Researching culture in contexts of social interaction:

An ethnographic approach, a network of scholars, illustrative moves

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In this chapter I report on an approach to the study of communication, and on the work of an interconnected group of scholars within the discipline of communication that is actively using and improving this approach in multiple contexts, languages, cultures, and arenas of practice. The approach is grounded in a simple but profound and consequential learning that, over the years, the participants in this group have achieved through their disciplined and systematic studies. That learning is that wherever and whenever there is communication, there are traces of culture laced through it. The learning began as a working assumption, adopted several decades ago (Philipsen 1989a). Now it stands as a rich and robust finding demonstrated across the work of this group, in the past and in multiple ongoing projects. Our enterprise has been principally an academic and theoretic one. But we have also learned that these traces of culture, and the understandings we produce of them, are an important force in the lives of individuals and communities.

The chapter unfolds in three related parts. First is the approach that I and my colleagues take to the study of communication: (1) a focus on local means and meanings of communication in particular social milieus; and (2) an ethnographic method for the study of those means and meanings in any given situation. Second is the development, within the communication discipline, of a network of scholars who practice this approach and educate others to use it. The third presents two examples of how participants in this network are applying this approach to the study of cultural factors in communication in

order that they might understand and shape communication in important arenas of contemporary social practice.

I. A culturally-oriented approach to the study of communication

There are two aspects to what I am describing here as an approach to the study of communication: (1) the manner and (2) the object, of the approach. To name the manner in one word, it is ethnography, and I begin with that.

The ethnographer is concerned to approach a research site with an attitude of exploration, that is, with curiosity about what may be found there. Typically, a research site is an organization, community, neighborhood, locale, or country, that is, a physical site in which people are living and interacting, including digital locales. A site for ethnographic inquiry could also be a body of textual material that has been constructed for the purposes of research. In such cases, the materials examined could be a batch of letters, a collection of media reports, electronic recordings of life stories, or other materials that constitute a body of discourse that can be approached in an exploratory way for an ethnographic purpose.

To speak of an ethnographic purpose requires that such a purpose be defined. I treat it as such if the researcher approaches a body of materials not only in an exploratory manner but also with an eye and an ear to the discovery of local means and meanings, especially when those local means and meanings can be shown to have some history in the site in which they are experienced. To specify further, as an ethnographer of ways of communicating, the ethnographer trains her eyes and ears to local means of communicating, and to a local system of meanings associated with those means.

Given the above exposition of ethnography as exploratory inquiry into local means and meanings, and ethnography of communication as exploratory inquiry into local means and meanings of communication, a researcher could approach a neighborhood, village, organization, scene, or nation, or a corpus of letters, stories, or materials drawn from same, and if the researcher were interested in finding there evidence of local means of communication and their meanings to those who used and experienced them, that researcher would, in my definition, be an ethnographer of communication. This definition of ethnography of communication could be fully satisfied in studies of social networks, communities of practice, or communities that are linked electronically, that is, communities that are not necessarily defined by traditional notions of space.

As exploratory, curious observers, ethnographers ask, about any particular site, whether it is a neighborhood, an organization, a community, a nation, a group, a scene, or an assemblage of texts: What are the means of communication that are (or were) being deployed here? Obvious examples of such means are language varieties, dialects, ways of speaking, gestural systems, visual communication, strategic silence, communicative forms such as stories and jokes, talk, writing, graphic and other visual means, and such hybrid means as electronic mail. This enumeration of means is meant to be suggestive, not definitive. Part of the purpose of being exploratory is to find, in some site, means of communication that might not have been anticipated in some pre-formulated check-list of possible means or ways of communicating. It is to be open to discovering in any particular time or place how it is that people communicate.

