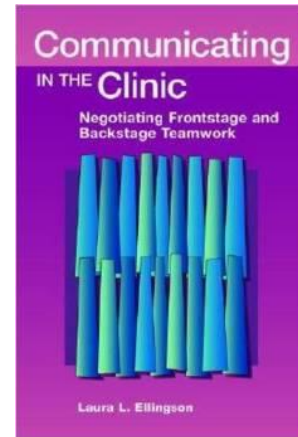


Laura Ellingson, **Communicating in the Clinic: Negotiating Frontstage and Backstage Teamwork**, Hampton Press, New York, 2005, 292 pp., \$26.50 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Timothy E. Martin, Jr.
Washington State University, USA

Many studies have examined how doctors and patients interact and communicate. Medical school students receive training in how to properly communicate with and evaluate patients. These types of studies view communication as the process through which information is transmitted to and from the patient. However, few studies have been initiated to examine how team members within medical clinics communicate with each other away from patients. Laura Ellingson's *Communicating in the Clinic* is an ethnographic study that provides a richer understanding of how medical team members communicate. Her interpretive ethnographic approach challenges positivist thinking by advocating that qualitative research methods have a place in generating knowledge and understanding of communicative interaction. Thus her book promotes qualitative research as a viable approach for examining communication within medical clinics.



The author examined how medical teams communicate by immersing herself in two years of ethnographic study. Ethnography—also referred to as participant observation or fieldwork—includes personal observation that is documented in extensive field notes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Those engaged in ethnographic study write about what they see, hear, feel, smell, and taste (Ellingson, 2009). This type of study incorporates interviews, discourse analysis, discussion groups, observation, and field notes as aspects of research inquiry. Ethnography “refers to social scientific description of people and the culture basis of their peoplehood” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 40). In addition, ethnography is “primarily a process that attempts to describe and interpret social expressions between people and groups” (Berg, 2001, p. 134).

Ellingson explains that she chose this research method to “look holistically at content, process, language, and behavior in a medical context, rather than simply identifying or counting types of communicative practices of patients, physicians, or other health care providers” (p. 11). She also takes a grounded theory approach in the book. Typically a grounded theory study gives primacy to process rather than setting (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory researchers use “basic grounded theory guidelines such as coding, memo-writing, and sampling for theory development, and comparative methods are, in many ways, neutral” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9).

The author’s objective in utilizing an interpretive methodological framework is to produce thick description of “naturally occurring phenomena through the construction of richly detailed accounts that shed light on complexities of daily communication” (p. 13). Those who approach scholarly work from the

interpretive paradigm are interested in explanations that are rich in detail. Geertz (1973) compares ethnography to reading a manuscript that is "foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (p. 26). Interpretivists are also interested in thick description—therefore ethnography as a methodological framework is an effective way to receive large amounts of qualitative data that provide description.

Ellingson provides multiple methods of analysis to contribute to crystallization within this work. Originally this concept was referred to as triangulation. However, Richardson (2000) proposed the term crystallization to better explain the actual process. Crystallization involves multiple forms of data that adds validity to research, and it is through crystallization Ellingson establishes the validity of her research. Ellingson believes the "inclusion of multiple accounts enables readers not only to experience teamwork from varied angles, but also to consider the relationship between the style and content of writing" (p. 14). She includes the three genres of narrative ethnography, grounded theory analysis, and autoethnography and how these accounts represented team members, the patients, and herself (p. 14).

The author explains that " 'doing' narrative ethnography involves collecting the data, making sense of them, and then writing about them; these processes do not occur in a linear fashion, but are interwoven" (p. 155). The quest for researchers to understand first-hand the perspectives of those they observe has established participant observation as a way to achieve human understanding. To enhance crystallization in this work, Ellingson engages in autoethnography. She becomes the main character by providing a narrative and story of her personal journey as a patient at the medical clinic. This method requires an author to be critical and reflexive of his or her own interpretations, and provides personal insight into the context and relationships observed. By exploring multiple forms of qualitative analysis, Ellingson provides crystallization of the data and therefore validates her research.

Prior to her grounded theory analysis, the author delves into the investigation of relevant literature—including sections on health care teams and backstage of health care. First, while examining the literature on health care teams, she observes that previous research has been primarily focused "on the frontstage of medical care-physician-patient interaction" (p. 56), and has ignored or avoided communication happening away from the patients and between the medical practitioners themselves. Ellingson utilizes Goffman's (1959) concept of frontstage and backstage communication as her model for discovering a deeper understanding of communication among medical professionals. She emphasizes that effective communication is vitally important to teamwork and examines communicative interactions within a specific clinical team. She explains that by utilizing a bona fide group perspective she "sought to uncover ways in which team members engaged in teamwork outside of meetings, addressing the following research question: What are the communication processes among team members in the clinic backstage?" (p. 57).

Ellingson's ethnographic approach to communications research in a clinical setting is an example of the type of research she is advocating. Her blending of multiple modes of analysis provides a crystallized examination of communication within one particular context. In doing so, Ellingson is demonstrating crystallization through interpretive methods as a viable and legitimate procedure for

engaging in research. Positivist scholars might disagree with Ellingson's approach to research presented in this book. However, it is difficult to disagree with the fact that this study adds depth of understanding to a communicative process that is typically ignored by positivist scholars.

References

- Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2005). *Communicating in the clinic*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2009). Ethnography in applied communication research. In L. R. Frey & K. N. Cissna (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of applied communication research* (pp. 129–152). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: NY. Basic Books.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923–943). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Vidich, A. J., & Lyman, S.M. (2000). Qualitative methods: Their history in sociology and anthropology. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 34–84). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.