

Ethnography and the shifting semiotics of gender and sexuality

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on ethnography as a multi-method research approach in the study of language, gender, and sexuality. Based on the practice of long-term participatory fieldwork, the approach primarily originated within cultural and linguistic anthropology, where it remains the central anchor of research today. Yet, as seen in the following chapters in Part II, ethnography has also been taken up by scholars in diverse fields across the humanities and social sciences and shaped to fit the particularities of each discipline. Several recent collections have addressed the use of ethnography within language-oriented fields such as linguistic anthropology (Perrino and Pritzker forthcoming), linguistic ethnography (Snell, Shaw, and Copland 2015), and ethnography of communication (Kaplan-Weinger and Ullman 2015). Our overview focuses on the use of ethnography within the now robust tradition of research in the field of language, gender, and sexuality.

Our discussion highlights the ways that ethnography enables the analysis of semiosis – here defined as sign processes that produce social meaning – as embedded in social context. This approach is uniquely appropriate to the field’s long-held understanding of gender and sexuality as intertwined social systems that are brought into being through everyday discursive practice. Although the development of this understanding is often traced to Butler’s (1990) philosophical work on performativity, it is also evident in early language and gender scholarship informed by ethnography, including research on indexicality (Ochs 1992), language ideology (Gal 1989), and communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). The ethnographers who advanced these formative concepts, each in different ways, enabled the field’s later uptake of Butler’s work by countering sex-based generalisations with a dynamic vision of gender as produced in everyday discourse (for a review, see Hall, Borba, and Hiramoto 2021). Each stressed the crucial role played by social context in this production, establishing ethnography as a necessary partner to the analysis of discourse. In one of the chapters appearing in Part II, Philips, a leading ethnographer of language and social life, calls this partnership ‘anthropological discourse analysis’. If gender is cultivated through community-based practice as a ‘dynamic verb’, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 462) argue in their early influential review, then ethnography is the approach for

tracing those dynamics in discourse (on ethnography as a central approach in language, gender, and sexuality research, see Besnier and Philips 2014; Gaudio 2019; Hall 2009).

We have come together to co-author this discussion as two linguistic anthropologists who are deeply committed to what ethnography can bring to the social analysis of language, even as we acknowledge the important critiques made of the method by each new generation of scholars. In fact, ethnography is one of the ‘most critiqued’ methods in the social sciences, in part because it asks for a kind of reflexivity from the researcher that methods aspiring to a dominant model of scientific objectivity do not share. Today’s ethnographers are trained to be suspicious of claims to objectivity, holding that all research – even research based purely in quantitative methods – is in some sense influenced by the position of the researcher. Certainly, our own positions as a ‘native ethnographer’ writing from the inside about Indigenous communities in the United States (e.g. Davis 2014, 2018, 2019) and a ‘foreign ethnographer’ writing from the outside about Hindi-speaking communities in India (e.g. Hall 2005, 2009, 2019) affects the kind of data we collect and the type of analysis we pursue. This reflexive awareness arises in the very act of doing fieldwork, whether in a village, at school, in front of the television, or online. In ethnography, researchers do not do *objective* observation, collecting specific pre-determined information from a detached vantage point; rather, they do *participant* observation, taking part in the everyday practices that are formative to the social, cultural, and linguistic behaviours they analyse. In the broad interdisciplinary study of language and society subsumed under sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall 2008), these practices include the face-to-face interactions that are the focus of more traditional fieldwork alongside the digital interactions that pervade twenty-first-century social life. We are all participant observers of the media systems that surround us; an ethnographic sensibility makes this participation the subject of analysis.

