

Translational Performances: Toward Relevant, Engaging, and Empowering Social Science

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Abstract: This paper challenges the assumption that written reports are the preeminent medium for information dissemination in social research and argues instead for translational research disseminated across a variety of delivery systems using multi-media approaches. Translational performances are described, several examples of translational performance projects are provided, and guidelines for assessing translational attempts are presented.

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1. Background

Former United States Vice President Al GORE and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize "for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for measures that are needed to counteract such change" (NOBEL FOUNDATION, 2007). Vice President GORE was recognized for creating greater worldwide understanding of the climate change issue, primarily through his role in the production and distribution of the documentary film "An Inconvenient Truth" which won two Oscar awards in 2007. This film, along with GORE's other activities, has highlighted the important role of *dissemination* in the reporting of scientific information in the 21st century. Some may say that it is about time. Although GORE described his startling findings as "inconvenient," many would say he shared his work in the perfect way, at the perfect time. [1]

Traditional research treats dissemination—usually conveyed through written report—as the final stage of research. However, as we enter a new millennium, greater attention is being paid to the importance of disseminating scientific research with stronger links between research, practice, and public policy (see for example, BARNES, CLOUDER, PRITCHARD, HUGHES, & PURKIS, 2003). The assumption that written reports are the preeminent medium for information

dissemination is being strongly contested by policy makers, scientists, and the contemporary public (BREKKE, ELL & PALINKAS, 2007; GLASGOW, KLESGES, DZEWALTOWSKI, BULL & ESTABROOKS, 2004). These arguments contend that written documents alone are insufficient for 21st century cinematic, mediated, information-based societies. The problem exists that—although social scientific research findings may be published in the scientific media—practitioners, policy makers and community members remain relatively unaware of the findings or of their importance. As REBACK, COHEN, FREESE and SHOPTAW (2002, p.838) pointed out, failure to provide the general public with research findings in comprehensible formats breeds mistrust toward research output and social scientific research in general. Moreover, DELANTY (1997, p.1) asserted that the current crisis in the social sciences "is no longer one of methodology nor one that can be conducted as a critique of positivism; it is one of the very social relevance of social science." Across cultures, the need for relevant information has prompted change in research dissemination practices and has led to a performative turn in research. DENZIN (2001) attests that as humans are increasingly connected via technology, they have become increasingly "cinematic," and this cinematic nature requires a social science that both engages and empowers those who are consumers of this research information. [2]

The objectives of this article are to: (1) describe *translational performances* as a form of engaging, empowering, and relevant social science and (2) offer some guidelines for the evaluation of these translational performances. [3]

2. Translating Research

What is social research? The word *research* derives from Middle French and its literal meaning is 'to investigate thoroughly' and can be described as an active, diligent, and systematic process of inquiry aimed at discovering and interpreting knowledge of the social world. This knowledge guides and equips us as individuals and collectives to identify, name, describe, explain, question, and act. Even within the post-positivist emphasis on local knowledge, subjective human experience, and contingencies of truth claims, knowledge can be used to provoke action in our social worlds and address everyday problems. Yet, to do this, researchers must progress beyond knowledge discovery—to the translation and representation of results in ways that are accessible and clear to a variety of audiences. [4]

Sandra PETRONIO (2002, p.508) argued that 21st century scholars must reconceptualize the research enterprise to effectively accomplish translation of scientific research. She argued that contemporary scholars must reconsider current definitions of evidence and develop ways to bring information more effectively to those who desire, who are in need of, and can make use of this scientific knowledge. This is not an isolated movement toward enhancing the relevance of research. Indeed, translational science has become a top priority of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and some of the goals of translational science are to speed up the use of research findings within applied settings, and facilitate partnerships between research, practice, and policy constituencies to

enhance relevance of scientific research (NIH, 2007). As PETRONIO (2007) pointed out, translational research is a "very real 21st century need" (p.216). [5]

According to LOMAS (1993, p.226) *diffusion* is a passive process by which a growing body of information is initially absorbed and acted upon by a small body of highly motivated recipients. While diffusion is a passive process, *dissemination* is a more active process through which target groups are made aware of, receive, accept, and use the information (LOMAS). That is, information is communicated to the target group. Although there is a low probability that a particular journal article would reach a particular individual, community group, or clinical practice by diffusion, *directed diffusion*—the strategically planned efforts to promote, influence, and accelerate the natural dissemination and diffusion processes (ORLANDI, 1996)—may have promise for translational research efforts. Across all of these processes, communication is fundamental. [6]

