



Research, methods, and the Zen art of questioning what you know

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What do you understand by “method development”?

Undated, 2018, my diary—Listening to walls

My job title says that I should be professionally interested in political communication. Traditionally this has meant scrutinizing media coverage of elections, how politicians communicate with journalists, how journalists report about politics, public opinion. But I am interested in the politics contained in the small gestures of everyday life—what colleagues might, in fact, call “irrelevant.” I am also increasingly irritated by the preoccupation, in my field of research, with the messages, attempts at influence and the propaganda contained in texts and images in the media: news stories, movies, social media, what people openly tell each other. What about all the rest? The other “communication” that is embedded in the material world? A smile, a waving hand, changing your seat on a bus because you do not want to sit next to a person with skin of a different color than yours—they do send a message, too. So do luxurious embassy palaces or compounds fortified to their teeth that represent a country and what that country stands for in a foreign land, and division walls. And what about the messages between the lines? What about the stories that are missing and never told? I want to dig into the filter drain of the collective washing machine.

Being a communication researcher means training myself to hearing the “voices” of objects, practices and unwritten rules that regulate everyday life. Does this make me a sociologist? Or an ethnographer, instead of a communication researcher? When it comes to [researching] a taboo subject, like [involuntary] childlessness, it means becoming sensitive to the whispers in the background, the uncertain steps of the individuals walking at the margins, what never gets noticed, whose presence does not even register. I am an investigator of the “social wallpaper.” Or, going back to the sound metaphor of the voices, I am a connoisseur of ambient noise, the unstoppable communication, chatter, all around me, full of incessant, subtle reminders of what is “normal.” Once you start noticing it, it is difficult to tune it out, like suffering a form of social tinnitus.

(Archetti 2019d: 4)

Before answering the question of how I understand “method development,” it is helpful to introduce myself briefly. I am a cross-disciplinary researcher who, over time, has investigated what to an external observer might look like the most varied and possibly only loosely connected range of topics. They span, to give a few examples, international news and foreign correspondence, public diplomacy 2.0, the role of the media in the phenomenon of terrorism, the silence and stigma surrounding involuntary childlessness and infertility. While each subject I have investigated at any one time was, in many respects, an accident of life and circumstances, I have, in reality, always dealt with the very same questions of theory and method: How do we explain the mediated reality we live in? How do we know what we know?

I “began” with “traditional” methods, like quantitative and qualitative content analysis and process tracing (Archetti 2010) and interviews (Archetti 2012). Over time I complemented these tools—as an empirical reflection of my favorite ontological framework, actor-network-theory (Latour 2005)—with the mapping of the chains of connections between humans and objects/technologies (Archetti 2014, for one example). More recently, I have extended my repertoire of analytical tools to poetry (Archetti 2015), performance (this included storytelling, the use of breathing and movement on stage, voice) (Archetti 2018a), creative and experimental writing (Archetti 2020). As I have gone along, I have, in other words, added instruments that would enable me to register greater nuance, texture, and granularity in my analysis than the contents of a basic researcher’s toolbox otherwise would. These tools now include precision brushes, surgical scalpels, and some magic wands that allow me to detect the smallest detail and variation. In the case of the experimental writing (Archetti 2019d, 2020) and the performance lectures (2018a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) developed to investigate the mystery of silence in the “age of communication”, I could even capture what was “invisible” to my field of study: the media messages that we internalize without even realizing it, and that get stored—as physical pain or an undignified posture in walking, for instance—in our bodies.

So, answering your question, I do not really think that it is the *methods* that develop, rather *we*, the researchers. I do not believe there is any such thing as a linear progression from a stage where methods are less developed—“worse”—to one where they are more developed—“better.” Neither are there any entirely “right” or “wrong” methods. There are only methods that are more or less appropriate to the research questions we are pursuing, more or less consistent with the theories we use and with our own epistemological reflection. I also believe—you see, I am myself, just like any “good method” should be, *aligned* with my theoretical framework—that the theories I use in my research also apply to making sense of myself, not just of my objects of study. Me and you, as everyone else, are actor-networks—i.e. who we are is shaped by our interaction, both direct and mediated, with all those who surround us, with the material reality of our environment (from the iPhone in our pocket, to the fridge in the kitchen, and the street lamp on the pavement outside), and the information that bombards us every moment of the day, as well as all the experiences we have had. The methods we use ultimately reflect our own journey as human beings and researchers, and further shape both our selves and our investigative practices on our way forward. Although I have used the metaphor of tools, methods are not in reality things *outside* of us and *separate* from us. As we mature and progress in our careers, it seems natural to me that also our methods should evolve. That is why—in a perspective that might sound provocative, but is in fact truthful to my standpoint—“method development” could ultimately be understood as the *practice* of “self-development” and, in the deepest sense, “living life.”

How do you go about developing your own methods?