This chapter advances an understanding of social context as situated in a specific time and place yet complexly informed by what came before and what exists elsewhere. This deep contextualisation is the hallmark of ethnography and, as we argue in the pages that follow, undergirds all phases of ethnographic activity, from collection and analysis to writing and dissemination. The term ‘ethnography’, in our view, comprises much more than simply ‘describing a social group’, as its Greek etymology (*ethno* ‘social group’ + *graphia* ‘description’, ‘writing’) may suggest. As a kind of describing that is based on the author’s participation in the practices of others, ethnography refers to the process of research as well as its product, involving much more than narrowly defined tools for data collection. As researchers of language in social life, we have found it challenging to represent the dynamism of gender and sexuality in published work: How can we write about a specific time and place in a way that acknowledges the ongoing processual nature of that particularity? We suggest that ethnography offers an answer through its attention to the conceptual triad of practice, ideology, and theory. We draw from our own work and the excellent work featured in Part II to illustrate how ethnography, designed anew to encompass the heavily mediated nature of contemporary sociality, enables researchers to assess how gender and sexuality come to matter in the semiotic exchange of everyday life.

Practice

The concept of practice runs deep in language, gender, and sexuality scholarship. Prominent lines of research assume Bourdieu’s (1977) influential understanding of language as a practice that shapes, through repetition, a social actor’s habitus, or way of being in the world.

Where the concept of practice has perhaps surfaced most robustly in the field is in research focused on ‘communities of practice’ – a term initially advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their exposition of learning as a process of becoming a member of a sustained community. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s (1992) introduction of this model into language and gender scholarship countered broad-scale generalisations about women and men’s language patterns found in early research in the field. In a community of practice view, links between language and gender are not merely a binary product of childhood language socialisation, as scholarship advocating a two-cultures understanding of gender often implied. Rather, these links are ‘learned’ throughout the life course as social actors become members of diverse communities that cultivate the relationship between language and gender differently.

Ethnographic research inspired by the community of practice tradition has convincingly shown that indexical knowledge – that is, knowledge of how linguistic forms are connected to social meanings – arises from sustained participation with others. In her research on uses of ethnic jokes by lesbian and transgender youth in Delhi, Hall (2019) identifies this kind of knowledge as ‘indexical competence’ to emphasise the exclusionary semiotic mastery that is required for localised forms of identity work (see also Parish and Hall 2021). The importance of this form of competence is amply illustrated by research on organisations of gender in educational youth environments such as high schools, institutions that are recognised in social scientific scholarship as vital sites of identity formation. Ethnographers entering these sites have explored the ways that competing youth communities ascribe social meaning to constellations of language, apparel, embodiment, and space as a means of achieving stylistic distinction (e.g. Bucholtz 2011; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Pichler 2009; Shankar 2008; Smalls 2018). Consider, for example, Bucholtz’s (1999) influential account within language and gender studies of a community of female nerds at a Northern California high school. As the girls in her study engage with one another across multiple interactions, they learn to use and interpret hyper-standardised uses of the English language as indexical of a female nerd identity that opposes the perceived superficiality of more popular peers. Community members display nerd identity by demonstrating knowledge of these indexical relations and the ideologies that inform them.

The link between knowledge and practice is what makes ethnography, with its key component of participant observation, such an important approach for understanding the social analytics of language. A primary strength of ethnographically informed analysis is its attention to the ways that indexical relations are situated within time and space. Through longitudinal participation in situated communities, researchers can come to know the multiple, ever-shifting, and often competing indexical relations that give meaning to gender and sexuality. Scholars often comment on the paradoxical nature of participant observation: How can one be both a participant and an observer? But the term is paradoxical only within a perspective holding that observational knowledge must be detached from participation to escape bias. This perspective, still dominant across the social and natural sciences, is built on the premise that ‘knowing’ must exist independently from ‘being’ – that we can only know *about* the world when we refrain from participating *in* it (see discussion in Ingold 2014). However, community-based research in sociocultural linguistics has demonstrated that our understanding of how to use and interpret language (‘knowing’) is in fact cultivated through our everyday interactions with others (‘being’). When cultural anthropologist McGranahan characterises ethnography as a ‘unique way of knowing’, she is speaking to the sensibility that derives from this cultivation: ‘The ethnographic consists of the rhythms and logics through which we, in sociocultural groups, collectively make, and make sense

of, the world’ (2018: 2). In this respect, we are all participant observers, acquiring indexical knowledge as we engage with others through our bodies, minds, and senses. As a research method, participant observation is designed to approximate the learning process that takes place in everyday life, as lived experience.

