Account-Giving and Contending With Real and Imagined Audiences in Evaluation Research

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Pub. Date: 2018
Access Date: January 12, 2018
Academic Level: Postgraduate
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd
City: London
Online ISBN: 9781526444547
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526444547
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Abstract

In this case study, we present methodological and analytical challenges that arose as a result of conducting evaluative research of a workforce development program for low-wage, low-skilled, entry-level hospital workers. We conducted interviews at all levels of the organization, including supervisors and low-ranking frontline workers. Methodologically, interviews and consent had to be designed to ensure confidentiality and to minimize fear of repercussions should respondents criticize the workforce development program. Analytically, we recognized that the factors shaping the interview content were as important to analyze as the content itself. Real and imagined audiences, the status and job position of the participants, and the identity work performed by the participants were also analyzed as data that contextualized the responses given. This case study illustrates how analyzing account-giving provides a deeper understanding of the interviews and the organizational structures and processes out of which they are produced.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Identify possible real and imagined audiences and how these might influence research participant narratives
- Consider how identity work can shape interviewees' accounts
- Understand accounts as a source of data
- Evaluate how accounts function within interpersonal relationships and in specific organizational contexts

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Project Overview and Context

Evaluation research is distinctly different than the typical social research methods you learn about in college. Instead of gathering and analyzing data to create or validate theory, evaluation research systematically acquires and assesses information and provides useful feedback within political and organizational contents. The methods are close to traditional social science research, but distinguishable for it requires certain skills, dexterity, and sensitively beyond basic quantitative and qualitative methods and analysis. For this case, we will focus on sensitivity to multiple stakeholders, defined as the people, groups, or organizations which have an interest in that organization.

Lead author, Dr. Kendra Jason, was a part of an evaluation team housed in a major research institute in the Southeast. The team was hired by a private foundation, with supplementary

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funds from a business and management funder and a government source. The evaluation team was charged to evaluate a workforce development program that targeted low-wage, low-skilled entry-level workers, called frontline workers, at a selection of hospitals, long-term care facilities, community health centers and behavioral health centers across the U.S. Frontline healthcare workers are low-wage nonprofessional workers. Their jobs make up approximately 54% of the total health and healthcare workforce and include jobs such as nurse assistants, respiratory therapy technicians, social and human service assistants, and home health aides (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2006). The goal of the program was to provide frontline healthcare workers on-the-job training, education, and skill development to improve their opportunities for advancement and increase their income and well-being.

The team interviewed all levels of the organization from the hospital CEO to the low-ranking frontline workers, including the workers' supervisors. Interviews elicited answers to questions such as what was going well with the program and what wasn't, what support was needed, and what challenges, successes, and failures were experienced. This type of evaluation, also known as Summative Evaluation, investigates whether the program caused demonstrable effects on specifically defined target outcomes (Mathison, 2005). Evaluation research is also different from traditional social science research because its purpose is to provide useful feedback to multiple stakeholders in order for them to make better short- and long-term decisions about some program, plan, or organizational element. Feedback should influence decision-making and policy formation.

This research uses a case study approach. A case study is a methodological design in which the researcher aims to "contribute to knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" whereby "the researcher focuses on a 'case' to retain an holistic and real-world perspective" (Yin, 2014, p. 3). This case study uses a subset of the total sample and includes 77 supervisors of frontline workers in 7 hospitals across the United States and examines how sensitivity to the multiple stakeholders requires unique methodological and analytical strategies. In particular, we had to take into consideration the position of the supervisors in both the program and in our evaluation. When detailing unfavorable production outcomes, negative experiences, or problems with frontline workers, supervisors did not want to imply their own incompetence by blaming themselves. Nor did they want to risk getting in trouble by blaming upper management. Nor did they want to seem to prejudicially blame the least powerful people in the system—the frontline workers, many of whom were poor women of color.

