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The Ethnographer of Communication at the Table: Building Cultural Competence, Designing Strategic Action

Leah Sprain & David Boromisza-Habashi

Ethnographers of communication are increasingly working within interdisciplinary teams to address social problems in communities, corporations, and governments. This special forum brings together ethnographers of communication to reflect on the opportunities, tensions, and challenges involved in using the ethnography of communication to seek workable solutions to social problems with fellow scholars, practitioners, and community members. Through empirical case studies, contributors demonstrate how the ethnography of communication is used to build cultural competence and design strategic action.

Keywords: *Ethnography of Communication; Applied Research; Cultural Communication; Communication Competence*

This forum brings together ethnographers of communication to systematically reflect on their intellectual and social role(s) when doing applied work with communities, corporations, interdisciplinary teams, and governments. Following common practice within EC (the ethnography of communication, also called the ethnography of speaking), these observations are grounded in empirical case studies wherein ethnographers make applied moves and conduct applied research. Rather than report research findings, each of these cases provides a context for the authors to reflect on the opportunities, tensions, and challenges they encountered when in the applied mode. Together the contributions to this special forum provide cases that help us reflect on the contribution of EC research to applied projects, and offer

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heuristics to ethnographers of communication for making informed decisions regarding how to contribute to applied communication research.

The EC tradition has developed a rich repertoire of theory and methods for discovering the *means of communication and their meanings to those who use and experience them*. Rather than review the theory complex associated with EC (see Philipsen & Coutu, 2005), this special forum focuses on the intellectual and social position of the ethnographer of communication working in applied contexts—the full range of issues and opportunities that the ethnographer of communication negotiates as he or she joins others at the table. Through these reports of how ethnographers of communication have done applied work, we develop a heuristic framework for how EC research can contribute to scholars and practitioners doing applied research and work.

Ethnography of Communication

A foundational problem drove the development of EC: What does it take to be a communicatively competent member of a community? In response to trends within linguistics, Dell Hymes (1974) argued that communication competence is context dependent, that interactions between language and social life are fundamental to understanding meaning in language use. Due to the intimate relationship between language use and social life, ethnographers can study local “ways of speaking” as windows on local “ways of life,” available modes of participation in the social lives of particular communities. Hymes called for ethnographies that would catalogue local systems of communication practices, which could later be used to generate formal linguistic theories.

A reliance on description could, initially, hint at basic research. Hymes (1974), however, considered EC practical work in three ways. First, ethnographic methods require a researcher to deal directly with the social world, orienting to how participants understand and accomplish communication instead of privileging theoretical models. Thus ethnographers of communication engage existing communication practices on their own terms and learn from them—a practical endeavor. Second, ethnographies of communication enable other applied research projects since ethnographies can provide local knowledge about a community valuable to other researchers. For example, ethnographic findings can be used to construct interview protocols that resonate better with respondents’ cultural practices and beliefs or to evaluate the conceptual basis of survey-based research projects. Third, ethnographies of communication can detect the conditions and possibilities for social change. By capturing local needs and tensions in social relations, ethnographers of communication can suggest modes of intervention that resonate with local needs and local systems of meaning (Hymes, 1980).

Despite early orientations to EC as practical work, principles from EC can work against applied communication objectives. In particular, EC’s focus on *understanding* cultural practices can be in tension with the desire to *change* social life through communication interventions. In his 2008 Carroll Arnold Lecture, Gerry Philipsen

revealed this tension in his opening narrative of how he “tried to change a culture” through attempts to stop racist talk in an inner city afterschool program. His interventions failed. Instead of continuing to try to challenge and change racist talk, Philipsen reported that he shifted his objectives: “I changed my goal from trying to change a culture to working and living among people in a way that I might be useful to them, on their terms, yet without sacrificing altogether my ideals” (p. 2). This narrative raises questions about how an ethnographer of communication can and should *change* communication practices, reflecting a larger debate within applied communication research between observational research and interventions (Frey & Sunwolf, 2009).

We argue that ethnographers of communication contribute to applied research projects by using ethnographic knowledge to build cultural competence and design strategic action. In these applications of ethnographic knowledge, ethnographers of communication negotiate with others at the table about how to move from understanding cultural practices to changing social life.

Applying Ethnographic Knowledge

Ethnographers of communication fundamentally contribute to applied research endeavors through two related paths: building cultural competence and designing strategic action. By competence, we refer to Hymes’ (1974) notion of what an individual must know to be able to use language effectively and appropriately within a social group. Ethnographers recognize that cultural members are not always capable of articulating complex systems of cultural competence on which they rely regularly in their daily lives. EC research can provide a basis for understanding what counts as effective, ineffective, appropriate, and inappropriate communication in a particular setting, and the cultural knowledge behind these evaluations.

We identify three ways in which ethnographic knowledge of communication competence can contribute to applied research projects. First, such knowledge can inform other research practices. EC research can provide a baseline for collaborators to consider before they initiate an applied project. For example, ethnographic knowledge can refine research methods (e.g., constructing interview guides or surveys) and data interpretation (e.g., when participants say X it is likely to mean Y).

Second, ethnographic research methodology can be used to assess other applied research and interventions. For example, Miller and Rudnick (2006) draw on the principles of EC to argue that survey-based Post-Conflict Needs Assessments (PCNAs) conducted by the UN’s Joint Assessment Missions are not sensitive to culturally variable interpretations of conflict and security concerns. As a result, current PCNAs cannot adequately inform UN programs of action designed to prevent the trade of small arms and light weapons.

