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## Return to Teamsterville: A reconsideration and dialogue on ethnography and critique

Mark Ward Sr. , Leland G. Spencer , Craig O. Stewart , and Elisa M. Varela

### ABSTRACT



As the places of monuments are reconsidered today in light of social justice concerns, the authors revisit a “monument” of language and social interaction (LSI) research. Philipsen’s foundational work published nearly 50 years ago, “Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville,” thus becomes a starting point for dialogue among four scholars with diverse views on the critical voice in ethnography of communication research. When read today, the homophobic speech of Teamstervillers is shocking. Also surprising by present standards is that such speech passes unremarked and does not figure in the analysis. In the present essay, the authors—an LSI scholar, discourse studies scholar, critical rhetorical scholar, and an LSI doctoral student—review early debates on the critical voice, relate individual narratives of their experiences in either reading “Teamsterville” again after a long hiatus or encountering the work for the first time, and then conduct a joint dialogue on the question: What is the ethnographer’s obligation when harmful and oppressive speech is observed? Though their views remain diverse, the authors advocate for a disciplinary consensus: that the present moment calls for renewed discussion—and, even if differently practiced, affirmation—of the critical voice in the ethnography of communication.

### KEYWORDS

Language and social interaction; ethnography of communication; speech codes theory; critique; ethics

[E]ither the director was not a normal male or the role expectation of corporal punishment ... was not applicable. ... Teamsterville boys interpreted the [director’s] verbal strategies as a sign of homosexuality ... (Philipsen, 1975, p. 17)

“Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville,” published in 1975 by the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, is a foundational work in the field of language and social interaction (LSI). The author, Gerry Philipsen, recounted culturally patterned speech and role enactments that he observed in a blue-collar Chicago neighborhood. Building on the work of Dell Hymes (1962, 1964), Philipsen went on to champion the ethnography of communication (e.g., Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986) and later formulated his own theory of speech codes (Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005). Today, “Teamsterville” remains a staple of student reading lists and is routinely cited in introductory theory textbooks.

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The title of Philipsen's (1975) report, "Speaking 'Like a Man' in Teamsterville," conveys the culture of hypermasculinity that he observed. And as the epigraph above suggests, he further discovered a culture of heteronormativity and strident homophobia—though Philipsen did not invoke these critical concepts to name his experience. Men who did not enact masculine role expectations, such as the social group worker who tried to reason with unruly boys, were assumed to be "non-normal" and thus gay and "immoral" (p. 17). Even Philipsen's own sexuality was questioned by his Teamsterville informants:

[I]n a group discussion at a Teamsterville settlement house someone interpreted my wearing of colored socks as a sign that I was a homosexual; the assertion was quickly disputed when someone else said, "He can't be a queer, he's married." (p. 17)

While the homophobic speech of Teamsterville men was reported, though unremarked, another essential contextual element was omitted. Philipsen (1975) introduced Teamsterville as "located on the near South Side of Chicago" and "a neighborhood of blue-collar, low-income whites" (p. 13). This terse description slights the intense racial animus that was a prominent feature of Teamsterville life. In the postwar decades, the Great Migration saw an influx of Black Southerners into Chicago's South Side. White gangs patrolled neighborhood boundaries, fearful that "At any moment, it seemed, the black neighborhoods to the east might expand and overrun" white enclaves (Cohen & Taylor, 2000, p. 29). In 1961, just eight years before Philipsen began his fieldwork, a white mob rioted after Black families, made homeless by a tenement fire, were housed by the Red Cross at a church in a white South Side precinct. Given what has been learned about whiteness, it seems likely that preserving racial hierarchy was a prominent factor underlying the masculine honor code of Teamsterville.

In reading "Teamsterville" some 50 years after Philipsen conducted his fieldwork and published his findings, new perspectives inevitably raise new questions. For scholars who have not read "Teamsterville" since graduate school or, alternatively, encounter the work for the first time, the homophobic speech may come as a shock—no less, perhaps, because the speech passes unremarked and does not figure in the analysis. Or at least, that was the experience of the present authors, including mid-career scholars in the ethnography of communication (Ward) and discourse studies (Stewart), a doctoral student (Varela), and a critical scholar (Spencer) reading "Teamsterville" for the first time (or for the first time in many years). In the present essay, which stems from a 2020 discussion panel sponsored by the Language and Social Interaction Division of the National Communication Association (NCA), we explore the question: What are the ethnographer's obligations when harmful and oppressive speech and discourses of power are observed? We hold diverse views on the place of the critical voice in ethnography of communication research. Yet our dialogue, presented here, also yields consensus and suggests ways forward for researchers today.

As will be seen in the review below, the place of critique in the ethnography of communication occasioned debate as the method gained disciplinary traction. What, then, does our essay add? The present moment, we contend, is ripe for revisiting not only “Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville” but the research paradigm for which the article is a “founding document.” Society today is rightly questioning its monuments—and in some cases, toppling them. In that light, can “Teamsterville,” with its uncritical descriptions of hypermasculine and homophobic speech, as well as its omission of a structural racism that was likely relevant to informants’ speaking, be read today as it was when published nearly 50 years ago? And yet, if one contends that the foundations for the ethnography of communication are flawed, must its disciplinary narrative be “canceled”? Must instructors, for example, assign “Teamsterville” to their students with a disclaimer that places the article, like a monument from the past, within its historical context? Such questions, at the intersection of ethnography and critique, drive our dialogue.

