6 Ethnography in Applied Communication Research

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“Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them,” claimed anthropologist Behar (1996, p. 5) in her discussion of ethnography. Anyone who has conducted ethnography (especially participant observation) can attest to how strange it feels, particularly at first, to set oneself apart as an observer and turn a discerning eye to the taken-for-granted processes of a particular social setting. Strange though the endeavor may seem at times, ethnography has proven enormously useful to applied communication researchers for exploring, participating in, and documenting the rich details of daily life as they unfold (Gans, 1999).

Ethnography, broadly defined, “refers to a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 40). Berg (2001) added that “ethnography is primarily a process that attempts to describe and interpret social expressions between people and groups” (p. 134). The validity of ethnography is grounded in the claim that a researcher has been there—wherever “there” might be (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Being there and writing about what one sees, hears, feels, smells, and tastes there constitute the essence of conducting ethnography. Applied communication ethnographers seek to be there in various sites for the purpose of learning about and assisting in the development, change, or improvement of that site or other related sites. Thus, this chapter explores how and for what purposes applied communication researchers do ethnography—as participant observers in the field, as data producers and analysts, and as writers.

To provide an overview of the use of ethnography in applied communication research, I collected articles and chapters published over the 15-year period from 1990 to 2005. Using online search engines, articles in communication journals that used the terms ethnography and applied communication first were found. I then conducted a more general search using the term ethnography, selecting only those articles that focused on applied communication. Finally, I searched through the Journal of Applied Communication Research (JACR) and several edited collections of applied communication research, selecting articles or chapters that used ethnography as their method. In total, 41 articles and book chapters were gathered, forming a rich and varied collection that reflects the breadth of ethnographic inquiry in contemporary applied communication scholarship and forms the foundation for my commentary.

In this chapter, I first explore definitions of ethnography, the goals of this research, and the history of the method, including an overview of applied communication topics addressed using ethnography. I then examine common practices for data gathering, data analysis, and writing subsumed under the umbrella of ethnography. The final section discusses what we have learned about ethnography through its use in applied communication research and offers some suggestions for applied communication ethnographers.
Definitions of Ethnography in Applied Communication Research

Ethnography is a broad methodology that encompasses many practices, approaches, and philosophies. The methodology is difficult to define, and no consensus exists within communities of ethnographers on its ideal definition or description (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Potter, 1996). The method assumes a naturalistic paradigm (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), meaning that it involves studying groups of people in their natural contexts (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Ethnography requires being present in the space being studied, for the ability to make claims is grounded in researchers’ direct observation of that space (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Field notes and subsequent reports of ethnographic work should convey “thick description” of the culture studied, including as many specific details as possible (Geertz, 1973). Many ethnographers and methodology textbooks also highlight that ethnography embraces the dual perspectives of (1) *emic*, research participants’ perspective; and (2) *etic*, an outsider or more detached perspective (Potter, 1996).

Communication ethnographers focus directly on symbolic processes within the settings they study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The emphasis on communication departs from the focus of sociologists and anthropologists on social structures, kinship configurations, and other aspects of cultural systems. Communication scholars also examine structures, but they study how structures are constituted by communication among members of a culture. Potter (1996) suggested that ethnography can be divided into two basic orientations: (1) *macroethnography* (also called *holistic* or *general ethnography*), in which researchers seek to explain the workings and worldview of a culture; and (2) *microethnography*, which focuses more narrowly on particular behaviors or symbols within a cultural group.

In practice, definitions of ethnography vary considerably among applied communication researchers. Some authors offered no definition or explanation of what they meant by ethnography or participant observation (e.g., Amason, Allen, & Holmes, 1999; Meyer, 2004; Novek, 1995; Zoller, 2003). Other scholars offered no formal definition, but did provide insights into their understanding of the method, such as Adelman and Frey’s (1994) explanation of participant observation as part of the naturalistic paradigm they adopted. Other applied communication scholars defined their method explicitly; for example, Gillespie (2001) drew on Denzin’s (1997, p. xi) definition of ethnography as “that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about,” and DeSantis (2002) invoked Truijillo’s (1992, p. 352) process-oriented definition that “ethnographic methods require researchers to immerse themselves in the field for an extended period of time in order to gain a detailed understanding of how members interpret their culture.”

Some researchers describe their work as subsumed within a particular type of ethnography. For example, *critical ethnography* critiques cultural groups, norms, power structures, and institutions; often is based on neo-Marxist, feminist, queer, postcolonial, or other philosophical perspectives; and seeks to promote social change (e.g., Conquergood, 1991; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993). Conquergood (1994, p. 24) noted in his critical ethnography of the communication of street gangs that he was “committed to ethnographic research methods that are intensely participative and critically engaged,” and Ashcraft (1999) claimed that her ethnography “reflect[s] a critical, participatory bent. A critical approach seeks knowledge of social action in the service of social change” (p. 249). Several researchers labeled their projects as *feminist ethnographies*, a subtype of critical ethnography, such as Meyer and O’Hara (2004), who cited Lengel (1998) and DeVault (1999) as the bases for their definition: “Feminist ethnogra-
phy challenges theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and political assumptions that undergird traditional (patriarchal, elitist, capitalist, colonialist) ethnography and offers an alternative form of inquiry that examines power relations of self and other in a self-reflexive manner” (p. 7). Scrutinizing the (mis)use of power and its accommodation or resistance is appropriate, even necessary to applied communication research that seeks to make a positive difference in the world.

The long tradition of ethnography of speaking (also called ethnography of communication; Saville-Troike, 1989) also was evidenced in this sample. Boone (2003) explained that her ethnographic study of the use of a call–response speech pattern in the classroom “involves describing speaking practices as situated within, and constitutive of, particular speech communities and cultures” (p. 217). Boone posited that the focus on natural contexts of speaking is the ideal way to capture speaking patterns for analysis (see also Braithwaite, 1997).

Clearly, applied communication researchers use a wide variety of ethnographic approaches, all of which potentially are useful. Ethnographers determine their individual approach—which often blends elements of one or more types of ethnography—depending on political, philosophical, methodological, and practical commitments.

Stated Goals of Applied Communication Ethnography

Attaining a deep understanding and producing a rich description of a culture are the traditional goals of ethnography (e.g., Van Maanen, 1988). Applied communication researchers clearly embrace this fundamental goal in the work examined. In addition, three other types of goals emerged: ideological/political, pragmatic, and theoretical. In practice, applied communication research goals tend to overlap, producing pragmatic suggestions to evoke political change, for example, or producing deep understanding of a group that offers significant theoretical insights.