Nevertheless, this approximation is always partial, given the ethnographer’s peculiar investment in the learning process. Feminist anthropologists have argued for decades that the asymmetry between ethnographer and subject has consequences and requires care. Scholars in language, gender, and sexuality do not often display the self-reflection seen in certain genres of anthropological writing, yet the field’s ongoing concern with power relations requires researchers to be attentive to biases that unavoidably pervade all stages of the research process, whether personal, cultural, or institutional. For instance, how might our own social backgrounds affect the kinds of things we notice in the field? How might our previous histories of knowing and being influence the way we analyse the data we collect? This attentiveness is precisely what is captured by the term ‘reflexivity’. Ethnographers of language, as a special category of ethnographers, must also consider the semiotic biases that inform our entry into worlds of practice different from our own. How might our interpretations of language be influenced by life experiences in communities that view the relationship between linguistic form and social meaning differently? As Briggs (1986) argued over three decades ago when reflecting on his research among Spanish speakers in northern New Mexico, the assumptions academics may hold about communicative events as seemingly ubiquitous as the interview can lead us to ask the wrong kinds of questions and to draw interpretations that may inaccurately reflect the perspectives of those we write about.

It is for this reason that the feminist concept of intersectionality figures so prominently in ethnographically based research on language, gender, and sexuality (cf. Chun and Walters forthcoming; Cornelius 2020; Levon and Mendes 2016). Because identity is multiply constituted by engagement in diverse communities of practice, there can never be seamless congruence between a researcher’s subjectivity and the subjectivity of the individuals under focus. Rather, as language-and-gender scholar Jacobs-Huey has pointed out, ‘ethnographic fieldwork is an intersubjective process that entails an interaction of various subjectivities’ (2002: 791). It is this acknowledgement of intersubjectivity that transforms ethnography into a feminist method, compelling us to see our interlocutors not as objects of study but rather partners in discovery. This brings us to the second concept we see as integral to ethnographic analysis, ‘ideology’.

Ideology

In the course of our respective careers, we have each encountered colleagues in linguistics who view ethnographic work as ‘narrow’. A recent event in one of our departments comes to mind, when a sociolinguistic presentation analysing over 14,000 tokens of the sound /s/ as used by a gender variant community was characterised as based on ‘small data’. We counter with the following response: ethnography is big data. It is the kind of data that can be collected only by immersive participation over an extended period of time, often involving observation of hundreds or even thousands of hours of interaction. In fact, as Radin (2017) and Lemov (2017) point out, Big Data owes much to ethnography and the associated methods outlined in this chapter. Consider, for example, the Pima Indian Diabetes Dataset (PIDDD) that now forms an integral part of the UC Irvine Machine Learning Repository

responsible for testing data-mining algorithms (Radin 2017: 53) or the more than 300 hours of anthropological interviews with Hopi consultant Don C. Talayesva that are foundational to the web-based full-text database eHRAF World Cultures (Human Relations Area Files). The difference between big data and small data, then, is often more a matter of how the ‘local’ is acknowledged:

What makes data “big” is not so much its size – though that is relevant too – but its ability to radically transcend the circumstances and locality of its production. Computers and algorithms make that possible, but understanding the politics of Big Data also requires attention to the creation and processing of the data itself, including the recognition that it often comes from living, breathing people.

(Radin 2017: 45–46)

Because ethnographers of language and social life investigate the ways that linguistic forms and social meanings emerge within an array of practices that include consumption, cultural traditions, education, kinship relations, media, politics, and religion, there is nothing ‘narrow’ or ‘small’ about ethnography. On the contrary, ethnographers examine a situated aspect of semiotic practice in comprehensive detail as a means of discovering the historical, cultural, political, and interactional processes that invest language with social meaning in the (living, breathing) lives of those who use it.