## Literature review

We chose “Speaking ‘Like a Man’ in Teamsterville” as a productive starting point, for its status as a touchstone in the field highlights foundational questions of ethnography and critique. The article established a “role for ethnography in communication studies . . . as (ideally) objective description” (Philipsen, 1989, p. 259)—a stance, however, that also prompted debate at the time. In a 1990 essay, Fiske put the critical case against “ideally objective” description as an

attempt to divorce analysis from criticism, the denial of structured social differences . . . and [an] acceptance of a common sense relationship of the individual to society that denies the socio-political construction of the individual and therefore excludes theories of subjectivity. By uncritically, if meticulously, analyzing the construction of a consensus around the dominant values this [research] ends up by supporting them. (Fiske, 1990, p. 452)

Fiske (1991) further asserted that ethnography is not science because its results are not replicable. Thus, the ethnography of communication seeks to “redefine itself as a discursive science, not an empirical one” (p. 330). In so doing, the method shifts from writing the culture to “writing the other.” However, the “act of putting into discourse does not *describe* a non-discursive reality, it *produces* an apprehensible reality; discursivity is not descriptive but generative.” In turn, by “putting the [non-discursive] practice of the *other* into *our* discourse we change the status of its otherness” (p. 330, emphases in original).

Yet Carbaugh (1988), whose book *Talking American: Cultural Discourses on Donahue* was the immediate target of Fiske's critique, cautioned against a priori categorizations of power that may "assum[e] power (and sometimes economics) is salient to a world when its members deem it perhaps secondary, or even unimportant" (Carbaugh, 1989, p. 278). Wrote Carbaugh:

When this [critical] premise is applied unquestioningly, one sometimes strains to hear a cultural voice through a political earpiece . . . render[ing] a world in terms distant from its home. If forced into ethnography, such a presumption risks muddling the cultural voice, obscuring another voice in terms of our own, thus rendering the cultural as something unworthy of study for its own sake, in its own terms. (Carbaugh, 1989, p. 278).

As the leading advocate for the ethnography of communication, Philipsen (1989) argued that critical approaches can "pre-judge the kind of theoretical insights one might take beyond the case." Instead, description should lead to "theory development using ethnographic data, and empirically-grounded interpretations" (p. 259). Rather than "show the people we study how to change their lives . . . we owe it to the people we study to try to appreciate and understand their discursive practices" and "be as accurate, careful, and sensitive as we can be" (pp. 259–260). Later he added, "For ethnography to perform only a liberating, and not a conserving, function, is to reduce its scope and power by theoretical fiat" (Philipsen, 1991, p. 329). While ethnographers must gain an "appreciation of many discourses, including, on occasion, discourses of power," they must first "document and describe those discourses, as others, with as much principled care as possible" (p. 329).

However, Philipsen denied being a moral relativist. In a video recorded in the early 2000s for an introductory theory textbook, he had a revealing exchange with author Em Griffin (A First Look, n.d.):

EG: To be an ethnographer, and not just to go through the motions but to really embrace the methodology of ethnography, do you have to be a relativist? I mean, a moral obligation in one culture becomes deviance in another culture. And if you're going to appreciate the culture, do you really have to become a cultural and ethical relativist?

GP: I am here to try to understand them. I'm here to walk in their path. I'm here to try to see the world through their eyes, hear it through their ears; and to the degree that one begins to judge them, it seems to me that this then limits one's capacity to enter into an appreciation of their world.

EG: Can you have standards for yourself, however, where you say, "For me, something is right or wrong," be it in the speech area or other areas, rather than just saying, "And this I prefer?"

GP: I think absolutely, and I think that one could be studying a way of life that one does not appreciate or find particularly attractive, and then to figure out where you would draw the line as to how far you would go in terms of adopting the code that you're trying to study. Now, it's a difficult line to draw, but I think it's an important one.

In the most recent iteration of his speech codes theory, Philipsen and colleagues responded to criticisms that the theory not only slights power in discourse but omits the dimension in its very assumptions. They countered that ethnographers of speaking are open to all discourses that may be salient to their informants, including “manifestations of power, solidarity, intimacy, and other fundamental dimensions of social life” (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 64). Thus, since theory is developed from a database of cases, and since cases derive from a method open to observing discourses of power, then the theory does not preclude power in its assumptions. As a case in point, they noted that one early study of Teamsterville (Philipsen, 1986) reported on a discursive link between its masculine honor code and local political power:

By following a model that directs the observer to give voice to the people being studied, rather than to the voice of the author herself or himself, power was found and invoked by the ethnographer on the basis of the evidence of the case itself, not on the basis of an a priori commitment to find that power is a dominant motive in all discourse. (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 65).

With the conversations reviewed above as prologue, we turn to our own dialogue: What are the ethnographer’s obligations when harmful and oppressive speech and discourses of power are observed? Again, we hold diverse views. Yet we agree from the outset that, in the present moment when much that was taken for granted is now questioned in the light of social justice concerns, the place of a critical voice in ethnography of communication research merits renewed discussion. To that end, we each present a brief narrative and then conclude the essay with a collaborative dialogue and consensus on ways forward.