The ethnographer of communication explores not only the means but also asks: What are the meanings of these means to those who use and experience them in this time and place? A given language variety, way of speaking, gestural system, font, communication technology, and the like, is always and everywhere not merely a means for conveying something about the world that is in some way separable from the means being used. It is something with a history, in the site, and with rich associations that are woven through the site's history and present activity. And it is something whose existence and use are potentially a source of identity or alienation, power or submission, pleasure or displeasure, solidarity or separation, and so forth, for those using and experiencing it. Thus, the teacher's use of one language or another; the physician's smile and eye contact with a patient or the physician's studied avoidance of such intimacies; the company presenter's use (or not) of powerpoint; the use of a particular form of greeting or personal address over another available form; such are always potentially consequential in their own right and not just for the content that presumably their use is intended to convey, but consequential to those who use and experience them because of their significance to the parties who are involved with their use.

The ethnography of communication, as I describe it here, involves not only exploratory inquiry, in situ, into the means and meanings of communication, but involves as well the use of specifiable investigative resources. The ethnographer draws on two types of such resources. One is various descriptive frameworks—schemes to aid observation—that have been suggested by practitioners. Chief among these is a descriptive framework first set forth by Dell Hymes in 1962 and subsequently modified by Hymes and others (Albert, 1964; Hymes, 1962, 1972). Complementary to these are

frameworks developed by scholars in the communication discipline, including those by Philipsen (1987, 1992, 1997), Carbaugh, Gibson, and Milburn (1997), and Philipsen and Coutu (2005). These frameworks, schemes, and guides all have one purpose: They help an investigator discover something about the means and meanings of communication in a given case. In this regard they are a general resource for learning about something that is very particular—the means and meanings of communication in particular times and places. These schemes suggest things to notice, to look for and to listen for, and ways to record, analyze, and interpret one's findings.

Three recent examples of the type of inquiry I described above, each of which was conducted by a scholar in the communication discipline, immediately follow. The first is Michaela Winchatz' (2001) study of personal address in Germany. Winchatz, an American who is fluent in German, has over several years examined a broad array of communicative phenomena in Germany, always working in the German language. For one study, she spent ten months observing daily life and conducting fifty research interviews with the purpose of examining how Germans address each other orally, with special attention to the use of the German second person pronoun forms du ("you" in English) and Sie (also "you" in English). Du is generally considered a more informal way to address someone as the English "you" and Sie a more formal way to do the same thing. In her work on forms of personal address in German everyday interaction, Winchatz was concerned, first, to document patterns of usage and, second, to discover the significance of the use of these two forms to the Germans who used and experienced them.

In the following brief excerpt from Winchatz' first published report of her fieldwork we are given some idea as to how an exploratory researcher of the means and meanings of communication, in a particular site, might work, at the levels of description and interpretation. She reports a comment by Johann, a 57-year old man who is a high school teacher in Germany and who, during his years in the classroom addressed his students with the informal du. Walking to the store one day with Johann, Winchatz observed him greet a former student and in so doing addressed her with the formal Sie. Later, he commented to Winchatz that "With this [use of Sie] I recognize that they are no longer my students, they are adults" (Winchatz 2001: 347). Johann's conduct and his explanation of it to Winchatz provide several points of data that a fieldworker can use to construct an account of (1) a means of communication (the use of du and Sie as forms of personal address) and of (2) the rich meanings that the use of such forms can have for people. For example, Johann's retrospective explanation provides possible insights as to the significance, to him, in one situation, of using the Sie form. Sie here is, he says, a resource through which he accomplishes something ("with this I recognize"), that something being his acknowledgement of his interlocutor's status now as an "adult." This one datum suggests one sense of one aspect of the meaning potential of one communicative form. Over a year of field work, Winchatz assembled hundreds of such data points, and in her reports of her findings she presents a systematic and complex synthesis and interpretation of the contemporary German system of practices and meanings with regard to pronominal personal address, the thoroughness and richness of which is only hinted at in the brief exposition here.