To recall a well-cited phrase from Silverstein (1985), ethnographers seek to uncover the ‘total linguistic fact’ – that is, the dialectic interaction between linguistic form (structure), social use (practice), and human reflection on the meaning of those forms in use (ideology) (see also Woolard 2008). This totality makes ethnography time-intensive with respect to both data collection and analysis, so much so that it often disadvantages scholars in departments expecting rapid publication. And yet for an ethnographer, a focus on only one or two of these elements instead of three would betray the fundamental anthropological insight that relations between form and meaning are forged in ‘situations of interested human use mediated by the fact of cultural ideology’ (Silverstein 1985: 220). For ethnographers of language and social life, ideology is the glue that holds form and meaning together. When community members ascribe gendered meanings to a certain sign form – whether a phonetic variable, a taboo term, an intonational contour, or a movement of the body – they do so through appeal to local and broader ideologies that give sense to everyday life, that bring a logic to its messiness. Language ideologies are never really *just* about language; rather, they reflect the prejudices and privileges of the social systems in which they are situated.

Participant observation is often held up as the investigative practice that makes ethnography unique, but ethnography is inherently a mixed methodology. It involves a methodological complexity that is in many senses iconic of the complexity of social life (Blommaert 2007). While the field-based method of participant observation is the bedrock of ethnography, it is always used together with a variety of other methods (some specific to sociocultural linguistics; others associated with cultural anthropology or other fields), among them sociolinguistic interviews, archival research, media analysis, collaborations with field-based research partners, recording, transcription, translation, discourse analysis, and fieldnotes. The multifaceted methodologies that result from these combinations are designed to make the ideological bond between micro and macro discoverable. A central tenet of ethnography is that more information is always good information, particularly when taken from data

sources that illuminate the focus of investigation from different spacetimes. For ethnographers of language, one of the most challenging aspects of this tenet is that the methods associated with this diversity may lead to contradictory findings regarding language use. For example, the method of sociolinguistic interviews may uncover ideas about language use that are not borne out in an analysis of actual language practice. It is in this disconnect that ideology is found.

A case in point comes from Hall's (1995) early dissertation research among Hindi-speaking hijras in northern India (see also Hall and O'Donovan 1996), a group whose members identify as *na mard na aurat*, 'neither man nor woman'. When conducting sociolinguistic interviews with members of the community, Hall repeatedly heard the refrain 'We *never* speak like men! We *always* address each other as women!'. Yet longitudinal participant observation of hijras' actual speech practices, coupled with discourse analysis, revealed that they did in fact often use masculine reference for each other and even for themselves. Why this disconnect between saying and doing?

For ethnographers of language, methods such as sociolinguistic interviews highlight the ideologies of language and society that background speakers' discursive behaviours. Further interviews revealed that hijras, most of whom were raised as boys, wished to distance themselves from the masculine representations of their youth. This stance was made stronger by society's unwillingness to address them in the feminine, which to them indicated a lack of respect. However, in actual language practice, a pattern emerged whereby these same hijras would use masculine self-reference among themselves when establishing relations of hierarchy. The disconnect between saying and doing is thus explained as the difference between a public-facing communal identity that distances itself from masculinity ('indirect indexicality', in Ochs's 1992 terminology) and an in-group practice-based identity that deploys masculine self-reference for certain conversational ends ('direct indexicality', in Ochs's 1992 terminology). Should Hall have stopped at the sociolinguistic interview she would not have seen the complexity of identification practices within the community, where hijras exploit broader indexical links between language and gender to take stances of hierarchy and solidarity. In fact, it was these shifting uses of gender morphology that enabled Hall to understand hijra positionality as non-binary.

Davis's work (2014, 2019) in a Native American Two-Spirit community in the western United States additionally illustrates how ethnography can explain a contradictory use of identity labels, in this case through a consideration of local vs. regional social contexts. In her fieldwork, Davis encountered several instances in which individuals identifying as Two-Spirit (Native Americans who are spiritually both male and female) simultaneously used and contested a variety of terms for their identity, among them 'gay', 'trans', and 'queer'; 'Two-Spirit'; and tribally specific terms such as *nadlé* (taken from Diné/Navajo). Multi-sited discourse analysis revealed seemingly contradictory transcripts, both within single events and across multiple discourse events, in which terms used as synonymous in some instances were used with different meanings in others. Davis argues that these terms are contextually polysemous: their meanings change based on factors that include the audience's presumed knowledge (or lack thereof) of Indigenous cultures in North America as well as discourse uses of micro- and macro-categories with which Two-Spirit identity might be compared.

