analysis would include students, journal editors and reviewers, research audiences, and more.

City, arriving at the World Trade Center, where she exited and walked to her job at New York University. She traveled often with an old college friend, Deb Finn, who also lived in Westfield, and who worked for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> Deb told Jane of her recent offer to head the Task Force for Homelessness and that after a few days of deliberation she had decided to take the job. Jane agonized about whether she should approach Deb to see if she could study the Port Authority's struggle with the homelessness issue as a way to deepen knowledge of how organizations interpret strategic issues. She knew she would be putting her friendship with Deb to a test with this request. However, she also knew that if she was granted access, she would have a trustworthy and influential contact who could facilitate the research. At the same time she would have to live up to the high expectations that her friend would have for a quality research project.

**Story 2: Research participants.** Janet and Jane traveled to the Path Train terminal, where several Port Authority employees had agreed to be interviewed as part of the project. Their first interview was with a seasoned civil engineer who had worked for the Port Authority for close to a decade. When they asked him about how the PA's involvement with the homelessness issue affected him, he paused. There was an agonized expression on his face. With anguish in his voice, he told them about the helpless feeling he had experienced a few weeks before when a homeless mother who was sleeping at the Path Train terminal asked him to hold her sleeping child and explained to him that both she and her baby had AIDS. The expression on his face and the pain conveyed by his physical manner suggested that the issue impacted him in more ways than words could convey. As researchers, Jane and Janet returned to this expression and reaction many times to seek insight into how an organizational issue like homelessness related to the lived experience of Port Authority employees.

**Story 3: Collaborators.** For the two years that they worked on this research project, Jane and Janet commuted on the same train line into New York City. Janet had the much longer commute, making Jane's house and train station "on the way" to their jobs. Jane and Janet were not only interdependent because of the joint research project, but also were deeply connected through their struggles as moth-

ers of young children, wrestling with child care dilemmas and trying to survive junior faculty jobs. The interweave of the rhythm and circumstances of their personal lives meant they snatched research conversations whenever they could. One day, Janet's child care fell through; she drove her child to be with Jane's child care provider, and they commuted together into New York City. At the end of the day, they were rushing on foot to Jane's house from the train station, still trying to make sense of the theme coding for the Port Authority project, which they had been wrestling with all day. In the rush of their walking, the conversation turned insightful. Dropping their briefcases on the sidewalk, they each pulled out yellow pads of paper, and in what seemed like minutes, composed the major thesis about identity and image that would become the centerpiece of the theoretical analysis. It was a surprising time for such a rush of insight to find them.

### Relational Challenges in Doing Research

The three stories identify three research domains in which the quality of the relationships formed is consequential for research process and research content. Each research domain—access, participants, and collaborators—involves relationships that are fraught with challenges with the potential to undermine research quality. At the same time, if the relationships that compose these research domains are of high quality, they provide a vital relational foundation for knowing, learning, and growing in ways that contribute to the capacity to do and write interesting research.

**Gaining access and receiving support.** Gaining access to a research site and creating relationships that sustain support for a project throughout its life are very challenging and underspecified as research skills (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). Access is not a single event, but an ongoing process that at any time can be interrupted or turn sour (Feldman et al., 2003). Access challenges include (1) not knowing who is the right individual or group to contact, (2) being uncertain about what one can offer to those who provide access, (3) being shunted by initial contacts to other contacts, (4) creating swift trust (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996), (5) relying too much on key access people when setbacks occur, and (6) accommodating changes in plans initiated by research site or researchers.

Additionally, there may be concern about who "owns" the data and the researchers' ability to publish their findings. For the PA study, we knew we could not disguise the organization, but we tried to

<sup>2</sup> The PA manages many aspects of the bistate region's trade and transportation facilities, including large passenger terminals that at the time of the study were often occupied by many homeless people.

mask the identities of the individuals who spoke to us. Before we sent the paper out for journal review, we gave a draft to Deb Finn to read, to ensure we had our facts in order and that we had indeed disguised our informants. She indicated that there were some members of the PA who did not feel as though the paper presented the organization in the best light, and we experienced some tense moments as we wondered if the PA would try to block publication of our findings. However, Deb remained our advocate, and we ultimately were able to submit the paper for review. For Deb, the sense that this project was contributing to organizational knowledge helped to sustain her loyalty and tenacity in getting the paper out to a broader audience.