Having constructed the system and meanings of a German system of personal address, Winchatz (2001) shows how this system works in daily life, in terms of close relationships, public events, and workplace communication. With regard to the workplace, she provides accounts showing that how German workers address each other, with du or Sie, can have important consequences for personal satisfaction and workplace morale, especially in those settings in which the dominant system is not shared by all workers. Thus, from this small detail of daily life, we can see large-scale consequences in particular settings and arenas. In a later study, Winchatz (2007, 66) shows how a worker from the former East Germany came to the West shortly after German reunification and found, in her new workplace, what she experienced to be an aggressive use of the du form—she said it came too early in her work relationships for her comfort and as a result she experienced considerable distress, that lasted for a very long time. See other work on local means and meanings in organizations in Baxter (1993) and in Hall & Valdes (1995).

A second recent example of such research is the study by Sally O. Hastings of everyday and public communication among students from India who were studying at a large US university. One of the concerns of such sojourners, as Hastings refers to them, is to adapt to their host society while yet retaining their sense of cultural integrity. They experience the normative and cultural pressures of the host society and, at the same time, the cross-pressures of other sojourners from the same country of origin. How can one come to understand the meanings and force of such cross-pressures in the lives of the individual sojourners? Hastings spent over a year observing and interviewing Indian students at the university in order to learn about the cross-pressures they experienced and of their ways of dealing with them.

The core of Hastings' research consists of intensive, exploratory interviews with sojourners, including repeat interviews of many of those who worked with her, as well as extensive observation of community events which sojourners planned and in which they participated. That is, her method involved a series of intense conversations with sojourners about their experience as well as direct observation of sojourner communicative conduct across a variety of settings that Hastings did not herself create or manage. Hastings' concern with the big picture involved filling in many small details, using the big picture as constructed to illumine such details but also using the details—particular communicative events, or sequences of acts and interpretations—to help understand and complete a more holistic portrayal of the sojourner experience.

One seemingly small matter was observed at a community event, for which Hastings had a videotape that permitted her to examine, and re-examine, some of the fine details of communicative conduct of the event. In a skit performed at India Night, an annual campus event organized by the Indian Student Association, one of the Indian graduate students performed a parody of another Indian student at the university who had expressed in public some of his concerns about his own adaptation to the local US culture. At one point during the performance, the crowd responded to the speaker's parody with seven seconds of disapproving laughter, yells, and whistles that stopped the performance (seven seconds can seem like a long time in such a performance situation). Later Hastings transcribed this brief but poignant moment and then used her notes and recollections of over a year of field work among these sojourners to explain why the performed identity that the speaker displayed evoked the strong and largely disapproving response that it did.

Working with her extensive collection of field materials, Hastings built an interpretation of the significance of the performance and of the audience's response to it. The substance of the performance was an Indian graduate student reflecting about how he might do things to draw attention to himself on campus as a means of establishing a persona for himself in a world in which he was a stranger. The performance evoked disapproving laughter as well as scorn because, as Hastings demonstrated, the performance highlighted the flaunting of two fundamental Indian principles of self-expression: (1) be who you are and (2) be interdependent with others. The mock performance of an Indian speculating about how to gain attention by distinguishing himself in the host society violated both of these principles. Here the researcher focused on a means of communication, the public expression of speculation about self-adaptation to a host environment on the terms of the local culture, and the meaning of the actions that such expression would entail to the sojourners in terms of their homeland culture. Hastings' achievement in doing this exemplifies the work of the ethnographer of communication in exploring local practices of communicative conduct and their meanings to those who use and experience them. See other work on intercultural adaptation in Fong (1998) and Witteborn (2007).

As a third example, Evelyn Ho (Ho 2006) spent eight months of full-time field work studying communication at an acupuncture clinic in a city in the Pacific Northwest. The clinic, GFAC (an acronym for the pseudonymous Good Fortune Acupuncture Clinic), serves as a treatment center and as a training site for student interns from a local acupuncture college. There is one professional staff member at the clinic, a licensed acupuncturist, and Ho came into contact with fifteen different interns there as part of her

field work. The clinic philosophy emphasizes a Qi-based approach that is considered to be a part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Ho's specific point of inquiry was to discover whether the professional staff member and the fifteen interns she encountered used a common way of speaking about their practice and, if so, what significance that way of speaking, as a means of communication, holds for participants in this community of practice.

