

On some lessons of the NHI project and its forgotten holism of communication. Response to Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, Adam Kendon and Henning Engelke

H. Walter Schmitz

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In “A Natural History of the ‘Doris Film’”, H. Engelke 2021 [this volume] sheds light on a very important aspect of the NHI-Project which has remained in the dark up until now: the circumstances under which the film at the center of the project came into being as well as its technical and aesthetic design. Engelke arrives at the following important conclusion regarding the object of observation, transcription and analysis of the participants in the project:

But ignoring Doris’ misgivings also had to do with the researchers’ wish to exclusively study *filmed* interaction. The film, in fact, became their prime object of study. Their focus, moreover, was on looking at this film as if it preserved traces of “naturally” occurring behavior. (Engelke 2021 [this volume]: 111–112)

However, if we were to accept Engelke’s conclusion, it would mean that the film was not treated as a document to be examined critically for the perspectives it offers and the context in which it came into being, but rather as the event itself that was the object of the investigation.¹ On this view, Bateson’s interview with Doris and Myers’ film of the interview were conflated within the NHI project, so that film analysis could be undertaken on the assumption or in the hope that it would at the same time constitute analysis of the interview.

This position is not contradicted by what Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz and Adam Kendon write in their contribution on J. Van Vlack’s recommendations for filming psychiatric interviews or Adam Kendon’s advice for filming interactional

¹On the distinction between event, document and transcript, and the relationship between these, cf. Ingenhoff & Schmitz (2000).

events. This is because they refer exclusively to “later modifications and refinements due to the further work of Birdwhistell and Scheflen, also adding observations by Kendon who has discussed aspects of this methodology in several places as an outcome of his collaborations with Condon and Scheflen [...]” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 166).

It is perhaps a commonplace to say that not only “terminological networks (whether everyday or ‘scientific’) create observations” and that, as Clemens Knobloch (2021 [this volume]: 45) reminds us in his contribution, the “placing of the camera [...brings] an external perspective into play” [„Platzierung der Kamera [...] eine externe Perspektive ins Spiel [bringt]“]. But pointing out this methodological weakness of the NHI project overlooks the fact that even today there is hardly a film-based or video-based study of interaction that offers the interested reader a precise account of the spatial, temporal, social and technical aspects of how the sound and film were recorded – including the consequences of these factors for transcription and analysis.

Engelke (2021 [this volume]: 123) mentions in passing what he calls “the NHI group’s cybernetically informed perspective on communication systems and observable interaction behavior”, but he does not really justify this description. It is true that the concept of communication entertained by the group is not the topic of his interesting paper, but it would still be worthwhile to address this issue. In their contribution, Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon also have nothing to say about the quite different understanding of “communication” among, e.g., Bateson, Birdwhistell and McQuown, but only offer this rather general observation:

The theoretical framework that arose from this collaboration supposes that communication in 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. It supposes that for all participants any aspect of behavior could be communicatively relevant, and it is because of this that a new methodology developed. (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 148)

Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon do imply that they see the influence of Edward Sapir’s ideas from the time between 1921 (*Language*) and 1934 (entries in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* on “Communication”, “Language” and “Symbolism”) in the conceptions of language and communication put forward by Birdwhistell, McQuown, Hockett, Trager and even Brosin. If we were to trace these connections more closely, we would no doubt be able to show that the NHI

project was deeply rooted in the Boas-Sapir tradition of American anthropology (cf. Schmitz 1975). Even the broad range of research questions that Frieda Fromm-Reichmann formulated in her proposal for the project had been anticipated in the Boas-Sapir tradition; for example, in Sapir's papers "Speech as a Personality Trait" (1927a), "The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society" (1927b) and "The Contribution of Psychiatry to an Understanding of Behavior in Society" (1937).

By contrast, Bateson developed his own conception of communication largely independently of the Boas-Sapir tradition through his own ethnographic studies and then soon after under the influence of information theory and cybernetics. We may ask whether his ideas from communication theory did indeed affect the choice of methods or play a role in the analyses and interpretations within the NHI project. Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon do not address this question directly, but they imply that Bateson showed little interest in the work of the empiricists within the research group.

Since there was clearly a shared conception of communication in face-to-face interaction as a *continuous process*, it would be of interest to us scholars today to examine how participants in the NHI project attempted to do this conception justice in their transcription work. A prerequisite for transcription is having a clear notion of units of behavior with a beginning and an end, which can then be represented with symbols in the transcription system. It may indeed be the case, as Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon assure us,² that the published version of the NHI project had nothing to say about that, but the transcripts themselves and, above all, Birdwhistell's publications could tell us more. For Birdwhistell, communication is a continuous process of interaction that consists of *discontinuous* segments of behavior that are multi-layered and overlap. In the belief that the analytical techniques of structural linguistics were highly productive and in the hope of establishing the links between spoken language and bodily movements, Birdwhistell adopted the methods of a linguist. After all, he argued, we have found out "[...] that body motion communication behavior is both learned and structured" (Birdwhistell 1967: 59), and that the kinesic system structures bodily movements into forms that are comparable to the way in which the linguistic system structures the flow of speech into sounds, words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs. Others challenged or even outright rejected Birdwhistell's position. However, after this discussion concluded, it would seem that scholars simply decided to ignore the problems that even today are still associated with the transcription of so-called non-verbal behavior.

