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Social Approaches

A Role for Communication Theory in Ethnography and Cultural Analysis

by Donal Carbaugh and
Sally O. Hastings

During the past decade, students of interpersonal communication have heard calls from several prominent courtyards urging investigators to enter socially situated scenes and, once there, to explore the natural communication of social life. Constructivists have invited us to explore "interpretive processes" of individuals within "sociocultural communities" through a "reflective empiricism," with special attention to "free response data" (Delia, O'Keefe & O'Keefe, 1982). Similarly, Malcolm Parks (1982), after exposing the hidden workings of an ideology in some research, proposed a closer examination of real world practices, urging us "off the couch and into the world." More recently, Steve Duck (1991) reexamined many concerns in research about relationships, finding a new focus on the "realisation" of "symbolic union," "universes," and "meanings" refreshing. Yet, how does one conduct empirical research into naturally occurring communicative practices that brings into view their various forms, functions, and meanings? Our claim is that a version of ethnography and cultural analysis provides one such social approach to interpersonal communication, with our main goal being to reflect on the role of communication theory within this

approach. We hope, like Berger (1991), to make "theory development . . . an integral part of the training of all communication researchers" (p. 102). To begin, we sketch some social and cultural bases of our approach.

To use the term "social" to characterize a general approach to interpersonal communication is to say something about that approach that is distinctive to it. Some prominent connotations of "social" include "seeing" and "hearing" communication as a situated accomplishment (Stewart & Philipsen, 1985), as a reflexive process (Pearce, 1989; Pearce & Cronen, 1980), as interactive even in its various monologic forms (Sanders, 1987), and as instantiating conceptions of the self or person, relations with one another, social structures, and institutions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1989; Sigman, 1987). Conceiving of communication as such is to stand one foot firmly on a social foundation, to see (hear and feel) on this base the social life in communication, the situated, interactional patterns that creatively evoke, sometimes validate, sometimes negotiate, sometimes embattle, sometimes transform, social selves, relations, and institutions.

But we have left one foot dangling. An "adequately ambulatory" theory of communication—if it is to penetrate the meanings of selves in societies—would stand firmly also on a "cultural" foundation (see Hymes, 1990, p. 420). Brought into view, on this base, would be the locally distinctive symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings that participants themselves consider significant and important (Carbaugh, 1988, 1991). What are the various ways they themselves make their social lives cohere? How do they render (validate, negotiate, contest, transform) the world during their many situated, reflexive, interactional social performances? In short, how, if at all, is their interpersonal communication culturally coded through their own system of symbols, symbolic forms, and their meanings?

With one's social and cultural footing established, one can be responsive to these kinds of questions and calls, and thus create interpersonal communication theory accordingly. So positioned, a few have developed an ethnographic approach to communication, as well as produced methodological proposals, programmatic statements, and reviews that suggest a central place for communication theory (e.g., Philipsen, 1989; Stewart & Philipsen, 1985). And further, the role of communication theory is evident in several fieldwork reports (see for examples the papers in Bauman & Sherzer, 1974; Carbaugh, 1990; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972). But to our knowledge, none of these essays explicate in detail the various phases of communication theorizing within ethnographic studies, although the general role of theorizing is mentioned and its various phases are implicit in many ethnographic studies.

Our aim is to contribute to an understanding of ethnography as a way of theorizing interpersonal communication. We first briefly discuss ethnography as a cyclical research process, then present four distinct phases of theorizing within this process. We cite empirical studies that demonstrate our points throughout. Our specific objectives are both to show how an ethnographic approach includes in its research design interpersonal communication theory and to show

how such theory can be developed in an ethnographically informed, culturally sensitive way. We do not claim to be offering a wholly new way of doing ethnography, only to be formulating a cyclical research design and phases of theorizing that we find endemic in the process. Making this explicit may help other practitioners and consumers of this kind of interpersonal communication research.

