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The Ethnography of Communication as Applied Methodology: Insights from Three Case Studies

Saskia Witteborn, Trudy Milburn & Evelyn Y. Ho

Based on three case studies in organizational, health, and institutional settings, we show that research processes and outcomes can have different logics for scholars in the field, for clients, and other participants. We illustrate how applied work prompts researchers to reflect on their shifting research goals and outcomes in the context of interaction with participants and clients.

Keywords: Ethnography of Communication; Applied Research; Facilitation; Health Communication; New Technology; Migration

The Ethnography of Communication (EC) focuses on situated communicative conduct that co-constitutes place and social positioning, relating the individual to the communal (Philipsen, 1992; Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). Research in EC maps the practices, social structures, and related worldviews through which people constitute what it means to act as a member of a group in a particular spatial and temporal context. EC enables researchers to move between contextualized communicative practices and conceptualizing ways of being, acting, and relating, tightening them into a communicative theory about social life. As a theoretical frame, EC provides useful guidelines for understanding the applied nature of researching situated communicative conduct and, in fact, the nature of research itself. EC foregrounds communication, and it is through communication that we engage others.

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Participants engage with and create communicative (inter)actions with particular purposes, or *ends* (Hymes, 1974), in mind. Hymes' (1974) initial distinction between *ends-in-view* (goals) and *ends-as-outcomes* has mostly gone unrecognized. As we enter social scenes, as EC researchers, we have initial goals and outcomes (with regards to a particular setting) and future goals and outcomes in view (e.g., writing a paper about communication). As outcomes we can judge our success with any community by the changes we help enact; and we are judged by our peers and others when we describe these outcomes in published research. The major contribution of EC scholars to applied research is that we are often willing to suspend our applied ends-in-view to the *ends-in-view of the community in which we work*. Some applied researchers may discount native competencies in order to accomplish their own goals and outcomes. However, as a research method, the in situ nature of EC work often leads to the researcher contributing to important applied work.

We use three case studies to illustrate a continuum of applied moves (as presented in Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi's introduction, 2013). The case studies represent a range, from applied research understood as generating knowledge to produce strategic action (outcome-based), to applied work understood as responding to social problems as they arise in situ. The case studies illustrate how EC scholars often align their research outcomes with the ends of the community. The case studies also illustrate how EC scholars can sacrifice their own ends in privileging the community's goals and anticipated outcomes.

In particular, we will focus on goals and outcomes (ends) of applied moves. We begin by describing our entry into the scene and our often shifting roles as researchers. These illustrations help us demonstrate how members include us within their logics of what is sensible and valuable to the group itself. Our analyses raise questions like: What purpose does the researcher serve for the community? Are participants' goals compatible? If not, what are the consequences? These issues are fundamental for EC and vitally important to consider when doing EC applied research.

Examining research through participants' perspectives and privileging their ends is slightly different from received definitions of *applied* research that privilege the scholar's goals. Applied research typically "solve[s] problems and improve[s] communication practice, but it could also systematically test the solution (i.e., theory) to a given problem or issue" (Keyton, Bisel, & Ozley, 2009, p. 156). From an EC perspective, we ask, solving, improving, and testing from whose perspective? As we demonstrate in the case studies, this is sometimes straightforward and at other times a point of negotiation.

Introduction to Case Studies

Case 1 relates to a nonprofit organization formed for the purpose of promoting Latino Culture and Art in a small Ohio town. The organization sought a facilitator to assist its board of directors in the process of creating a strategic plan. The chairman of the board learned about Milburn's nonprofit book (Milburn, 2009) and invited her to

facilitate a one-day meeting. Prior to the meeting, they negotiated both the consulting fee and permission to record the meeting for Milburn's future research. Within this strategic planning event, three levels of *ends* exist that illustrate the continuum of applied moves including applied work and mutually agreed upon a priori strategic action (applied research).

Case 2 comes from research at a public health acupuncture and massage therapy clinic. Beginning first as an EC researcher, Ho was invited to work with the clinic to create and lead a health outcomes study to test/measure the effectiveness of acupuncture and massage therapy for HIV-related neuropathy. This study illustrates how the researcher had to redefine an intended outcome according to participants' understandings of applied research.