²"**Transcription:** Again, there is a step which remains implicit in the description provided in the NHI compilation of 1971: transcription" (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 172).

Since Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon do not go into the process of analysis and interpretation in detail, I would at this point like to draw our attention to an analytical procedure which – as far as I know – was developed and used for the first time within the NHI project, specifically in the analysis of Doris' statement: "I suppose all mothers think their kids are smart but I have no worries about that child's intellectual ability." Birdwhistell described the procedure as follows (Birdwhistell 1973: 235 f.):

In an attempt to get some kind of perspective upon the lexical aspect of this piece, twelve women of comparable age and social class background to that of Doris were given a typescript in standard English orthography and asked to comment upon it. All except one commented that this was standard "woman talk," i.e., a preliminary apology followed by a proud statement about the child, unusual only in the presence of the "but" rather than the expected "and."

Later Birdwhistell adds in parentheses:

(It is worthy of note that four of a control group of six women, when showed this sentence among five other sentences and asked to recall them 5 minutes later, wrote this sentence as "I suppose [one case 'guess'] all women think their kids are smart [two cases, 'bright'] and I have no worries [one case 'I'm not worried'] about that child's [three cases, 'my child's'] intellectual ability.")

This procedure of confronting naïve observers with observational data (such as film clips, sound recordings, transcripts, etc) became, for example, part of the so-called *methodischer Dreischritt* (methodical three-step) of Kalbermatten and von Cranach (1981: 91, 93).³ Under this approach, observational data are used to help explain manifest behavior, data from interviews with the participants in the interaction are brought to bear on conscious cognition, and naïve interpretations are used to elucidate social conventions. The value of the interpretations of naïve observers for research rests on the assumption that:

What counts as an action is something that we only know through the understanding of its social meaning. We can find out what social meaning an

³On the application of the "methodical three-step" to the examination of non-verbal communication, cf. Erb-Sommer & Schmitz (1989: 101-136).

action has in a community of communication if we take into account the interpretations of naïve observers from this group.⁴

Finally, we may ask what effects or influence the ideas and procedures of the NHI project might have had on subsequent research into communicative interaction. Is it really true that “many of the assumptions and features of their [the NHI researchers’] methods have had an *extensive* influence and have contributed *significantly* to the way interaction studies are pursued today” [emphasis H.W.S.], as Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon (2021 [this volume]: 178) claim? There is a hint that they might doubt this claim themselves when at the end of their contribution they adopt the slightly more cautious formulation:

NHI is an unavoidable “influence *shadow*” (or perhaps one might say it is like an “infusion”, in the background), *but it is striking how scholars today provide few acknowledgments of its influence.* (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 185, emphasis H.W.S.)

Of course, influences do not necessarily have to manifest themselves in explicit references and citations. But it is perhaps not unreasonable to request more detailed justification and proof before claiming such a wide-ranging influence for the NHI project:

Whether the term used by a particular researcher is language and social interaction, ethnography of communication, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, multimodality, gesture studies, or embodied communication, there is a significant debt owed to NHI. Such a debt is rarely recognized any longer by most of those who owe it if they were not in some way part of the larger theory group, but that does not make it any less real. (Leeds-Hurwitz & Kendon 2021 [this volume]: 188)

On the contrary, I would argue that it is difficult to make out even a hidden influence of the NHI project in the relevant literature, even in empirical film-based or video-based studies of interaction from the past 40 years – with the exception of Adam Kendon, who can describe himself as “a member of the NHI theory

⁴Original quotation: “Was eine Handlung ist, wissen wir nur durch das Verstehen ihrer sozialen Bedeutung. Wir können erfahren, welche soziale Bedeutung eine Handlung in einer Kommunikationsgemeinschaft besitzt, wenn wir die Interpretationen naiver Beobachter aus dieser Bezugsgruppe heranziehen.”

group”.⁵ The influence of the generation following McQuown and Birdwhistell extended at most to the end of the 1970s; this is the generation that included such figures as Starkey Duncan, Albert Scheflen, William S. Condon, Harvey B. Sarles and Margaret R. Zabor (see Leeds-Hurwitz and Kendon’s bibliography). However, I would argue that after this time there was not only no continuation or further development of Birdwhistell’s kinesics or the paralinguistics of Trager and Smith, but that the “holism of communication” propagated by the NHI group – insofar as anyone even remembered this notion – was given up in favor of a strong focus on specific theoretical and empirical points. As a result, the respective objects of study changed significantly, although the explanatory claims were of course not necessarily adjusted accordingly.

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⁵This lack of real influence does not of course preclude invoking, either explicitly or implicitly, the pioneers of the NHI project in order to legitimize one’s own video-based studies of interaction, e.g.: “Our multimodal approach to interaction is rooted in a tradition which has emerged around an interdisciplinary interest in the microanalytic study of interaction during the 1950s” (Deppermann et al. 2010: 1701; see also Mondada 2008).

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