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Meetings: A cultural perspective

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We draw on Helen Schwartzman's seminal work on meetings to make the case for studying meetings and studying them from a cultural perspective. In a global context marked by the increasing interdependence of social groups of all sizes, scholars need ways to study and interpret local phenomena; a cultural approach to meetings provides a means for discovering local practices and theories of communication, and for enabling cross-cultural comparison to generate empirically grounded multi-cultural perspectives. After reviewing how scholars have used Schwartzman's work, we revisit her scheme for studying meetings and demonstrate how it orients researchers to local cultural practices and processes. To illustrate the kind of theoretical innovation that can follow from the application of her scheme, we reformulate her work on the relationship between meetings and social order to argue that egalitarianism and hierarchy should be theorized as strategic communicative accomplishments that serve the locally relevant social ends of some or all meeting participants.

Keywords: culture; ethnography of communication; meetings; sense making; hierarchy; social interaction

A US American professor presents, with the help of a translator, a taller *(a capacity-building workshop) on raising the quality of the coffee harvest to members of a Nicaraguan coffee cooperative. The workshop trains participants about a strategy for fermenting coffee, but it is also a sales pitch: the professor wants some cooperative members to adapt the strategy and collect data as part of her research project. The professor will present eight points for getting high-quality coffee. She notes that although the cooperative members participating in the workshop are probably familiar with these points she wants to talk about them from her experience. After she explains several strategies for ensuring quality picking (the first point), a Nicaraguan agronomist offers a comment about other strategies for quality picking: having a supervisor watch over the harvest and provide feedback, providing incentives, and retaining past workers. A cooperative member next to him chimes in: provide better food. The professor responds to this, 'yes,* otra pregunta *[another question]?' In the next two hours, the workshop slowly unravels as participants tune out and stop interacting with the presenter. The translator tries, unsuccessfully, to reframe several of the professors' comments to help facilitate more interaction. But, eventually, the participants stop participating. By all accounts, the meeting goes poorly.*

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This ethnographic vignette is based on the first author's fieldwork in Nicaragua. Discourse scholars reading this vignette may easily imagine the interactional problems created when someone labels comments/stories/suggestions as questions. Critical discourse analysts may attend to the power relationships enacted and reinforced in even this brief description. Sociolinguists may suggest the significance of a translator reframing comments during direct translation. In this short scene, there are multiple discursive problems that can be analyzed and interpreted – issues of translation, adjacency pairs, frame alignment, and more.

But if the US American professor wanted to make a better presentation – or, if the professor wanted to understand why the workshop failed on multiple levels – we would suggest that useful insights might come not just from analyzing the observable sequence of interaction but instead asking: what are the local means and meanings of conducting meetings in this culture? That is, we think she would benefit from a cultural understanding of meetings in this local context. Understanding the local norms for meetings – and the ways that she violated them – would help this professor better adapt her approach to Nicaraguan cultural norms and understand the reactions of workshop participants. For example, a cultural approach would identify how her expectations for her role in the workshop (present expert information and answer questions) did not match participant expectations (to engage in a dialogue exchanging experiences and learning from each other), and why Nicaraguan participants resisted her prompts for audience questions as a result. Instead, understanding a local preference for exchanges between respected equals who come together to make decisions might lead her to designing the workshop to focus on interaction rather than presenting information from her perspective as an expert.

More broadly, we argue that scholars would benefit from studying meetings from a cultural perspective. For us, a cultural approach grounded in the ethnography of communication necessarily orients scholars to local means and meanings for communicative action. As such, it provides an alternative to traditions such as critical discourse analysis that often ignore, deny, or explain away local historical and cultural conditions (Shi-xu 2009). In a global context marked by the increasing interdependence of social groups of all sizes, scholars need ways to study and interpret local phenomena that do not fit universal, Western theories of discursive conduct (Shi-xu 2011). We offer a cultural approach to meetings that provides a means for discovering local practices and theories of communication, and enabling cross-cultural comparison to generate empirically grounded multi-cultural perspectives.