Understanding and Description

Ethnographers translate the details of one culture for an audience usually unfamiliar with that culture. Some applied communication scholars argue that ethnographic research has higher ecological validity for explaining communication than does experimental laboratory research (see Query et al., this volume) because studying existing groups provides insights into natural contexts (Frey, O’Hair, & Kreps, 1990). Morgan and Krone (2001), for instance, stated that their goal in conducting an organizational ethnography was to, as Van Maanen (1979) articulated, “uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation” (p. 540). This deep understanding of daily life is uniquely accessible through ethnography, because of the prolonged interaction of the researcher with the group studied. Having stated their goals as uncovering and explicating these detailed processes, Morgan and Krone then provided rich details of the interactions they witnessed, such as the following instance of atypical emotional “improvisation”:

The patient, a prominent businessman, became increasingly agitated the longer he waited for the doctor to come visit him. He had finished his test hours earlier. When the doctor finally arrived, the patient was irate, and...shouted, “If I ran my business the way you ran yours, I would be out of business!” The doctor was visibly stunned by the patient’s display. (p. 328)
Providing such concrete and specific details strengthens applied communication ethnographers’ credibility. All of the studies reflected this goal and provided good details, with some studies offering more than other studies. Exemplars of particularly rich descriptions include Conquergood (1994) and Elwood, Dayton, and Richard (1995).

**Ideological/Political Goals**

The second type of goal of applied communication ethnography is ideological or political, which involves a researcher uncovering and ideologically problematizing the “taken-for-grantedness” of a cultural group (Gergen, 1994) through the use of critical ethnography. This goal often involves attention to the overt and hidden ways in which power operates to privilege some people and oppress others. Although many studies do not explicitly state the goal of ideological or political change, Conquergood (1995) argued that the goal of applied communication research always is political, potentially revolutionary, and never neutral:

> We must choose between research that is “engaged” or “complicit.” By engaged I mean clear-eyed, self-critical awareness that research does not proceed in epistemological purity or moral innocence: There is no immaculate perception…. The scholarly commitment of the engaged intellectual is to praxis…. By praxis I mean a combination of analytical rigor, participatory practice, critical reflection, and political struggle. (p. 85)

For Conquergood (1995), it is impossible for researchers to remain uninvolved; to refuse to advocate or assist is to be complicit with existing power relations, not to remain impartial (see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume).

Conquergood’s (1994) study of youth gangs in Chicago is an outstanding example of applied communication research that strives to promote social justice. As he wrote in the conclusion to that study:

> My research calls for a radical reorientation of the many gang-intervention programs that deploy fear appeals and shame tactics aimed at scaring street youth out of gangs…. The work of communication needs to be redirected toward rallying and awakening communities and public policymakers to a sense of social justice and responsibility to these youngsters and their families. (p. 55)

Conquergood (1994), thus, sought to alter public views of gang members and, thereby, to alter social policy.

Goodwin (2002) sought to debunk stereotypes of women’s and girls’ talk as always reflecting feminine norms of inclusion and equality, with men’s and boys’ communication viewed as competitive and aggressive. Her political goal was to provide a complex understanding of how female talk is manifested rather than a reaffirmation of oppressive gender stereotypes. She documented differences among females rather than emphasized only those differences between females and males. Similarly, Warren (2001) studied the performance of Whiteness within university classrooms to make performances of racial identity evident to those whose interests are served by ignoring or denying the realities of racism and White privilege. As Warren explained, chinking the armor of denial and complacency is political work:
The generative power of performativity—the potential of locating race in its own process of reiteration—offers us the possibility of interrupting the discursive process of racial formation, as well as the naturalization and sedimentation of those racial categories. The ability to see how race gets accomplished in everyday life might just present the possibility of constituting race differently. (p. 105)

Warren advocated attention to the possibilities of reimagining race and, thereby, challenging racism (see also Nicotera, Clinkscales, Dorsey, & Niles, this volume). For many applied communication ethnographers, political goals are expressed through concrete recommendations for altering oppressive practices within the group studied or within similar groups, as well as recommendations for enacting progressive social policy and creating positive change in communities (e.g., Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005).

Practical Goals

Ultimately, practical implications of research are what make applied communication applied. Frey (2000) argued that applied communication research should seek to assist participants in bringing about change in their collective communicative practices. Intervention from this perspective involves “researchers putting their communication knowledge and skills into practice...to make a difference in people’s lives” (Frey, 2000, p. 179; see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume). To assist in improving the particular setting under study, researchers must attain in-depth knowledge of the workings of the group. As Frey et al. (1990) explained, “Most applied research occurs in the field because researchers study how a specific problem within a particular setting can be solved” (p. 37).

Other scholars take a broader approach, suggesting that applied research should have as its goal the production of pragmatic strategies for use in specific contexts, but not necessarily for the group with whom the study was conducted (e.g., Eadie, 2000; Keyton, 2000; Seibold, 2000; Wood, 2000). I also urge researchers not to dismiss the microlevel activism accomplished through a researcher’s embodied presence that calls attention to everyday patterns of communication within a setting. Not all activism is large in scale but all forms of activism can contribute to social change.

Some scholars state their practical goals upfront. Ashcraft (2000, p. 378) claimed that her purpose was to assist in “the development of practical, empowering, gender-conscious alternatives to traditional organizational relationships,” and then generated strategies for how organizations can foster more empowering work relations. In a study of cigar smoking, DeSantis (2002, p. 169) stated that his purpose was “to explain why such efforts from loved ones, the media, and the medical establishment are unsuccessful at persuading these men to stop smoking”; he then developed strategies for prevention agencies to reach cigar smokers. S. J. Tracy (2002, p. 137) explicitly stated that her purpose was “to improve our understanding of problems and difficulties associated with the 911 call-taking encounter,” and then provided specific way to improve emergency communicative practices between employees and callers in 911 call centers. Elwood et al. (1995) pointed out the shortcomings in public health campaigns targeting illegal drug users and argued for both the effectiveness of outreach programs and the utility of ethnography for studying such programs. Finally, Braithwaite (1997) and Boone (2003) elaborated on ways in which instructors can be reflexive about the cultural specificity of their pedagogy and accommodate students’ expressions of their diverse cultural speaking traditions, reflecting these scholars’ goals of improving classroom experiences for both instructors and students.
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Theoretical Goals

The final type of goal in applied communication ethnography is theoretical. Theoretical goals often involve generation of grounded theories, inductive typologies, or new concepts, or seek to extend existing theories or perspectives (see Barge & Craig, this volume). The primary goal of applied communication research is not immediate theory building but theory still may be instrumental to its accomplishment or be generated as one result of a study (Eadie, 2000). Given that ethnography usually is conceptualized as inductive rather than deductive—that is, seeking rich description and generating deep understanding rather than testing preconceived propositions—the role of theory in the beginning, middle, and end of ethnographic research can vary considerably.