**Learning from participants.** An interview study like ours obviously depends on the quality of the connection built with research participants who have the information, knowledge, and wisdom that are so essential to understanding and answering research questions. The challenges to learning from participants are also varied and quite complex; they include (1) limited knowledge about each other, (2) initial distrust and/or anxiety about data use, (3) need for attunement to nonverbal indicators, (4) inability of the researcher(s) to “speak the participants’ language,” which impacts how well the researcher(s) can ask relevant questions and make sense of answers, and (5) asking participants to give their scarce and valuable time.

It is important to note that insights from participants aren’t limited to qualitative studies using interview methods. Researchers using experimental designs have much to learn from their subjects through the debriefing process. Projects relying on observational methods can also benefit from building a connection to participants through careful and deep listening to their views. For example, Connie Gersick talks about the struggles she had as she attempted to learn the language of the groups she observed and audiotaped in her research on punctuated equilibrium:

The most daunting part of my data collection was observing the bankers. They talked so fast, interrupted each other so often, and used such unfamiliar jargon that I couldn’t follow their meetings, and could barely understand the tapes. I considered dropping them from the sample. (Gersick, 1992: 57)

Her advisor convinced her that she should persist in transcribing the tapes of the banking groups; thus, Gersick continued to listen to the tapes over and over again and relied on the field notes she had taken during the four meetings she had observed until she was able to understand what was going on. She later noted that the “team provided some of

the easiest-to-explain examples of punctuated equilibrium dynamics.” Thus, regardless of how data are gathered, a relationship between researchers and participants can be formed through direct or indirect contact, a relationship that greatly enhances the learning that is part of the research product.

**Collaborating.** The relationship between research collaborators is also essential to the viability and vitality of a research project (Meyer, Barley, & Gash, 1992). Research collaborations are critical means by which researchers can pool expertise, share loads, divide labor, and fire each other up. However, like all relationships, research collaborations are subject to real challenges that can affect the relationships’ process and outcomes: (1) differences in training, values, and preferred research practices, (2) shifting and differing life circumstances, (3) logistical and timing difficulties, (4) the work of coordination (such as making time for research meetings and coordinating writing responsibilities), and (5) the potentially contentious apportioning of authorship credit. These challenges may all be amplified by the lived reality of two or more people stewing in a tenure pressure pot.

The PA project certainly contained many of the above challenges for us. Although neither of us had formal training in qualitative methods, Janet’s training as primarily a lab experimentalist seemed antithetical to this particular way of gathering and analyzing data. We had created a 20-page interview guide, and when Jane suggested that she wanted to change the order of questions asked when interviewing the executive director of the PA, Janet was horrified. She obviously was uncomfortable with what she perceived as a “lack of control.” Jane, however, realized the importance of changing the interview guide to reflect the unique role of the person that they were going to interview. Jane was able to convince Janet that the criteria by which qualitative data are gathered can be different, but no less rigorous, from those by which experimental data are obtained.

### **Relational Practices That Facilitate Dealing with the Challenges**

The relational challenges one encounters in doing research can retard the process, deplete the researchers, or dilute the data in ways that undermine the quality of the final research product. Alternatively, the ways in which relationships are created and sustained can enrich, enliven, direct, and enhance the research process and product. The key theme of our essay is that research-relevant

relationships are not necessarily benign. They feed or deplete the key research ingredients and processes (the researchers, the data, the analysis, the writing, the publishing) in ways that significantly impact research quality. Thus, the relational practices one uses—how one builds and sustains connections to others—are pivotal to research quality.

