

Abstract

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Title: Silence in qualitative communication studies: How to interpret?

Introduction

In Western cultures silence often has negative connotations. Silence is part of the routines of communication professionals, journalists, and other sociopolitical actors, but it has not received due attention in qualitative communication sciences research. Silence, nonverbal and indirect communication are effective ways of conveying meaning. Therefore, silence is not the absence of communication, but it may be embedded with unexplored meaning. What is left to silence, assumes a discursive function in the organization of meaning. There is an increased awareness of the significance of silence in communication, mainly because we live in an age of noise stimulated by online social networks. Increasing awareness of the significance of silence, therefore, urges further research.

Goals and Methods

This paper aims to examine explorative and reflexive ways of interpreting silences in qualitative research on communication sciences. This is particularly relevant in an increasingly intense, diverse, and often conflicting communication environment. Resorting to an interdisciplinary literature review complemented with empirical examples, we focus on three research methods - ethnography, focus groups and interviews - which, by their nature, are conducive to discursive practices that resort to silence as units of meaning.

Results

This study offers an overview of different ways of interpreting silences in three concrete qualitative research methods. Attributing legitimacy to silence in qualitative research has proven particularly useful for the analysis of relational tensions and perceptions of power in broader contexts that inform the research situation. We also provide suggestions on the interpretation of silences in qualitative research in communication sciences.

Conclusions

Within qualitative research in social sciences data production tends to focus on spoken words, what causes silence to be often undermined from interpretation Showing how

silence can bring productive analyzes to qualitative research in communication sciences requires processes of reflexivity that this study aims to help clarify.