Ethnography as a Cyclical Investigative Process

The sociocultural model that we adopt suggests designing and reading ethnography as a theoretically focused, descriptive, culturally interpretive, and comparative mode of research (Carbaugh, 1991; Philipsen, 1977, 1989). However, designing and conducting research to meet these requirements is difficult. How can one describe the various tasks that go into ethnographic research, and why characterize them as cyclical?

One description of the process draws attention to three general phases—prefieldwork, fieldwork, and postfieldwork—each with attendant tasks. Prefieldwork activities typically involve three kinds of interrelated reading, each motivated by a specific purpose: (1) readings about ethnographic theory and method that orient investigators to a way of conceptualizing communication as sociocultural life; (2) readings about particular intellectual problems that the ethnographer finds interesting, such as facework, symbolizing personhood, emotion expression, terms for talk, relational development, speech acts, turntaking, narrative, address terms, and so on; (3) readings about diverse local patterns of communication including, if possible, those about a field site or people of a proposed study. This is hardly an exhaustive list, but we find it representative of tasks that are prominently conducted prior to entering the field. Note also how such tasks position the ethnographer, respectively, within a general approach, with particular intellectual problems and interests, as well as with knowledge of particular communicative practices. This equips the ethnographer with a general orientation that suggests some kinds of questions about communication and communicative phenomena and leads, subsequently, to some field sites rather than others.

Fieldwork typically involves distinct phases such as generating data (through interviews, observations, document collection, surveys, and so on), recording data (through transcribing, audio and video recordings, and other field notation systems), analyzing data (through various quantitative and qualitative procedures), and continued reading of the kinds mentioned earlier. Work in the field thus is often exploratory, though it is also purposive, in that it gets done by using in an open, investigative, and heuristic way, the orientation(s) developed prior to entering the field, formulated during prefieldwork studies.

Postfieldwork activity typically continues with the analyses begun in the field (sometimes leading back to the field—in both senses, geographic and intellectual—in order to generate better perspective and new data), and with the always audience-driven phases of intensive writing (usually begun in the field).

Note how the above description draws attention to distinct stages

within ethnographic research that reflect, following Philipsen (1977), a "weak commitment" to a linear ethnographic process (p. 42). But also note, within each general stage in the process, the ethnographer cycles though distinct activities, just as each such stage, once moved through, becomes a potential point of return. Conceptualizing ethnographic research this way suggests both a linear sequence of activities through which ethnography gets done, as well as a cyclical dynamic among these activities. We hope to provide, as does Philipsen (1977), "a middle way between rigid linearity and deliberate non-linearity" (p. 45). But what is the role of theorizing within this process? What are the ways in which communication theory animates this process?

Four Phases of Theorizing Interpersonal Communication Within Ethnography

What we describe here are four distinctive but interrelated phases (or moments) of theorizing that are incorporated in the above description of the ethnographic research cycle.[1] We pull them out and sketch them here in order to amplify our point about phases of theorizing communication within ethnography. At the outset, we wish to emphasize that each phase we discuss, like each stage above, provides a context for, and is itself contextualized by, the others, though we present them here in their logical, chronological sequence.[2]

A first phase of theorizing involves the ethnographer in developing a basic orientation to communication. What assumptions ground one's view of communication? Through what conceptual lens will one hear or look at it? What characteristics does communication take on from this vantage point? Most typically, ethnographies of communication draw upon, and have empirically verified and developed, the *assumptive base* laid by Hymes (1962), that is, communication is systematic, social, and culturally distinct. Hymes's (1972) subsequent *conceptual system* has suggested various social units for analysis and observation (speech community, situation, event, act, styles, and ways of speaking) as well as a schematic vocabulary for doing such analysis, the SPEAKING mnemonic (*Situation*: setting and scene; *Participants*: personalities, roles, relations; *Ends*: goals and outcomes; *Acts*: message content, form, sequences, dimensions, and types of illocutionary force; *Key*: tone or mode; *Instrumentality*: channel or media; *Norms*: of interaction and interpretation; *Genre*: native, formal). Based on such a view, and through this conceptual system, communication is seen (heard and felt) as a sociocultural system of coordinated action and meaning, that is, an interactional system that is individually applied, socially negotiated, symbolically constituted, and culturally distinct. Over 250 ethnographic reports have been published that have adopted and developed this general theoretical orientation (Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986). The basic goals of these studies have been, to paraphrase Hymes (1972), to particularize from this general orientation (i.e., to understand communication, through fieldwork studies, as an instantiation of particular sociocultural lives), and to generalize from these particular cases (i.e., to discover cross-cultural and universal dimensions of communication). For exam-