We draw on Helen Schwartzman's (1989) seminal work on meetings to make the case for studying meetings and studying them from a cultural perspective. We begin by briefly looking at how scholars have used and cited her work in the 20 years since it was published. We then revisit her scheme for studying meetings and demonstrate how it prompts researchers to attend to local cultural practices and processes rather than presume Western theories of communication processes. As such, her heuristic offers scholars a means for discovering local practices and using them to generate theory from non-Western contexts. In line with our orientation to discovering local practices, we turn to Schwartzman's cross-cultural observation that the sense-making function can be expected to dominate in egalitarian sociocultural settings and that the social-validating function dominates in hierarchical settings. Drawing on empirical research, we reorient this observation to argue that the key variable is not whether a setting is egalitarian or hierarchical. Instead, we suggest that from a

cultural-analytic perspective on communication in group life it is more productive to regard 'sense-making' as an identifiable communication process used as a resource to enact an egalitarian relationship among (some) participants and to consider 'social validation' as a separate process used to enact social hierarchy among participants. This reorientation, we argue, is key to the study of discourse in multi-cultural societies because it focuses scholarly attention on communication processes rather than pre-existing notions about typical social arrangements.

Helen Schwartzman's work on meetings

In *The Meeting: Gatherings in Organizations and Communities*, Schwartzman (1989) argued that the significance of meetings had been severely underappreciated in the study of groups and organizations. Her conceptual definition of meetings focused on interaction:

> A meeting is defined as a communicative event involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group, for example, to exchange ideas or opinions, to solve a problem, to make a decision or negotiate an agreement, to develop policy and procedures, to formulate recommendations, and so forth. A meeting is characterized by multiparty talk that is episodic in nature, and participants either develop or use specific conventions (e.g. Roberts' Rules of Order) for regulating this talk. (7)

Schwartzman argued that *the meeting* ought to be viewed as a complex phenomenon itself, a topic of research rather than a tool, a coincidental setting, or a context for research. As Schwartzman explained, 'Meetings may be the form that generates and maintains the organization as an entity and one that also influences the work and goals of individuals and an organization or community in ways that may be totally unanticipated and unintended' (86).

By researching the form and function of meetings, Schwartzman (1989) argued, scholars can understand meetings as sense-making and culture-validating forms that can illuminate the social and cultural systems in which they are located and that sometimes function as sites of a group's transformation. Her comparative review of ethnographic accounts from diverse cultures buttressed her theoretical argument about the relationships among meetings, culture, and society.

Schwartzman's book has been widely cited in research on meetings across disciplines and research traditions, including qualitative and quantitative studies in anthropology, communication, sociology, psychology, engineering, and business. However, more often than not, references to her work disregard the theoretical and methodological focus on cultural variation. Most frequently, scholars note her initial call for studying meetings as a topic in their own right (e.g. Luong and Rogelberg 2005; Rogelberg et al. 2006) because meetings had been under-researched (e.g. Bluedown, Turban, and Love 1999; Nixon and Littlepage 1992).

Schwartzman (1989) is noted for identifying a range of meeting formats (e.g. Olson et al. 1992), including identifying differences between gatherings and structured meetings (Gastil et al. 2008), scheduled versus spontaneous meetings (Rogelberg et al. 2006), and lecture-style versus collaborative meetings (Bluedown, Turban, and Love 1999). This diversity of meeting formats suggests a diverse set of functions that meetings can play for particular groups, organizations, and communities, including how meetings function as: rituals (Peck et al. 2009); places to play,

display, and bid for status (Owens 2000; Sutton and Hargadon 1996), discover information, create, and learn (Solomon 2002), maintain tradition and learn new practices (Eisenberg, Murphy, and Andrews 1998); and as sites of sense-making, identity performances, discursive closures, and construction and legitimation of action plans (Kuhn and Jackson 2008). Scholars credit Schwartzman for demonstrating that particular phenomena are key to understanding meetings, including informational aspects of groups (Pinsonneault and Kraemer 1990), small talk (Mullany 2006), and the importance of pre-meeting interactions (Abdat, Atkinson, and Pervan 2000).

In sum, this review suggests that Schwartzman (1989) remains a key citation for research on meetings, and that scholars continue to build on the concepts and arguments about forms and functions of meetings articulated in her book. Despite a resurgence of research on meetings (see special issues of *Small Group Research* and *Journal of Business Communication* on meetings), few scholars draw on her work as a means of understanding the diversity of communicative resources for accomplishing meetings and relevant social relations. We argue that her heuristic scheme can be used to analyze meetings from a cultural perspective, which provides a means for generating 'genuine theoretical innovation' (Shi-xu 2011, 211) from non-Western contexts.

A scheme for studying meetings

Schwartzman conducted several years of ethnographic observation before she discovered that a focus on meetings gave her traction to understand the organization and how members understood it. Once she discovered a focus on meetings, Schwartzman needed an analytical guide for studying them. She adapted anthropologist Dell Hymes's SPEAKING framework (1972, 1974) to study meetings. In this section, we review the justification for Hymes's original framework, introduce Schwartzman's scheme, and demonstrate how Schwartzman's scheme can attend to local practices and generate theoretical insights.