Many applied communication ethnographers cited no specific theories in their research reports (e.g., Amason et al., 1999; Elwood et al., 1995; English-Lueck, Darrah, & Saveri, 2002; Novek, 1995), although they provided detailed reviews of literature that grounded the inquiry. For example, Apker (2001) provided an overview of research on sense making and role development in organizations in her study of nurses’ role in managed care systems; Meyer (2004) reviewed the meanings of feminist pedagogy, values, practices, opportunities, and tensions in her study of a classroom; and Martin (2004) focused her ethnographic study of women managers on humor, situating it within the literature on organizational paradox.

When theory was used to frame ethnographic applied communication research, it generally served to ground the research questions posed rather than to generate hypotheses to test. Moreover, much of the theoretical work invoked may be thought of more properly as providing a philosophical framework or as establishing a metatheoretical perspective for the inquiry rather than as invoking a theory per se. Theoretical perspectives of power and knowledge were common in the sample studied; for instance, Foucault’s (1971, 1979, 1980) work on disciplinary power and resistance was employed by several researchers (e.g., Edley, 2000; Gillespie, 2001; Zoller, 2003), and Croft (1999) drew on Fiske’s (1993) theory of imperializing and localizing power. Feminist theories of the gendered nature of power and resistance (see Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Sterk, & Turner, this volume) also were common and included the feminist case against bureaucracy (Ferguson, 1984), feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), subaltern counterpublics (Fraser 1990–1991), and strategic essentializing (Spivak, 1988). Performance theory also commonly was used, drawing on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory, Butler’s (1990) theory of the performative nature of gendered (and other) identities, and other relevant theories (e.g., Morgan & Krone, 2001; Murphy, 2001; S. J. Tracy, 2002; Warren, 2001). Other theories used to frame applied communication research included symbolic convergence theory (Lesch, 1994), play theory (Brooks & Bowker, 2002), dialectical theory (Adelman & Frey, 1997; Alemán, 2001), structuration theory (Howard & Geist, 1995), and peer cluster theory (DeSantis, 2002).

Some studies in this sample sought to extend existing theory or models. Miller (1995), in her study of a family of four generations of women who had attempted suicide, extended the “basic suicidal syndrome outlined by Breed (1972)” with a model of communication that described the “intersubjective experience of the mother–daughter relationship and the perpetuation of the suicidal tradition” (pp. 264, 268). Similarly, in my research on a health-care team (Ellingson, 2003), I extended the bona fide group perspective (Putnam & Stohl, 1990) by proposing the concept of “embedded teamwork”—work done in dyads and triads of team members outside of team meetings. Lammers and Krikorian (1997) earlier articulated the role of organizational context in bona fide groups in their study of communication on surgical teams. Finally, S. J. Tracy (2004) extended theoretical
perspectives on framing by developing a model of framing techniques for organizational
tensions that suggests employees commonly frame tensions as simple contradictions,
complementary dialectics, or pragmatic paradoxes.

Theoretical perspectives, thus, form a starting point that aids applied communication
ethnographers in focusing and grounding their inquiry. Given these definitions and goals,
I now contextualize the current state of ethnography within the broader history of the
methodology.

History of Ethnography

Ethnography has its roots in 17th- to 19th-century conquerors describing natives in colo-
nial outposts, reports that were intended to establish the uncivilized nature of indigenous
groups by providing detailed descriptions of those groups’ religious, cultural, family, and
daily life practices. Anthropologists eventually professionalized ethnography, developing
an evolutionary perspective of cultural development (Vidich & Lyman, 2000). Bronislaw
Malinowski generally is regarded as having established modern norms and standards of
ethnographic fieldwork (Conquergood, 1991). By the late 1920s, ethnography was being
conducted by sociologists (many of the Chicago School) and by anthropologists in urban
and immigrant enclaves, as well as in small towns, in the United States—meaning that
the ethnographic gaze no longer was restricted to exotic locales (Atkinson et al., 2001).
Whyte (1943) coined the term participant observation in his classic study of young men’s
street culture. In the post-World War II 20th century, the 1960s in particular, anthropol-
gists and sociologists became critical of the idea of “the primitive” versus “the civilized”
world. The 1970s saw the beginnings of postmodernist challenges to positivism with its
emphasis on scientific objectivity (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; see also Query et al.,
this volume), and feminists have been instrumental in deconstructing patriarchal biases
of ethnography (e.g., Reinharz, 1992).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) summarized the development of qualitative methods (prin-
cipally, ethnography) as comprising eight overlapping historical periods: (1) traditional
period of positivist, scientific ethnography (1900–1950); (2) modernist phase that cel-
ebrated rigorous, systematic qualitative analysis (1950–1970); (3) time of blurred genres,
in which diverse approaches to collecting and analyzing data were recognized and valued
(1970–1986); (4) crisis of representation, which eschewed classic research norms and
embraced reflexivity (1986–1990); (5) postmodern, a period of experimental ethnog-
raphies that tried to make sense of the crises of the previous period (1990–1995); (6)
postexperimental inquiry, which saw an explosion of outlets for publishing experimental
ethnography (1995–2000); (7) methodologically contested present that was/is a time of
tension and conflict within the qualitative field (2000–2004); and (8) the future, which is
now (2005–). This map of ethnographic development is a useful heuristic that concisely
identifies historical trends, ideological shifts, and developments in practice. However,
Atkinson et al. (2001) cautioned ethnographers to remember that progress is not linear
and the past was not homogenous. At any point in time, there always have been diverse
ethnographic practices; for instance, not all current ethnographers are postmodern or
experimental in their representations, nor were all past ethnographies representative of a
single approach (such as the Chicago school). We, thus, should be careful not to misrep-
resent or “glos[s] over the historical persistence of tensions and differences” (Atkinson et
al., p. 3).

The current state of ethnography in communication, sociology, anthropology, and
other social sciences is hotly contested and increasingly critical in nature. Conquergood
(1991) suggested four fundamental themes that intersect in critical ethnography and
critiques of ethnography: (1) the return of the body as the site of knowledge production; (2) boundaries, borderlands, and “zones of contest” (p. 184) among and within cultures as the focus of engagement rather than an assumed-unified culture; (3) the rise of the performance paradigm of interpreting culture (i.e., viewing life as performed on a daily basis); and (4) rhetorical reflexivity about the writing processes involved in fieldwork and analysis. Likewise, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggested that ethnographers currently are “concerned with moral discourse...[and ask] that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community” (p. 3).

Current Use of Ethnography in Applied Communication Research

Applied communication researchers have employed ethnography to address a wide range of topics. The central purpose of such research is producing rich descriptions of communication in specific contexts, with the goal of understanding communicative practices and making recommendations for improving them. Most of the ethnographies in this sample addressed nonprofit and community organizations, with topics falling into four broad areas: health communication, organizational communication, community groups, and education.