Case 3 is about new technologies and asylum seekers in Germany. The initial goal of the study was to write about new technology use by asylum seekers and the meanings of virtual practices to the people, which would eventually result in strategic action (outcome), that is, recommendations to officials about forced migrants' access to new technologies or lack thereof, and the need for computer-based skills training and connectivity. However, during the research process, Witteborn had to respond in situ to participants' definitions of applied research and adjust her research goals and intended future outcomes.

EC Research

Case 1

As a consultant hired for her sensitivity to Latino concerns, Milburn sought to meet her ends as a facilitator (based on her analysis of nonprofit strategic planning meetings in similar centers) as well as the goals of the Center's board of directors in several ways. She collaborated to create the agenda with the Chairman; she enacted the role of facilitator, calling on participants to speak and move to subsequent topics, keeping the group on schedule; and she categorized participants' comments on the whiteboard to help frame the relationship between the mission and the activities within the Center.

As a facilitator Milburn enacted a role prescribed by the event. She was able to use this role to negotiate recording the meeting to serve two ends: her own future EC research as well as writing the final strategic plan for the board.

Additional application of her research to her participant role came in the form of her in situ analysis, as she helped the board recognize some patterns within their activities. By helping to categorize and align the board's current activities to its mission, Milburn facilitated the group's construction of its strategic plans. Considering this activity from a communication researcher's perspective, the act of articulating or providing an account of one's actions in the presence of others creates organizational cohesion (or disunity if one gives an unacceptable account). Therefore, by publicly accounting for their actions, board members' behaviors were positively or negatively sanctioned by other members. Those sanctions provide the

impetus for deciding which actions would be continued and which discontinued. Strategic planners from the business world engage in similar behaviors, but they may not necessarily appreciate the way that communication itself frames the group's norms now and into the future.

At the conclusion of the strategic planning event, the board had at least three outcomes: (1) They learned how one participates in a strategic planning session; (2) they began to recognize how their various programs could be articulated as stemming from the Center's mission; and (3) they learned how their own values and commitments resonated with other board members as shared values and beliefs.

In the process of facilitating this meeting, Milburn learned about this organization's board as well as how strategic planning is facilitated. This session resulted in the board articulating the following goals: having programs with measurable outcomes, ensuring a sound budget with financial stability, creating a membership-development strategy, and planning officer succession. To enact her research ends-in-view, Milburn can compare this meeting to the facilitation literature and reflect on its outcomes. Focusing on these outcomes, improvements can be made to facilitation techniques—purposefully crafting different outcomes, or ensuring that the next group achieves its goals in a more effective manner.

So, this case illustrates the two-fold outcome of applied EC research. What the group takes away as a result of the researcher's participation and what the researcher takes away as a result of participating with the group. There certainly may be other consequences of the interaction, but these two ends are important contributions that EC makes to applied research.

Case 2

Ho began at the Healing Touch (HT) Clinic (pseudonym) as an EC participant-observer. Eventually, as staff got to know her and her interest in research, she moved from regular administrative/clinic volunteer to volunteering with clinical research projects. Within these changes, new and negotiated ends led to doing important EC-intersecting applied work.

From a public health perspective, *research* measures outcomes and creates evidence to promote patient health. In this setting, Ho was ascribed the role of researcher but her communication interests were not well understood. In fact, her original communication research ends-in-view were deemed not very useful to HT staff because the communication codes of interest were those already most familiar to staff. Instead, the staff wanted to measure changes in HIV-related neuropathy experiences of patients after receiving acupuncture and massage therapy—not at all a clearly communicative activity. In an effort to be useful to the clinic, Ho and the staff designed a research study together, with Ho serving as the principal investigator. The clinic staff created the acupuncture and massage therapy intervention and Ho secured funding, developed and gained approval for the research design, including finding acceptable measurement scales. It was her ethnographic work that led her to conclude that these were the valued forms of data that clinic staff expected in *doing research.*

However, staying true to her original communicative ends, she also collected recordings of clients talking about their experiences with neuropathy and treatment which resulted in a communication-oriented research publication focused on understanding client experiences (Ho & Robles, 2011). These findings were helpful for the clinic in systematically documenting and therefore better understanding the use of these therapies in clients' lives. In other words, the applied work of doing research unified researcher and staff around the shared goals of improving client health.