Based on her extensive observational and interview materials, Ho found evidence of a systematic way of speaking about acupuncture that the professional acupuncturist and the interns used. Discovering and explicating this way of speaking provided a point of entry into the understanding of the nature and the meanings of the Qi-based practice that the students had learned and that was taught and practiced at the clinic, Qi being glossed as "life force" or "vital energy." Early in her field work, Ho had seen an article in a popular American news magazine that cast acupuncture in a highly favorable light. She was initially surprised to learn that practitioners at the clinic were highly critical of the article. They acknowledged that the article treated their practice favorably, but complained that at the same time it badly misrepresented it. One specific complaint was that an essential component of traditional Chinese acupuncture, Qi, was mentioned, but without presenting the conceptual background that is necessary, they felt, to describe it accurately. A related complaint was that the article treated Qi-based acupuncture by comparing it to Western medicine. They felt that to do so is to fail to capture the essence of Qi-based acupuncture in its own terms.

Ho's study (2006) provides descriptive and interpretive background that answers precisely the concerns that the Qi-based acupuncturists expressed about the way other

outsiders characterized their practice, in that she, Ho, paid particular attention to the very terms and expressions that these practitioners use to talk about their practice. The opening insight that Ho produces, the complaint that others fail to describe the conceptual background to Qi, even though they "mention" it, to some ears a seemingly trivial expression, turns out to provide an approach to what the practitioners themselves consider to be a fundamental defining attribute of their practice, that is, that it is set against a conceptual background that provides the ideational context of Qi. From there, Ho turns to the expression "feel the Qi," an expression that is used to describe the practice itself, from the perspective of the practitioners, an expression that says something that glosses an experience at the heart of the practice. Furthermore, to speak of "feeling the Qi" and similar expressions with Qi in them is an indicator, to these practitioners, that someone has an insider's knowledge and experience of the approach they all practice. Finally, it is the elevation of a way of speaking that has expressions about Qi in them that differentiates among practitioners from different national traditions, specifically that differentiates Chinese, Qi-based acupuncturists, from acupuncturists trained in a Japanese tradition.

Thus far I have sketched a general portrait of an investigator searching to discover local means and meanings of communication, with the aid of extant descriptive resources that help the ethnographer to discover the particularities of communication in some particular locale. There is a further resource that the ethnographer uses for her or his investigative work and that is the now-large body of published work that is available on culturally distinctive ways of communicating, work that crosses many societies and many language varieties. Here I refer to a large collection of individual studies, based on

particular times and places and on particular languages and other means of communication, all of which studies have been produced by ethnographers of communication across several disciplines, including anthropology, communication, education, folklore, history, and sociology. In 1962, Dell Hymes, a linguist, anthropologist, and folklorist, set forth a call for such studies and provided a descriptive framework for conducting and reporting such studies. As previously mentioned, the 1962 framework has been modified, and extended, many times, but its core principles are still in active use. Twenty four years after the 1962 call was made, Philipsen and Carbaugh (1986) made a record of some 250 subsequent published studies that could be traced to Hymes' earlier (1962) call. There is no systematic record of the number of such studies produced since 1986, but there can be little doubt that the number is at least equal to that earlier 24-year output, and there is a great deal of such work presently in progress.