3. Obstacles to Communicating Research

From a communication perspective, several obstacles exist to hamper dissemination and diffusion of research information. These obstacles include (but are not exclusive to) the clarity of informational content for a non-expert audience and the delivery systems (PETRONIO, 2007, p.216). [7]

Delivery systems are the modes used to deliver information such as an academic journal publication, book, or lecture; whereas *presentation media* include various forms of information such as written text, graphics, photography, or the spoken word. Presenting information in more than one medium, such as photographically and also in writing, is considered a *multi-media presentation*. Unfortunately, much research communication is delivered through static systems using limited and often inadequate media. Written reports to funding agencies as well as academic periodicals are typically not presented in accessible forms for non-experts. The material is often irrelevant or confusing to the non-expert, providing little motivation for them to pay attention to, let alone embrace and use, research findings. WALT (1994) wrote clearly that scholarly reports of research are often "esoteric, opaque and unclear ... and [do] not penetrate beyond narrow academic research circles" (p.235) and, as stated above, failure to provide the general public with research findings in comprehensible formats breeds mistrust toward research output and social scientific research in general. FLEMING (1988) completed a review of studies on the problems of getting research utilized by teachers and his findings revealed a frustration by practitioners regarding the over reliance on quantifiable data which made locating and comprehending findings difficult and often resulted in information overload. Additionally, his review revealed a lack of interest in reading as the sole mode of learning about research. [8]

In addition to the lack of clarity in many written research reports, the overreliance on written texts as the medium used for the delivery of research information is a substantive obstacle. To translate research programs for practical use and reestablish public significance of research for citizens, practitioners, and policy

makers, scholars must make research information usable, relevant, and accessible. I join those before me (e.g., FABES, MARTIN, HANISH & UPDEGRAFF, 2000; PETRONIO, 2002, 2007) who argue that by disseminating research information through multiple systems and using multi-media, researchers can succeed in making research information accessible, relevant, and ultimately more usable. To increase dissemination competence, then, it would behoove the academic community to create diverse products for distinct audiences using multiple delivery systems. [9]

With the increased availability and affordability of digital visual technologies, the contemporary researcher has the tools to triangulate and diversify not only research methods, but research presentations. Researchers can embed video clips, photography and other visual media into (hyper-) textual documents and also embed written texts and visual images into live performance events. These are just a few of the options available to the 21st century researcher. Through media in this digital age we can share experiences of the moment with millions of others—individuals, interest groups and policy makers—leading to communal constructions of (and investments in) the researched phenomena. [10]

DENZIN (2003) argues for a model of social sciences that is performative; performance as the "sixth moment" of qualitative inquiry in which performances exist not merely to describe or explain research, but to advocate for specific ideas. Whereas traditional delivery systems allow a consumer of research to play a passive role, multimedia presentations have the potential to situate the audience member as an active participant in performative ways of knowing, actively constructing knowledge through engagement with media. Performance approaches to knowing, such as "The Inconvenient Truth," insist on audience member involvement. Greater involvement reflects an emotional and cognitive state which results in greater attentiveness, perceptiveness, enhanced information processing, and responsiveness (RUBIN, 1998, p.259). Therefore, translational research promises to result in more robust learning and considered action. One of the most involving, multi-media approaches to the dissemination of research that I have experienced is the translational performance. [11]

4. Translational Performances

There is a long tradition of the term "performance" in academic discourses since the 1970's, with performance ethnographies emerging in disparate fields such as performance studies, sociology, and anthropology in the late 1980's and early 1990's (see the works of BECKER, McCALL, MORRIS & MESHEJIAN, 1989; CONQUERGOOD, 1991; MILLER-RASSULO, 1988; MILLER-RASSULO & HECHT, 1988; SALDANA, 1999; SCHECHNER, 1985; SMITH, 1994). Theatrical performances in the social sciences have been referenced in many ways across the decades, including research-based theater, performance texts, plays, dramatic works, social action theater, and most recently as ethnotheatre and ethnodrama (see SALDANA, 2005). In the late 1990's some scholars argued for a "performative turn" in the social sciences, advocating for the use of performance as a reflexive tool in science (DENZIN, 1997). That is, performance

was not only situated as a mechanism for articulating experience, but also as a site for enacting opposition, critically examining the status quo—including interpretations of research—and shaping and informing policy (DENZIN, 2003). Challenging the pervasive communication-as-transmission model, this performative turn emphasized a communication-as-mutual-construction model wherein the researchers, performers, and audience are active and involved, opening up spaces for critical dialogue. [12]

