



The Relevance of Cultural Communication: For Whom and in What Respect?

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Nancy: What?

Bob: Yes. (Sobs.) It . . . was a game.

Nancy: I shouldn't have done that.

Bob: I was not mad. I was just stupid. (Sobs.)

Nancy: But. You never. You never acted the same.

Bob: Nancy, I forgot about it the next day. And I have loved you more each and every day since we have been together.

(They cry and hold each other for one minute and 32 seconds.)

Nancy: I love you.

Bob: I love you, too, Nance.

I have yet to publish any of the data from the above project, and even when it is published, it likely will not make a large difference in how people enact their relationships through communication. The research process, however, undoubtedly made a difference in the lives of Nancy and Bob—as it did for others involved with this project and countless other research studies. Participants have stories about their communicative worlds. The research process—when honed toward thoughtful reflection from participants—can instigate significant thoughts about those stories and allow for individuals, couples, groups, or cultures to develop a deeper understanding of self. Even if small, that reflection can and should make a difference.

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I'd like to speak directly to a point that Mary Lee Hummert (May 2009) makes regarding the primary role of communication researchers: Mainly that their aim is to increase the "effectiveness" of communication. The question becomes, effective for whom, under what conditions and to what end? Without contextualizing "effectiveness" within these parameters, Hummert's benign goal of increasing effective communication runs the risk of implying a universal standard against which all communication can be judged. If we take seriously the idea that all communication is cultural (Philipsen, 2008), we readily recognize the importance of moving away from the idea of one "right" way to communicate with prescriptions for effective

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communication strategies; and moving towards an understanding and appreciation of diverse communicative practices.

In this essay, I want to illustrate how communication research that focuses on local communities changes the question from how we demonstrate effectiveness to how we understand the nuances of particular communicative practices. When considering the impact of communication research, we should ask ourselves: for whom is our research important? in which contexts? and, towards what end? That is, our research makes a difference when we consider the features of diverse communicators, the conditions where speaking is appropriate or inappropriate; and the goals of such practices.

Communication scholars undertake research focused on communication practices. Some researchers, for example, have investigated what particular Americans¹ say when they are referring to communication practices: “really talking” (Philipsen & Katriel, 1992) or “sharing” and “being honest” (Carbaugh, 1989a). By locating what Carbaugh (1989b) has called, “terms for talk,” we have been able to learn more about how some Americans describe and enact particular cultural practices: in this case, communication itself. By describing communication as “sharing” implies a process, or a ritual: sitting down, talking to work out problems and discussing the relationship (Philipsen & Katriel, p.77). This ritual has particular meanings for those group members who enact it. Doing it right suggests that one is “open, close and supportive;” while failing to do it suggests the opposite.

When we learn more about a particular communicative process that is attached to a label like “really talking,” we can begin to recognize that often what we teach in courses in Interpersonal Communication is based on specific cultural practices and based on particular group memberships. So the issue of effective communication cannot be considered without an attending context within which it is practiced.

We can see that when Hummert advocates “identifying the characteristics of effective communication and its benefits” (p. 222) to demonstrate that communication research makes a difference, she appears to overlook the importance of attending to the descriptive nuances that enrich any particular communication practice. Her stance seems to privilege one universal standard against which these other communication practices are judged and evaluated.

Rather than solely promoting one correct way of communicating, cultural communication scholarship that examines important features of communication practices has led many of us as instructors to describe the process for discovering, for any given group, those particular forms for communicating that recur and that are valued. Therefore, rather than teaching how, within a given context, one *should* communicate, we provide students with the *tools* for discovering how communication practices vary. In the end, a cultural orientation to studying communication allows us to live and work amongst increasingly diverse and overlapping speech communities with distinct communication practices.

Note

- [1] While it was Katriel and Philipsen's (1981) claim, "that 'communication' labels the academic discipline we practice is more or less incidental to the general point being made", I believe that we need to recognize that we work within a discipline with terms that overlap with so-called "native" terms for similar behavior. This makes it all the more important that we carefully distinguish researcher's discourse from everyday understandings.

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Research as a Transdisciplinary Networked Process: A Metaphor for Difference-Making Research

Leah Sprain, Danielle Endres & Tarla Rai Petersen

Communication scholars who seek to have their research affect communication practices and public understandings of communication should move toward a transdisciplinary networked approach. In addition to conceptualizing communication researchers as translating research results or intervening in communication practices (Frey, 2009; Hummert, 2009), the metaphor of research as a transdisciplinary networked process wherein scholars actively seek opportunities to connect people, projects, and ideas offers new insights to the conversation begun in the forum. In what follows, we define research as a transdisciplinary networked process. Then we describe how interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral networks facilitate such

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