ple, in a much celebrated book, Moerman (1988) integrated ethnography and conversation analysis into an orientation that sought, for example, both how cultural agents were symbolized in Thai culture and how this symbolic activity occurred within an apparently universal conversational structure of person reference. Moerman's study demonstrates how conversation analysis can help ethnographers identify interactional mechanisms that may be powerful sites of cultural information, just as ethnography can help conversation analysts identify the cultural uses and interpretations of such mechanisms. A second example is Foley's (1990) study of the "expressive practices" in a rural Texas school, hearing class productions in such practices.

A second phase of theorizing draws attention to specific kinds (or classes) of communication activities, practices, or phenomena. Theoretical attention moves here from the more comprehensive conceptualization of communication of the first phase, to more specific theories of communication activities or phenomena. For example, theories of communication forms, like address forms, sensitize investigators to variability in a form (from title plus last name, to nicknames), and its subsequent associated meanings (from power to solidarity to intimacy). Searle's (1990a/1976) speech act theory suggests another system of 12 possible dimensions that underlie basic types of illocutionary actions. Other examples would include dimensions of any communicative activities like theories of politeness and implicature, or theories of specific communicative phenomena like terms for talk, symbolizing persons, emotion expression, turntaking, metaphor (and other tropes), communicative silence, jokes, ritual, myth, conversational repair, agonistic expression, unwanted repetitive patterns, reciprocated diatribe, and so on. The listing is an effort to indicate the variety of specific dimensions and phenomena that have been and could be further theorized about, each suggesting distinct intellectual problems worthy of study.

A particular ethnographer might find one such activity of sufficient interest to develop a deep understanding of it, and then choose a field site where such an activity is prominent and thus ideally suited for such a study, as did Catherine Lutz (1988) whose fascination with emotion expression led her to the Ifaluk, who have an elaborate vocabulary for such expression. Others, like M. Rosaldo (1980, 1990), may move between activities, theorizing each and integrating several, as she did with speech acts, emotion expression, and the symbolic construction of personhood. Whatever the theoretical focus may be, it is noteworthy that various theories of communication activities have been developed and should be studied prior to—or at least in conjunction with—intensive fieldwork, so to be positioned better (i.e., theoretically equipped) to conduct fieldwork.

Note that, to here, the ethnographer has theorized about communication in two distinct, yet interrelated phases. Each has involved a kind of theorizing that is acontextual and acultural. That is, each kind of theorizing, whether of a basic orientation or of specific communication activities, is of a syntactic, broad type, rather than of a specific sociocultural domain (Cushman & Pearce, 1977).

The intent is to develop a conceptual system that informs one generally how to look (the basic orientation), and identifies possible parameters of variability in what one might see (the activity theories). Such a system grounds specific cultural analyses and lays a base for comparative and cross-cultural analyses. So, to here we have two phases of theorizing that suggest how to look both into and across cases, and some dimensions and phenomena one might possibly see. But we have left open, or unspecified, exactly what we will in fact see (hear and feel) in any particular place. We do not yet know how address terms or speech acts are culturally configured, or what actual pattern(s) obtains, in our own particular field sites. We do not yet know if our general theorizing is adequate (descriptively or explanatorily) to our selected case or place. To know, we must go to the field and enter another phase of theorizing.