Although a method is an empirical practice and, as such, it consists in the application of a technique or a skill, it has much deeper roots, both intellectual and emotional. For me any new idea, in one way or another, can only come out of a form of suffering, a sense of frustration: something we can't understand, a mystery that taunts us by escaping explanation, and leaves a gap not only in the literature, but also inside ourselves. That is also the place where my attempt to do research in alternative ways essentially comes from: a sense that, by using the blunt tools I was initially taught during my PhD, I was only living half of my humanity as a researcher and capturing merely a glimpse of the actual reality of the animate and inanimate participants in my analysis (see also Stoller 1997). More specifically, but also more broadly, my experimentation with new/alternative/creative methods (we could discuss in detail the implications of each of these terms, but call them what you like for the purpose of this text) is rooted in the question about what role should the media and communication researcher have in a world characterized by increasingly profound, multifaceted and, in many respects, *existential* crises. Answering this question requires grappling with myriad deeper and more fundamental issues: What is the nature of the human-technological constellations that make up our reality? What is science? What should be considered part of the “research process”? What constitutes “data”? How do we come to “know” the world around us and ourselves? How do we take responsibility in crafting both ethical research and a more sustainable world? Why are we here?

The complex emergencies we face, together with the human consequences they generate in terms of trauma, pain, betrayed expectations, but also demands for a new order and alternative social and political projects—what, for example, Italian philosopher Marco Guzzi (2019) calls a “new humanity”—demand, in fact, an urgent re-thinking of the way we both approach and make sense of reality. The rise of extremisms and populisms; the crumbling of a taken-for-granted epistemological consensus (if it ever existed) leading to a “post-truth world” and the rise of (what to some looks like) “fake news” (Archetti 2018b); increasing inequality leading, depending on the geographical context, to social exclusion, violence, displacement; environmental disasters caused by reckless exploitation of nature's resources and profit-driven commercial logic—the investigation of all these phenomena raises indeed questions about the limitations of the “traditional” scientific methods, particularly the more positivist, quantitative approaches. What kind of research practice, instead, can help us understand a world that is not only organized around rationality and what is “measurable,” but also shaped by ambivalence, uncertainty, intangible values, and feelings like passion, anger, hope, confusion? I wrote these last sentences only a few weeks ago, as part of a panel rationale for a conference that got cancelled because of the coronavirus global pandemic. They read even more compelling now—sitting in quarantine in a society in lockdown as a component of a family dismembered across Italy, Norway, and the UK—and as we witness the world-as-we-are-used-to-know-it on the brink of collapse.

More on the practice of how I devise different ways of conducting research, I keep on questioning myself about how they affect my understanding and my emotions (the latter, as I discovered, can only sharpen and complement rational understanding, never dull it), and what *value* they add to my investigation that other more “traditional” methods cannot provide. In other words: novelty and creativity, or even art, should never be pursued, in my researcher's view, for the sake of themselves or, worse, out of indulgence. The iron rule is that they should always lead to an *analytical* gain. There is much more to say about this than I can cover in the limited space I have here (see more about this in Archetti 2019d), but let me just point out that creative methods have, for me, at least four functions in research

beyond the mere “gathering of data.” First, they are a tool of *investigation*: in fields of study (such as Communication, Media Studies, Political Communication...) that mostly rely on the analysis of what is being explicitly said/written, they enable exploring what is embodied and unspoken. Second, they are a means of *engagement*: by involving academic and external audiences both analytically and emotionally, creative methods support deeper understanding. Presenting research through creative forms, in addition to this, makes a study’s findings accessible, entertaining, immersive: for example, not only can much more content be packed into a performance lecture than in an ordinary academic presentation; this format additionally enables injecting real *life* into its subject and providing not merely an account of some data, but also an *experience*. Third, creative methods are a tool of *reflexivity*: by helping identify, unravel, and develop those connections among data for which coherent words have not yet been found. In this respect, creative methods allow the embracing of a different way of working in which intuition—which always characterizes the research process, even if this remains largely unacknowledged—is valued and respected. Fourth, creative methods are a tool of *change*: particularly through the dimension of evocative storytelling, they have the power to transform the world of meanings we live in. Stories are constitutive of reality, and are thus performative. Both in the perspective of the teller and in that of the listening audience, whether through a poem or a performance, a story can help healing and restoring damaged identities, thereby leading to (at least a beginning of) social and political change (Denzin 2003).

Have you any examples of how you thought in new and creative ways to develop methods?

My Facebook timeline, Saturday 29 February 2020, 10.20am

Why only taking a creative approach in the main part of a manuscript? The INDEX of a book, it occurred to me, is also an essential part of how an issue (including a taboo one like involuntary childlessness [...]) is socially constructed. Compiling an “ordinary” index is not only so incredibly BORING, but also a missed opportunity to “shake,” broaden a reader’s view, and to challenge the mainstream discourse. So I thought I would include some creative and fact-based-yet-disruptive entries... The result should be an index that can be used in the “normal” way, but that is also (relatively) “interesting” to browse in itself. Since these ideas always strike at short notice and materialize without warning, I just hope the publisher now likes what I sent...