As in Hall's research, the disconnect between ideology and practice becomes most visible in moments when language use appears to contradict community members' previous statements. Consider, for example, Brent's discussion of his use of these different terms, which he shared with peers in a regional Two-Spirit group (Excerpt 1):

Excerpt 1

- 1 Brent: that is actually one of the biggest misconceptions.
 2 on on the reservations
 3 (.3)
 4 all these tribes actually had names for for Two-Spirit
 5 people.
 6 but how people see them as
 7 just like 'oh they just mean gay' but there is a deeper
 8 root
 9 James: ((cough))
 10 Brent: um that um for nadhle.
 11 I'm sorry I say nadhle more than I say Two-Spirit cause
 12 I (hhh)'m just stubborn that way
 13 TS Group: ((laughter))

Brent's justification for using 'nadhle' ('cause I'm just stubborn that way'; Lines 11–12) indexes a belief that community-specific terms are more automatic or even more 'natural' for Native Americans than the term 'Two-Spirit'. His reluctance to use the more generalised term echoes Eppler's critique of the broad academic use of terms such as 'berdache', 'gay', and even 'Two-Spirit', which in her view lack cultural and temporal grounding: 'current analytical concepts simply do not accommodate the simultaneous distinctness (identity as *nádleehí* [plural]) and fluidity (identity as context-dependent) of *nádleehí*'s self-descriptions' (1998: 268). It is perhaps for this reason that when group members offered accounts in a formal presentation of specific historical figures now included under the Two-Spirit umbrella, they referred to such figures as 'Two-Spirit' even as they used the term specific to that individual's tribal affiliation: for instance, *winkte* (Lakota), *nadhle* (Dine), and *lhamana* (Zuni). Individuals in the group were thus very attentive to using the appropriate local designation for historical figures as well as for themselves and other group members.

However, it is important to note that these tribally specific terms were asserted in a regional, multi-tribal Two-Spirit group, not in a local organisation comprised of individuals from a single Nation. Participant observation combined with the analysis of discourse in varied settings revealed that these same group members strongly identified as Two-Spirit in ways that were relevant to their daily lives. The importance placed on local Indigenous identity labels in the above example in no way contradicts the appropriateness of the Two-Spirit label as another facet of these speakers' identities. In fact, the mutual dependence of local and multi-tribal terms could be observed in their formal presentations precisely because the presenters were recognised as holding multiple forms of identification that crossed local and regional lines.

The above examples taken from our respective fieldwork sites illustrate what can be gained by combining participant observation with more specifically linguistic methods such as sociolinguistic interviews and multi-sited discourse analysis. Identity claims are never simple; like all features of language, they emerge from complex social processes that inevitably bring semiotic instability. The digital recordings that constitute the gold standard of sociocultural linguistic data collection are important, but as static snapshots of a much longer discursive history, they are never enough. At the same time, they are sometimes not even necessary, as demonstrated by the rich linguistic insights offered by ethnographers who are asked to refrain from using this method due to a community's marginalisation, as seen

in Borba's (2018) work on Brazilian sex workers and Gaudio's (2019) work on Nigerian 'yan daudu. Although rarely highlighted in language, gender, and sexuality scholarship, the anthropological method of writing fieldnotes is a powerful tool for tracking the shifting meanings of language across time and space. As qualitative data ideally recorded immediately after a research encounter, fieldnotes can provide important descriptive evidence (both factual and reflective) about the discourse context under investigation. Indeed, as Goldstein (2017) shows in her analysis of FBI director James Comey's scrupulously detailed memos of his interactions with President Trump, fieldnotes, when done well, may even bring to life the behind-the-scenes manipulations of a corrupt leader. The importance of Comey's note-taking after his meetings with the President was not lost on the media; in fact, his fieldnotes offered credibility to his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee and helped break the usual 'he said, he said' stasis. This reminds us of the importance of the *-graphia* in ethnography's etymology. In comparison to other approaches, ethnography is especially concerned with the descriptive techniques of writing that will best display the complexity of the people under focus, which for sociocultural linguists, also includes their language practices.