The import of the record of published studies in the ethnography of communication is manifold. For one thing, the record constitutes an impressive body of knowledge of communication across dozens of languages and cultures. For another, the record speaks to the productivity of the enterprise of the ethnography of communication. And for the presently working ethnographers of communication, this body of published work is a resource that can be deployed to aid any given study to be undertaken. Here is how this works. At the most general level, each of the entries in the record contains in some form the story of a previous scholar's success in discovering the means and meanings of communication in some particular time and place. Thus, the record can be read as a source of insight into how to do the present work of discovering the particularities of a given time and place. If a present investigator plans to study how, in a

given time and place, communication is talked about and thought about in terms of, for example, medical interactions, that investigator can consult the record to find out about whether and if so how such interactions have been studied ethnographically, in other times and places, with an exploratory eye and ear, and with a considered concern for means and meanings of communicative practice. Perhaps one finds, in such a search, that there is, or were, in some places—for example, Laotian villages—a rule against a physician smiling when he first encounters the patient (Fadiman, 1997). The present investigator can use such a cross-cultural insight by including in her scheme of awareness and observation the category of nonverbal communicative actions in greetings in initial medical encounters and then seek to discover whether there is a local means that people use and attend to and if so what its local meanings are.

The research strategy that I described in the previous paragraph consists of using past studies of similar phenomena to guide a present study, that is, of building upon past success to try to achieve present success. On one hand this involves using the descriptive frameworks that have been developed in the past, such as those developed by Hymes (1962, 1972), Philipsen (1987, 1992, 1997), Carbaugh, Gibson, and Milburn (1997), and Philipsen and Coutu (2005), to help one conduct a present study. This is what Winchatz, Hastings, and Ho did. On the other hand it involves using past studies of particular phenomena to guide present studies of particular phenomena. For example, in her studies of German personal address, Winchatz (2001) drew on past studies of personal address in the U.S. (Sequeira, 1993), Colombia (Fitch, 1990, 1998), and Mexico (Covarrubias, 2002). Hastings (2001) drew on past studies of social dramas and community discussion of proper communicative conduct such as those of Carbaugh (1990) and Philipsen

(1986). Ho (2006) drew on past studies of traditional medicine (Tonelli and Callahan, 2001) and of the role of common ways of speaking as constituting a speech community (Fitch, 1994) to develop her interpretation of the nature and social functions of a Qi-based speech code.

The above is a brief description of the approach to the study of communication that is taken by a network of scholars in the discipline of communication. Next, I turn to that network, to describe it and to suggest some of the work it has done and is capable of doing.

II. A network of scholars in the discipline of communication

The nature of the volume in which this chapter appears provides the rationale for reporting and commenting here on the emergence, over the past thirty years, of a network of scholars, trained in and working in the discipline of communication. The volume is addressed, most particularly, to two audiences. One of these is people and organizations that seek to advance knowledge through targeted research projects that show promise for addressing important needs and concerns in contemporary society. The other audience is prospective students who seek to become research scholars in communication and who therefore wish to ascertain what some of the styles and approaches of research are being pursued and for which one can be educated as a scholar.

To both of the audiences mentioned above, I would say: There is a network of scholars within the discipline who are capable and experienced to conduct the sort of research that is desired; the participants in this network are actively contributing important scholarship using the approach described here; and there is within this network a cluster of graduate programs that have strong records in producing scholars who are

competent to use this approach, as attested, for example by having their work published in highly competitive, peer-reviewed journals such as Research on Language and Social Interaction, the journal that published the studies by Winchatz, Hastings, and Ho as referenced above.

First I will mention the opportunities for graduate study. This is potentially important for someone seeking to enroll in a graduate program but also important for those who seek to recruit scholars from such programs. There are many good programs within the communication discipline for the ethnographic study of communication in the descriptive-comparative tradition. Although I will mention some of these, I do not mean to imply that there are not others that are worthy of mention, rather I emphasize those with which I am most familiar.

