An Overview of Video-Based Ethnography

Video-based ethnography, also called *microethnography*, addresses “big” social and organizational issues through careful analysis of “small” moments of human activity. Working at a particular site or institution, such as a non-profit hospital or an investment banking firm, researchers create video recordings of activities as they naturally occur—i.e., activities that would have happened whether or not a camera was present. These recordings are then analyzed repeatedly and rigorously, with attention to both the participants’ talk (who says what, when, and how) and their embodied behaviors (the relative location, orientation and movement of people and things). Video analyses are combined with other kinds of information, such as ethnographic data gathered through observations and interviews, altogether providing a variety of macro and micro views of social and organizational activity.

Microethnographic research claims are grounded in the empirical details of actual behavior that are captured on videotape and made available to the scrutinizing audience. Researchers show how people interactively create and sustain the social and
organizational realities that they inhabit. Although researchers may avoid or postpone explicit claims about the generalizability of site-specific findings, microethnographers assume that patterns and practices in one place will have relevance to other contexts.

A Historical Sketch of Microethnography

Microethnographic research is a convergence of competencies from multiple disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communication. In 1942, anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead published a groundbreaking book, *Balinese Character*, which included more than 700 photographs that were arranged to show recurring patterns of social life. Their account of Balinese culture was grounded in the visible details of everyday behavior: how people walked, attended to their surroundings, moved their hands when eating or dancing, and so forth. This photographic analysis was a precursor to work in the 1970s, when social scientists started to use videotape (a new technology) to capture human behavior in “the wild.” For example, scholars concerned about social inequality in public schools used videotape to examine “microbehaviors” (talk and movement) as the building blocks of micro-cultures that developed within a particular classroom or school (e.g., Mehan 1979). The term *microethnography* was picked up as a label for this new approach to research.

From the field of sociology came the influence of Erving Goffman, whose “micro-studies of the public order” focused on the social rather than the psychological, on the interaction rather than the individual. Goffman used fragments of human behavior from a variety of sources (e.g., excerpts from field notes, snippets from overheard
conversation, lines from novels) to illustrate his theory about the fundamental order of social life. He was especially interested in ritualistic forms: the small verbal and nonverbal behaviors that individuals use to show appropriate respect for one another during daily encounters.

The strongest influence on microethnographic research has been “conversation analysis,” a research perspective developed by sociologist Harvey Sacks, in collaboration with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. As a challenge to the cultural determinism of Goffman’s views, Sacks emphasized the *sequential emergence* of social life. He used audio recordings of real conversation to uncover the orderliness of everyday talk and to identify the micro-processes or “mechanisms” whereby social actions (e.g., greetings, assessments, questions-answers) are interactively accomplished. Sacks argued: “Whatever humans do . . . there is order at all points [and] a detailed study of small phenomena may give an enormous understanding of the way humans do things and the kinds of objects they use to construct and order their affairs” (1984, pp. 22-24). Conversation analysis has a kinship with ethnomethodology, which is a revolutionary perspective promoted by sociologist Harold Garfinkel that regards social order as an ongoing product of people’s sense-making practices and procedures.

Although microethnographic research regularly employs conversation analytic assumptions and procedures, the methods diverge in three important ways. *First*, conversation analysts typically create collections of some recurring phenomenon that they have found in a variety of contexts. For example, a study of assessments within conversation might include instances taken from telephone conversations, classroom discussions, medical consultations, and so forth. By contrast, microethnographies are
typically case studies of a particular setting (e.g., a police department) or activity (e.g., weekly board meeting). Second, rather than seeking to build generalized claims about what people do and how they do it, microethnography works to provide a rich description and a thorough account of scenes of social interaction. “How does a strategic plan emerge from an 8-hour meeting of leaders and managers?” is the kind of question microethnography addresses. Third, conversation analysis has primarily focused on talk with relatively less attention to visible interaction, including people’s use of tools, artifacts, objects, architecture structures, and so forth. More often, microethnographic research has attended to the embodied features of human activity, including the subtle interrelationships between vocal and visible forms of interaction.

Microethnographic analyses of visible (nonverbal) behavior have been influenced by “context analysis,” an approach pioneered by psychologist Albert Scheflen during the 1960s and 1970s. Scheflen carefully documented people’s behaviors during therapy sessions, showing how their postural shifts marked phases of their meeting, and how their location and orientation in the room displayed interpersonal relationships and micro-strategic alliances. He also studied thousands of photographs of people within situations such as parties, hallways encounters, and office meetings. He explained the interactive affordances of different body parts and explicated social activities in terms of distance, orientation, and postures of the participants. Context analysis was further developed by Adam Kendon who advanced a more interactionist and sequential approach. Context analysis is more reliable than the notions of “body language” that became popular during the 1960s and 1970s: Rather than treating an isolated behavior
(e.g., folded arms) as inherently meaningful (e.g., defensiveness), context analysis examines the social relativity and sequential unfolding of visible forms and interaction.