This brings us again to the topic of reflexivity. We suggest that all of ethnography's methods, when adopted and adapted for the needs of a study, require the reflexivity that we often associate with participant observation. Consider, for example, transcription, the work-horse method used by discourse analysts to represent language practice in written form. As Bucholtz reminds us, 'transcription is not solely a research methodology for understanding discourse but also, and just as importantly, a sociocultural practice of representing discourse' (2007: 785). Sociocultural linguists have hundreds of transcription systems to choose from, each with their own set of conventions. Decisions about which conventions to use in a given transcript may be driven by research needs, but they also have 'potentially significant analytical and political consequences' (2007: 786). In this sense, methods such as transcription are inherently theoretical (cf. Ochs 1979), a point that leads us to the final element in our conceptual triad, 'theory'.

Theory

In an article entitled 'Ethnography as theory', Nader reflects on key ethnographic texts across 100 years of cultural anthropology and asserts the following: 'Ethnography, whatever it is, has never been *mere* description. It is also theoretical in its mode of description. Indeed, *ethnography is a theory of description*' (2011: 211, emphasis in the original). As we conclude this chapter, we want to reflect on the ways that this claim is also relevant to the history of ethnographic research on language, gender, and sexuality.

The first observation to make in this regard is that the field's use of ethnography has evolved in tandem with shifts in theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality. For instance, early ethnographies of non-Indo-European 'women's languages' and 'men's languages' in the first half of the twentieth century (e.g. Chamberlain 1912; Jespersen 1922) are often characterised as descriptive, but their emphasis on the rigidity of linguistic gender in non-European languages affirmed colonialist readings of these languages as primitive (Hall 2003). In the second half of the century, ethnography was deployed by a new generation of scholars to challenge broad generalisations made about women's speech in so-called difference models of language and gender. Research in sites such as Madagascar (Keenan Ochs 1974), Hungary (Gal 1978), southern Mexico (Brown 1980), a US high school (Eckert 1989), and a Philadelphia African American community (Goodwin 1990)

brought complexity to the field's unmarked focus on middle-class white speakers. In the 1990s, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity inspired the application of ethnographic work to non-normative organisations of language, gender, and sexuality in varied locations (see, e.g. articles in Leap 1995; Livia and Hall 1997). Many of the ethnographies emerging in this period were positioned as overtly political in their commitment to 'queering' a largely heterosexual and cisgender canon, hence the field's name 'queer linguistics'. Similarly, the rise of multicultural feminism and its emphasis on intersectionality inspired a deeper ethnographic consideration of the relationship between gender and race, as seen in turn-of-the-century work by Jacobs-Huey (2006), Mendoza-Denton (2008), Morgan (2002), and Zentella (1997).

In our current era of research on language, gender, and sexuality, ethnography continues to assist this decisively critical turn towards political advocacy for marginalised perspectives. Its diversity of method is now dedicated to the task of uncovering how gender and sexuality articulate with systemic hierarchies of race, class, age, disability, colonialism, imperialism, and geopolitics, among other topics. LGBTQ scholars are now using ethnography to retheorise binaries (Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw 2014), counter cisgender assumptions found in previous language and gender scholarship (Zimman 2020), establish the centrality of the body to sociolinguistic investigation (Calder 2019; King 2019; Peck and Stroud 2015; Zimman and Hall 2010), and revise the queer theoretical concept of normativity (Barrett 2017; Cashman 2019; Hall 2019; Hall, Levon, and Milani 2019). Scholars of race are using ethnography to explore connections between language, sexuality, and Blackness in ways that challenge the whiteness of previous work on gay male speech (Cornelius 2020; Cornelius and Barrett 2020) and draw attention to everyday political pressures confronting Black Queer Women (Lane 2019). Finally, scholars of the Global South are using ethnographic methods to rethink organisations of gender and sexuality in Southern contexts and thereby contest the dominance of Northern-originating forms of knowledge production (Borba 2017; Deumert and Mabandla 2017; King 2017; Lazar 2017; Ostermann 2017; Shaikjee and Stroud 2017). This latter body of scholarship is particularly relevant to our discussion, as it turns the reflexivity that is ethnography's strength onto geopolitical exclusions in the language, gender, and sexuality canon (for programmatic statements, see Hall, Borba, and Hiramoto 2021; Milani and Lazar 2017). To return to Nader's point, ethnography is never merely descriptive. Like all scientific methodologies, even those held up by their practitioners as pillars of objectivity, ethnography is embedded in the broader theoretical questions that motivate its application.