There are four doctoral programs within the discipline that have, for the past ten to thirty years, educated strong doctoral researchers in the descriptive-comparative ethnographic approach to the study of communication. These are, in alphabetical order, the University of Haifa (Israel), and, in the US, the Universities of Iowa, Massachusetts-Amherst, and Washington. Each of these programs is located within a department of communication; provides doctoral level study in the approach; and has produced multiple doctoral-level researchers who have published scholarly books and published widely in peer-reviewed scholarly journals.[1]

If we take just these four programs together, considering the ethnographic research of the faculty and the doctoral students in them, there is published work that has been conducted in 17 different language varieties and 16 different countries. For the study in any one country or in any one language variety, the typical time of field work is

approximately one year of full time in-country research for data collection. This research is concentrated in the US (a site of multiple cultures and language varieties), Israel, and several Latin American countries and varieties of Spanish. But there is also work in several European and Asian countries and languages. Later in the chapter I describe a new initiative that gives promising initial evidence that it is possible to secure important ethnographic learning in less than our customary one year of field work.

There are two ways that the research of this group has—and can continue to—contribute new knowledge about communication. One is through the study of ways of communicating in particular sites. Thus, we have produced a great deal of knowledge about cultural aspects of communication in the US, Israel, Finland, Colombia, Mexico, Germany, to mention a few places. Reviews of our findings by people who live in these countries and speak the local languages suggest that our scholars succeeded in providing explanations of cultural conduct that had previously been puzzling to insiders and that pass other tests of insider validation. A second and related way is that we have used the results of the particular studies as sources of data for generating theory, for answering general questions about communication. Our collective corpus of ethnographic data is, so far as I know, the largest extant collection of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural data available on which to ground a theoretical understanding of communication. These synthetic and theoretical findings have been published in the forms of cross-cultural comparative analyses (e.g., Braithwaite, 1990; Carbaugh, 1989; Carbaugh, Boromisza-Habashi, and Ge, 2006; Goldsmith, 1990; Philipsen, 1989b) and in theoretical statements about how, in general, communication works (Hall, 1992; Philipsen, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, and Covarrubias, 2005). One of the cross-linguistic, cross cultural theoretical insights we

have been able to produce is basic knowledge about how to go about learning another culture's code for communicative conduct. Based on our collective experience, we can teach someone how to do this. This is stated in theoretical form in Philipsen (1997) as proposition four and in Philipsen, Coutu, and Covarrubias (2005) as proposition five. Should anyone publish evidence that challenges this proposition and, by implication, the basis of some of our best practical advice, we would be very interested to learn from such new data. All of our empirical and theoretical claims are always open to revision in the light of critique, and we are especially interested in experiential and empirical based critiques. We are not married to our theoretical conclusions.

III. From research to theory to practice

The work of this network of researchers began as research into particular sites and the means and meanings of communication that could be found there (for book-length examples, see Carbaugh, 1988, 2005; Covarrubias, 2002; Fitch, 1998; Katriel, 1986; Philipsen, 1992). To enter a site, study it, and then learn something reportable about communication there is always quite a ride. But from the beginning of the group's work we have also been interested in developing theories grounded in our field work data (Carbaugh, Gibson, and Milburn, 1997; Hall, 1992; Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, and Covarrubias 2005). More recently, participants in the network have increasingly been asked to participate in research projects, or have generated their own, in which there is the hope that ethnographic research into communication could directly address important human needs. We are now sufficiently advanced that we can make important contributions in this way. For the past ten years, participants in the group have worked as researchers in projects in schools of medicine, engineering, nursing, education,

and in other applied and professional domains. These are all projects in which the founders and funders have hoped that social research such as ours could contribute to the illumination and amelioration of social concerns. Here I mention two in-process projects that illustrate this recent, more applied move by participants in our network, collaborating with others.

First, for many, perhaps most people in the world today there is a need and a desire to learn about their own and others' ways of communicating in culturally distinctive ways. For example, there are many countries, organizations, and individuals who wish to enter into the lives of other countries, organizations, and individuals so as to work with them constructively in joint projects. This requires the visitors, as it were, to learn something about the local culture, and in many instances they do not know how to do this as effectively as they would like to do. More broadly, this is the problem of effective communication across cultures.