### **Narrative 1: LSI scholar**

Though it happened more than 15 years ago, I (Ward) remember the day that I first encountered Teamsterville. It started with Chapter 33. I had made a decision in midlife to pursue a second career in academe. As a new graduate student enrolled in a communication theory course, I was bursting with questions that had always perplexed me. One question came from my background in the subculture of evangelical Christianity: Why do people talk differently when they enter a church? Chapter 33 on speech codes theory promised some answers. Yet I was also captivated by Philipsen’s story. As the textbook author put it:

Gerry Philipsen was one of my classmates. When I finished my Ph.D. course work, the labor market was tight: I felt fortunate to receive an offer . . . A while later, I heard Gerry was doing youth work on the south side of Chicago. I remember thinking that while my career was progressing, Gerry’s was going backward. How wrong I was. (Griffin, 2006, p. 454)

Here was a scholar who risked his career to pursue questions that mattered to him. The story resonated, for I too was taking a major career risk for a larger purpose. So, when our instructor assigned us to choose one theory and write a bibliographic essay, I chose speech codes theory. Galvanized, I devoured Philipsen's work starting with "Teamsterville" and bought copies of his books *Speaking Culturally* (Philipsen, 1992) and *Developing Communication Theories* (Philipsen & Albrecht, 1997). Philipsen became a mentor for me, if from afar. Later, we met at a conference (where he autographed his books for me), and we struck up a correspondence. To this day, I take pride at being adopted into a family of scholars who call themselves "Gerry's Kids" in honor of our mentor.

Over the past dozen years, I have gone on to publish my research on American evangelical culture and media in three books and more than 40 articles and essays. But at first, when I began conducting fieldwork as a graduate student, I soon noticed that my observations diverged in one vital respect from what my readings of Philipsen had led me to expect. In his original iteration of speech codes theory, he asserted,

The matter, or substance, of speech codes is . . . interpersonal life, if that term is construed broadly. And the general point is woven through the literature of the ethnography of communication. . . . [S]o cultural thematizations of communication and speaking should reveal a culturally distinctive code of interpersonal meanings in particular cases. (Philipsen, 1992, pp. 127-128)

Yet my field observations indicated that "writing the culture" of evangelicals could not focus solely on interpersonal talk. Spontaneous micro-level speaking practices were important, of course. But speaking practices at the meso level of planned locally public rhetoric—Sunday sermons—were also decisive, as was speaking at the macro level of evangelical institutions and their mass-mediated representations. This drew my gaze to the evangelical culture as a larger social structure where its discourses of power, especially those of gendering, were unavoidable.

Still, I resisted the critical voice. Philipsen had given me the paradigm that I needed to construct a coherent research agenda, a path to forge my own scholarly identity. As far back as that bibliographic essay, Philipsen's rejoinders to his critics convinced me. Later, as I made conference presentations of my findings, I chafed at other session papers that critically pronounced on evangelical rhetoric yet evinced no familiarity with the culture itself. To my mind, Philipsen's warning about "theoretical fiat" was borne out time and again.

However, as I progressed in my career, a question kept nagging me: How long must I describe a culture on its own terms before I gained the standing to critique its power relations? Isn't a decade enough? Indeed, if I exposed taken-for-granted gender norms, was I not doing a service to my



informants? By denaturalizing a blind spot, marginalized voices could be heard and dominant voices might even reexamine their discourse in light of the hidden impacts that I reported. With that, I cautiously ventured into the fray with critical studies on the gendered dualism of evangelical discourse (Ward, 2018, 2019, 2021). Still, I hewed in my own way to the Philipsen paradigm. First, I would only employ a critical voice once I understood a culture on its own terms. Second, I would expand my literature reviews to include critical works relevant to the social practices I described. But third, rather than expressly tell my informants how to live, I would let the rigor of my findings speak for itself, insofar as how those findings aligned with critical assessments regarding the practices.

Yet this compromise remains somewhat uneasy, provisional, and subject to change. For that reason, I organized a 2020 discussion panel on the intersections of language, social interaction, and gender as an occasion to raise my questions. In subsequent discussions with scholars of diverse perspectives (which are the basis for this essay), I was stunned when a colleague pointed out the homophobic discourses that Philipsen reported in Teamsterville. To be honest, I had not read the article since graduate school. Yes, I very clearly remembered its report of hypermasculinity. But why did I not also recall the homophobia? Why did such talk not register a similar impression in my memory? And what did this say about my own standpoint?

In recent years, I have found the self-reflexivity of autoethnography to be a necessary correlative to the ethnography of communication (Ward, 2016). Autoethnography is derided in some quarters of the LSI community. Yet as one who came of age in the evangelical subculture, my need for a coherent method of self-interrogation comes from practicing ethnography in my own backyard. Here, I have taken Katriel's (1991) work in Israeli culture as a model. In her observations, Katriel looks for moments when she can estrange her cultural self so that an otherwise mundane social practice can emerge as a site for cultural exploration. My participation in the present dialogue is such a moment.

At this writing, I maintain my current compromise between ethnography and critique. And I fully acknowledge not only my debt to, but my basic agreement with, Philipsen's methodological and theoretical claims. However, I also hold the view, which should be uncontroversial, that self-reflexivity is fundamental to the ethnographer's discipline. As I think about reading "Teamsterville" today, I am reminded of a critique from my fieldwork. Many religionists read their scriptures literally, word for word. But in reading the text only as a divine monument, they miss another perspective: the text as a past record of imperfect people whose struggles toward wisdom challenge us to do the same in our day. Seen this way, "Teamsterville" and other canonical works serve us best not as "bibles" for our discipline. Rather, these works



challenge us to take both the insights and the flaws of those who struggled before us, albeit imperfectly but in good faith, and to continue our own struggle for wisdom.