Applied communication ethnographers have investigated many aspects of health communication. In one study, Gillespie (2001) explored the experiences of Medicaid patients receiving asthma treatment in managed care organizations, finding that administrative and medical procedures further disenfranchised patients as they sought assistance. Other health communication studies focused on creating and sustaining community in a residential facility for people with AIDS (Adelman & Frey, 1994, 1997), professional role development among nurses (Apker, 2001), collective rationalization of health risks by cigar smokers (DeSantis, 2002), backstage communication among members of a geriatric health-care team (Ellingson, 2003), efficacy of outreach for HIV prevention among illegal drug users (Elwood et al., 1995), communication on surgical teams (Lammers & Krikorian, 1997), mother–daughter communication in families where women have attempted suicide (Miller, 1995), professionalism and emotional expression by health-care professionals (Morgan & Krone, 2001), construction of narrative knowledge among caregivers (Morgan-Witte, 2005), nature and role of shared ideology in Alcoholics Anonymous groups (Wright, 1997), and employee occupational health and safety discourse in a manufacturing plant (Zoller, 2003).

Organizational communication topics also were common in applied communication ethnographies. Murphy’s (2001) ethnography of sense making and strategic communication choices of flight attendants during in-flight emergencies provides an excellent exemplar. Murphy explored the feminization of the flight-attendant role, the social construction of masculine power of pilots, how this organizational context contributes to communication difficulties during nonroutine incidents, and how airline management could improve training and coordination of flight crews. Other studies of communication in work settings explored stress and social support in a multicultural workplace (Amason et al., 1999); maternity leave and leadership in an organization (Ashcraft, 1999); a feminist organization’s efforts to empower members through personalizing work relations (Ashcraft, 2000); communicative practices on self-directed work teams (Barker, Melville, & Pacanowsky, 1993); communication codes used by university faculty and administration (Baxter, 1993); discourses of “play at work” in a new-media forecast research firm (Brooks & Bowker, 2002); the influence of environment on communication in fast-food restaurants (Eaves & Leathers, 1991); gender stereotypes and strategic essentialism in a
woman-owned business (Edley, 2000); cultural construction of trust among technology workers in global, high-technology communities (English-Lueck et al., 2002); management of uncertainty among employees of a company undergoing a merger (Howard & Geist, 1995); use of humor by women managers to negotiate organizational paradoxes (Martin, 2004); tension between artistic and business ideologies in a symphony orchestra (Ruud, 2000); emotion management among firefighters (Scott & Myers, 2005); “bitching” communication among corporate secretaries (Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999); question asking and facework by 911 call-takers (S. J. Tracy, 2002); correctional officers’ strategies for negotiating organizational tensions (S. J. Tracy, 2004); and emotional labor among 911 call-takers (S. J. Tracy & Tracy, 1998).

Communication within community groups forms the third cluster of ethnographic applied communication studies (for a recent review of research on communication and community, see Underwood & Frey, 2008). These studies focused on topics such as complaining among residents of a retirement community (Aleman, 2001), intracommunal communicative practices among gang members (Conquergood, 1994), identity and storytelling in a group home for men with mental retardation (Croft, 1999), social invisibility of homeless youth (Harter et al., 2005), performance of counternarratives of disability among artists in a sheltered workshop for people with developmental disabilities (Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman, & Morris, 2006), group roles within a community theater group (Kramer, 2002), consciousness-sustaining communication in a coven (Lesch, 1994), and the discursive interface between members of a women’s music festival and a university as they shared space (Meyer & O’Hara, 2004). Of particular interest is Goodwin’s (2002) study of power asymmetry among members of a core group of ethnically diverse female elementary school students, which found—contrary to prevailing belief that girls are more inclusive and equitable than are boys—that girls used deliberate communication strategies to exclude or marginalize other girls.

The final topic category was the education setting, with ethnographies exploring marginalized people, practices, and points of view within classrooms (see also Darling & Leckie, this volume). Topics included the pedagogical and cultural impact of the African-American “call–response” form of communication in Black college classrooms (Boone, 2003), communicative practices intended to foster a sense of Navajo culture and identity in a Navajo community college (Braithwaite, 1997), opportunities and challenges of using feminist pedagogy in a feminist organizational communication course (Meyer, 2004), strategic communication among African-American youth at an inner-city high school (Novek, 1995), and performance of racial identity and reification of Whiteness in a classroom (Warren, 2001). These scholars sought to disrupt dominant discourses that privilege some racial, gender, and class groups at others’ expense by providing insights and strategies for reflecting on and altering teaching and learning practices.

Practices of Applied Communication Ethnography

A large variety of practices fall under the umbrella of ethnography. Ethnography often involves, for instance, observation/fieldwork, formal and informal interviewing, analysis of documents, interaction with participants, functioning in a job or role particular to the research site, writing field notes, keeping a field journal, coding data, constructing narratives, member checking, and conducting interventions (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2001). Much of what is involved in conducting applied communication ethnography is not reported in publications, probably due to space constraints, particularly because qualitative research requires as much thick description as possible as evidence (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Description of these practices (or lack thereof) has implications for
understanding ethnographic applied communication scholarship. In exploring current norms for reporting methodological practices, there was significant variation in terminology, format for describing practices, length of explanation, and selection of details. Such variation is unsurprising because lack of standardization in reporting methods and findings characterizes qualitative methods, in general (Potter, 1996). Although good reasons exist for diverse practices, the underlying assumption that readers share a common understanding of ethnographic practices that needs little explanation is an unfortunate vestige of positivist research writing conventions that are more tightly defined, regulated, and rule bound, and that are not warranted by the current range of research approaches being utilized. I divide this overview of practices reported in this sample of applied communication research into the categories of data gathering, data analysis, and writing issues.

Data Gathering

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) defined *participant observation* as “the professional craft of experiencing and recording events in social settings” (p. 134). As Atkinson et al. (2001) explained, participant observation requires a presence in the field: “Whatever the range of data collection techniques...ethnographic research remains firmly rooted in the first-hand exploration of research settings. It is this sense of social exploration and protracted investigation that gives ethnography its abiding and continuing character” (p. 5). Participant observation involves adopting a role in the field, producing field notes, and collecting other types of data.

Field Roles

Ethnographers adopt a wide variety of roles. Gold’s (1958) classic typology identified four master roles in fieldwork: (1) *complete observer* (a researcher does not interact with a group and members do not know they are being observed), (2) *observer-as-participant* (a researcher behaves as much like a “real” member of a group as possible but members are aware of being observed), (3) *participant-as-observer* (a researcher acts in a limited capacity as a group member and interviews members), and (4) *complete participant* (a researcher fully joins a group, with members not knowing that they are being observed). These are ideal types only; in practice, ethnographers adopt more nuanced identities with respect to the people studied (e.g., Ellingson, 1998) and may enact various roles over time (e.g., Howard & Geist, 1995). Ethnography is an embodied practice that involves not just watching but paying attention to all of one’s senses (Conquergood, 1991; see also Murphy, 2001). Moreover, the researcher’s body (e.g., gender, race, and age) has meanings to those being studied and should be a major consideration when researchers reflect on how those being observed relate to them (Coffey, 1999).