Third, research aims to discover the differences in communication practices that lie at the root of different social, technical, or environmental disputes or miscommunication. Ethnographers of communication are trained to discover rather than presume cultural practices, which enables framing some interactional problems

as intercultural communication problems. Carbaugh et al.'s (Carbaugh, Winter, van Over, Molina-Markham, and Lie, 2013) research on human–car interaction is premised on General Motors (GM) and the research team's shared expectation that cars programmed to interact with humans are not necessarily ready to accommodate the full range of cultural variability in language use. An EC approach results in descriptive accounts of cultural features of in-car communication that can include framing frustrating user-experiences as intercultural miscommunication.

Ethnographers of communication map and understand what it takes to be communicatively competent in a particular social milieu, using this understanding of competence to improve research practices, account for faulty interventions, or frame interactional problems as intercultural communication problems. Notably, these applications of ethnographic knowledge start by understanding means and meanings of communication to those who know and use them. Building cultural competence focuses on learning existing cultural practices before moving to altering them in some way.

Ethnographers of communication have long studied indigenous meanings of strategic action in particular communities (see Philipsen, 1997). Studying strategic action means discovering how particular communication practices count as means of achieving particular ends in a social situation. Those concerned with strategic action ask, "What course of action is likely to work *best* here as we strive to bring about change?" Acting strategically requires cultural competence, but community members do not recognize all competent actions as particularly compelling, credible, or creative. Instead, strategic action has rhetorical power: It has the capacity to persuade community members to alter their familiar, habitual practices (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013).

Ethnographers of communication engage with strategic action in four ways: they study local strategies for strategic action, they contribute to the design of technological or social interventions, they offer counsel to communities trying to act strategically, and they design interventions themselves.

First, ethnographic research can provide valuable input into the design process of creating technologies, objects, and social processes. In this forum, GM sought Carbaugh's research team (2013) because GM wanted to understand cultural logics of communication as part of their technological design process. More fundamentally, Rudnick, Leichter, and Edmonds (2013) demonstrate how understanding the cultural practices of users results in designs that better address social problems through their case studies of design pedagogy and UN assessment. All of these cases demonstrate how ethnographers can use cultural knowledge for improving designs.

Second, ethnographers of communication can also use cultural research to suggest new forms of strategic action for the purpose of changing communication practices community members themselves find damaging. For example, Boromisza-Habashi (2013) draws on his research on cultural forms of hate speech in Hungary to suggest ways of countering hate speech that are strategically designed to interrupt the cultural logic supporting hate speech. After laying out the symbolic resources for participation in the hate speech debates (communication competence), Boromisza-Habashi

suggests particular means of rhetorical identification (designing strategic action) that draw on this cultural knowledge to produce rhetorical strategies.

Third, scholars can draw on theoretical principles from EC to propose designs for strategic action. In this forum, Townsend (2013) discusses her research on public participation designed to respond to planning officials' expressed desire to improve engagement with "hard to reach" populations. The theoretical rationale for her civic engagement model comes from EC's commitment to studying ways of speaking and learning from communities about the meanings people have for their experiences.

Ethnographers of communication contribute to applied research by building cultural competence and designing strategic action. Next, we highlight how ethnographers of communication work with fellow scholars, practitioners, and community members at the table developing applied research.

The Applied Mode

Donal Carbaugh (2007) outlines five modes of inquiry in cultural discourse analysis (one approach to EC research): the theoretical mode, the descriptive mode, the interpretive mode, the comparative mode, and the critical mode. Each of these modes accomplishes specific tasks, allowing researchers to answer particular questions. The case studies in this forum suggest that ethnographers of communication are increasingly working in what we consider an applied mode, responding to the question: How can these communication practices be altered to address and manage the social problems they sustain? In the applied mode, scholars draw on the EC tradition to address social and communication problems. The applied mode has two key characteristics: (1) a coorientation to a social problem with others at the table (fellow scholars, practitioners, and, especially, community members) and (2) a commitment to seek a workable solution with them for that problem. The commitment to impact problems transforms the practical potential of EC envisioned by Hymes (1974) into resources for addressing social problems.

Applied research directly uses ethnographic expertise to understand and address a social problem. The Security Needs Assessment Protocol (SNAP) project discussed by Rudnick et al. (2013) is a clear illustration of applied research that engaged in the applied mode throughout the research process. The SNAP project started with a practical problem: how to best design locally effective peace and security programming? In this case, scholars started with a social problem and used field methods to generate applied research that resulted in a way of producing knowledge (a protocol) that could be used to address social problems (how to achieve peace and security in postconflict societies).

We hasten to point out that not all *applied moves* being made by ethnographers of communication represent *applied research*. Instead, some scholars are addressing social and communication problems through their interactions with participants in situ or through consulting. Witteborn, Milburn, and Ho's (2013) ethnographic reflections on field practices help us develop a more nuanced understanding the range of applied moves ethnographers of communication make. The applied moves

these ethnographers of communication discuss include consulting, developing an applied research project with community members that draws only indirectly on ethnographic expertise, and helping community members with their practical needs while conducting ethnographic research. In each of these cases, the researcher does orient to real-world problems, but EC research is not always used to address the problem. Through interaction with participants, for example, Witteborn et al. (2013) become accountable to address participant needs (e.g., creating Facebook accounts or information on technical training) related to their questions about their use of communication technology. When they address these communication problems, however, they are not drawing on their research or expertise as an ethnographer. Instead, they are drawing on nonspecialist technical knowledge.

Ethnographers of Communication and Applied Research

This forum brings together ethnographers of communication to reflect on their case studies of doing applied work with communities, corporations, interdisciplinary teams, and governments. Through ethnographic reflection of their own research experiences, these authors suggest a range of ways that ethnographers of communication can contribute to applied research and address social problems while marking some of the challenges to making applied moves in EC research.

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