Ultimately, the team was unable to measure statistically significant change. However, the intervention (receiving treatment) was important in situ applied work because it could not have been done without a researcher on staff. It also positively addressed clients' needs. Clients reported that the interviews made them feel heard, took their illness experience seriously, and improved their situations. As one client explained, "these studies will help other people…if you weren't doing your work many of us wouldn't be here so thank you." Clients urged the team to continue with *research*. It was a sobering reality that the only tangible help this project provided was in listening and providing the intervention treatments. The team could not produce the measurement data that passed statistical muster, but that did not negate the fact that every participant reported moments of relief that they credited to the intervention, and the staff reported a better understanding of what clients were experiencing.

Case 3

In her study on asylum seekers and new technology, Witteborn's end-in-view was to collect data on forced migrants' new technology use and the meanings of virtual practices to the people and create strategic action based on the empirical data. The strategic action was aimed at officials and NGOs in the form of recommendations and brief trainings about asylum seekers' access to new technology and the necessity of needs-based computer skills training. However, the roles that asylum seekers ascribed to the researcher shaped the potential outcome of her research. To the asylum seekers, Witteborn was a resource and supporter who could assist with practical issues like finding accommodation or being a good listener. In situ work was thus as important to the participants as any potential future outcome.

Moreover, during the research process Witteborn's questions about new technologies led asylum seekers to inquire about computers, where to learn skills, or how to use Skype. Witteborn had responded to but also created needs through her presence and felt accountable for some of them in situ (applied work). Some needs could be satisfied such as learning about Skype or being listened to. Some needs could not be fulfilled (e.g., finding a computer or housing), which left some people disillusioned about what they understood applied research to be—a process that produced tangible results and immediate improvements to their lives.

The definitions of applied research thus differed. As a researcher, designing strategic action based on data was the expected research goal with the potential future

outcome to persuade officials to assist asylum seekers by bettering their lives through skills and connectivity. At the same time, asylum seekers' understandings of outcome-based action (applied research) were related to access to housing, jobs, or education. For a communication researcher, those were not the primary intended outcomes.

During the research process, Witteborn thus adjusted her goals and potential outcomes without sacrificing them. The eventual goal still was to give recommendations to officials about asylum seekers' access to new technologies and training but in combination with data about education and future job opportunities and by creating partnerships for education (additional goal and potential future outcome). In sum, the EC research process generated relevant applied work. This applied work, which took participants' input seriously, shaped future research.

Conclusions

We have illustrated the continuum between applied research and applied work (presented in the introduction) and how applied work can be necessary to define strategic outcomes from participants' perspectives. As EC scholars, before entering any scene, we try to articulate applied research goals and outcomes that will match or at least fit with the community we research; often, our own applied research may be altered as we come to learn more about the participants' goals and outcomes by interacting with them. For each group of participants, research itself was meaningful when it prompted practical application or involvement in defining this application (in the case of applied work), not necessarily related to communication.

Both researchers and participants are not static in their roles, and analyzing the research process itself can provide important insights into how participants' ends may alter the researchers' role from experts of social scientific inquiry, to problem-solvers, or to listeners. Participants, including the researcher, engage in applied work throughout the research process by merging into each others' experiences, leaving the scene different than they were before (Stewart, 1996). This process, or applied work, intersects with the intended strategic outcomes (applied research) from an EC perspective.

EC has often been criticized for being merely a descriptive methodology. EC's goals are indeed descriptive; nevertheless, these descriptive findings, and the process of research that leads to finding those descriptions, can be the foundation of applied research, outcomes, and strategic action (prescriptive). Saville-Troike (1982) explained:

> For Hymes, research and application involve a two-way sharing of knowledge—the investigator contributing scientific models of inquiry, and participants providing the requisite knowledge and perspective of the particular community contexts. (p. 267)

Any applied research certainly recognizes mutuality and sharing of knowledge. However, though this quote focuses on the binary between researcher-as-scientific and participant-as-local, in this paper, we have shown that these roles are not so

easily demarcated. Similarly, applied research often privileges ends without recognition of the research process that leads to those ends-as-outcomes. In this paper, we have reflected on the research process itself, how the researcher negotiates her own ends with community members' ends in creating multiple outcomes. Although an EC researcher may initiate applied research with different ends, EC researchers are well equipped in their research methodology to generate important community-driven applied work, goals, and outcomes.

Acknowledgments

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