Our second and final observation concerns the importance of social theory to ethnography more generally. Those of us who identify as ethnographers frequently characterise our research approach as 'bottom-up', much like our colleagues in conversation analysis, a field that shares our disciplinary roots in ethnomethodology. Our work is focused on the micro-details of everyday discourse, collected across space and time in our capacity as participant observers. At the same time, we share with our colleagues in the field of critical discourse analysis an interest in top-down questions of power: How are broader social hierarchies constituted through interaction? As researchers situated between the micro and the macro, we would never characterise our method as 'atheoretical', as conversation analysts often do. Rather, we make sense of the patterns we find across diverse sources of data by consulting the ideas of those who have dedicated their careers to understanding social life, otherwise known as social theorists. The importance of social theory is perhaps obvious to researchers in language, gender, and sexuality, particularly given the field's long-term intimacy with evolving traditions of feminist and queer theory (Bucholtz 2014; Kramer 2016; McElhinny

2003). And of course sociocultural linguists have also developed their own social theories, among them the social semiotic concepts of indexical order, enregisterment, style, and language ideology. Together, such theoretical perspectives carry the potential to illuminate patterns in our data, to make our claims regarding the workings of language in society more robust. In addition, by engaging with broader social theoretical perspectives, we may be able to persuade our colleagues in other socially oriented fields that language, no matter how small, matters to societal organisations of gender and sexuality.

The authors of the five chapters that appear in Part II each make use of the triad of concepts we have outlined in this essay: practice, ideology, and theory. Locating their analysis in the practices and ideologies they have observed as participants, they build on social theory in ways that highlight the importance of language to the constitution of gender and sexuality. In keeping with the spirit of this Handbook, the authors are reflexive about their methodologies, offering a wealth of perspectives on how ethnography may enable us to see the workings of language, gender, and sexuality more clearly.

Shaw situates her ‘elite ethnography’ of UK parliamentary contexts within an emerging tradition of scholarship known as ‘linguistic ethnography’ (Snell, Shaw, and Copland 2015), an approach that arose primarily in Europe. Shaw relies on a triangulation of methods that include participant observation, formal interviews, field notes, and archival work. Longitudinal fieldwork in a variety of debating chambers revealed the ways that parliaments share a habitus that prioritises some speakers and not others. For instance, Shaw details how a ‘full view’ experience from the public galleries enabled a more robust understanding of the gendered hierarchies that inform interaction in the chamber: Why is the *female* minister sitting in a row of male ministers asked to fetch the First Minister a glass of water? This same habitus appears to explain Assembly Member reactions to a female colleague who performed ‘illegal sustained interventions’ when Cheryl Gillan, the British Secretary of State for Wales, visited the chamber. Backstage interviews revealed that Assembly Members were uncomfortable with their female colleague’s contrary behaviour, even as they disapproved of Gillan’s elite ‘queen-mother like’ demeanour. On the surface, the Assembly Members’ disapproval of the behaviours of both women appears to affirm Lakoff’s (1975) early reading of women’s language as ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’. But Shaw’s ethnographic insights offer more complexity, exposing how the responses of the Welsh Assembly Members (and indeed the female Assembly Member’s own behaviour) are also guided by a history of tension between Wales and Westminster. Her analysis of how micro-details of interaction connect to ‘macro questions of exclusion and power’ comes to life through her reflexivity at every stage of the ethnographic process, an approach she views as distinctly feminist.