Although not always intentional on our part, some of the relational practices that we deployed in the PA project did contribute to the quality of the final product. In the paragraphs below, we reflect on four of the many relational practices that facilitated the building of high-quality connections. By “high-quality connections,” we mean ties between people characterized by mutuality, positive regard, and vitality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). These high-quality connections fueled and sustained our research project. They also helped us to overcome or work effectively with the challenges raised in the three stories narrated above. Rather than being particular to one of those relationships (access, research participants, and collaborators) more than the others, these relational practices are generic, interpersonal ways of interrelating that are useful for building high-quality connections in all life domains. However, despite the simplicity and universal power of these relational practices, researchers typically do not consider them as task-critical for research processes and products.

**Being vulnerable.** We were not subject experts on homelessness or on transportation facilities. No one knew us except Deb Finn, our direct access person, and we were completely dependent on her willingness to contact people and endorse us as credible, trustworthy researchers who were open to learning. Although we had credibility as management researchers in a local university, this credibility would only open a few doors, and it would not ensure that people would share meaningful feelings and personal knowledge about a potentially sensitive subject. It is a nontrivial point that as commuters, we also experienced firsthand the reactions that PA employees and customers had to homeless individuals: pity, fear, sorrow, and ambivalence. Like the PA employees, we also stepped over sleeping homeless people, debated whether or not to give money to the many panhandlers, and looked away from those who seemed psychologically unstable or intoxicated. PA members knew that people like us (commuters) often blamed the PA for the many “inconveniences” that homeless individuals in their facilities caused; however, any attempts to move the homeless out, especially in the winter months, were met with media outrage over the PA’s heartlessness. Thus, the members of

the organization were naturally wary of being open with us.

In doing this project, we were cognitively and emotionally vulnerable to being influenced by members of the homelessness project team (who became our major sponsors) as well as open and vulnerable to influence from our research participants. Concretely, this openness and vulnerability showed up in our sharing our experiences of commuting (if appropriate), in admitting we did not know “all the answers,” and in not hiding how we were moved by the dilemmas expressed by the people we interviewed. We believe that our vulnerability and emotional openness both heightened the trust and mutuality in the relationships with people at our research site and also strengthened our connection to each other as research collaborators, by fostering mutual dependence and learning.

**Being genuinely interested.** We were genuinely fascinated and puzzled by the Port Authority’s dilemma in working with the homelessness issue. Our sense is that members of the homelessness task force and the participants whom we interviewed felt this genuine interest and that it fostered give-and-take in gathering information, creating interpretations, and obtaining meaningful feedback as the project progressed. Our genuine interest was communicated in several ways. First, we think the quality of our presence conveyed it. In particular, because of our direct experience of the homelessness issue, our relationship to Deb Finn, and our concern with the magnitude of the dilemma, we brought more than our heads to the interviews, and people shared extensively in the interviews. Edward Hallowell (1999) described a concept, the “human moment,” which signifies points of human contact where there is more than physical presence—there is a heartfelt connection. It is difficult to describe what causes human moments, yet their impact is conveyed in residual feelings of “growth-in-connection” (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Second, genuine interest was conveyed by how we tried to listen and hear more than words in what participants were sharing with us. Third, we made ourselves available for contact inside and outside the formal interviews. This occurred not only with Jane’s interactions with Deb Finn but also when opportunities arose to sit in on training sessions on dealing with homeless people that the PA offered to its police force. The quality of connections built on this genuine interest led to better learning on our part and to deepened appreciation of the meaningfulness of the project, which increased our mutual investment and commitment to the project.

**Seeking feedback.** The project had a formal feedback-seeking component to it, as we presented

initial findings to participants at our research site. However, because of our ties to members of the homelessness task force, we had more ready access to feedback than is typical in many research projects, and we used it. The seeking of feedback created a mutual learning dynamic that helped to enrich the quality and volume of mutual learning during the process. This learning dynamic drew excitement and energy from us and from our research participants as we all struggled to convey what we saw in a way that was understandable to others. As noted earlier, not all the research participants were pleased with the portrayal of the PA in the paper, but they did acknowledge the relevance of the concepts we used to explain the unfolding of events.