[PICTURES of some of the index pages]

“the abyss” (where you end up living in the midst of an infertility crisis) 87

Abbott, A. 62

‘acceptance’ 12, 55, 92, 117

Actor-Network-Theory 33

adoption 4, 7, 8, 11, 38, 107, 127, 135, 178, 217, 234; in film 194, 195; not an option 4, 114–15

adoptive parent not “real” parent 8

a friend (of a friend of a friend): filed for adoption and got pregnant; went to this clinic in Eastern Europe (or Spain, or Denmark, or the Baltic countries) and now they have twins;

stopped thinking about it and it just happened; succeeded at the 10th attempt; see also hope: “never give up hope”

Agamben, G. 98

ageing without children 89, 218–19, 219n4; *see also* lack of support

Ageing Without Children (AWOC) 219

Agigian, A. 64

Aleksijevitsj, S. 142

‘as a mother’ 84, 223

‘as a childless woman’ 84

Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) 3, 6, 111n5, 199; ethical issues 4, 111–12; (un)likelihood of pregnancy 3 (*don’t remind me*); *see also* IVF

Australian Institute for Health and Welfare 2

autoethnography 139, 252; definition of 36, 43n3

Avalanche: A love story (book) 12, 86–87, 238

“baby dream” 116, 117, 133, 177, 179

“baby questions” (questions about children) 56, 87, 105, 106, 234; *see also stupid questions (about children)*

Barnlängtan, xiv, 103, 179, 103

barrenness 2, 60, 114, 127, 187, 195; *see also* sterility

“battle for public spaces” 54, 131–32

Beaujouan, E. 3

“Bechdel-Wallace test” 198–99

Benso, S. 98

Berardelli, C. 93

body: [*When the entry contains more than six pages references, or a reference spans more than nine consecutive pages in the text, it should generally be broken down into subentries. I get that. I would like to have subentries like “role of the body in communication,” “the body and narratives,” “own relationship to the body,” “materiality of the body,” but how can I disentangle them?*] 5, 8, 16, 29, 31, 32, 35, 36, 40, 41–43, 48–58, 61, 63–64, 73, 81, 90, 91, 93, 108, 110, 128, 134, 135n10, 138, 158, 163–64, 166–67, 170–72, 198n25, 199, 204, 208–09, 212, 228–230, 233, 235–36, 237–38, 239n5, 241, 242, 244, 252; *see also* embodiment; *see also* mind-body relationship

Boivin, J. 4

bonus parent 8, 127, 128, 185

(Archetti 2020: 262–63)

The publisher, by the way, did like my idea. The index was accompanied by a rationale that explained how its creative format further contributed—literally, to the very last page—to advancing the book’s aim of documenting and reclaiming the silenced childless experience beyond the limited language of the script produced by the “majority.” Most of the examples I use in this piece are from a study of the construction of taboo around involuntary childlessness in which I developed a new theory of silence for the 21st century and innovatively combined academic analysis with creative writing (Archetti 2020). However, in case you think these methods only apply to “touchy-feely” subjects, you can also watch a video (<https://bit.ly/3bVr4tR>) of a short creative monologue I gave as part of a researcher-artist collaboration on journalism, fake news, and an analysis of the coverage of the crash of the airship *Italia* in the Arctic in 1928 (Archetti 2019c).

I do not have any special “technique” to think creatively around method, no special secret. I am a very practical researcher and alternative/creative methods are my way of responding to the need of the moment, *surviving* if you like: What data do I need? How can I get hold of it? What is the point I want to make? How can I best convey it? I am particularly interested, however, in which conditions favor thinking beyond the usual schemes and strengthen the researcher’s “resilience.” What is most important, in this respect, is remaining curious, not being scared by what one does not know—the latter possibly being the greatest challenge because it requires us to abandon our position of “authority” as “experts” and become vulnerable, “beginners.” Being a beginner, though, is also liberating and empowering: it gives you the freedom to pursue *any* research question, not just the ones you can answer with the methods you currently have.

Be thus open-minded and trust that you can learn anything, if you really want. I have, effectively, self-managed my training in all the techniques I have experimented with. In this respect, start small and proceed gradually. For instance, in taking a semester-long evening theatre course for adults in 2018–19, I used the project of the final assignment to try out using my voice. I wanted to sing a song, “Sanctuary,” by childless singer and songwriter Chiara Berardelli (2018) and dedicated to Gateway Women, an organization that supports all women “united by and beyond childlessness,” at an academic conference to convey my own emotions and those of my interviewees (especially grief)—a key aspect of explaining silence, but also something that the “traditional” academic presentation format would not have enabled me to cover adequately. I was inspired, yet utterly terrified by my own plan. So I relied on the safe context of the theatre class and its small audience of 12 to first confront my fears. Then I sang as part of my contribution to a local theatre workshop (Archetti 2019a). This was my “training” for finally giving a more refined version of a performance lecture at the IAMCR annual conference in Madrid (Archetti 2019b).

Experimenting with anything new requires spending considerable time outside of the comfort zone—sometimes really far out into it and without a map. You will feel lost doing things you have never tried before. But creativity is not a bolt of lightning from the blue—although that will strike every now and then, too, if you keep on charging the air with electricity. It is endurance in practicing the uncomfortable. And as such, returning to my initial point and closing the circle, it is a form of patient training of the soul and a process of refinement for the self.

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