STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

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VOLUME 53

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PART I

INTERACTIONIST AND QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO TRANSLATIONAL TEAM SCIENCE

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INTRODUCTION: INTERACTIONIST AND QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO TRANSLATIONAL TEAM SCIENCE

Joseph A. Kotarba

The growth in science and engineering research conducted by teams has dramatically accelerated since 1975, making multiuniversity collaborations the fastest growing authorship style (Jones, Wuchty, & Uzzi, 2008). This transition has been accelerated by the recognition that increasingly specialized scientific fields must develop collaborations to enhance creativity and accelerate the pace of discovery, especially in terms of addressing major societal health problems (Disis & Slattery, 2010). Research and intellectual property developed by highly functioning multidisciplinary research teams has greater impact in peer recognition through citations and patent uses than research products from siloed investigators (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007). As a result, major funding agencies are placing increasing emphasis on team science approaches in their funding opportunities.

The growing emphasis on team research has been most dramatically illustrated in translational health research, which refers to the movement in health research to increase the efficiency of designing and applying research findings to health-care delivery (Kotarba & Wooten, 2017). The Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA), an initiative emerging from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Roadmap, is intended to stimulate the speed and effectiveness of scientific research through the interdisciplinary and interinstitutional work (Wooten et al., 2014). Bennett, Gadlin, and Levine-Finley (2010) provide a generic yet useful definition of team science:

> Team science has been described as a collaborative and often cross-disciplinary approach to scientific inquiry that draws researchers who otherwise work independently or as coinvestigators on smaller-scale projects into collaborative centers and groups.

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The literature also includes definitions of teams according to a wide range of organizational/structuralist dimensions, such as size, organizational complexity, geographic scope, funding, duration, leadership structure, team goals, etc. (Stokols, Hall, Taylor, & Moser, 2008).

The definitions or models of team science are very closely situated with or intended to inform strategies for evaluating team science. This makes good sense since team science has become a – if not the – primary mechanism for enacting translational science, the ultimate goal of which is to improve the scientific enterprise (Calhoun et al., 2013). Thus, the general understanding in the literature on team science is that the team is a mechanism, an organizational structure at the center of the translational science enterprise. Accordingly, collaboration involves bringing external others (e.g., scientists, community members, and healers) into the team through conversion or limited participation. The team is identifiable by its structure, organizational location, and temporal location (Chiocchio & Essiembre, 2009).

There is a commonsense tendency among scientists and other team participants to see the team as, or assume the team to be, an object with thing-like qualities (cf. Blumer, 1969). This realist perception leads to evaluating the team as something to be measured, something with a beginning and an end, and even something with a personality. Furthermore, there are two tendencies in conceptualizing or categorizing teams in this realist fashion. They can be judged in terms of dichotomous variables such as success/failure, functional/dysfunctional, productive/less productive, etc. (Fiore, 2008). They can also be seen as unitary entities to be intervened in as such, for example, to "fix" a broken team (Hall, Feng, Moser, Stokols, & Taylor, 2008).

This general understanding of team science can be critiqued from the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective in sociology. Symbolic interactionism is a pragmatist-based perspective that posits a processual model of social life. Society – at all levels ranging from everyday life and informal groups to formal organizations and social institutions – is the product of ongoing interaction among people who share concern over a problem (Waskul, 2009). Interaction among group members involves the search for consensus over the nature and potential solutions to the problem at hand. The culture of the local (scientific, university, political, religious, etc.) community serves as a primary source of meanings for the potential solution, but the team itself is always emergent (Charmaz, Harris, & Irvine, 2019).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, we are suggesting a suspension of the thing-like perception of the team and to instead operationalize it in terms of a generator of ideas that could lead to innovative ways of thinking about, designing, and implementing the scientific effort. The most essential task of a team is to design a method for assembling and managing relationships among all individuals involved in a shared scientific interest (Kotarba, 2014). This conceptualization encourages the inclusion of a wider range of possible members, beyond those initially defined by institutionalized citizenship such as the scientists located at a particular research center. Perhaps most importantly – especially for the present studies – this conceptualization calls for the direct observation if not experience of everyday interaction in teams to understand and, therefore, critique/evaluate them (Pollner, 2011).

The traditional institutional theory approach to formal group research in sociology has traditionally included three components. The first is the study of the *organization* in which the activities in question transpire. The second is the study of the actual *interactions* by which participants communicate, negotiate, bargain, and in other often face -to-face ways conduct the work of the organization. The third is the study of the broader cultural, historical, and economic context within with organizational work takes place, that is, the *institution* (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Zilber, 2013).

There is much discussion in the literature over which of the three components deserves most attention for generating good organizational theory (Schmidt, 2010). Will Gibson and Dirk vom Lehn (2018) posit a distinctly symbolic interactionist solution to this dilemma by arguing for a qualitative methodology that examines how people engage in social practices in order to generate *meanings* that apply to either the organizational or institutional dimensions (or both) of their work. There is a tradition in symbolic interaction of research on medical/organizational phenomena that focused on interaction to make sense of health and illness management. Classic examples range from Anselm Strauss' (1978) studies of interaction among doctors and nurses to manage patients and their families in the modern hospital to Alac's (2011) studies of meaning negotiation among scientists interpreting experimental magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) images. One point is perfectly clear across topics and conceptualizations: qualitative methods are the preferred style for structuring symbolic interactionist research, whether through ethnography, interviews, or participant observation (Gibson & vom Lehn, 2018, pp. 171–172).