## Narrative 2: Critical rhetorical scholar

I (Spencer) came to Philipsen's work as a result of the panel conversation referenced in the introduction of this essay, though I had certainly seen his name and references to the Teamsterville essays in my reading over the years. I knew from having taken and taught qualitative research classes that some interpretive scholars espouse a value-neutral approach to their research, though to be fair, I have mostly read or taught about the social-scientific commitment to objectivity to rebuke that view and insist that neutrality does not and cannot exist and, if it could, we ought not desire it (Ellingson, 2009, 2017; Harding, 1991; Manning & Kunkel, 2013; Patterson, 2016; Spencer, 2020).

The conversation at the panel, though, inspired me to read Philipsen's work and try to understand this point of view from its own perspective, much the same way Philipsen approaches learning about culture. I read *Speaking Culturally* (Philipsen, 1992) in early 2021, nearly 30 years after its publication and 50 years after the publication of some of the articles adapted for inclusion in the book. My commitment to openness notwithstanding, I read the book as a white gay man trained in feminist rhetorical criticism and whose research expertise includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communication.

Early in describing Teamsterville, his research context, Philipsen (1992) already seems to break from his commitment to neutrality when he expresses "frustration" at Teamsterville residents' misperception of his sexuality:

In my work in Teamsterville I was responsible for supervising the after-school activities of several groups of neighborhood young people who participated in the program of a neighborhood youth center. By training and preference it was my practice to discipline young people who had violated the center's rules by talking with them, trying to understand their feelings, to discuss the cause of the problem, and to talk out ways of improving conduct in the future. Soon, word of my methods was broadcast around the neighborhood[,] and my reputation as a man who used words to influence youths was secured. Much to my surprise, and eventually frustration, this practice of mine led to the conclusion, by the neighborhood boys, that I was a homosexual. (p. 5)

Several pieces of this passage caught my attention. First, Philipsen admits that the youths' misperception of him caused him frustration. That is understandable, but it seems to belie his commitment to accepting their culture as he encounters it, almost immediately. Second, though Philipsen's frustration has instrumental ends (i.e., he expresses annoyance because the youths' misperception prevents him from doing the work he needs to accomplish),

Philipsen (1992) tacitly accepts the homophobic premise the youth adopt. He could only overcome the perception “after some months of reflection, and the use of a revised strategy of self-presentation” (p. 5). Certainly not all aspiring ethnographers of communication reading Philipsen’s book could enact such strategies, or would even desire to. Some of us might want to question whether someone who is indeed gay could work in Teamsterville. Philipsen seems to suggest not and certainly misses an opportunity to intervene on our behalf in the writing. Third, I wondered too about the gay adults and youth in Teamsterville: How does Philipsen’s work in the community center help them? Does his book address their needs and realities? How does Philipsen’s predicament help us understand the realities of life for out gay men working in Teamsterville, if merely the perception of “homosexuality” (itself a clinical term out of favor by the 1990s) so hampered Philipsen?

I suspect that many of these questions lie beyond the scope of Philipsen’s interest and certainly beyond the range of what communication theories were addressing when he published the first of the Teamsterville essays in 1975. But I endeavor here to point out how many important queries Philipsen misses in his ostensibly neutral approach. I would also observe that by the time he published his 1992 book, important work in the field of communication like *Gayspeak* and other sources had begun to appear (Cheseboro, 1981; for discussion, see Morris & Palczewski, 2014) that might have complicated his discussion of sexuality. But whatever revisions he made in reprinting his work in the book, updating his language and the nuance with which he talked about the relationship between gender ideologies and sexuality was not one. Although I admit that a critical view from Philipsen in his articles or books would have done little to alter the gender ideologies of Teamsterville, they might well have contributed to the field of communication’s slow movement toward resisting homophobia. Instead, Philipsen’s work quietly accepts the premise that stigmatizes “homosexual” as a label and, more broadly, an identity. Philipsen keeps his ethnographic principles, but has he no other principles—principles of care for the dignity of his gay friends, colleagues, students, and readers?

A few pages later, Philipsen (1992) returned to the topic of punishment to comment on the differences between parental discipline of children in Teamsterville and his other research context, a middle class suburb he called Nacirema. He wrote,

In Teamsterville a parent is expected to use physical punishment to discipline an errant child; among the Nacirema a parent is expected to use supportive speech as the first tactic in discipline—a difference in rules. The Nacirema concept of “communication” is, if not unknown, at least not prominent in Teamsterville speaking—a difference in meaning. What these peoples and others are doing, and what their speaking activities mean to them—these are culturally shaped and defined. (p. 11)

As in the case with homophobia, Philipsen's commitment to neutrality here seems to me to abdicate some scholarly responsibility. If indeed research shows that corporal punishment is more harmful than helpful (which we know to be true now, and which was hotly debated at the time of Philipsen's writing), should not a responsible writer note that discrepancy? The contrast here is not just a cultural difference but a qualitative difference between capable parenting and arguable abuse. Philipsen may deny cultural relativism in his conversation with Griffin, but what is this passage if not relativistic?