Schwartzman (1989) drew heavily on Hymes's (1972, 1974) SPEAKING scheme to develop a framework for studying meetings. Hymes's scheme was intended as a heuristic framework that could be used in field studies to identify local ways of speaking and to account for their component parts. Field researchers, according to Hymes (1972), needed 'a way to *see* data as ways of speaking'; thus, an etic framework represented a conceptual tool that could increase the 'observational adequacy' of fieldworkers' descriptive accounts of speaking in diverse situations (51). We argue that Schwartzman's scheme provides scholars studying meetings with a *way to see meetings and beyond them* – that is, to see the communication processes enacted in and sustained by meetings. For Schwartzman, this focus on meetings provides a means for understanding the relationship between macro-level and micro-level processes in groups, organizations, and communities. This adaptation of Hymes' framework is particularly valuable for scholars focused on meetings and meeting dynamics but not familiar with socio-linguistics.

Following Hymes (1974), Schwartzman's (1989) scheme is based on the presumption that meetings are *speech events*, temporally bounded activities governed by rules and norms for communication. She offered seven components for studying meetings as speech events: participants, channels and codes, frame, meeting talk (including topic and results, norms of speaking and interaction, oratorical genres and styles, interest, and participation), norms of interpretation, goals and outcomes,

and meeting cycles and patterns. Drawing on her ethnographic research, she suggested several combinations of these components that may be of particular interest to organizational scholars. This scheme and her suggestions of key relationships are outlined in Figure 1. By developing specific components relevant

Event components

Participants: people who interact during a meeting, including roles (e.g. speaker, receiver), relationships between participants, and responsibilities to each other and outside constituencies

Channels and codes: channels for communication (e.g. speaking, writing, singing) and codes (linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, etc.) that may or may not be shared by all participants

Frame: process that signals the beginning and end of the meeting

Meeting talk

Topic and results: what the meeting is about from the participants' perspective; the types of results expected from a meeting (e.g. that meetings produce decisions or meetings result in consensus)

Norms of speaking and interaction: processes for determining how and when people speak, including turn-taking, decision rules, meeting chairs, and formal protocols

Oratorical genres and styles: occurrence of specific forms of speech (e.g. jokes, proverbs, prayers) and styles of speaking (e.g. indirect or direct speech)

Interest and participation: the means, sanctions, and rewards used to encourage participation, interest, and involvement in the speech event

Norms of interpretation: processes for interpreting what happens in meetings, including how meetings are compared to other communicative events

Goals and outcomes: goals refer to interactional goals individuals may have for specific meetings (e.g. hire their candidate); outcomes occur in general from the standpoint of the community, organization, or culture (e.g. cohesion)

Meeting cycles and patterns: relationships between different types and forms of meetings

Component combinations

Negotiating a meeting (participants, setting, topics)
A meeting setting (setting, channel)
Meeting arrivals and departures (participants and setting)
Meeting frame (frame, participants, goals, and outcomes)
Meeting talk (participants, topics, norms of speaking and interaction, goals)
Participation and interest
Postmeetings (norms of interpretation)

Figure 1. Schwartzman's scheme for studying meetings.

to meetings as a particular type of speech event, Schwartzman's scheme aids analysis and theorizing meetings beyond Hymes' original framework.

We argue that the utility of Schwartzman's scheme for scholars studying meetings comes from the way that the framework can be used to categorize naturally occurring meetings into constitutive sociocultural components. Such analysis allows researchers to develop nuanced and empirically sound understandings of *how the social life of groups unfolds in the context of meetings, and how meetings act to create, maintain, or transform group life*. Schwartzman's framework provides a way to move from seeing meetings as a source of data to descriptively and interpretatively analyzing meetings as key sociocultural phenomena.

First, this scheme can be used as a heuristic to see components of meetings. The basic advantage of this heuristic is that it points scholars to see *what* is being accomplished in a meeting and *how* it gets accomplished beyond the topical substance of meeting talk. Group scholars primed to see meetings as data sources often have experience *listening* to meeting talk to gain insight on organizational perspectives or conflicts between members. Notably, Schwartzman's framework situates meeting talk as one of the *several* related components that researchers should consider when they study meetings. Furthermore, it classifies the topic of discussion as the only one factor of understanding *meeting talk* even though in some cases, it is not even the most important factor. When a meeting is understood as a speech event, meeting talk is as much about the norms of interaction or the means of cultivating and regulating participation as it is about the topic of conversation. A scholar studying the opening vignette about the Nicaraguan workshop might ask: what means, sanctions, and rewards used to encourage participation in the workshop did the US American professor use, and how did these means compare to local norms of speaking and interaction? This scheme can also be used to tease out different cultural rules and norms for speaking being used by interlocutors (see Philipsen 2000 for a model). Analytically, the conceptual categories are flexible enough to analyze meetings across different social scenes, from organizational meetings (such as the US health-care organization that Schwartzman studied) to community meetings in non-Western societies (such as polyvocal Xavante meetings, where participants rely on multiple speakers to weave together their asides and comments into cohesive statements, as examined by Graham [1993]).

