Ethnographic Perspectives on Culture and Communication

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side, however, also developed arguments that represented different cultural topoi. Tax opponents voiced egalitarian themes by claiming that the excise tax would damage the livelihoods of small retailers and small tobacco farmers. Tax advocates developed a competitive individualist theme by arguing that the excise tax was really a user's fee that reimbursed the state for treating sick smokers (Esrock et al. 2007).

Public relations itself is a culturally constituted system (Leichty 2003). Different versions of PR practice are advanced and criticized in discourse about PR. A hierarchical model of PR and a competitive individualist model have long vied for disciplinary dominance (Leichty 2003). This cultural competition is visible when communicators: (1) identify problems with PR practice, (2) predict future trends in PR, or (3) make recommendations for collective action regarding the discipline. The hierarchical voice portrays PR as a science that applies its incrementally growing body of knowledge systematically and deliberatively. In contrast, the competitive individualist model portrays PR as an art that requires continual adaptation to rapid changes in society and communication technologies (Leichty 2003).


References and Suggested Readings


Culture and Communication, Ethnographic Perspectives on

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Studies of culture have been conducted in a variety of productive ways in several academic fields; one might say the same about studies of communication, while also
saying as much for ethnographic studies (→ Cultural Patterns and Communication). Adding this variety, that is, all three of these, together can create an unwieldy assortment of theories and research reports. Saying something about them all would be a difficult task, indeed. However, examining a subset of these that stand at the nexus of all three concerns, that is, identifying studies of communication that highlight cultural variability, and do so ethnographically, is a more manageable pursuit, and one that this entry undertakes, with special attention to intergroup and intercultural dynamics. It will be shown that this type of study has provided a very detailed and deep look at actual intercultural encounters.

We begin by assuming that communication and culture are inextricably tied, and, further, that the relationship between them can be studied through ethnographic theory and methodology. This brings several assumptions with it: (1) communication is a situated practice, and process, that is formative of social life; (2) communication is in some sense distinctive in its cultural scenes and communities; (3) ethnographic study of the social situations and communities in which communication occurs can indeed unveil the cultural features in communication conduct. In this way, ethnography provides a general way of studying communication that is not simply the implementation of a set of specific methods (such as interviewing and participant observation), but also a theoretical orientation to the subject matter of communication and culture (→ Communication: Definitions and Concepts; Ethnography of Communication).

DIMENSIONS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

Ethnographic studies of communication and culture involve systematic observations of socially situated practices. For example, Bailey (2000) has noticed that service encounters in Los Angeles convenience stores are conducted differently by African-Americans than they are by Korean-Americans; Chick (1990) has observed that communication in educational settings is conducted differently by native speakers of English and of Zulu; Wilkins (2005) has investigated similarly Finnish and American enactments of speaking, and silence, in educational settings; my own work has explored how communication among people from different regional and national communities is coded differently (Carbaugh 2005).

Each such study is conducted through these basic modes of inquiry: describe the communication of concern in exacting and detailed ways; interpret the meaningfulness of that communication to those who have produced it; comparatively analyze the practices so described and interpreted; and occasionally, critically assess the resulting intergroup, or intercultural dynamics at play in these interactions. Each of these analytical tasks involves different yet complementary procedures. However, when put together, the set creates robust ethnographic accounts of communication and culture.

Ethnography involves living with the practices one is concerned with, seeing them firsthand, and feeling how they work (or do not work) for particular people. More formally for ethnographers, this involves carefully creating a detailed, descriptive record of the practices being investigated. This is done in the form of electronic recordings (audio and visual, if possible), detailed field notes, and recorded interviews (Gumperz 1992). These
materials are subsequently analyzed in order to create a documentation of the actual occurrences of the practice being investigated. This is the empirical bedrock of ethnographic inquiry, and involves claims of the form: “This practice indeed occurred, in these social contexts, in exactly these ways.” Detailed accounts like those cited in the studies above involve exacting transcripts, for example, of communicative phenomena. These provide the necessary toe-holds of ethnographic inquiry in real-world events. A collection of these creates a descriptive record, a corpus of data, from which features of patterns are analyzed.

To describe a practice, pattern, or event is not necessarily to interpret its meanings. In other words, one can describe how a woman addressed a man, yet not be able to interpret the social meaningfulness of that form of address in that community. A further dimension in such study thus involves interpretive analyses, claims about the meaningfulness of the communication to participants. For ethnographers, this type of analysis focuses on cultural meanings, that is, those that are shared, common, and publicly active during the performance of the practice (e.g., Geertz 1976). In Bailey’s (2000) study, he was able not only to describe exactly how Korean- and African-American participants engaged in service encounters, but also to interpret how these encounters activated different meanings in what constituted “respectful” (and disrespectful) interaction for each. While African-American customers enacted a high degree of verbal interaction as a way of showing appropriate interactional concern, Korean shopkeepers enacted verbal reserve as a way of showing proper distance between themselves and their customers. Efforts to become more verbally engaged by African-Americans led to further reserve from the Korean shopkeepers. In the process, each interpreted their own practice as appropriate, and respectful, but the other’s practice as being improper, and disrespectful. Interpretive claims are thus built on the back of a descriptive record in order to establish the patterned practices of concern, while unveiling the socio-cultural significance in, and importance of, those practices when done in that way.