The three articles in this special issue give the reader a taste of the qualitative research ongoing at the Institute for Translational Sciences at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston. The central theme of team research applies across the board, although the type of team varies from research team, evaluation team, and administrative team. Data collection techniques include participant observation, interviews, and a bit of survey research. Nevertheless, in all three cases, the authors are intimately involved with their teamwork, so that we are given lucid descriptions of everyday life in translational science. An important and practical feature of all three articles is the application of insights and findings to practical organizational and institutional concerns. Evelyn McKinney describes the evolution of ethics as a topic within the culture of a medical center and concludes by presenting suggestions for the establishment of Ethics Teams to work in accord with research scientists to protect all individuals involved in medical research and care delivery. Sharon Croisant and her colleagues suggest best practices for the establishment and management of sci cafés, community-based programs that bring experts from the university together with community members and lay experts to discuss real-world problems related to health and illness. And, Joseph Kotarba and his colleagues describe the evolution of the role, self, and identity of the consultant in this period of translational science.

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THE SCI CAFÉ, HEALTH LITERACY EDUCATION, AND TRANSLATIONAL TEAM SCIENCE

Sharon A. Croisant, Amber L. Anthony, Chantele R. Singleton and Joseph A. Kotarba

ABSTRACT

The establishment of Science Cafés has become a popular strategy to enhance informal yet instruction-oriented interaction between medical and scientific experts and members of the relevant local communities. The purpose of this chapter is to report on two significant findings of a mixed-methods evaluation of the SCI (Science and Communities Interact) Café. Method: The Clinical and Translational Science Award in the Institute for Translational Sciences at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston established an SCI Café program in 2013 to enable local residents to engage in dialogs with clinicians and researchers regarding their scientific interests and health concerns. A mixed-methods approach was used to evaluate the program. Results: The essential experience of SCI Café (SC) is updating one's knowledge of a topic. The primary comparative and analytical feature of SC participation is expertise. Expertise varies in terms of the social position of the participants: graduate student, university staff, engaged participant, topical participant, and curious participant.

Keywords: Health literacy education; community outreach; Science Café; translational science; evaluation research; team science

INTRODUCTION

Bodison et al. (2015) has noted that health science awareness is increasingly important to community health and primary care as individuals seek health-related

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information from diverse sources. Given the breadth and depth of information available from such a wide variety of venues, individuals must be able to understand and evaluate the credibility of the source and the information provided. Goldina and Weeks (2014) notes that their ability to do so, however, is still highly dependent on their formal education, health status, and health literacy. US subpopulations have different levels of access to health science information and differ in their ability to use that information to directly benefit their health outcomes. In a recent study by Rooks, Wiltshire, Elder, BeLue, and Gary (2012), African Americans and Latinos were found to be significantly more likely than whites to use the information they found to make changes to maintain or improve their health. As science communication and public dissemination of research findings take deeper root, understanding how different groups process and use health science information is critical to the development and improvement of community and personalized health information delivery (Dijkstra & Critchley, 2016: Kotarba, 2014).

The "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act" (2010) offers effective techniques for improving health literacy that are essential for supporting communities and individuals in acquiring knowledge that can be effectively used for health promotion and illness prevention. Science Cafés have become a popular way to enhance informal interactions between medical and scientific experts and members of the relevant local communities. The Science Café hosts interactive dialogs that have served as a medium for priming, organizing, communicating, and strategizing among the individuals involved in team science via community-based research projects and CBPR projects. The concept of the SCI Café (where *S*cience and *C*ommunities *I*nteract) is not unique to the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), Galveston. As Ahmed, Defino, Connors, Kissack, and Franco (2014) note in their comprehensive review of the phenomenon, Science Cafés are intended to create informal dialog between scientists and community members over shared concerns. The Science Café provides a comfortable and accessible – nonacademic and nonclinical – setting for this discourse. Clearly, community engagement is a multidirectional endeavor, although the unidirectional communication of ideas is more often associated with "community outreach." Science Cafés generally operate to educate the lay audience to scientific discovery. The translation is primarily from scientific/clinical talk to commonsense talk. The Cafés also build relationships among scientists, clinicians, and community members, priming the participants for future exploration and projects. Cafés serve as the initial contact with science and scientific institutions where relationships based upon trust and shared knowledge can begin.

Kotarba, Croisant, Elferink, and Scott (2014) have noted that the Institute for Translational Sciences (ITS) (home to the Clinical and Translational Science Award [CTSA] at UTMB) established an SCI Café program in 2013 to serve as a mechanism for multidirectional communication between and among local residents, clinicians, and scientific investigators. The purposes of SCI Café at UTMB are to engage community members with science and science with the local community; connect to community needs and interests; increase accessibility and connectivity between researchers and the community; and to translate CTSA