A third phase of theorizing is perhaps the most celebrated of ethnography, the theory of the case, the formulation of the general way in which communication is patterned within a socioculturally situated community, field, or domain. Theorizing in this third phase involves formulating a contextually bound, culturally sensitive description and interpretation of communication as it is created and interpreted by a people. One listens to a local world and explicates how specific communicative symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings are patterned there. Consider, for example, Basso's (1990/1970) study of silence among the Western Apache. He noted that silence was used as a communicative strategy by various participants, including children, parents, co-workers, young sweethearts, friends and family of mourners, recipients of profanity, and by those visiting the sick. He found, further, that it was used, and culturally meaningful, in at least six cultural scenes: "meeting strangers," "courting," "children coming home from school," "getting cussed out," "being with people who are sad," and "being with those for whom they sing." By holding the communicative act of silence constant, and exploring associations among participants and cultural scenes, Basso ruled out various sources of explanation and eventually was able to formulate the inchoate Apache theory of communicative silence: (1) silence is used and interpreted as a communicative act; (2) silence is typically directed at a focal participant; (3) when used, silence is associated with relationships among focal participants that are uncertain, ambiguous, or unpredictable. What Basso provides is a theory, a local theory, of a communicative activity in a sociocultural context. (He goes on to suggest that his account has some cross-cultural support and might perhaps be universal.) Relatedly, Philipsen (1990/1975) found in a community he called Teamsterville, on the basis of several problematic episodes, that among males, silence was associated with asymmetrical role relationships, while speaking was associated with symmetrical role relationships.

These two cases—of silence and gender role enactment—help make several points. Theorizing a situated activity, like silence or male speaking, is to theorize about communication activities that occur in specific communities, such as "giving up on words" in Apache culture, or "speaking like a man" in Teamsterville. The-

orizing a case is thus not to theorize primarily about a context or community, but to theorize about communication within a context or community (or as stated throughout our essay, it is to theorize communication as an instantiation of context or community). Theorizing about communication within a context in this way is to demonstrate the particular yield of a more general conceptual system, such as the basic theoretical orientation, or the theories of specific communication practices discussed above. Theorizing using an explicit conceptual orientation lays a basis for further comparative study and cross-cultural generalizations, such as the one about silence suggested above and later presented by Braithwaite (1990). The latter points are important to emphasize because many ethnographic reports indicate their general orientation and theory through brief notes or patterns of citation, creating perhaps the impression that they are of lesser importance than the local pattern. What is often elaborated in the field report, therefore, is the field theory, the socioculturally situated theory, more than the general orientation or specific theory grounding the report. This literary dynamic is an important one for interpersonal communication researchers to recognize.[3]

A final phase of theorizing involves a direct evaluation of the general theory (of the communication activity or general orientation) from the vantage point of one's situated case or cases. Based upon what one has found in the field, the actual situated pattern, one examines one's general way of looking: Is the general lens observationally adequate? Does it warrant some revising, developing, or discarding? For example, Rosaldo (1990/1982) undertook an ethnographic study (the basic orientation) of speech acts (the activity theorized about) among the Ilongot. She found (the situated field theory) that Ilongot speech acts such as directives (commands and requests) vary by two cultural continua. One has to do with urgency or the desired speed of a response. The other has to do with lines of social rank, especially age and gender. Rosaldo argued further, developing these cultural continua, that they instantiate a relational identity of "social bonds and interactive meanings." On the basis of this cultural patterning of speech acts, Rosaldo then reflected on speech act theory itself (evaluation of theory), calling into question the priority often given to dimensions of illocutionary force such as "expressed psychological state and point or purpose" (see Searle 1990a/1976, 1990b). These dimensions resonate nicely with Western notions of persons as individuals, but risk a misreading of Ilongot speech acts—if applied uncritically. She questioned further the wisdom of emphasizing speech acts, outside larger interactional sequences. She thus sounds cautionary notes, on the basis of field research, about the weighting of dimensions within speech act theory, and its relationship to a larger taxonomy of discursive practices (see Hymes, 1990; Searle, 1990a/1976, 1990b). By reflecting upon the lens used to conduct the ethnography (the basic/activity theory), and critically assessing its use (through situated theory), the lens itself is refined, developed, and/or validated, even, though rarely, discarded.

