**Ethnographers of Communication**

**Joining Theoretical Conversations Outside Their Subfield:**

**Challenges and Possibilities**

**Blue Sky Workshop, ICA 2015**

**Hallmarks of successful theoretical engagement**

* Crafting a credible response to a communal problem or need that calls for understanding cultural variability
* Developing useful concepts that can inform practice and/or design
* Academic relevance (productive engagement with contemporary scholarship that yields publications in recognized journals)
* Adhering to ethnographic principles

**Key tensions**

* **local vs. academic theorizing** (considering the theoretical relationship between local theories that guide communicative conduct and the interpretation of conduct and academic theories that seek to explain a broad range of communicative phenomena beyond particular communities)
* **translation vs. standards** (making our work accessible and acceptable to broad audiences while adhering to high research standards)
* **in-group vs. out-group** (appreciating the communal experience with other EC scholars while opening up toward and attracting non-EC audiences)
* **descriptive vs. normative** (balancing the careful representation of cultural practices with recommendations for intervening into those practices)
* **domain-specific vs. communal codes** (considering the consequences of pursuing codes related to particular domains of practice (health, politics, religion, etc.) in a community or codes relevant across domains)
* **coherence vs. fragmentation** (balancing the desire to find coherence in a local code with the possibility that the code may contain contradictions or may not be fully coherent)
* **engagement vs. incommensurability** (seeking theoretical engagement with research outside the EC tradition while remaining open to the possibility of theoretical incommensurability)
* **cultural vs. non-cultural vs. partially cultural theorizing** (appreciating the complexities of engaging with theories that do not pursue cultural explanations of communication phenomena, or that call into question the “omnirelevance” of culture to human conduct)
* **offline vs. online** (considering the theoretical consequences of the distinction between these two types of contexts)
* **EC’s disciplinary vs. interdisciplinary character** (appreciating EC’s theoretical principles while acknowledging the historically interdisciplinary character of the approach)

**ethPractical advice**

* Learn/engage key concepts from other fields
* Seek out and engage with sub-fields that emerge as a result of a critical response to EC and its theoretical assumptions
* Take our unique skills (listening, observation, orienting to meanings of participants) to our interactions with fellow researchers, collaborators and critics from other fields
* Do not hesitate to invoke EC practices and principles cross-disciplinary conversations
* In letters to the editor, spend more time setting up who might be an appropriate reviewer (even if the submission system asks for recommendations).
* Maintain conceptual clarity from the outset of a research project / publication.
* Think of theory as a tool. Use what there is to use in or beyond EC to help you think further, just maintain systematic practice of ethnographic principles.
* Think of theory as “theorizing,” as embedded in the process of discovery. Too much theory can stiffen “motion” through data, through discovery.
* Use multiple theories, perhaps in separate pieces to avoid ontological conflicts. Yet these pieces can together constitute a whole that more fully explores a site or phenomena.
* Combine more to address weaknesses/problems within theories.
* Use the ethnographic process as a guide to theorizing