Second, researchers can use the scheme to categorize fieldnotes or transcripts of meetings. In field research on meetings, this initial step provides a means for seeing meetings within organizational life in two respects. First, Schwartzman's (1989) scheme pushes field researchers to identify diverse forms of meetings that occur in local settings. For instance in the first author's research of a Nicaraguan coffee cooperative, initial analysis identified a descriptive typology of local meetings ranging from the general assembly (*asamblea general*) to capacity-building seminars (*talleres*) to staff meetings (*reuniones de técnicos*). Beyond this basic move, the scheme is used to identify component parts of meetings. For instance, a general assembly differs from a capacity-building seminar in some obvious ways in terms of its components. For example, a general assembly, consisting of elected representatives, is the formal decision-making body for the cooperative, and participants expect that key decisions will be made during the meeting that then can be communicated to member cooperatives via delegates. Capacity-building seminars, by contrast, create opportunities for members of the cooperative to learn about an agricultural technology or social topic from outside experts. These differences among various

genres of meetings bring into view different configurations of social relations among participants.

The scheme also helps researchers identify meeting dynamics that do not fit Western notions of proper meeting behavior. For example, side-conversations were tolerated – including side conversations that moved to a separate room and involved up to half of the participants – as long as the topic of conversation was different from the general topic at hand. However, when side-conversations during a general assembly were about the current agenda item, side-conversations were sanctioned because everyone had a right to hear relevant thoughts about the topic being discussed. As an etic framework, the scheme becomes a lens to see separate components of meetings as events and their potential relationships, enabling scholars to attend to local practices and use them to theorize meetings.

In sum, Schwartzman's (1989) scheme can inspire cultural research on meeting communication and meetings in three ways. First, it helps researchers analyze meeting communication by identifying constitutive component parts of meetings. Second, the analysis helps researchers learn about the sociocultural life of the specific group conducting the meeting. Third, having identified components, researchers can compare different or similar types of meetings across cultures. Understanding how participants accomplish their participation in meetings reveals much about the social order of the group's life. In turn, as we discuss in the following section, these practices can generate new theoretical insight guided by local practices rather than Western theories or expectations.

The function of meetings across cultures

Schwartzman's (1989) central contribution to the study of meetings is that she called attention to the meeting as an isolable communication practice whose forms and functions vary across cultural contexts, and her scheme allows researchers insight into the social order of natural groups. In this section, we would like to illustrate the kind of theoretical innovation that can follow from the application of her scheme. We do this, somewhat ironically, by challenging one of Schwartzman's own tentative theoretical claims about the relationship between the functions of meetings and the cultural context in which participants make use of those functions. We argue that by focusing too much on pre-conceived models of social relations, Schwartzman neglected participants' strategic choices between meeting functions and, thereby, overlooked some of the dynamics of how groups accomplish and enact social order.

Schwartzman (1989) highlighted three central functions of meetings in groups and organizations. First, she argued, meetings' sense-making function provides meeting participants with opportunities to create and recreate the social system they are members of, including their social relationships. Second, meetings' social and cultural validating function allows group members to interpret and evaluate their existing social relationships. Third, the transformative function allows participants to change the existing social system. Toward the end of her book, Schwartzman adopted an 'admittedly difficult distinction' (279) between egalitarian and hierarchical societies from Myers and Brenneis (1984) to identify culturally specific tendencies in how members of cultural communities use the first and second functions of meetings. According to the distinction, egalitarian societies typically tend to place emphasis on the political autonomy of social actors, whereas hierarchical societies tend to take for granted relationships of subordination and

superordination among social actors. Reflecting on the link between the function of meetings and cultural context, Schwartzman put forth the following observation of a cross-cultural pattern:

> Meetings occur in both egalitarian and hierarchical societies, but their frequency and patterns and cycles appear to be accomplishing different things for the groups involved. Preliminary observations suggest that in egalitarian societies, the sense-making function of meetings dominates as each event becomes the place for individuals to constitute and create their social system. In hierarchical societies, the social validating function of meetings is stressed as meetings become one of several *carriers* of the social structure and culture for participants, interrelating them in such a way so as to continually reproduce the system in the multiple and nested arrangements of the meeting groups. (307)

