

**Analyzing Authority and Power in Interaction:
Promise of and Cautions from Ethnography of Communication**

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In this abstract, we nominate ethnography of communication (hereafter EOC) as a useful methodology to illuminate certain aspects of power and authority in interaction. Specifically, EOC's pragmatic orientation prompts researchers to understand communicational forms (linguistic or nonlinguistic) in light of their power-related functions in society, while its contextualist orientation insists on situating observed (inter)actions in broader context of power and politics, thereby linking the micro and the macro. To achieve these analytical merits, EOC also offers helpful analytical toolsets, including its broad identification of relevant data¹ and components of communicative events²[2] for analysis, its three units of analysis (activity, event and situation) (Hymes, 1974), and concepts such as speech community/discursive community/community of practices, and so on (cf. Saville-Troike, 2003).

When applying EOC to the excerpt, we see how the same-sex couple and Kim Davis—respectively representing their community of practices: same-sex marriage license applicants and conservative bureaucrats—engaged in a struggle for power and decision over same-sex marriage rights via making competing claims to authority. More specifically, in the excerpt it appears that the same-sex couple claimed more and diverse authority and power, as they appealed to law, politics and liberal public opinion through sophisticated and versatile debating rhetoric and strategies, their formed alliances with other same-sex applicants, protesters as well as the media, and they displayed communicative assertiveness and even aggressiveness.

While these findings are valuable, EOC's contextualist orientation questions the excerpt as adequate data, and it continues to raise questions about power and authority's

¹ For instance, participants' verbal/non-verbal expressions and materials artifacts, their organizations, and various background information that gesture macro, socio-cultural processes.

² For instance, scene, which consisting of genre, topic, purpose/function, setting; key; participants; message form and content, act sequence, and relationship among them.

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continuity and generality, as well as their variation and contingency. Therefore, we expand the range of data to three relevant videos David V. Moore uploaded on Youtube. As the additional data shows, within a series of three communicative events where the same-sex couple's application for marriage were refused by the clerk Davis in identical situation, the couple's claiming activities to authority (their debating rhetoric and strategies, their emotional intensity, and their mobilization of alliance) escalated, diversified and became more sophisticated within events across time. On the other hand, Davis' claiming activities to her religious and bureaucratic authority remained constant—they were less vociferous and visible, yet quite effective in obstructing and frustrating the applicants. In other words, the couple's seemingly prevailing claims to authority and power in the excerpt do not only show their increasing efforts to challenge Davis, they are also evidence of their relative powerlessness in the unduly prolonged struggle.

To conclude, EOC is useful for analyzing power and authority in interaction, for power and authority are always tied to people's political intentions and functions; they are dynamic but also tenacious; and they appear and effect across micro and macro... However, the second part of the analysis acutely shows that EOC's analytical merits would only deliver when certain requirement for data and methods are satisfied. Relying otherwise on a limited amount and variety of data—particularly data that cannot adequately situate communicative activity within their events and situation—might induce great interpretive risks, if not misunderstanding of the specific power dynamics. (word count: 510)

References

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction (3rd Edition)*. Blackwell Publishing.