To summarize, then, we have discussed an ethnographic approach to

interpersonal communication as a cyclical research process that involves four phases of theorizing. The phases can be summarized with the mnemonic, BASE, as follows:

Phase 1. Basic orientation: assumptions, vocabulary, and subsequent character of communication.

Phase 2. Activity theory: general theory of a specific communication activity, practice, or dimension of practice.

Phase 3. Situated theory: theory of a socioculturally situated communication practice.

Phase 4. Evaluation and/or Evolution of theory: Evaluating the relationship between the situated theory and the basic orientation/activity theory, and modifying the theory when necessary.

Again, we emphasize that the sequence here is not a simple, though it is a weak, linear one. Ethnographic research design and rules of logic suggest that one follows the sequence from 1 to 2 (with *B* and *A* being formulated prior to fieldwork) through 3 and 4 (with *S* and *E* being formulated during or after at least some fieldwork). The dynamics of Phase 3 (*S*) often lead back to 1 (*B*), and so on. This is the nature of the cyclical process and phases of theorizing within it.

Following the spirit of reflexiveness in recent interpersonal and ethnographic writings, we would hope our essay instantiates the process of theorizing we seek to describe: with our Basic orientation to communication being erected firmly on social and cultural footing, the primary Activity of concern being the theorizing of interpersonal communication within ethnography, the Situated case studies we have cited being particular demonstrations of the theorizing process, with the Evolution of theory including—we hope—a more scrutable role for communication theory within the general program and specific practices of ethnography and cultural analysis.

Kenneth Pike (1967) suggested that theorizing occurs between moments etic (initial, tentative, yet general units) and emic (distinctive and local). He wrote of the two under a section heading, "Caution—Not a Dichotomy," saying, "etic and emic data do not constitute a rigid dichotomy of bits of data, but often represent the same data from two points of view" (p. 41). Hymes (1990) has noted similarly, the etic-1, emic, and etic-2 moments of theorizing in ethnography (p. 421; see also Carbaugh, 1990, pp. 291–302). We hope the above comments help readers to a similar conclusion about an ethnographic approach to interpersonal communication, as a process that includes at its *base* communication theory, a communication theory that moves cyclically through phases that are both general (BAE) and sensitive to cultural particulars (S).

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Notes

[1] Our view of the process of theorizing is informed by Oakeshott (1991).

[2] For ease of exposition and memory, we present the phases with the mnemonic device, BASE, which summarizes the four phases: Basic theoretical orientation, Activ-

ity theory or theory of a communicative phenomenon, Situated theory of a sociocultural case, and Evaluation of theory.

[3] See VanMaanen (1988), and the special section on ethnography and critique in Volume 23 (1989/1990) of *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.

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Social Approaches

Personal Narrative as a Social Approach to Interpersonal Communication

by Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we *should* value the narrative. (Richardson, 1990)

Scholars interested in advancing communication theory inevitably confront the quandaries of reflexivity. As communicating humans studying humans communicating, we are inside what we are studying. Our object is a subject. Sooner or later most of us recognize that the social phenomena of communication are different in important ways from the phenomena of nature. Atoms cannot comprehend the terms by which they are described theoretically; humans can.

What place should reflexivity occupy in the study of communication? Some scholars think reflexivity should be bracketed in the name of what is scientifically tenable and responsive to rigorous inquiry (Berger & Chaffee, 1987), while others construe reflexivity as an abundant and enduring quality of interaction that must be taken seriously and confronted directly in communication research (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). The differences between social and other approaches to