This model of social science communication framed performance as a method of investigation as well as a mode of research dissemination. Well known performance pieces in this genre that highlight qualitative research include "The Laramie Project" and "The Vagina Monologues." "The Laramie Project" is a play (later adapted to film) written by Moisés KAUFMAN about homophobia and the reaction to the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. The drama is based on over 200 interviews conducted with inhabitants of the town where the crime occurred (TECTONIC THEATER PROJECT, 2007). "The Vagina Monologues," also adapted to film and featured on Home Box Office television, is an Obie Award-winning episodic play written by Eve ENSLER which ran at the off-Broadway interviews she conducted with 200 women about their views on sex, relationships, and violence against women. This play is performed every year during V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls, with a new monologue added each year to highlight a current issue affecting women around the world (RANDOM HOUSE, 2000). Lesser known pieces exist across numerous disciplines and have made bounded, local impacts, sometimes changing lives as well as local practices and policies (for a listing of qualitative and ethnographic works presented in dramatic form see SALDANA, 2005, p.10-14). [13]

As we enter the new millennium, the term "translational performances" recognizes performance as not only a method of investigation and a delivery mode for the dissemination of research, but also as a way to meaningfully apply research discoveries in heuristic ways to important social problems (HECHT & MILLER-DAY, in press). These performances are not limited to qualitative and ethnographic work and can provide more accessible and clearly articulated public explanations of research than can traditional written texts. Moreover, these explanations have the potential to be educational and emancipatory (MIENCZAKOWSKI, 2001, p.470). These considerations are not to suggest that traditional means of dissemination be replaced; on the contrary, scholarly reports continue to teach and inform many who are highly invested in the proliferation of scientific knowledge. Thus, the idea is not to replace current delivery systems and presentation media such as scholarly reports, but to supplement these in a way so that the research story, along with participant's stories, can be convincingly and vividly told to an audience in ways that can enhance the linkages among research, practice, and public policy. [14]

4.1 Illustrations of translational performances



In the late 1980's my colleague Michael HECHT and I were part of a group interested in exploring whether personal narratives could impact prosocial behaviors. Our research endeavors began with collecting personal narratives about a variety of risky behaviors. We analyzed these narrative accounts and translated them into stage performances (see for example, MILLER-RASSULO & HECHT, 1988; MILLER-RASSULO, 1992; MILLER, 1993). Realizing the potential for performance to educate, empower, and disseminate research findings in an engaging fashion, we applied for and received funding for a line of research in the area of substance abuse prevention that continues to this day in Phoenix, Arizona (Grant# RO1 DA2005629, National Institutes of Health/National Institute on Drug Abuse). The simple premise we used to guide our thinking suggested that:

"(1) identifying prototypical adolescent drug offer interaction narratives would reveal the strategies youth utilized to offer as well as resist offers of alcohol and other drugs. Narratives would also uncover underlying cognitive processes through which alcohol and other drug use decisions were made; (2) translating the findings from this basic research into prevention interventions would provide a vehicle through which we could teach adolescents resistance skills. This movement from a basic research endeavor to the development of drug prevention interventions marked the advent of our translational process" (HECHT & MILLER-DAY, in press). [15]

The analysis of the narrative data yielded a typology of four core resistance strategies, represented through the acronym *REAL*, and included refuse (simple no), explain (no with an explanation), avoid (avoid the offer or the place where the offer will be made), and leave (leave the place) (MILLER, ALBERTS, HECHT, TROST & KRIZEK, 2000, p.57). The four resistance strategy types—along with the representative stories that illustrated each strategy—provided the foundation for developing a "customized" intervention for the youth in this school district. The indigenous narratives were the essential device used to develop a curriculum that would teach influence resistance skills and decision making, in an effort to alter student norms and expectations, and ultimately reduce substance abuse. [16]

Based on these narratives, our initial translational performance media, titled *Killing Time* (RASSULO, 1990) was scripted in two ways; one script was a stageplay designed for live performance and the other a screenplay that was shot on video via a subcontract with a video production company (MILLER et al., 2000, p.160). Not surprisingly to us, in a study of the effectiveness of each modality to involve the audience and adjust attitudes, we discovered that the most involving and effective modality was the live performance when accompanied by post-performance discussion (HECHT, CORMAN, & MILLER-RASSULO, 1993, p.85).