Research Design

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The data consist of 16 individual semi-structured interviews and 13 focus groups, ranging from three to seven people (*N* = 77), collected over a three-year period beginning in 2008 and ending in 2011. Evaluation data were collected in three phases during each year of implementation at seven hospital sites in seven states, representing all but one region of the United States. Interviews were conducted in person at the beginning of the program (Phase I), over the phone in the middle of the program (Phase II), and again in person at the end (Phase III). The sample of 77 supervisors was taken from participating departments and units within each hospital. A bulk of the focus groups were conducted during Phase I (8) and Phase III (5), whereas, most of the individual interviews were conducted in Phase II (13). Supervisors were selected by upper-level managers to meet with the evaluation team to discuss their experiences with the workforce development program. For baseline interviews and focus groups, program managers were asked by the study team to recruit supervisors that were available at the day and time the focus group was scheduled. After the program began, program managers were asked to recruit supervisors that supervised frontline workers that were participating in the workforce development program and were available at the time of the visit.

It should be noted that this procedure did not engage in maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) which aims to represent a wide range of variation of experience and interests of those supervisors with some involvement in the workforce development program. While such a sample would have been ideal, a number of factors, including turnover, mobility among supervisors, and work obligations during scheduled interview times, made it difficult to achieve. We must also consider that managers might have been choosing supervisors who they felt would give a favorable impression of the implementation, or those who had better experiences than others. It is important to note that in this case, supervisor superiors could be seen as gatekeepers. In evaluation research, this is not uncommon, but we must acknowledge that these factors may influence the data collected as we describe the more pragmatic and practical task of getting the research done. It is thus possible to consider that that maximum variation sampling would have yielded a different picture. However, since the data show a wide range of experiences including negativity and resistance to praise for the program, the authors are confident that selection bias does not discredit the data and substantial variation was achieved.

Dr. Jason conducted an inductive analysis using methods traditionally associated with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). She began by subjecting the interview transcripts to line-by-line open coding to conceptually tag the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). These initial codes served to identify recurrent themes, such as supervisors' feelings about workers, relationships with other supervisors and with higher administrators, sources of satisfaction and feelings of work-related self-efficacy, struggles with resource limitations, and perceptions of the jobs

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program. Dr. Jason used information and data analysis from Phase I to inform questioning and analysis in Phase II. Then she continued this iterative process to analyze Phase III data. Subsequent, more focused coding, followed by memo writing, helped to flesh out these themes and specify their relationships. What eventually emerged was an analytic story about the relationships between supervisors' daily struggles to manage their frontline workers, feelings of work-related self-efficacy and identity, type of involvement in program implementation, and degree of support for the program.

To conduct the evaluation study, our plan was to identify organization and personnel characteristics that allowed the program to work well and to identity factors that caused the program to not meet its goals. The following sections detail the challenges Dr. Jason and the evaluation team experienced as they conducted interviews and engaged in analysis and how she overcame those challenges for the case study of hospitals.

Research Practicalities

The evaluation team consisted of two senior research social scientists and four advanced graduate research assistants (all have since received PhDs) employed at a research institute at one of the most prestigious universities in the nation. Given that the evaluation team needed to gather information from the respondents about the program to inform the program funders, the team had to first understand the motivation of the funders (stakeholders) and goals of the program. The goals were to make frontline workers better in their current jobs, or to provide them with the training necessary to make them good candidates for promotion. The funders publicized that they would provide financial support to healthcare organizations over a three-year period that would pilot a program to hire and train frontline incumbent employees to meet demands for greater output. This program sought to reduce the costs of (new) hiring and turnover, and to give healthcare facilities access to a population of loyal workers with higher levels of skill. The workforce development program was created to help frontline workers improve their chances of getting ahead by providing accessible and affordable education and training.

Ethics and Interview Questions Design

Obtaining consent and ethical considerations are an important part of any human-subject research. As sociologists, we follow the American Sociological Association's (ASA) Code of Ethics which provides a common set of values by which we build our professional work and notes "its primary goal [as] the welfare and protection of the individuals and groups with whom sociologists work" ("ASA Code of Ethics", 2017). As a team of social scientists, we were aware of status-based inequalities (e.g., race, gender, class, seniority) embedded in each hospital

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organization. Frontline supervisors have authority over their low-level staff, but little power relative to their superiors. In going over the consent form, we emphasized that respondent names would not be attached to reports, their participation would not affect their employment status, and no information discussed in the interview would be relayed directly to their supervisors, administrators or coworkers.

