

# Retracing the NHI. Response to Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz and Adam Kendon

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In this chapter Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz and Adam Kendon (2021 [this volume]) give a substantial and fascinating account of a project that, even though unpublished, shaped key assumptions about interpersonal communication and marked a cornerstone for interaction research. One of the central theoretical views emerging from the Natural History of an Interview (NHI) was that “face-to-face interaction is a continuous process and it is as much about the establishment, regulation, and maintenance of necessary behavioral interrelations as it is about the transmission of new information” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 148). At the same time, the project constituted a groundbreaking example of multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research. Combining a social history of the professional networks involved in the NHI project with considerations on its methodological and theoretical implications, this chapter contributes to an understanding of this seminal project that is of interest for interaction researchers, historians of science and media scholars. It draws on but goes beyond Leeds-Hurwitz’s (1987; 1989) and Kendon’s previous contributions to the field (1979; Kendon & Sigman 1996).

The authors succinctly describe the different methodological approaches and research interests of the core group members at the beginning of the article. It remains somewhat unclear, though, how these differences played out in the research process and how they manifested themselves in the final manuscript. It is also somewhat surprising that the relationship between analog and digital communication is not mentioned anywhere in the text. For Bateson, at least, the project seems to have been closely linked to the question of “what is analogous to what in the analogic messages” (Bateson, *Letter to Robert E. Pittenger, May 27, 1957*). A minor point that comes up in this context: It does not sound quite right to say Bateson’s “interest in animal communication” was “beginning to overtake his concerns with human communication” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this

volume]: 160). I think it was rather that he extended his theoretical concern with communication to *include* animals. In a brief autobiographical text (dating from the early 1960s, and written in the third person), he relates his earlier work on river otters (“something like Bertrand Russel’s Theory of Logical Types must apply to the communication of animals”) to his subsequent research on the double bind (he “continued these enquiries” at the V.A. Hospital), and then to his research on animal communication: “It was clear that even among people, the signals defining these classes of behavior are usually not verbal. Bateson therefore shifted his focus of inquiry to examine such communication at the animal level” (*Biographical Sketch*, n.d.).

Among the reasons why the NHI did not “have a more prominent place in the later development of interaction studies” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 151) the authors list that “the Natural History approach may have appeared to be too exotic or esoteric for it to be easily appreciated and also the importance of the kinds of questions that were being asked were also not yet widely appreciated” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 151–151). This may be true for interaction studies in communication, sociology and psychiatry. But there seems to have been some early influence on methods of visual anthropology (Jablonko 1968; Mead & Byers 1968; Byers 1972), as well as considerable overlap with tendencies in dance studies and choreometrics (Lomax et al. 1969; Davis 2001; Jablonko 2001). Given that two major contributors to the NHI, Gregory Bateson and Ray Birdwhistell, were, at least nominally, anthropologists and sustained intense contacts with other anthropologists, it might have been interesting to learn more about intersections of the NHI with the emerging field of visual anthropology.

But on the whole, these are minor issues that should not distract from the article’s usefulness. Especially worth mentioning is the detailed description of the different academic backgrounds of the researchers: the linguistic, kinesic, and psychiatric perspectives that converged in the NHI. Another important aspect is the instructive account of the methods developed in the NHI. The brief paragraph on “Creating an Archive” suggests interesting possibilities for further research – not only with regard to questions of whether “the materials in these archives will prove useful in interaction research” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 178), but also for research on the media history of interaction studies and related fields such as visual anthropology.

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