By contrast, the risk associated with asserting expertise seems at least twofold. First, the insistence that the writer knows something the community does not know can be understood as elitist and may miss some of the nuance or context the ethnographer set out to understand (as Ward notes above in recounting his frustration with conference papers about evangelicals that make no attempt to understand evangelicals). Thorough ethnographic work would seem to militate against this charge, but not entirely. Second, importing research or critical analysis or complex theoretical concepts into a written analysis seems unlikely to make any kind of material intervention into the research context. In any case, outsiders who spend a year or so in a space will face quite a challenge in trying to overcome decades of socialization, if indeed they try at all. On the other hand, if we understand the primary audience of ethnographic scholarship to be students and scholars of communication (and not the populations studied), the absence of a critique itself may strike readers as problematic at best—as it did for this reader. In my view at least, our research participants' homophobia tells us something about them and their culture. Our response to it says something about us and our values. Critique does not mean a failure to understand a culture as we encounter it; critique means that we apply our training, including in critical theory, to make sense of what we find.

### **Narrative 3: Discourse studies scholar**

The conversation that began at NCA and continued in this essay echoed for me (Stewart) the debate between the conversation analyst Emmanuel Schegloff and the critical discourse scholars Michael Billig and Margaret Wetherell in *Discourse & Society* in the late 1990s (Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999; Wetherell, 1998). Schegloff (1997) warned against the “theoretical imperialism” of critical theory, insisting that analysts not go beyond what is “demonstrably relevant” to the participants themselves. Wetherell (1998) countered that conversation analysis (CA) cannot be truly complete without reference to broader contexts and social theory. Billig (1999) further questioned the foundational assumptions and terminology of CA and whether it can “objectively” describe what is relevant or understood by participants. Despite disagreements on how best to ground

critical claims in discursive evidence, critical discourse analysts agree that we “should not merely presuppose (even plausible) contextualization [of power and/or social inequality], but ‘prove’ it by attending to the details of what social members actually say and do” (Van Dijk, 1999, p. 460).

That gender and sexual orientation are relevant to the men and boys in Teamsterville and their talk is hardly a presupposition, as Philipsen’s ethnography persuasively documents. However, Philipsen does not go on to describe their communication practices as homophobic and sexist. Re-reading this article in 2021, I cannot help but wonder how broader U.S. ideologies about gender and sexuality influenced Philipsen at the time, both in his fieldwork and in the process of publishing his work. Philipsen acknowledged that he altered his own communication practices in response to his being perceived to be “homosexual,” demonstrating the power that such perceptions held during a time when the gay liberation movement was just beginning and the American Psychiatric Association still officially considered homosexuality to be a mental illness. Would Philipsen have been able to (accurately) describe what he was observing as homophobic? To what extent would editors and reviewers at the time (especially in the 1970s) have been open to a critique of these communication practices as homophobic? Or would they have seen rejecting a potentially gay youth worker as “common sense”?

However, without reference to power and inequity, Philipsen’s ethnographic account of Teamsterville’s speech codes is at best incomplete, and perhaps inaccurate. Whereas Philipsen has otherwise been willing to address issues of power when he sees it in his data (e.g., Philipsen, 1986; Philipsen et al., 2005), he does not name the homophobia he clearly observed and experienced. If Philipsen’s ethnography offered sufficient data to claim that “in their [the Teamsterville boys’] eyes a man who uses speech to influence boys is not really a proper ‘man’ and must be a ‘queer,’ in that a ‘queer’ is not a proper ‘man’” (Phillipsen, 1992, p. 5), then the data surely would have supported the claim that their attitudes and behavior were homophobic. Such claims would be grounded empirically, hardly an instance of a researcher imposing a critical agenda on their data. What is more, such a description would be more “objective” than an account that cannot see (or say) what is in the data (even if “objectivity” as a scholarly goal is questionable to begin with).

If “Teamsterville” is a monument, should it be toppled? I do not think so. Philipsen’s work still offers contemporary students and scholars important documentation of how heteronormativity was/is accomplished in everyday discourse, even if it is up to the reader to draw those implications. For me, re-reading this piece after many years and participating in this dialogue offered an opportunity to think through the relationships between critical claims and empirical descriptions, and how each is vital to the other. These are important conversations for both students and seasoned scholars.

#### Narrative 4: LSI doctoral student

When I (Varela) first encountered Philipsen's speech codes theory in an undergraduate textbook, his work was simply another chapter to read. His theses were interesting, but I identified then as a critical scholar. As a burgeoning graduate student, I delved into critical theories and methodologies, moving steadily away from interpretivism—or my erroneous perception of interpretive research as an epistemically positivist project of seeing “from everywhere and nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 584) through “objective” observation. I also assumed that interpretive research—undergirded by objectivist epistemologies and ontologies and by relativist axiologies—indiscriminately accepts problematic and even oppressive ways of speaking.

Only later, as I moved into doctoral research, did I begin to see interpretivism less through my critical biases and more on its own terms. One of my mentors, who was once a Philipsen advisee, introduced me anew to the ethnography of communication (EC). I read more widely in the EC literature and interacted with my new mentor in the classroom, during office hours, at department colloquia, as her research assistant, and ultimately as her advisee. The more I read and understood, the more my misconceptions about EC and interpretive methodologies melted away. Further, I saw in my mentor the person and academic that I could be—if first and foremost, I took the intellectual stance of humility that EC requires. Thus, I could listen to, on *their* terms, people who are socially marginalized due to their intersecting identities (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Rather than engage in colonial interventionist practices, I could be useful to marginalized communities—again, on their terms. And I could challenge overbroad and often stereotyping generalizations based on a strong emic understanding of a speech community's culturally inflected speaking practices.