As a contracted evaluation team, our charge was to report on the progress of the workforce development program, not to detail the complexities of the organizational role of mid-level supervisors. Thus, we crafted interview questions that should take about an hour to complete, and the bulk of the questions were directly related to organizational characteristics (e.g., hierarchy, job tasks and responsibilities, training protocols, and organizational programs). We attempted to keep questions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the workforce development program and their role in it in this same vain—as objective reporting. For example, instead of inquiring about interpersonal problems they may have with their superiors and staff, we framed the questions as, “What could your organization do to make your job better?” and “What could your organization do to make the work lives of your staff better?”

In taking this approach, supervisors seemed confident in their answers and did not appear to be uncomfortable in the interview settings. There was hardly a case when we felt that supervisors were put in a compromising position or were worried about potential consequences. (We say “hardly a case” because we cannot be 100% certain that this was the experience of the respondent; it’s the perception of the interviewer). Additionally, as a part of obtaining consent, we told respondents that they could stop interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions with no penalty. All supervisors completed all interview questions—there were no refuses. In our team meetings, we regularly discussed ethics and interviewing situations to ensure that protocols were being followed and respondents were protected. In our analysis, we considered the positionality of the supervisors, and were careful to protect their title while reporting, and at times, promoting their stance. We did this by aggregating the data (a process of combining observations and data and reporting in a summarized, rather than individualized, format) and removing titles and/or names from direct quotes.

Eliciting Supervisor Accounts

Despite being invited to talk about problems, supervisors knew they were expected by upper management to represent their organizations well and to be advocates for their workers. The evaluation team tried to create a safe and comfortable space in which supervisors could speak freely about their work experiences. While reviewing the consent form at the beginning of the interviews and focus groups, the evaluation team assured supervisors of confidentiality and

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made it clear that we were charged with evaluating the workforce development program, not them or their superiors. Despite our assurances, supervisors might have worried about critical remarks being traced back to them because only one or two supervisors were interviewed per department, and management was aware of which supervisors participated. In one extreme example, during a phone interview with a seemingly timid supervisor whom we thought was alone during the call, we found out that that a superior was in the room with her listening in on the call. We thought that the supervisors' perceived shyness may have been due to her being under surveillance during the interview, so we politely ended the call to get her out of a possibly compromising situation. In other cases, it was also possible that supervisors felt they had been selected to participate in the evaluation because upper-management saw them as especially good supervisors. In these regards, even though managers were not present as an audience, they were, possibly, an imagined audience.

Real and Imagined Audiences

In focus groups, confidentiality and anonymity could not be guaranteed. In these situations, supervisors had to trust their peers to maintain confidentiality. Fellow supervisors also constituted a reference group whose reflected appraisals likely mattered a great deal for how supervisors thought of themselves, at least in the workplace. Supervisors were also aware that the evaluation team consisted of PhD-level social scientists affiliated with a prestigious university. This might have inclined supervisors to try to "speak the language" of the evaluators by referencing (as they did) social culture and institutions. (For example, in some cases supervisors blamed the "culture of poverty" as a viable reason why workers were not getting ahead or spoke to economic downturns related to deindustrialization or the Great Recession.) Thus, despite good methodological practices (outlined above in "Ethics and Interview Questions Design" section), the conditions of the evaluation study meant that a great deal was at stake for supervisors. They had to be concerned with the impressions they were making on the evaluators and each other (the real audiences), and, potentially, those outside the interview or focus group situation (the imagined audiences).