Microethnographic work is making a unique contribution to communication studies by addressing “big” social, organizational issues through careful analysis of “small” interaction moments. For example, Goodwin (1994) conducted a frame-by-frame analysis of the courtroom activity that led to an acquittal of Los Angeles policemen who beat Rodney King. The study showed how defense attorneys organized the jury’s perception of the videotaped beating so that King, rather than the policemen, was seen as the aggressor. Similarly, LeBaron and Streeck (1997) used computers to analyze a covertly videotaped interrogation at a police station with a history of getting confessions from suspects later found to be innocent. Their study showed how interrogators constrained talk at the same time that their spatial maneuvers literally backed the suspect into a corner. Such attention to vocal and visible behavior, including people’s’ use of objects and artifacts, combined with concern for “big” social and organizational issues, resonates across the disciplines.

How to Conduct Microethnographic Research

Although microethnography takes different forms, depending on the interests and practices of the researcher, it generally involves five steps:

1. Select a research site. Selecting a site depends on the nature of the research project. Although an Internet chat room might be a legitimate place for research, sites are typically physical locations where people move and talk in ways that collectively constitute recognizable action. Traditionally, ethnographers have chosen sites without
knowing what they will observe or discover. Basic social research—that is, discovering and documenting features of the interaction order—could be conducted almost anywhere because patterns of interaction found in one place, such as a beauty salon, might also occur within a courtroom, a boardroom, and so forth. Increasingly, site selection is guided by a specific agenda or question that the researcher wants to pursue, such as, “How do surgeons at a teaching hospital work to save the life of a patient and at the same time instruct a junior apprentice?”

2. Collect data. Participant observations, field notes, interviews, and field recordings (audio and video) are all considered premium data for microethnographic research. However, video has become the staple because it provides empirical grounding for interpretive claims, captures subtle details of interaction that analysts can review and others can verify, and helps researchers attend to both vocal and visible phenomena interactively orchestrated. A variety of cinematic decisions influence the “quality” of videotaped data. Simply turning a camera “on” or “off” is an interpretive act—a decision about what is important or worth recording. The camera’s scope is often a dilemma: A wide-angle view that includes all participants will not include close-ups of facial expressions and other subtle behaviors; a close-up view of someone writing on a chart will exclude the eye gaze or facial orientations that direct the attention of others. Cameras necessarily embody a perspective. They must be placed and pointed, and analysis is always contingent upon the perspective a camera provides.

Thus, microethnography diverges from other research traditions: It does not rely on hypothetical data that depend on someone’s ability to imagine; survey and self-report
data that depend on a subject’s ability to remember; nor laboratory data in which the subjects are removed from the people and things associated with their everyday lives.

3. Analyze video data. By watching videotaped data carefully and repeatedly, analysts can identify patterns of interaction that provide empirical grounding for research claims. Occasionally, a videotaped moment “jumps out” as obviously noteworthy, but usually the significance of a moment emerges slowly as it is examined. Throughout this inductive process, an analyst’s eyes are unavoidably guided by research interests, as well as informed by existing literatures. Once a particular phenomenon is identified, induction may give way to abduction as the analyst looks for additional instances. Sometimes analysts work in groups (called “data sessions”), making rapid progress through synergistic observations and immediate evaluations of each other’s claims. In the end, research claims must agree with what can be seen and heard in the videotaped data.

4. Digitize and transcribe key moments of interaction. When analysts become serious about examining a particular videotaped moment, they may use various computer software tools to transcribe the talk and study the frame-by-frame unfolding of visible behaviors. The computer offers different “views” of digital data: For example, the video can be slowed down or zoomed in, or different slices of behavior can be easily juxtaposed on the computer screen for comparison. New technology cannot replace the eyes and ears of a well-trained analyst, but it can support smart and rigorous research. Transcripts reduce interaction to a two-dimensional page to highlight (precisely) details of talk and nonverbal behavior. Transcription is a process of observing more exactly.
5. Describe and report research findings. Microethnographic research is literally empirical. Analysts examine the visible and vocal behaviors that subjects make available to each other during their interaction, then analysts make these data available to the audience or reader. Research claims routinely appear on the same printed page as transcripts (featuring vocal behavior) and corresponding video frames (showing visible behavior). Recently, microethnographic reports have been published with a computer disk or Internet address that gives readers access to the raw video data (e.g., Jones & LeBaron, 2002). Video-based claims are supplemented by ethnographic insights and evidence from participant observations, field notes, interviews, and so forth. Admittedly, these methods are fundamentally interpretive: Social scientists are unavoidably symbol-using and meaning-making beings. However, video-based research is more rigorously empirical than traditional ethnography, as claims are grounded in the raw data that audiences and readers can see and scrutinize.