The applied communication ethnographers in this sample described many different ways of relating to those they studied. Morgan and Krone (2001, p. 324), for instance, tried to be “as silent as possible” by positioning themselves at the “periphery of a given scene,” as they observed communication among busy medical professionals carrying out patient procedures. Kramer (2002) auditioned for a community theatre production; after winning the role, he asked participants for permission to study the group. Meyer and O’Hara (2004) were “festigoers” and also volunteered to work at the women’s music festival explored in their study. Zoller (2003) initially was a consultant at the factory whose health and safety discourse formed the basis for her study; she explained how she separated from that role to become a researcher. In a different type of role, I explained
(Ellingson, 2003) that I am a cancer survivor and considered how the lasting physical and emotional effects of that disease affected my communication with the geriatric oncology team members and their patients that I studied. Croft (1999) offered an insightful discussion of how she functioned within a group home for men with mental retardation, particularly in how her availability to listen and her freedom from having to reinforce rules enabled her to be an appreciative audience for residents’ narratives. With great specificity, Edley (2000) listed tasks she performed at an interior design firm she studied:

I worked alongside the designers, office workers, owners, and warehouse workers. I answered telephones, filed forms, wrote advertising copy, helped with inventory, waited on customers, sat in on staff meetings and client meetings, assisted designers in selecting wallpaper and fabric samples for presentations to clients, and accompanied the designers to clients’ homes. (p. 283)

Scott and Myers (2005) similarly explained that during fieldwork at a fire station, they “assisted with station chores, observed training sessions, prepared and shared meals, and accompanied the firefighters on fire and emergency medical service (EMS) calls” (p. 72). Elwood et al. (1995) characterized each of themselves as ethnographers and the outreach workers they observed in descriptions ranging from one to seven paragraphs in length that offered rich detail about these individuals’ communication styles and ways of relating to the drug users who were the outreach workers’ clientele.

Although residing with the group being studied was atypical, there were examples of ethnographers who did so. Conquergood (1994), for instance, lived for several years in a tenement building in the Chicago neighborhood where he studied gangs. Similarly, Novek’s (1995) study of African-American youth involved her living in the community for 6 years, conducting research and teaching journalism at the community’s high school, teaching in a weekend education program and at a community recreation center, and serving as a literacy tutor.

All of the researchers in this sample fell somewhere between participant-as-observer and observer-as-participant, and all (eventually) were known as researchers to the groups they studied. For many, this openness facilitated the “informal interviews” they conducted, which involved asking questions about the meaning of people’s practices and discussing research-related topics with them as they worked or performed tasks (e.g., Amason et al., 1999; Edley, 2000; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). At the same time, these interviews reinforced the ethnographers’ outsider identity, as they asked questions about practices that likely were taken for granted by group/cultural members.

**Field Notes**

Perhaps the most characteristic element of ethnography is the production of field notes, firsthand accounts of ethnographers’ participant observation. Field notes should be rich with details and thick description of experiences (Geertz, 1973). Ideally, researchers should record data reflecting all the senses: taste, smell, touch, and hearing, as well as sight (Berg, 2001). Field notes also may include reflections, questions, and musings that arise as researchers compose notes. Richardson (2000), drawing on classic work by Gla ser and Strauss (1967), provided a useful typology of field notes: observation notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes. In addition, she suggested that researchers keep a separate journal in which they record their feelings about the work, a practice with a long tradition in anthropology.

Applied communication ethnographers varied in the amount and type of detail they
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provided about field notes. Boone (2003) gave the most detailed explanation of events she recorded in her field notes of classroom observations “that included descriptions of the setting and activities, the sequence of events, descriptions of the participants and their verbal and nonverbal behaviors, descriptions of how the participants interacted with one another, and other personal interpretations and observations” (p. 218). Most scholars, however, did not elaborate on what was in their field notes and reported only quantities produced. Commonly reported details included number of hours of observation, number of pages of field notes, and frequency and length of observation sessions. At one end of the continuum, English-Lueck et al. (2002, p. 93) stated that they used “traditional anthropological tools such as in-depth interviews and participant observation,” but cited no methodological texts or ethnographic exemplars as models for their practices. A bit more specifically, Adelman and Frey (1994) reported that they did participant observation but offered no estimate of how many hours they observed, nor the volume of their field notes (see also Barker et al., 1993; Eaves & Leathers, 1991). A few researchers characterized their field notes as “extensive” (e.g., Baxter, 1993; Brooks & Bowker, 2002). Reported length of observation also varied tremendously. For example, at the briefer end of the continuum, Lesch (1994) observed and taped three 2.5-hour meetings, whereas Boone (2003) observed one summer session of a public speaking class and provided the exact dates of May 27 to June 25 for her period of observation. Morgan and Krone (2001) stated that they conducted 2 months of observations, 4 times per week, for 2 to 4 hours per session. In the middle of the range, Kramer (2002) reported that, acting in a theatrical production, he engaged in 75 hours of observation and generated 68 pages of field notes, and S. J. Tracy (2002) reported 100 hours of participant observation and 200 pages of field notes.

At the lengthy end of the continuum, Ashcraft (2000) reported conducting 230 hours of participant observation, plus an additional 50 hours of observing meetings, and generated more than 700 pages of detailed field notes. Martin (2004) stated that, in total, she produced over 950 pages of field notes, meeting transcripts, and interview transcripts (although these were not categorized by type of data). Like Conquergood (1994), Goodwin (2002), who conducted participant observation in a middle school for 3 years, at lunch and in classrooms, focusing on a core group of ethnically diverse girls, and English-Lueck et al. (2002), who conducted a 10-year project in four global, high-technology communities, reported that their studies relied on extensive periods of observation but did not offer details such as those described above. Field notes as data remain at the center of ethnographic inquiry, but no consensus exists as to the necessary or ideal quantity, or the degree of detail in which field notes can or should be described in published work.

Other Types of Data

In addition to field notes, the vast majority of applied communication ethnographies involved gathering other types of data. After field notes, the most common form of data was audio-recorded, transcribed interviews with participants following observation of them. These interviews differed from the fleeting opportunistic interviews conducted informally during observations and were designed to elicit participants’ perspectives on the meanings of their communicative and cultural practices. For example, Ashcraft (1999) interviewed 21 company members at the office furniture company she studied, and Howard and Geist (1995) interviewed 19 employees of the utility company they studied.

Analysis of documents generated by or pertaining to the group under investigation also was common. Murphy (2001), for instance, conducted archival research at airline headquarters, analyzing newspaper stories, magazine articles, and old flight-attendant
manuals. Braithwaite (1997) examined documents produced by a community college that explained Navajo philosophy, culture, and traditions, and how those traditions were incorporated into courses. Similarly, Sotirin and Gottfried (1999, p. 65) examined documents “on secretarial protocols and company procedures” pertaining to secretaries whose “bitching” communication they studied, and S. J. Tracy and Tracy (1998) examined 911 call-center materials, including training manuals, year-end public reports, and internal memos.