Two researchers who are part of our network have initiated an innovative program to assist, through research, in the process of effective communication across cultures, in difficult situations. Derek Miller, a Ph.D. in political science, and Lisa Rudnick, a doctoral candidate in communication at the University of Massachusetts, have for six years worked to develop and implement this program, through which they have built and demonstrated a new way to do in-country research into local cultures that can help to improve the operational effectiveness of international agencies in humanitarian, development, and security operations in local communities (Miller and Rudnick 2008). Their immediate project is the Security Needs Assessment Protocol (or, the acronym SNAP), a systematic approach to research into local cultures that they have field-tested

now in two countries, Ghana and Nepal. At the theoretical heart of the project is the theoretical apparatus that has been developed by our network of scholars in the communication discipline and, thus, it emphasizes paying explicit attention to local means and meanings of communication, with special attention, in this phase, to local vocabularies pertaining to "security" needs and the structure of understandings that are expressible through those vocabularies.

Preliminary work by the SNAP team provides evidence that the application of its protocol has significant promise for producing rapid, valid, and practically valuable learnings about local understandings of security. The initial reception of their early findings, both locally in the sites of inquiry and internationally by funding agencies of several nations, suggests that they have made a significant advance in the development of a methodology for contributing to cross-cultural understandings in situations where such understandings are vital to the well-being of local communities that experience difficult conflicts and that seek to minimize the harmful effects of those conflicts on local populations. The SNAP team's work also has considerable promise for the development of the broader methodology and theoretical perspective of the communication-discipline based network of ethnography of communication researchers.

A second example is found in the work of Deborah Bassett, a doctoral student in the ethnography of communication at the University of Washington. She is working on a National Science Foundation-sponsored project on social and ethical issues in developments in the new interdisciplinary field of nanoscience. In the face of claims, by prominent nanoscientists, that nanoscience has the potential to change dramatically many aspects of human life, there has been expressed strong concerns about whether the social

and ethical aspects of such new developments in knowledge are being considered adequately. This has given rise to multiple research projects in the US that are concerned with how these aspects are, or are not, being discussed and considered. Bassett’s particular project, including her doctoral dissertation in communication (in progress) is concerned at the descriptive level with listening to how nanoscientists themselves talk about their work and to ask (1) whether there can be heard in such talk a “code,” as it were, about such work and, if so, (2) of what does that code consist? Put in the terms of this chapter, this is a matter of investigating whether there is a means of communication--that is, a way of speaking--that can be found in the talk of nanoscientists about their work. To report briefly, and in only a very preliminary way about Bassett’s findings, I can say that one important part of the news is that, indeed, among these scientists there can be found such a code. Furthermore, the code as expressed reveals a strong disposition to warn against, even to preclude, serious talk about the social and ethical issues of the potential social implications of the development of such a science. Bassett works to discover, to delineate, to analyze, and to interpret this way of speaking (or way of speaking about not speaking), and to find in it a code that can be understood and engaged as an important part of a larger project to hold a productive social conversation about these potentially important social implications.

The two examples given above can only hint at the richness of the two projects that are mentioned and these two projects themselves are but a few of the many such applied moves being made by ethnographers of communication in the communication discipline. It seems that everywhere one might turn to consider social processes and social concerns, there is a need for local understandings in general and a need for

understanding the local means of communication and the meanings of those means to those who use and experience them. We are discovering this need, in studies of intimate and family life, organizational work, community dialogues and forums, the understanding of communication technologies and communication about science and technology, as well as the problems and prospects of communication across and within local cultures. To these many situations and concerns, we offer a modest contribution, an approach to the study of communication from a local ethnographic perspective, a network of scholars who can help to make that contribution, and a series of places where this approach is being taught and, of course, held up to critical examination.

NOTE

[1] There are scholars who earned their doctorates in one of these four programs who are now on the communication faculties of other institutions where the doctorate in communication is offered. These include the University of Colorado-Boulder, the University of New Mexico, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Mention should also be made of strong programs in the ethnography of communication in departments of communication at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and at the University of Oklahoma.

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