A Case Study: “Watching Strategy: Senseshaping in Organizations” (Co-author Richard Whittington, Oxford University)

This work in progress is a video-based study of how a top management team interactively imagines their organizational history, and at the same time creates a map or an image of it, in order to satisfy the demands of a regulatory commission. Our study contributes to a growing interdisciplinary interest in the situated, social practices of organizational strategy (e.g., Whittington, 2007). We emphasize that strategic work is necessarily material and visual, showing how the team’s understanding of their past is mediated through embodied maneuvering and in the present, as they produce visual
artifacts that they can then carry forward. We refer to such material and artifactual practice within organizations as *senseshaping*.

Academic research on corporate strategy has been largely concerned with the future scope and long-term direction of organizations. Leaders of strategy are typically depicted as forward-looking captains who steer the momentum of their organization through dynamic and emerging environments (e.g., Mintzberg, 1978). Through “sense-making” activities (Weick, 1995), leaders ascertain the circumstances of their organization, both internally and externally; through “sense-giving” efforts, leaders then disseminate their vision to stakeholders and constituents and thereby inform future action (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Even the “narrative view” of strategy proposed by Barry and Elmes (1997) emphasizes forecasting and the social construction of future realities that influence and shape participants’ actions.

In practice, strategy is also about the past. Because prior activity is often regarded as a proxy for predicting future performance, leaders must sometimes consider and imagine the past so that they can authorize organizational histories that will fulfill stakeholder expectations in the present. In addition to organizational strategies intended and strategies realized, we observe that there are strategies *remembered*. Although a handful of scholars have pointed to evidence of retrospective sense-making in organizational strategy (e.g., Weick, 1995), it has not been carefully examined as an *in situ* organizational practice. By capturing a moment of retrospective sense-making “in the wild” (Hutchins, 1995) and by analyzing how it is socially and materially accomplished, we contribute to current academic theory about strategy and provide empirical findings that may inform the strategic work of organizations.
This is a microethnographic (LeBaron, 2005; Streeck & Mehus, 2005) study of a large U.S. healthcare organization, in which a regulatory commission asks the CEO to report on his strategic activities of previous years. Specifically, the commission wants to know how top management has assessed the effectiveness of their strategic plans. Our study features a 30-minute video recording: Between meetings and huddled at a whiteboard, the CEO talks with two other top managers about the history of their strategic planning, and especially about their possible “assessments” of their own effectiveness. As the organization did not have a formal assessment process, the trio can be seen negotiating an organizational history that includes a series of informal “assessments” along the way. Continually, the group orients toward a timeline that the CEO has drawn on the whiteboard, sometimes adding new elements that document a new and shared understanding, altogether preparing for the CEO for his upcoming report to the commission.

Our video-based method enables us to closely examine the empirical details of the managers’ talk and interaction at the whiteboard. Through talk, the participants constitute a frame for collective remembering, giving each other a license for imagining the past in ways that may serve current organizational needs. By coordinating their talk with references to and inscriptions on the whiteboard, they draw upon the affordances and constraints of this material object and the symbol systems that they employ. They re-member assessment activities by locating and inscribing them in association with other key events on the timeline. Inevitably, the whiteboard becomes a chess board for micro-politics of the moment, as participants strengthen their organizational standing and relevance through the way that they colonize their past and future.
In sum, this paper makes theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions. We propose that strategy research has privileged the present and the future of organizations, thereby neglecting the past as an important strategic resource and failing to recognize that the past may—even must—be appropriated to fulfill stakeholder expectations in the present. Also, we extend theoretical understandings of sense-making within organizations (e.g., Weick, 1995) by showing how sense-making is unavoidably embodied, material, and artifactual. Empirically, we show a kinship between imagining and imaging within organizations, as organizational minds are necessarily mediated by interacting bodies and their artifacts at hand; we identify and explicate organizational practices that are associated with *senseshaping*. Finally, we suggest that strategy-as-practice research has been too logo-centric, and we recommend video-based methods as one solution. Although strategies may begin in the head, they necessarily take a social and a material form; organizational strategy is unavoidably shaped by the affordances and constraints of bodies and things, through practices that can be captured on videotape.

**References**