Other ethnographers recorded and transcribed naturally occurring interactions among participants, such as staff meetings at a zoo (Martin, 2004); interactions among patients, patients’ companions, and geriatric team members (Ellingson, 2003); coven meetings (Lesch, 1994); and residents’ narratives in a group home (Croft, 1999). Ruud (2000) distributed a “brief” questionnaire to the board of directors and musicians asking about communication concerns of symphony orchestra members, and Amason et al. (1999) administered a quantitative questionnaire to employees following observation and interviews with them. Finally, Miller (1995) asked each of her participants to keep a journal of thoughts and reflections on their emotions and family dynamics.

Methods of Data Analysis

In addition to the variety of data gathered by ethnographic applied communication researchers, varying methods of data analysis were employed. Again, some researchers in this sample were much more specific about their data-analytic procedures than were others. Some gave no explanation of data-analytic procedures; they simply described their involvement in a particular setting and then proceeded directly to their findings (e.g., Barker et al., 1993; Brooks & Bowker, 2002; Meyer, 2004; Novek, 1995).

Other ethnographers clearly identified an analytical step between data gathering and presenting results. Many ethnographers analyzed data using grounded theory procedures as delineated by Glaser and Strauss (1967; see also Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008); exemplars included S. J. Tracy and Tracy (1998), Miller (1995), Zoller (2003), and Wright (1997), who provided an unusually detailed explanation of the method in his article. Other researchers conducted analyses that were similar to grounded theory in the sense of being inductive and discerning patterns, but did not follow precisely the exact guidelines. Deriving themes was one way of describing inductive analysis; for instance, Apker (2001, p. 121) “reviewed [data] for emergent themes,” and Gillespie (2001) employed Owen’s (1984) criteria for themes (repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness) to determine which ideas were representative in the data (see also Meyer & O’Hara, 2004). Patterns was another term invoked to describe inductive analyses: Morgan and Krone (2001, p. 325) analyzed data for “patterns of performances,” and Baxter (1993, p. 315) noted that she “searched for emergent patterns” in her data. Braithwaite (1997) also looked for themes and patterns, and added that he “stopped collecting data when I identified recurring patterns of interaction...when I stopped seeing something ‘new’...when my informants did not tell me anything I had not heard before” (p. 223). Ruud (2000) described his inductive data analysis using Geertz’s (1973) process of searching for symbols, significant clusters of symbols, and contradictions among symbols. Still other ethnographers specified methods of analysis that were uniquely suited to their projects and were not found elsewhere in this sample: conversational analysis (Goodwin, 2002), fantasy theme analysis (Bormann 1972, cited in Lesch, 1994), “grounded practical theory” (Craig & Tracy, 1995, cited in Ashcraft, 2000; see Barge & Craig, this volume); and action-implicative discourse analysis (K. Tracy, 1995, cited in S. J. Tracy, 2002; see Barge & Craig, this volume, Tracy & Mirivel, this volume).
Use of grounded theory and other inductive procedures often is compatible with other analytical perspectives. For example, Zoller (2003) stated that she drew “upon Fairclough’s (1995) conception of critical discourse analysis as the attempt to understand the role of ideological discursive formations in naturalizing ideologies and transforming them into common sense” (p. 124); this reflected Zoller’s choice of Foucault’s (1971, 1979, 1980) theories on power and discourse to frame her study of contradictions in workplace health and safety discourses (see also K. Tracy & Mirivel, this volume). In a similar manner, Meyer and O’Hara (2004, p. 9) used standpoint theory as “another analytic lens” and “identified discursive and counterdiscursive moves” to address their research questions, which focused on discourse and subaltern counterpublics.

A final aspect of data analysis reported by several ethnographers in this sample was recalcitrance, or inviting feedback from selected participants to consider their responses to researchers’ preliminary findings (Tompkins, 1994). Kramer (2002), for instance, invited two theater group members and two outsiders to read and comment on the initial draft of his manuscript. Alemán (2001) conducted “member checks” intended to clarify her understanding of participants’ perspectives, particularly with regard to comparing management and employee points of view. Morgan and Krone (2001) held an informal meeting with five participants for feedback that was integrated into their data analysis. Novek (1995) showed her student participants a draft of her ethnography and quoted the following from their responses:

Kahn wrote, “This is an excellent paper. It covers all points on how young black youth survive and strive in [West Urbania]. You excellently used phrases that showed pain in some of the students, as well as their happiness.” He felt I had used the word “some” too often to describe situations experienced by only “a few” students, however. (p. 184)

Inviting participants’ voices into the data-analysis process and providing space for divergent views in research reports, as Novek did, is a common practice among feminist and other critical theory scholars (Reinharz, 1992).

Writing Strategies

The ethnographies in this sample were written using postpositivist academic writing conventions, following standard research report format (i.e., the American Psychological Association’s guidelines that specify introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion as the sections of research articles), and utilizing existing theories, concepts, and research to justify and contextualize their inquiry. Far more similarities than differences in writing style emerged within the sample. Two common elements of writing included first-person voice and inclusion of (some) thick description as support for claims made.

The vast majority of authors wrote in the first person, rhetorically taking responsibility for their actions and claims, a common postpositivist practice that departs from the passive voice characteristic of positivist research. For example, Gillespie (2001, p. 106) noted, “In my official position at the Center, then, I worked within a cognitive anthropological framework,” and Lesch (1994) stated that “I observed, audiotaped, and took notes during each 2 1/2-hour meeting” (p. 61; see also Adelman & Frey, 1994, 1997; Alemán, 2001; Meyer, 2004; Miller, 1995; Warren, 2001; Zoller, 2003). Far fewer authors wrote in the third person and, in each case, the article was written by multiple authors who served in different roles during the study, making the use of “I” or “we” difficult and
potentially confusing. For example, Morgan and Krone (2001) explained that “the first
author originally looked for...” and that “patterns of performance were identified” (p.
325; see also Amason et al., 1999; Brooks & Bowker, 2002; English-Lueck et al., 2002).
First-person voice appears normative and certainly is consistent with current trends in
qualitative social science (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000).

The other characteristic aspect of the writing style involves incorporating thick descrip-
tion in the form of short excerpts from field notes, reconstructed dialogue, and summaries
of interactions witnessed; in most cases, ethnographers included some lengthier, indented
block quotes that were interspersed with a larger number of brief quotes or paraphrases
that were woven into the analysis (e.g., Ashcraft, 2000; Gillespie, 2001; Martin, 2004;
Meyer & O’Hara, 2004. Other ethnographers engaged in variations on this manner of
presenting evidence to support their claims. English-Lueck et al. (2002) and Goodwin
(2002) included extended examples transcribed from interview tapes, and I (Ellingson,
2003) offered a narrative account of an interaction at the beginning of the findings and
referred back to the lines of that narrative throughout the analysis. Miller (1995) suc-
cinctly summed up the conundrum of wanting to provide rich details but not having suf-
fi cient (journal) space within which to fi t them when she introduced her fi ndings with a
disclaimer: “Due to space considerations, these categories are briefly described omitting
fully descriptive detail” (p. 253). Although sufficient details were included in each of the
articles, we can safely assume that many more were omitted.