Clark’s chapter also engages the theoretical work of Bourdieu when she asserts the usefulness of ethnography for exposing practices of symbolic violence – the unmarked forms of non-physical violence that manifest in organisations of social hierarchy. Her focus is on the compulsory heterosexuality found in everyday discourse: How do we analyse something so systemic in conversation that even participants themselves may not recognise it? For Clark, the answer to this question lies in ethnography’s ‘sustained engagement’ with the people we study. Her analysis of interactional data collected over time through her participation on a women’s hockey team brings to light the everyday grammar of compulsory heterosexuality and its adverse effects on LGBTQ individuals. As seen in other queer linguistic work, Clark’s use of ethnography in this chapter is overtly political: in her words, ‘a priority for Queer linguistic ethnography is to reveal instances in which those unwritten rules [of interaction] require participants to adhere to a heteronormative framework’.

Philips returns the focus to gender ideology as she reflects on her ethnographic work in Tongan courtrooms in Polynesia. In a careful discussion of the ways ‘ideas about women vary systematically across social domains’, Philips distinguishes uses of ethnography in linguistic anthropology (her professional field) as requiring discourse analysis across time and space, a method she identifies as ‘anthropological discourse analysis’. She compares discourses about ‘bad words’ in two different domains – the public domain of the Magistrate’s Courts and the private domain of a women’s work group – to uncover the ways that gender ideology differs across organisational contexts. Her work thus emphasises the importance of understanding the ‘larger system’ in which ideologies about language and gender circulate, as the nature of the activity may shape the way gender ideology emerges in the data. Importantly, Philips also outlines how her analytic observations arose from collaborations with co-researchers in the field who offered key insights as they recorded, transcribed, and translated discourse data from different domains. When these backstage forms of linguistic labour go unrecognised, ethnography retains its colonialist roots, extending the power relations inherent to fieldwork to practices of description, authorship, and citation. However, when this linguistic labour is the site of recognised collaboration, it can produce theoretical and methodological models that better align researcher and community positions. In sum, ethnographic research is made better – more honest, more feminist, even more insightful – when we are transparent about the ways these backstage forms of collaboration unfold to shape our findings.

With Nagar’s chapter, we move to one of our field’s signature frameworks for the ethnographic investigation of language, gender, and sexuality: the community of practice (see Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). Nagar reflects on her use of this framework for understanding meaning-making among jananas, a non-normative gender identity in India. Not all communities have clearly defined boundaries; members of the janana community, for instance, cannot be located in a ‘common space, profession, or cause’. Rather, they come together around mutually defined practices, which ethnography, as a method ‘based in practice and learning’, enabled her to discover. The excerpts she analyses from her conversations with jananas in 2004 and 2006 suggest different and even contradictory views of janana identity, yet through a diversity of ethnographic methods applied over time, she was able to ‘find’ the shared practices that gave these divergent views meaning.

Finally, Varis reflects on her research in a discourse environment that has only recently captured the attention of ethnographers of language: digital media. Her focus on an early twenty-first-century online genre known for rapid semiotic shifts in gender and sexuality – YouTube ‘camgirl’ broadcasts – provides a fitting conclusion to our discussion. We mentioned at the outset of this chapter that ethnography must be revised to reflect the highly mediated nature of current social life. Drawing on her immersion in social media culture, Varis constructs a compelling analysis of why the broadcasts of one female YouTuber, Hannah Witton, have attracted almost 400,000 subscribers. She seeks to understand why Witton’s videos of her encounters with normative reproductive practices such as menstruation and birth control are so tantalising for her viewers. The answer is found not just in the agentive intimacy Witton displays in these videos, but also in the way her broadcasts are mediated by ever-shifting online environments.

Varis suggests that digital ethnography is novel in its assumption of a ‘changing media and communication landscape’, but as we see in the chapters that follow, all ethnographers grapple with the challenge of following people and their social practices over time (see also methodological discussions in Goldstein 2020; Hall 2009; Wortham 2006; Wortham and Reyes 2015). In fact, Philips asserts in her chapter on Tongan gender ideology that we can truly understand larger systems of social organisation only by examining the ways ‘talk at different points in

time are related'. Taken together, the work featured in this section reminds us that the strength of ethnography lies in its ability to consider forms of discourse across time as well as space. Like all social scientific research approaches, ethnography is imperfect, but its reflexivity, diversity, and staying power are well suited to the elusive nature of social life.

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