Over the past decade, however, with the advent and accessibility of digital technology, we have subsequently moved toward the production of a series of digital films, scripted, filmed, and edited by the high school students who are our co-researchers in this project. The resulting films comprise the [keepin' it REAL series](#).



Central to the translational process was working closely with key stakeholders interested in substance use issues in the community, such as teachers, students, and school administration. We found it helpful to solicit the feedback and involvement of individuals who were aware of the research process, who had an investment in the research topic, and these included both formal and informal contacts. Feedback was solicited at all phases of the research process through focus group and individual discussions. We discovered that when people were involved during the data collection as well as the scripting phases, there was more investment in accessing and using the research. In consultation with the students and production staff, we produced the series of videotapes which included an introduction to the *keepin' it REAL* curriculum and taught, through narrative example and stimulated recall, each of the four REAL refusal strategies. To date, the DRS project has produced nine films in both English and Spanish, garnering awards that include four regional Emmy awards and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) has selected *keepin' it REAL* as a "model program" for its National Registry of Effective Prevention Programs (HECHT & MILLER-DAY, in press). [17]

4.1.1 Homework: An ethnodrama

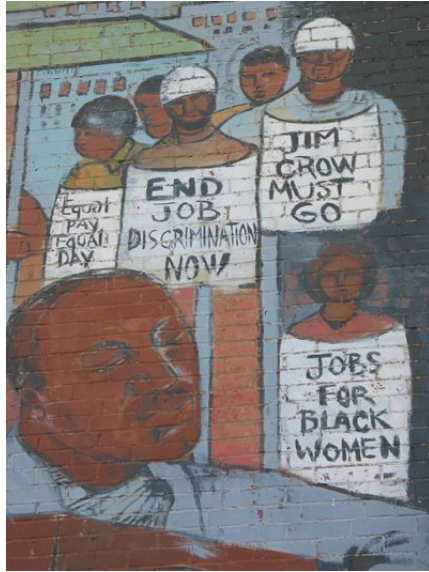
In contrast to the multi-year Drug Resistance Strategies Project discussed above, is an ethnodrama written for an ethnotheatre project in the urban area of Harrisburg, PA entitled, "HOMEwork." In 2004 I embarked on a project to

investigate the experiences of working poor mothers and their middle school children; specifically inquiring about how low wage work and family processes shaped their day-to-day lives. Based on interviews with 100 working mothers and at least one of their adolescent children, [HOMEwork](#) represents not only the voices of the women and children, but those of social service providers and community activists. [18]

For this translational performance I enlisted the assistance of a board of advisors whom I refer to as my co-researchers. These advisors included working poor mothers as well as social service providers and church leaders from the community. In the script we wanted to (re)present the rich data collected through the community-based interviews as well as the information gathered in our quantitative assessments. Therefore, the script was developed to highlight the most significant findings of the quantitative assessments as well as illustrate the experiences of the families in this study. Ultimately, our goals were to engage a variety of individuals in the final ethnotheatre event in order to disseminate the findings of our research, involve the participating families in this dissemination process, and hopefully impact local policies and practices based on our findings. Since Harrisburg is the Capitol of Pennsylvania we had a unique opportunity to invite and include state legislators as well as local officials in this performance event. [19]

The final script and presentation of [HOMEwork](#) was a compilation of multiple media including photographs ...





... music (DAY, 2005)



... video clips (MILLER-DAY, 2007), as well quantitative findings to reveal the experiences of the families struggling to manage low wage work and family and also some of the challenges experienced by the community in providing services for these families. [Click on the arrow to see the first few minutes of the show.]



An important part of this translational performance was the proposal of four action steps for the local community. As JONES (2006, p.341) pointed out, these kinds of performances are acts of agency for community members. As I outline in MILLER-DAY (in press), action steps are often articulated in ethnotheatre, requiring concrete action for purposes of change. The four action steps articulated in "*HOMework*" included:

- Increase funding for more structured and fun after-school activities for the 11-13 age group.
- Coordinate and share more information with low-income households about services available to them and how those services can be of assistance.
- Increase oversight of the housing authority: Reinstate funding for the liaison officer to patrol section 8 housing.
- Support the Healthy Family Act.¹ [20]