Further economizing on space was accomplished through being as concise as possible
throughout the report. DeSantis’s (2002) account stood out as an exception to this rule
with his opening narrative of a fellow cigar smoker’s funeral and humorous references
to old television shows to introduce the cigar shop: “The interior design, to use the term
very loosely, can best be thought of as a cross between Sanford and Son’s living room
and Floyd’s Mayberry barber shop.... As one wife observed, ‘the room is done in tasteless
testosterone’” (p. 168). Elwood et al. (1995) also devoted space to the lexicon of African-
American communities on the South Side of Houston that were the focus of their study
on HIV prevention, when they wrote, “There, anyone who’s anyone knows Ms. Phyllis....
But Phyllis isn’t the Diva of the South Side simply because people know her. She also is
‘all that.’... She reminds people to use condoms when they’re doing the wild thing” (pp.
265–266). Elwood et al. did not just quote participants’ words; they incorporated some
of the participants’ style into the prose. They also used contractions and second-person
voice (e.g., “If you interrupt her...”), strategies that typically are not used in formal aca-
demic writing but are effective in illuminating participants’ worlds. Harter et al. (2006)
went even further by including in their article two photographs of artwork produced
by adults with developmental disabilities in the workshop they studied. Such evocative
details take up space, but they enhance the richness of the accounts signifi cantly (see
Adelman & Frey, 1997).

The dearth of richly evocative accounts of lived experiences in most communication
research reports underlies Goodall’s (2004) call for applied communication research-
ers to engage in autoethnography and write personal narratives. Autoethnography is
a type of ethnography that shifts the focus from a group to a researcher’s lived experi-
cences as the object of study and often generates narrative or other artistic representa-
tions as fi ndings (Ellis, 2004). Goodall posited that personal narratives are “ways of
explaining things” that connect research on important issues with individuals’ “actual
telling of a life story,” and that “this form of reporting is a new embodiment of applied
communication research” (p. 187). Goodall’s position that such tales constitute applied
research is not widely shared, at least as refl ected in venues that publish applied com-
munication research. Although such alternative, or creative-analytic, representations
have become more widely accepted (e.g., fiction stories, poetry, and performance art; see Richardson, 2000), space has not been allotted to them in “mainstream” journals, such as *JACR* (see Tillman, 2009), nor in most edited collections of applied communication research, such as Buzzanell, Sterk, and Turner’s (2004) book, *Gender in Applied Communication Contexts*. Some applied researchers publish autoethnographic, narrative, or confessional accounts of ethnography separately from conventional analyses (e.g., Adelman & Frey, 2001; Ellingson, 1998) or mix autoethnography and grounded theory analysis in a book-length ethnography (Ellingson, 2005).

### Lessons Learned About Ethnography in Applied Communication Scholarship

This chapter has described how ethnography has been employed in applied communication research. In this section, I reflect on what we have learned about ethnography as a methodology through the studies explored here, with particular attention to ethnographers’ descriptions of difficulties encountered and stated limitations of their studies. Although a discussion of research limitations generally is expected in published monographs (and obligatory in some journals) as a qualifier for claims made on the basis of one’s data, this brief segment of articles, along with discussions of methods and sometimes conclusions, also functions as a site for the negotiation of methodological legitimacy. That is, by examining the professed limitations of ethnographic methods and findings, we can explore ways in which applied communication topics, goals, and implications illuminate the practices of ethnography.

Some of the published ethnographic research reviewed did not directly address any limitations (e.g., Gillespie, 2001; Meyer & O’Hara, 2004; Morgan & Krone, 2001; Murphy, 2001; S. J. Tracy, 2004). This absence is notable in light of the fading but persistent legacy of quantitative research conventions employed in communication journals. Although qualitative methods now are widely embraced, many reviewers and editors support traditional writing norms that require at least a nod toward identifying limitations of a study. For qualitative research, this nod often included eschewing claims of generalizability based on the limited number of sites or participants studied; some applied communication authors went so far as to argue for limitations that were so significant “as to deny the validity of the theory or method. In essence, authors argued successfully against their own research project” (Keyton, 2000, p. 167). On a positive note, it appears that the time for being overly defensive about the value and utility of qualitative findings largely has passed. Still, some authors in this sample did address methodological limitations that provide insights into the use of ethnography in applied communication scholarship.

To begin, the traditional qualitative lament of the lack of generalizability of findings was evident in this sample, as reflected in Kramer’s (2002) statement that the “transferability of his findings” to other settings is speculative” (p. 168). This acknowledgment is grounded in the fact that ethnographic studies usually are confined to an in-depth exploration of a single site (e.g., Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). Given the specificities of the particular group studied, variation across groups is to be expected and has to be accounted for in applying findings. For most studies, this fact went unstated, indicating that it was understood and did not require repeating. In one case, Lammers and Krikorian (1997) indicated that it was difficult to gain access to multiple hospitals for observation but that doing so was imperative because “to draw reliable and valid conclusions, the cooperation of a single facility...is insufficient” (p. 28).

As another limitation, Alemán (2001) noted the problem of field notes (rather than recordings) as data:
Most instances of complaining were reconstructed in my fieldnotes from observed conversations. While I recognize the limitations of these reconstructed acts and episodes, complaining events were fleeting and ephemeral, often captured in the hallways and elevators making audio recording difficult. (p. 95)

The necessity of reconstructing events is inherent to ethnography because the method requires simultaneous observation, sense making, and note taking (that is, recording of data), but this issue was raised only by a few authors.

Other limitations concerned points of view reflected or excluded from the ethnography and awareness that ethnographers often differ in important ways from their participants, which may limit their ability to understand participants’ perspectives. Amason et al. (1999) noted that they were Anglo, whereas many of the people they studied were Hispanic, and Zoller (2003, p. 136) explained that her “study was limited to the often-silenced voices of employees” and suggested that further research should incorporate other voices (e.g., management). Novek (1995) stated the limitations of her perspective but also advocated for its value:

The observations...offered here are a limited effort to describe what the author saw, heard, and experienced.... They illuminate the strategic communication behaviors of specific adolescents in a specific time and place, described to the best of one observer’s ability. Still the descriptions, whatever their limitations, had real resonance for some participants. (p. 184)

A few authors expressed critical awareness of the difficulties of writing their accounts. One issue that authors raised was power, for ethnographic writing inescapably is political and cannot produce a neutral account; as Van Maanen (1988) explained, “ethnographies are politically mediated, since the power of one group to represent another is always involved” (pp. 4–5). Warren (2001) said that he sought to “take the cautions about ethnographic objectivity...seriously [that] argue that ethnography is always already an interpretive process—that any view of culture, my own included, stems from a source with a particular history and ideological point of view” (p. 106).