**Being trustworthy.** Asking about the PA's response to homelessness touched raw nerves for many of our informants. The subject was painful and sometimes controversial. At the time of our study, the PA was routinely portrayed in the media as being unsafe and inhumane, and often individual members were singled out as ineffective or callous. We had the opportunity to talk to Port Authority members ranging from the very top of this organization (the director) to the front lines—members of the police force of the PA who were working in various of its buildings. Trust was critical currency for building connections with informants, for keeping a meaningful connection with our access person, and for ensuring flexibility and give-and-take in our own research collaboration. We attempted to build this trust by carefully explaining why we wanted to study the PA's response to this particular issue and how we were going to protect informant anonymity and data confidentiality, and by assuring our informants that we were indeed sympathetic to their dilemma. Our personal experience of the homelessness issue as commuters perhaps made it easier to communicate this sympathy. Thus, while we were sometimes concerned that our intimate experiences with the issue might cloud our interpretations of how PA members interpreted and responded to homelessness, we also recognized that it helped form a bond between us as interviewers and them as informants.

### **Why Are Relational Practices So Helpful? Some Theoretical Insights**

We believe the power of relational practices lies in helping to build high-quality connections between researchers and their interaction partners and that these connections, in turn, sustain the life

of a research project. When relational practices cultivate respectful engagement, trust, and helping, higher-quality connections develop as a result (Dutton, 2003). These connections are consequential for how a research project unfolds because they help resolve many relational challenges and because they facilitate creating and sustaining coordination, learning, and energy.

High-quality connections are ties between individuals in which the individuals in them feel a sense of mutuality (Jordan, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997), positive regard (Rogers, 1951), and vitality (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). High-quality connections describe healthy ties between people, where the ties also have distinctive features (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) that are important for nourishing the research process and outcomes. First, high-quality connections are marked by a high emotional carrying capacity: more emotions flow through these connections, both positive and negative emotions. Second, high-quality connections have tensility, or flex and bend, allowing the ties to withstand stress and strain (e.g., Reiss, 2001) better than lower-quality connections can. Finally, high-quality connections have strong connectivity, which Losada and Heaphy (2004) described as making interaction partners open to new ideas and influence.

All three qualities of high-quality connections—high emotional carrying capacity, great tensility, and strong connectivity—help to explain why this form of human tie is useful as the relational foundation of a research project. First, high-quality connections help a research project adapt to the new information and new understandings that are essential to its progress. Just as Gittel (2003) argued, high-quality connections are essential for the coordination of highly interdependent tasks, and high-quality connections facilitate the relational attunement and mutual adjustment that give a research project adaptability. In particular, the element of high emotional carrying capacity eases the inevitable setbacks, misunderstandings, and conflicts that appear over the life of a research project. Second, high-quality connections facilitate growth by allowing their participants to learn from each other. The openness and vulnerability that mark high-quality connections foster information sharing and mutual understanding that facilitate learning. Third, high-quality connections foster vitality and energy that fuel continued investment in a research program and help to sustain momentum through its inevitable ups and downs. Thus, there is ample theoretical logic for why cultivating high-quality connections as part of a research project can yield positive results.

## The Relational Foundation of Research

Our answer to the question of what makes for interesting research may appear to fly in the face of conventional wisdom. Rather than singling out the importance of the right research questions, a clever theory, or a creative or rigorous method, we look to the relational foundation of a research project as the keystone. The relational foundation of research alone cannot put research on an interesting trajectory, but researchers often ignore the relational foundation to their detriment. We see the relational foundation of research as a feeder and enabler of the overall quality of a research project. We see the relational practices that build or diminish the quality of connections between the people involved as pivotal for building a healthy, enriching, and generative research project.

Our hope is that this essay will motivate reflection about how to be more cognizant of the relational practices that undergird research projects and are foundational to the scholarly research enterprise. Whether paying attention to the relational foundation of research practice means being mindful of collaborations, relationships with research participants, research funders, or reviewers and journal editors, we believe that this attention is practically useful and theoretically justified.

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