The identification of cross-culturally relevant patterns in the function of meetings is an important contribution to the study of group interaction. We, however, have doubts that the distinction between egalitarian and hierarchical societies can shed enough light on the nature and function of meetings and meeting discourse. Empirical cases challenge Schwartzman's (1989) working theory in two important ways. First, Brison (1989) demonstrated through research of Kwanga meetings that the types and functions of meetings Schwartzman associated with egalitarian societies are also found in communities with more hierarchical leadership. Second, this distinction is further complicated by societies that are not easily described either as egalitarian or hierarchical. Consider, for example, Bloch's (1971) classic account of council meetings among the Merina of Madagascar, where elders are admired and seen as important sources of wisdom. Council meetings feature intense competition for relative prestige among the elders and for the status of elder itself. One feature of these gatherings that often functions as the site of competition is the long, ornate speech, one that a true elder must be able to give without interruption. Should an elder, or a person aspiring to be an elder, not command the attention of other meeting participants or deflect occasional jokes at the speaker's expense he or she loses his or her status.

Schwartzman's (1989) distinction and Bloch's (1971) account do not adequately answer the question whether the Merina are a hierarchical or an egalitarian society. Outside the council meeting, the status of Merina elders as sources of great wisdom seems unquestionable to communal members; council meetings, however, create opportunities for the intense negotiation of that status. Likewise, Van Praet (2009) demonstrated conflicting pulls between norms and functions in team meetings in a British embassy, such that meetings had an explicit requirement and norm of solidarity, yet those meetings functioned to affirm the Ambassador's status and position. Graham (1993) also noted contradictory tensions in *wara* meetings in the Amazon, explaining that these meetings simultaneously recreated domination on age and gender lines while promoting social cohesion among senior male participants.

Based on these empirical cases, we suggest that there is little to be learned about communication in meetings from comparing meetings in hierarchical and egalitarian societies by focusing on the typical *form of social organization*. This is not to say that Schwartzman's (1989) comparative analysis has no merit but that her theory-building on the basis of that analysis requires reformulation. A close look at these cases and Schwartzman's analysis supports the claim that egalitarianism and hierarchy are better theorized as *strategic communicative accomplishments* that serve the locally

relevant social ends of some or all meeting participants. For example, Schwartzman's analyses of group interaction in meetings at Midwest suggest that, at times, enacting hierarchy matters more to participants, whereas at other times, meeting attendees seek to foster egalitarian relations.

What does not seem to vary, however, is that when meeting participants display an interest in enacting egalitarianism, they accomplish that by engaging in what Schwartzman refers to as sense making (i.e. creating the local system of social relations); and when they are seen to enact hierarchy, they rely on the cultural-validating function of the meeting (i.e. they reflect on, assess, and evaluate existing social relations). In sum, rigidly categorizing a group or society as having an egalitarian or hierarchical social order neglects a fundamental aspect of social order – namely, that the accomplishment of that order is founded upon the strategic use of locally available cultural resources (Carbaugh 1988; Wieder and Pratt 1990). We advocate that scholars should look for evidence of when and how groups construct egalitarian and hierarchical social order in particular cultural contexts. In turn, we suggest that Schwartzman's work gives us a productive way to study the relationship between meetings and social order. The sense-making function of meetings helps groups enact egalitarianism; the social-validating function of meetings helps groups construct and reinforce hierarchy.

Conclusion

In the opening ethnographic vignette, the US American professor saw it fit to structure the meeting in this way: first, the expert gives a presentation, then she engages in a question and answer session with the audience. In the US, this interactional format offers opportunities for the enactment of egalitarian social relationships between the expert and audience members by creating space for tough questions and exchange toward the end of the meeting. However, the selection of such a format violated the local preference for enacting egalitarianism through dialogue, an interactional format that requires *all* workshop participants to offer a wider variety of speech acts – telling stories, commenting, asking questions, giving advice, and posing critiques. In an increasingly globalized world, the vignette serves as a reminder of the danger of relying unreflectively on one's own cultural norms in unfamiliar cultural settings.

Scholars should heed the same warning: if cultural norms are imbedded in our discourse theories, we may fail to understand non-Western practices. As a corrective to this potential folly, we offer a cultural approach to studying meetings as a means of orienting scholars to the local, as opposed to supposedly universal, meanings of meeting discourse.

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