From one methodological perspective, the social desirability biases operating in the interview and focus group situations can be seen as problems. These biases could raise doubts about the truthfulness of supervisors' reports. But all reports by research subjects, especially those given in person, are affected to some degree by social desirability; anticipated audience reactions always affect what people say and how they say it (Schostak, 2002). People, in general, want to be viewed as good and moral; thus when situations occur that may make them feel they may not be perceived by real and imagined audiences in this way, they engage in identity work to uphold a positive self-image; this was made evident in focus groups where we

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could observe interactions between respondents which sought to preserve an identity or self-image by promoting themselves as "good supervisors" with stories to support their claims. For example, some supervisors told stories of helping their staff study for the educational component of the program, encouraging workers to apply for better jobs when the workers doubted their chances, and working with single mother's working schedules to accommodate family emergencies.

Identity Work

Since supervisors did not want to be thought badly of when responding to the interview questions, they offered accounts that downplayed their unsuccessful efforts and bolstered an image of competence. By providing these accounts, supervisors sought to manage the impressions they made on the evaluation team, their peers, and, potentially, their bosses. Supervisors' account-giving can thus be seen as a form of identity work for multiple real and imagined audiences. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) defined identity work as "anything people do, individually and collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others" (p. 115).

The supervisors were, in Scott and Lyman's (1968) terms, subjected to "valuative inquiry," and they may have sought to "prevent conflict by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation" (p. 46). Goffman (1963) argues that when people need to explain unanticipated or improper behavior, including those which attempt to lessen responsibility, they offer accounts to show that they are simply responding in a way that reflects the values or culture of their social group. Accounts often reflect defensive strategies (Berard, 1998) or disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) that minimize or deflect blame (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). Therefore, our awareness of the unique position of supervisors and the account-making process influenced how we designed the interviews as well as how we analyzed the interview data. These considerations are outlined below.

Practical Lessons Learned

Methodological Perspectives

The challenge addressed in this case study is how make sense of the existence of real and imagined audiences while being sensitive to middle management respondents, holding integrity to funders and stakeholders, while recognizing these power dynamics as a sociologist of inequality. Schostak (2002) explains this methodological complication when capturing respondent accounts:

> "What is going on here?" is a key question to ask of any situation. Asking it assumes

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> there is an "answer." Whether or not respondents claim to have the answer, what results is an account of what they think they "know," or what they claim to believe, or the reasons why they do not know, or do not care about knowing, believing and so on. During accounts, respondents may ramble, change the subject, and attempt to please the researcher by providing "answers" they think are "wanted" by the researcher. In any case, the account does more than try to explain, convince or deceive someone about a situation it is also a negotiation of identities as between the questioner and the answerer and can "cover up" as much as uncover.

From the methodological perspective we utilized, this is not a limitation but an inherent quality of the data—something to be analyzed rather than ignored. Rather than treat supervisors' implicit concerns with impression management as distorting what supervisors said, Dr. Jason analyzed their reports as accounts. She, thus, did not treat supervisors' talk as if it provides a window to another reality, but as a reality itself to be analyzed.

In their classic *American Sociological Review* article "Accounts," Scott and Lyman (1968) urged social scientists to examine how social actors use talk to protect and repair identities by excusing or justifying behavior. Dr. Jason examined how language—in the form of supervisors' accounts for problems at work and the difficulty of their jobs—had the consequence of justifying unfair treatment for low-status workers and protecting management from blame. Here is an example:

Analytic Question

How did supervisors deal with the identity-work dilemmas in which they were put by the program evaluation process?

Analysis of Account-Giving

Supervisors dealt with identity-work dilemmas by using rhetorics of blame that targeted neither themselves nor their bosses—nor frontline workers, at least not directly. In one key regard, supervisors did blame their organizations. Supervisors often said that frontline workers were not given adequate orientation and training to do their jobs well. For example, supervisors complained that workers received poor training because so little time was allocated for it. Supervisors described the training new hires received as brief and superficial. They noted the training process typically involved hospital orientation (one to three days), departmental orientation (one to two days), followed by the viewing of procedural video tapes, reading workplace manuals, and shadowing a senior worker for five minutes to one week, depending on the job. But rather than pointedly blaming managers for cutting corners on training, supervisors

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cited “limited budgets” that led to hiring unskilled workers coming from backgrounds in retail, fast food, and low-level customer service.