Since these realizations, I have learned that the ethnography of communication—the same interpretive methodological lens through which Philipsen observed the Teamsterville speech community—accomplishes neither objective stances on language nor relativistic stances on speaking culturally. An “objective” stance would treat communication as mere transmission and language as an arbitrary medium for identifying and describing phenomena. This “objective” lens would fail to see how social worlds and intersubjective production are constructed in and through discourse and interaction. The ethnography of communication is not invested in this “objective” ontology, but views communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 8) through situated language and social interaction.

As for the charge of relativism, EC calls the researcher to understand, though not necessarily agree with, the speech codes and interpersonal ideologies of particular speech communities. Speech codes are patterned

ways of speaking that range from “talking American” (Carbaugh, 1988) to Finnish silences (Carbaugh et al., 2006). Interpersonal ideologies are beliefs about the values that persons should accomplish in their relationships; the communicative activities that count as reasonable, fair, and friendly, and why they count as such; and appropriate communicative practices for people who hold various interactional and sociocultural identities (Tracy & Robles, 2013). Thus, “Teamsterville” reports interpersonal ideologies regarding the communicative activities that count as reasonable between male-identified community workers and children, among men, and between men and women. The ethnography of communication challenges us to understand the speech codes and interpersonal ideologies of particular speech communities on their terms, but comprehension is not tantamount to agreement.

Philipsen’s own writings affirm that understanding does not preclude frustration (Philipsen, 1992) or even shock and dismay (Philipsen, 2010). By deferring an immediate move to critique, the project of first understanding speech communities on their terms “change[s] our goal from trying to change a culture to working and living among people in a way that might be useful to them, on their terms, yet without also sacrificing altogether [our] ideals” (Philipsen, 2010, p. 2). This work of listening to and being useful to communities on their terms is not for the faint of heart. Nor is this work to which everyone should aspire. Interpretation has its place in research, as does critique. Neither mutually excludes the other. Both approaches do, however, merit mutual understanding and respect.

Ontologically, the ethnography of communication presupposes that social reality is constructed in and through communication. Epistemologically, EC aims first to understand a speech community’s practices and ideologies *emically* before offering a description, interpretation, or critique. *Praxeologically*, EC intervenes in ways that members of a speech community would find intelligible and useful. *Axiologically*, EC observes a speech community’s culturally-inflected speaking practices but without requiring agreement or support. Once these commitments have been satisfied, ethnographers of communication are not precluded from engaging critical theories of discourse (e.g., Katriel, 2015, 2016). In this way, ethnographers of communication who commit to understanding a communication phenomenon on its own terms begin their critique at a place that facilitates robust understanding rather than stereotyping.

Thus the question: Does “Teamsterville” do more either to further or to stop sexism, abuse, and homophobia? In my view, Philipsen’s interpretive take on Teamsterville does more good than harm. To put it colloquially, I would not vote to “cancel” Philipsen’s foundational work. Rather, I would challenge us to do a better job as students, scholars, and teachers at recognizing there are different ways to conduct research—ways which, when

considered simultaneously or even hybridized, offer a more holistic and robust understanding of communication phenomena from which to potentially begin critique.

For myself as a nonwhite, queer-identified, working-class, cis woman of immigrant descent, I might have written a study of Teamsterville that hybridized interpretation and critique to say something outright about the community's sexism, homophobia, and racism. But I would also be indebted to, and would build on, Philipsen's pioneering work in the ethnography of communication as a research method.

Then, too, just as there are different ways to conduct research, there are different ways to resist sexism, homophobia, and racism. We need not all take up critical theories of discourse to catalyze critical reflection. For example, by denaturalizing speaking practices' interconnections with notions of gender, "Teamsterville" furnishes a more robust basis for critical reflection. (And we might at least give Philipsen credit for refusing to go along with corporal punishment as a heteronormative and masculine role expectation.) In sum, Philipsen may not have written "Speaking 'Like a Man' in Teamsterville" as an exercise in critique. But we can appreciate his interpretive take, since ethnographic description can also generate critical reflection—as illustrated, for example, in the present essay.

## Dialogue and consensus

Spencer: Thanks, everyone, for sharing your narratives. One observation I made in reading all of our reflections about the homophobia that Philipsen encountered in Teamsterville is that we differed in our allowance for letting the homophobia stand without comment. Ward calls it surprising to see upon rereading it, but not something he recognized until I mentioned it in conversation. Stewart notes that, at the time Philipsen collected his data, even the American Psychiatric Association classified "homosexuality" as a mental illness. As such, the attitudes Philipsen encountered were quite common and the language for critiquing them rare. My own reflections make space to cede some ground to Stewart's observations about time, but I seem to want an update in the 1992 revision for *Speaking Culturally*. Since we know that Philipsen is still actively publishing, what responsibility does he have to address this point—or does he? I also wonder if I hold myself to the same standard. In revisiting some of my earlier publications, I know I would use terminology slightly differently or write about identity even more carefully today. Yet I have not published any updates or retractions for these relatively minor spots. What questions occurred to you all as you read our various reflections?