Intergroup dynamics such as these involve comparative and cross-cultural analyses. These help establish two complementary types of findings: what is distinctive to one group’s practices relative to another, and what principles are held in common across different groups’ practices. Given adequate fieldwork, ethnographers are thus positioned to analyze more deeply the unique qualities of, for example, respect in each group’s practices, but also to understand what is common among those practices and others elsewhere. For example, addressing others or taking turns may be patterned in different ways in different speech communities, and these may hold different meanings; or the same or similar meanings, for example, of respect, may be active, but these may appear in different practices. Note, then, how ethnographic studies such as these employ comparative analyses in order to work toward the dual objectives of understanding what is particularly distinctive in a people’s communication practices, and what is general across them.

At times, ethnographers describe and interpret how one set of practices may disavantage, subvert, or in some ways harm others. For example, the way courses are taught in some classrooms can privilege some while disadvantaging others. Chick’s (1990) study demonstrates this point, as others have done (e.g., Carbaugh 2005). The nature of some intercultural and intergroup dynamics thus warrants critical analyses,
judgments based upon an explicated ethical or normative stance. This is especially the case when asynchronous dynamics create outcomes such as the misattribution of intent, negative stereotyping, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and/or discrimination (⇒ Intercultural Conflict Styles and Facework; Social Stereotyping and Communication). Ethnographers have identified and can identify these as aspects of interpersonal and mass communication, they can document in detail how these outcomes have occurred, interpret the meanings of these dynamics for participants, even link them to historically transmitted trends, and thus critically assess the ways communication is thus formative of such circumstances.

**PRIMARY THEORETICAL CONCERNS**

Ethnographic studies of communication and culture have examined many current, major theoretical concerns. These have included the role of one's first language in learning and using a second language, the role of key terms in discourse systems, the relationship between visual and verbal signs in specific communicative situations, the relationship between speaking and silence as means of communication, and the ways in which electronic and face-to-face media are used, with all such concerns exploring the variability of each in cultural systems of expression.

A major concern in these studies has been the relationship between communication practices and identity (⇒ Interactional Sociolinguistics; Speech Codes Theory). A strong link has been examined in several cases between one's identity and the structuring of communication (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1984; Wieder & Pratt 1993; Hester & Eglin 1997; Hastings 2000; Philipson 2002; Katriel 2004). Variability in the focal interactional concerns has been examined in some televised and interpersonal events, revealing the importance of truth-telling for some, the espousal of a collective ethic for others (Carbaugh 2005).

A second set of concerns focuses on the cultural shaping of communication acts, sequences, and forms: whether one should speak or remain silent; if one should talk, who should speak; whether speaking should be done alone or together, and to what degree; how long one should speak, and in what ways; what the rules are for opening social events; how turns are exchanged, pauses managed (⇒ Conversation Analysis); what rules there are for departing encounters; and so on. The investigation of responses to each question begins an understanding of the cultural shape and meaning of communication acts, sequences, and forms. Various responses to each question suggest cultural features in the patterning of communication practices, such that communicative actions vary in culturally significant ways (Carbaugh 1990; Milburn 2000; Wierzbicka 2003). How social relations are structured, and indeed how interpersonal life should be conducted, have also become focal concerns (Fitch 1998; Milburn 2000; Philipson 2002; Wilkins 2005).

Over the past few years, new theoretical concepts and perspectives on communication and culture have been developed. Some works have proposed a discourse-centered approach to culture (Sherzer 1990), with one program of work, indeed, developing a theory of cultural communication (Philipson 2002). While not all of this work focuses on actual instances of intergroup and intercultural communication, some have set this as an
agenda for communication studies (Tannen 1986), with some work already done in exploring, ethnographically, the cultural role of communication in intergroup dynamics (Bailey 2000; Carbaugh 2005; Wilkins 2005).

SEE ALSO: ▶ Communication: Definitions and Concepts ▶ Conversation Analysis ▶ Cultural Patterns and Communication ▶ Discourse Analysis ▶ Ethnography of Communication ▶ Interactional Sociolinguistics ▶ Intercultural Conflict Styles and Facework ▶ Social Stereotyping and Communication ▶ Speech Codes Theory

References and Suggested Readings