When involving community members and gatekeepers of policy and practices that might be challenged in the performance, action steps provide an opportunity for dialogue and an impetus for change. The audience for "*HOMework*" consisted of community members, research participants and their families, social service providers, and members of both local and state government and, wonderfully, at the end of the show, the audience was then involved in a post-performance discussion of the issues. As DENZIN's (2003) book suggests, by involving all of these parties, performances are a way for connecting the personal, pedagogical and political, making sites of oppression visible, and making an emancipatory commitment to community action. [21]

Of the four action steps proposed in the performance of "*HOMework*," there was measurable change in the first three. For example, as explained in MILLER-DAY (in press), the third action step in "*HOMework*" was to "Increase oversight of the housing authority: Reinstate funding for the liaison officer to patrol section 8 housing." Essentially, a proliferation of violence and drug use threatened families living in section 8 housing. As a result, mothers were constantly distracted from work with concerns for their children and the children partook in very little outside play or exercise due to the threatening environment. The children living in these housing projects shut themselves into their homes and watched television for the majority of the day between school and when their mothers returned from work. Decision makers linked to the housing authority and also members of the local police community were present at the performances of "*HOMework*" and, in addition, project staff submitted 30 DVD's of the performance to local and state officials within 2 weeks of the initial performance. As a result, within a 6 week period funding was reinstated for a liaison officer and—to the relief of the residents—police protection for public housing was back in place in the community. This is just one instance of change that resulted from community

1 The Healthy Family Act is legislation designed to guarantee a minimum of number of paid sick days to all workers in firms of 15 or more. Seventy-five percent of low-wage workers and more than 59 million workers in the United States have no paid sick leave (BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, 2004).

members' voices being heard, but as reported in MILLER-DAY (in press), this change resulted in empowerment and hope for the community members. [22]

5. Guidelines for Evaluation

As we enter the 21st century, people are more inundated with information from all angles across a variety of delivery systems than ever before. To compete with the information overload most people experience, social scientists would be wise to accomplish translational research in ways that will reach those who might make use of the scientific knowledge. Whether translational performances are the delivery mode and whether or not multi-media are used in these translational efforts, PETRONIO (2007, p.216) proposed five types of translational validity that professionals might use to evaluate translational work: experience validity, responsive validity, relevance validity, cultural validity, and tolerance validity. She explained that *experience validity* is making certain that researchers account for the lived experiences of those being studied, including participant's histories and personal practices. She argued that in order to achieve translation, researchers must position their data within this larger framework in order to enhance identification with social research. *Responsive validity* takes into account how communication influences and is influenced by the act of conducting and translating research. The acknowledgment and discussion of how researchers are responsive to this is also warranted in dissemination efforts. Through *relevance validity*, she argues, researchers must always take into consideration the relevance of their data for any given target population. Certain information will be relevant to some audiences and not others, and translation practices should be guided by this relevance. Through *cultural validity*, PETRONIO argues that translators can only successfully yield functional practices by taking into account the role of customs, routines, and values within the cultural context. Finally, through *tolerance validity*, translators usher research into practice only when recognizing and honoring (rather than imposing on or challenging) existing patterns. [23]

Beyond validity, there are also three sites at which meanings are made in translational communication efforts: the site of the *creation* of the performance (What were the processes of creation? Who was involved? Whose voices are honored? What was included and excluded?), the site of the *production itself* (What occurred during the presentation? How closely was the script adhered to? Was there technical difficulty? Was this a monologue or a dialogue?), and the site where it is seen by or intersects with an *audience* (Who was the audience? Is this an audience who can be empowered by this information? What was their involvement? Their attitudes? Their participation? How did text and audience come together to inform each other?) In assessing translational communication efforts in social science, to fully understand the processes and outcomes of these efforts, it may be warranted to examine these efforts at each of these sites. [24]

Following the lead of AL GORE and "An Inconvenient Truth," it is my hope that social science in the 21st century is increasingly performative. From GORE's work and the innovative work of other scholars, we should strive toward a science

that utilizes any number of effective dissemination tools, such as drama, photography, music, dance, poetry and other media—indeed these should become a common part of any contemporary researcher's investigative and dissemination toolbox (JONES, 2006, p.341). A science that pushes beyond the current status quo, strives toward an engaging, relevant, empowering social science, and recognizes the importance of disseminating scientific research to build stronger links between the science and the social—serving those for whom we do the science. [25]

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Videos

Video_1: <http://www.youtube.com/v/IWNhJ5EF8Z4&hl=en> (425 x 355)

Video_2: <http://www.youtube.com/v/1YL7itmAn4> (425 x 355)

Audio_1: http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-08/08-2-54_audio.mp3

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