Ward: *What is our consensus on "Teamsterville" and other canonical works in the field? What are our responsibilities as thinkers? As teachers?*



Spencer: We seem to agree the answer here must be “both/and.” We should keep reading famous, classic, and canonical works, and at the same time we should actively problematize them. We need to keep reading them in our own scholarship and in our teaching because they are foundational. Reviewers will expect us to cite them. Employers may expect our students to be conversant in canonical works. We cannot just discard them, and we would not want to, for they do offer valuable lessons. At the same time, we should all recognize that classic and canonical are not synonymous with inerrant. When we read “Teamsterville” or other famous foundational texts in class, we must not present these (or any other) works as sacrosanct. Instead, we should ask our students for their critiques of the articles and share our own. Such an approach models for students that no piece of writing is perfect, every writer has biases, and every published piece reflects some of the cultural conditions that contributed to its creation. Teaching students to think critically about what they are reading can yield refreshing and surprising results. Sometimes they offer critiques we have not thought about before, and everyone can learn from such a rich discussion. Similarly, in our scholarship we can use foundational texts even while we push on their growing edges—whether those critiques occupy a central place in the argument (as in the case of the present essay) or take a more marginal position (as in an endnote that acknowledges the liabilities of a given approach even when space constraints prevent more extended engagement with those limitations).

As researchers and teachers, then, we ought to engage in critical reflexivity about all of the assumptions we make, as well as the entailments of any theory, method, or ethical commitment we draw from—even when we may not endorse all of its implications. Failure to interrogate the weaknesses of any perspective will always lead to trouble. Since the perfect theory or approach does not exist, reflection on the ones we adopt (or adapt) is essential.

*Stewart: Looking more broadly, what does this conversation reveal about how we understand the ethical obligations of communication ethnographers and teachers of communication ethnography?*

Ward: Canonical works serve us best, I concluded above, not as “bibles” but as records of imperfect people whose struggles for wisdom challenge us to do the same. The record of Philipsen’s 40-year struggle is instructive. He began in the 1970s as a new member of the academy, expected to develop a coherent research agenda. Interpretive methodologies did not enjoy the acceptance they do today. Submitting a novel interdisciplinary extension of Hymes to the top journal in the field was a bold move. Seen this way, focusing narrowly, but foundationally, in “Teamsterville” on the cultural place of speaking itself is unsurprising. His next project with the Nacirema of the Pacific Northwest also focused on the cultural place of communication (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). Yet, if his informants’ homophobic speech in “Teamsterville” went unremarked, neither did it go unreported.

In the 1980s, Philipsen's struggle entered a second phase as a tenured scholar who extended, as well as defended, his research agenda. Thus, even as he examined the power dynamics of Teamsterville speech in local politics (Philipsen, 1986), he also argued against the "theoretical fiat" (Philipsen, 1991, p. 329) of making a priori critical assumptions about power. Tension was likewise evident in Philipsen's (1989) crucial parenthetical qualification when he asserted a "role for ethnography in communication studies . . . as (ideally) objective description" (p. 259). When he transitioned in the 1990s to theory development, Philipsen (1992) began a third phase of struggle, tentatively reflecting on his personal experiences in Teamsterville. Though he ultimately accommodated his informants' homophobia by "the use of a revised strategy of self-presentation," he nevertheless described "frustration" and "some months of reflection" over a situation he found "nearly impossible" (p. 5).

In the last phase of his struggle, Philipsen's status as a distinguished scholar allowed him to reflect broadly on what it all meant. He acknowledged a need for ethnographers "to figure out where you would draw the line" against moral relativism (*A First Look*, n.d.). And in his 2008 Carroll C. Arnold Lecture to the National Communication Association, Philipsen (2010) looked back 40 years to Teamsterville as the formative experience of his career. "Forty years ago, I tried to change a culture," he began. But then came a turning point. Neighborhood youth workers "were deeply concerned with the young peoples' frequent use of racial slurs and expressions of violent intent toward other racial groups" (p. 1). So, one night they showed an educational film. But when Martin Luther King Jr. appeared on screen, "shouts and cries erupted, the language of which I won't repeat and the apparent hatred of which I can't forget" (p. 1). To prevent a riot, Philipsen and the other youth workers stopped the film and cleared the building. As he recalled,

My early months led me to believe I had to leave and admit total defeat—or learn something. . . . So, I set myself to learn its terms and tropes, its premises and rules, for locally appropriate and efficacious communication. And 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 wisdom, which Philipsen struggled across four decades to gain, strikes me as still salutary. It applies well to my fieldwork with white evangelicals, where I have encountered deeply rooted discourses of overt patriarchy and heteronormativity and of covert racism. As Philipsen (2010) learned before me, I have discovered through my own struggles that "coming to terms with cultures" (p. 1), whose naturalized assumptions run deep and resist facile change, offers a path forward that is ethical yet viable. Yet I have also sought to pick up where Philipsen left off. As described in my narrative, I have extended his speech codes theory from the interpersonal to the structural

(Ward, *in press*). By taking the logical next step, what we have learned from critical theory in the half century since “Teamsterville” may now, in its turn, “be useful” in the ethnography of communication.

*Stewart: Philipsen believes that if you enter the field with a critical view already, you are engaging your participants from a perspective of “theoretical fiat.” Do we still believe that? Does this require ethnographers of communication to practice rhetorical field methods?*

Varela: No, there are many types of researchers. Research is not a zero-sum game. Different types of research produce important types of knowledge that we should understand in their own terms as different sides of a prism that characterize whole communication phenomena.