Supervisors seemed to understand the economic logic at work here. Some explained that since the turnover rate in most of these entry-level jobs was moderate to high, the decision was made to continuously bring in batches of workers and provide them with the minimal training necessary to do their jobs. They did this knowing full well that many would not stick around for long, since the work was hard and the wages were low. A soft labor market also meant that it was possible to hire new people as soon as others left. Some supervisors seemed to understand that low wages, high turnover, and easy replacement were factors that made their jobs harder. Yet they never explicitly blamed upper management for paying low wages, scrimping on training, or exploiting a labor market glut.

Supervisors were in a difficult position because they were responsible for meeting the production and patient-satisfaction goals of the hospital as they managed the characteristic shortcomings of their staff. When interviewed by the evaluation team, they were required to discuss the problems they had at work. This, again, put them in a hard spot. They needed to account for the poor performance of their staff, but they did not want to point blame at any stakeholders in the organization, including themselves, their management, or their workers. To fashion accounts that absolved organizational actors, these supervisors drew on cultural discourses about the causes of poverty and inequality.

Considerations for Evaluation Report

Although the evaluation focused on job outcomes for frontline workers, the analysis sought to understand the contextual and interpersonal issues pertinent to supervisors. Therefore, it was important to report their experiences in the evaluation. We tried to understand what made their jobs hard, how they could be better supported, what they really want their bosses to know. Since summative evaluation requires sensitivity to multiple stakeholders, we spent a lot of time in the evaluation reports detailing how important the supervisors were as participants and stakeholders as well, even when we knew it was not what the funder or organization wanted to hear. This enabled us to represent the perspectives of supervisors, even when critical of the program we were evaluating, while also working to mitigate the potential vulnerabilities their position entailed. In other words, as researchers we embedded our reports within a sociological perspective and took into consideration the positionality of the research participants.

Conclusions

To best conduct this analysis, Dr. Jason analyzed research participant accounts using a social

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psychological lens. Social psychologists who study identity argue that behavior is motivated by desires for positive reflected appraisals (i.e., feedback from others), favorable social comparisons, and self-perceptions of competence and morality (Callero, 2014; Gecas, 1982; Schwalbe, 2005). From this perspective, workplace behavior can be understood as driven by desires to elicit positive and avoid negative feedback from others, make favorable and avoid unfavorable social comparisons, and observe oneself acting in competent and moral ways. An implication of this view is that support for organizational change is likely to hinge on how change affects these key aspects of the self-concept.

Focusing on the impression or identity supervisors were trying to manage or present allowed Dr. Jason to examine what was meaningful in their jobs and to their identities and how these meanings influenced supervisors' feelings of status and value. She was then able to analyze how and why this mattered within the organizational context, within the relationships supervisors had to other (important) workers, and then in the work process in general. By taking a social psychological approach, understanding the supervisor as the unit of analysis, she was able to connect how supervisors' identity as good supervisors to their staff and good co-workers to their peers and superiors played a role in how they perceived the success of the program.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

For each of the following questions, imagine that you are conducting interview-based evaluation research for a new program at your school or your job.

1. Describe the program initiatives and identify its multiple stakeholders. Rank the status of the multiple stakeholders and briefly describe why you ranked them in this way.
2. What kinds of competing interests might shape how and what your participants talk about within the interviews? Consider their positions within the organization, your role as researcher in relation to them, and the subject of your research.
3. If you were conducting interviews with both lower and upper level workers at this organization, what are some of the real and imagined audiences that the research participants may have in mind? How might each affect responses to your interview questions?
4. Imagine that the research participants you have interviewed have told you information that is critical of the organization for which they work or that suggests changes that the organization needs to make that may be unpopular with stakeholders. What considerations about your role as both a researcher and as a program evaluator might you have to take into consideration as you write up your research findings? How will you navigate these

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various responsibilities?

5. If you know your participants might have criticisms of their workplace or school but are hesitant to discuss these with you, how would you approach the interview process?
6. What is the difference between treating a supervisor's implicit concerns about impression management as distorting some underlying "truth" and treating the accounts supervisors give as data to be examined as truth? What different conclusions might each approach result in?

Further Reading

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