Similarly, Meyer (2004) acknowledged her viewpoint in her ethnography of teaching using feminist pedagogy: “Like all ethnographies, the tale I tell is not some incontestable truth, but, to a certain degree, a fiction (Van Maanen, 1988) written from my perspective—which is...unique, yet partial, partisan, and problematic” (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997, p. 199).

In a somewhat different vein, Adelman and Frey (1994) noted the limitations of language and writing conventions for expressing the painful events they witnessed during fieldwork:

The discussions of dialectical tensions, communication practices, and metaphors...fall short in conveying the personal struggle to live and die within [an AIDS residence]. How can we convey the depth of feeling while watching a sick resident risk his survival to go outside in the bitter cold of a Chicago winter to release a balloon for a fellow resident who has died? (p. 20)

Adelman and Frey (1994, 1997) also suggested that ethnographic accounts must capture participants’ perspectives and that the research process and reporting methods should privilege participant’ voices (see also Novek, 1995).

Given the often close relationship in ethnography between researchers and those they
study, ethical dilemmas inevitably arise at all stages of research that may limit researchers’ ability to represent those individuals (e.g., Berg, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Overt discussion of ethics in these reports, however, was rare. One example is Conquergood (1994), who stated in a footnote that as he studied gangs and their secret credos, he confronted “ethical dilemmas, conundrums, and predicaments. I must negotiate continuously that delicate boundary between respect and sensitivity to my field consultants, and the need to write the fullest, most complex ethnographic account of their communication practices that my data support” (p. 28). Zoller (2003, p. 124) also discussed the issue of employee confidentiality, but she raised this less as an ethical issue and more as a way to assert the validity of her interview data: “I have confidence in the interview texts,” she explained, after noting that she reassured participants of confidentiality for both individual employees and the corporation. Similarly, Edley (2000) argued that the employees she studied felt free to express complaints against the owners of the firm because she assured them that their comments were confidential.

Suggestions for Applied Communication Ethnographers

Having reviewed the existing state(s) of ethnography in applied communication research, I now offer some suggestions for ethnographers. I advocate that published applied communication ethnographies should consistently provide (1) clarification of key methodological terms, (2) more complete and accurate roadmaps of their work processes, (3) recommendations for practitioners beyond the academy, and (4) support for wider variation in the length of journal articles.

A great deal of ambiguity and inconsistency exists regarding the specific ethnographic practices reported (and omitted) by applied communication ethnographers, and, consequently, greater clarity is needed. Potter (1996) pointed out that inconsistency in the use of key terms is characteristic of ethnography and qualitative research, in general. Like Potter, I eschew calls for uniformity and, instead, promote methodological diversity. However, the lack of standardization of practice and language should not encourage ethnographers to ignore the implications of this diversity, as was the case in many of these ethnographies. Authors should define key terms that they invoke (e.g., ethnography and inductive analysis), either by citing a relevant methodological treatise or by providing more precise details of their procedures. This level of detail is particularly important in explaining how data were analyzed, as readers deserve to know how researchers get from field notes to finished product. Ethnographers need not be defensive about their choices but they should be more complete in documenting those choices. This suggestion may add length to a manuscript, which is a problem given that publication space often is in short supply, but given ethnographers’ goal of providing thick description, citing a text or definition could be done succinctly.

Second, applied communication ethnographers need to acknowledge, if only briefly, the messiness, imperfections, and mistakes that inevitably are part of the actual process of conducting such research. If our exemplars are to be useful to those who are heading into the field or trying to make sense of what they experienced there, we must include more of the underbelly of ethnography. As Van Maanen (1988) explained:

Accident and happenstance shapes fieldworkers’ studies as much as planning or foresight; numbing routine as much as living theatre; impulse as much as rational choice; mistaken judgments as much as accurate ones. This may not be the way fieldwork is reported, but it is the way it is done. (p. 2)
Most certainly, ethnography is not reported this way in applied communication research. Ethnographers—myself included—want to publish the most credible and persuasive version of our stories when our goal is to influence policy, practice, or theory. Hence, ethnographers tend to sanitize their accounts, omitting missteps as irrelevant, tangential, or overly personal; historically, such confessional tales were kept separate from authoritative accounts of research (Van Maanen, 1988). Granted it is risky to combine confessions of embarrassing moments (see Ellingson, 2005, for a scene in which I engaged in a heated debate about the Virgin Mary and feminism with the oncologist I was observing, with disastrous results) with passionate calls for social, political, and professional change based on one’s findings; not everyone will forgive such truthfulness, let alone see it as enhancing a researcher’s credibility through realism. However, when we pretend that research processes are linear and smooth, we provide inaccurate and deceptively simplistic maps for those who read our work for guidance. I am not suggesting that we humiliate ourselves by detailing every imperfection but that we note in methodology sections (some) roadblocks encountered, opportunities seized or missed, ethical dilemmas faced, and mistakes made.

I also urge applied communication ethnographers to make explicit and specific their recommendations for practitioners in the area in which they conduct their ethnographies. Since Keyton’s editorship, all articles published in JACR must include, in a separate section, concrete suggestions for professionals/practitioners (see Frey & SunWolf, this volume). Articles and chapters sampled here that were published elsewhere (or earlier in JACR’s history) often lacked such specific applications to real-world contexts. In every article sampled, significant theoretical or conceptual insights were provided that implied possibilities for application; in all cases, such insights should be articulated in pragmatic form (see also Barge & Craig, this volume). After all, communication research cannot claim to be applied if the findings from it cannot be translated into useful practices (Frey, 2000).

Finally, let us remember that journal publication guidelines are neither natural nor inevitable but are socially constructed and, hence, changeable. Despite resource limitations, we should advocate for the merits of accepting—at least occasionally—longer ethnographic accounts in journals that publish applied communication research. I am not naive about the challenges of journal editing, and I have the highest respect for those who perform that vital service. However, ethnographic thick descriptions often look rather thin by the time they are shrunk into standard article length. In addition to flexibility on article length, perhaps Web technology could be used, enabling authors to print links to further illustrative examples or to longer electronic versions of articles. Of course, ethnographers need to make the best possible use of additional space through strategic writing choices.

Conclusion

Ethnography is alive and well in applied communication research. Although significant variety exists in how ethnography is defined and practiced, common threads weave through the applied communication research that employs this method. The strength of ethnography is its attunement to the smallest mundane details of day-to-day life. Given that applied communication researchers seek to understand and enhance the daily life of individuals, groups, and organizations, ethnography has and will continue to contribute significantly to applied communication scholarship.
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