*Varela: What stance ought we take about the beliefs of the community? Are their beliefs irrelevant because they are not empirical and ultimately unknowable? Do we “play along” in order to understand our participants better, even if that means tacitly endorsing patriarchy, racism, homophobia, and other oppressive ideologies?*

Spencer: This question is important and difficult. To what degree do we understand “playing along” as necessary? If we interrupt harmful or toxic ideologies, then we may lose access to the populations we want to study. At the same time, if we attempt to stay neutral or perform neutrality (recognizing that no truly neutral position exists), then do we give tacit consent to the views we regard as harmful? In writing about evangelical views on gay and lesbian people, Tina Fetner (2008) admitted that she struggled in her interviews with evangelical leaders in a way she did not when she talked with gay and lesbian people, because she is not a member of the former group but does consider herself an ally of the latter. She managed this tension without losing access to her evangelical participants and, presumably, without alienating them. At the same time, she neither gave up her principles nor insisted on them in the spaces of her ethnographic and interview work with evangelical leaders. She seems to have found the sweet spot, but duplicating that success in other contexts seems challenging indeed.

*Ward: Would people who take a more critical lens benefit from the insights gained through the ethnography of communication and its more traditional, interpretive approach? What is the value of trying to be grounded in your data?*

Stewart: Just as “objective” empirical accounts of social practices are incomplete or inaccurate without reference to the social contexts and power relations that shape those practices, critical accounts are incomplete or inaccurate without empirical descriptions of social practices. As a critical discourse analyst, I take it as a given that critique should be grounded in evidence—indeed, this grounded approach is one reason why critical discourse studies (CDS) approaches are becoming more popular in U.S. communication studies (Martínez Guillem & Toulal, 2018).

CDS critics argue that tools of linguistic analysis are either inappropriate (e.g., Jones, 2007) or insufficient (Bartesaghi & Pantelides, 2018) to empirically ground critique in evidence that is not simply the analysts' own political or ideological preferences. In my own work, I draw on evidence from cognitive psychology to further ground critical claims (Rhodes & Stewart, 2016; Stewart, 2008) as do others working in Van Dijk's (2016) sociocognitive tradition of CDS.

Bartesaghi and Pantelides (2018) argue that CDS can too often make claims about intentions, hidden motives (of oppressors), and the thoughts and feelings (of the oppressed) that go well beyond what can be supported by linguistic textual analysis. Revisiting their own critical analysis of a university e-mail promoting a system for faculty to "refer students of concern" to the Office of Student Affairs (p. 165), they find their analysis to be "unilateral" and "unaccountable." They argue that their analysis imputes oppressive intentions to student affairs professionals and positions students as "voiceless targets" (p. 168), going well beyond what their textual data can support.

As one check against such "unilateral" critical analysis, Bartesaghi and Pantelides (2018) argue for "methodological reflexivity," wherein critical scholars acknowledge the limits of their own methods and consider how other methods, such as fieldwork, interviews, and ethnography of communication, could answer questions about how, in their example, student affairs professionals, faculty, and students, account for and interpret what is happening (p. 168). Other approaches to (critical) discourse analysis, such as Scollon and Scollon's (2007) nexus analysis, call for centering social action, rather than text, and draw on a variety of interpretive social science methods in addition to discourse analysis (see Carter, 2021 for an example of this method used in communication studies).

*All: What does our conversation offer readers by way of moving forward? What do we hope readers will do differently as a result of engaging with our work here?*

All: We presume our readers are thoughtful people who study language and social interaction, and communication more broadly, because they value critical thought and nuance. As such, our hope involves an embrace of complexity in our reflexive work with respect to epistemological and methodological ethics. No easy answers exist, and so the best solution invites us to turn into, not away from, the difficulty. Engage these questions rather than looking for pat answers. Interrogate assumptions and foundations regularly, and not just in introductory graduate seminars. Push on the soft spots. These questions require regular confrontation, not avoidance. As students and scholars who have dedicated our lives to difficult questions, we see this charge as an opportunity rather than a burden, and we ask our readers to join us. Such is the challenge and joy of our work as thinkers, writers, and teachers.

## Conclusion

Communication scholars specializing in the ethnography of communication, critical discourse studies, and rhetorical studies approach their work from different methodological viewpoints and often have varied epistemological and axiological commitments on which they base those choices. What can unite scholars from these different subdisciplines, particularly those with a critical bent, are their shared interests in the relationships among language, power, community, and social construction. Moreover, we certainly hope that a commitment to ethical research practices unites all communication scholars, regardless of specialty. But what happens when the ethical commitments that undergird a methodological perspective conflict with ethical standards of field research and critical theory?

Ethnographers of communication working in the Philipsen vein may well hold that their task involves describing the speech of a community on its own terms. But when those same ethnographers are committed to an egalitarian ethic, whether informed by humanist, religious, feminist, anti-racist, or queer-affirming worldviews, does respect for informants' cultural practices extend to speech that perpetuates patriarchy, homophobia, racism, or other systemic and structural forms of oppression? Do such ethnographers defer the resources of critical theory to describe, as objectively as possible, the sexist, homophobic, or racist speech they observed? If so, have they abdicated their critical values? But if they embrace the role of critique, do they abandon their commitment to meeting their informants where they are? Have they fallen into the trap of imposing scholarly language and values on a speech community with a different context, history, and system of beliefs?

Our dialogue has attempted to navigate these questions, not so much to offer definitive answers, but as a call revisit even our most foundational assumptions, our most beloved classical texts, and even the works by the mentors or thinkers that we admire most. Any text reflects the culture that helped produce it and, in turn, shapes that culture as well. The same holds true for readers who encounter a "canonical" text in their own times and with their own frames of reference. This much is not news. But how often do we reflect on that reality as it applies to field-defining texts? We aver: not often enough. We invite readers, whether now or fifty years hence, both to ask the questions we have asked—and the questions which are yet unasked.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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