

Rhetorical Ethnography and the Virtue of Vulnerability in Transdisciplinary Research Methods



Ryam Michael Murphy

*Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN*

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Abstract: This paper considers some of the ways ethnography has been adopted in transdisciplinary rhetoric and also considers theoretical questions internal to rhetorical ethnography that can help transdisciplinary scholars navigate limitations and potential liabilities inherent in transdisciplinary work. I seek to more carefully consider transdisciplinary features of rhetoric through ethnographic study which, in its position as studying cultures both familiar and foreign to the researcher, mirror many of the disciplinary relations expressed in Marilyn Stember's topology of disciplinarity. Noting that transdisciplinary rhetoricians engage with scholarship by experts in other fields, an ethnographic approach to transdisciplinary rhetoric recognizes that disciplinary experts might have expert knowledge that they struggle to communicate to non-experts, and rhetoricians should tread carefully in offering solutions to these communicative difficulties. I suggest rhetorical vulnerability and self-awareness expressed through standpoint as two strategies scholars of transdisciplinary rhetoric can use to adopt stances of transparent subjectivity rather than feigning scientific objectivity.

Keywords: ethnography; disciplinarity; rhetorical vulnerability; standpoint; bias; methodology

Ethnography, in a variety of forms, has been a method used by transdisciplinary scholars to understand differences in culture, perspective, and disciplinary paradigm, often intended to reach an interdisciplinary audience. In this paper I will consider some of the ways ethnography has been adopted in transdisciplinary rhetorical scholarship as well as some theoretical questions internal to ethnographic study that can help transdisciplinary scholars navigate some limitations and potential liabilities inherent in transdisciplinary work. Specifically, I turn to rhetorical

vulnerability as a disposition than can support more ethical forms of transdisciplinary rhetoric and rhetorical ethnography when they work independently and to better support their synergy when used jointly. Before transitioning into a more detailed discussion of ethnography in transdisciplinary rhetoric, it helps to consider some helpful distinctions among the variety of academic work that crosses disciplines such as nuances between interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and transdisciplinary scholarship.

Building from a Topology of Disciplinarity

Marilyn Stember's "Topology for Enterprises Within and Across Disciplines" (1991, p. 4) is a good starting place for understanding nuanced differences in disciplinary work, largely because she draws out differences among a cluster of terms that are often used interchangeably, but which she convincingly argues apply to distinctly different types of work and academic ventures, working from the most insulated to the most ecumenical in terms of disciplinary focus and parameters. *Intradisciplinary* scholarship is the base of work that happens inside of a discipline; this scholarship is written by a scholar in a discipline and it is intended to be read (almost) exclusively by other scholars in the same discipline. An example of intradisciplinary scholarship might be an email sent to a disciplinary listserv that asks a specific question (directed to colleagues) or that suggests a possible vector for future research or collaboration.

Crossdisciplinary scholarship happens when one discipline views some content knowledge from the vantagepoint of another. A rhetorician who adopts a methodology from sociology to study and interpret issues and questions in rhetoric would be an example of crossdisciplinary scholarship. While in crossdisciplinary scholarship I see an interest in looking beyond disciplinary boundaries to experiment with different ideas, the main limitation here is that ideas from other fields are being used without necessarily involving scholars from those fields in a conversation and this can lead to problematic repurposing, appropriation or misunderstanding.

Multidisciplinary scholarship is one degree more complex and involves several disciplines providing perspectives on a problem or issue. This could be a jointly authored publication on a local health issue in which scholars from public health, biology, medicine, and sociology come together to write about the same phenomenon, with each expert offering their own disciplinary knowledge. Outside of publication, committees and task forces might assemble to address issues local to a campus or community, and that serves as an example of multidisciplinary work.

Beyond multidisciplinary work is *interdisciplinary* scholarship in which the “integration of the contributions of several disciplines to a problem or issue is required” (1991, p. 4). I see interdisciplinary work as a significant tipping point in Stember’s topology because at all of the previous levels, work between and across disciplines *could* involve collaboration, but at this point, the operative notion of “integration” implies that collaboration is essential. Looking back to the example of a jointly authored paper on a public health issue, we could imagine a case where one scholar takes the lead in the project and invites statements from all of the other contributors before compiling them into a single document (something like an edited collection). Although different disciplinary perspectives are represented in the final document, there was not actual communication between the co-authors. That paper would become interdisciplinary if one (or more) authors decided to synthesize findings from the different perspectives in order to offer a position statement or proposed solution or some other section of the text that did not clearly “belong” to just one author.

Finally, *transdisciplinary* scholarship concerns the unity of intellectual frameworks beyond disciplinary perspectives. The major shift I see in transdisciplinarity, the highest level of the topology, is that integration of perspective isn’t just in the application of theories to practice, but rather in the synthesis of theories themselves. Stated differently transdisciplinary work involves interdisciplinary collaboration to develop theories, frameworks, or methodologies that work well in different disciplinary contexts, but don’t necessarily belong to any particular discipline.

I include this extended summary of Stember’s topology for an important reason—the label of transdisciplinarity requires scholastic focus beyond specific disciplines. While some cases that claim to be transdisciplinary appear to be working at the levels of interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, and crossdisciplinarity, I should emphasize that this topology is not hierarchical. The point in identifying these categories of disciplinary work is not to assert that any one category is better or more valuable, rather it is a matter of classifying how they differ from each other. The use of labels here is not what is really important, instead it is the way these labels denote relations between scholars, their scholarship, their work with other scholars and the ways that both the products and processes of these workflows are represented and epistemically justified. Consider the following example: a physicist working with quantum theory is expected to offer a different level of explanation for their theoretical work than a historian who writes about quantum theory. If we use these definitions,

interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work require scholars from different fields to work together and this integration of disciplinary practices and knowledge is a significant point that parallels ethnographic work. Unique challenges in epistemic justification arise too as scholars are no longer publishing just for their own disciplinary community, but rather are writing for and about other disciplinary communities and therefore need to take into consideration differences in disciplinary expectations for claims to knowledge.

Going one step further beyond Stember's topology, one might wonder if transdisciplinary rhetoric is just a particular variety of transdisciplinary scholarship (perhaps projects that include rhetorical analysis as part of the integrated overall view), or if it suggests something more significant, namely that aspects of rhetoric are inseparable from most scholarship. Jesús Zamora Bonilla argues that while the scientific method appears to rely on a systematic and empirical testing to make knowledge claims, the paradigm relies, in fact, heavily on "communication as one of its essential elements" as scientists work to convince their colleagues that their methods and findings are replicable and relevant to the field (2006, p. 189). Perhaps rhetoric's ongoing challenge as having an interdisciplinary identity (Mailloux, 2006) is perhaps just a problematized articulation of rhetoric's position as a transdisciplinary field of study. In the following sections, I seek to more carefully consider transdisciplinary features of rhetoric though ethnographic study which, in its position as studying cultures both familiar and foreign to the researcher mirror many of the disciplinary relations expressed in Stember's topology. As much as possible, I try to distinguish transdisciplinary scholarship (the general category described by Stember) from a more specific notion of transdisciplinary rhetorics as a kind of transdisciplinary nexus of communicative approaches that are framed with the disciplinary label "rhetoric."

Rhetorical Ethnography as Method and Methodology

At a recent Rhetoric Society of America Summer Institute on decolonization, Annie Laurie Nichols wrote about her practice of ethnography, noting that, "Rhetoricians often view ethnography as a method for gathering data, but ethnographic research itself is rhetorical" (2019, p. 7). The rhetorical tenor of ethnography is due, in part, to the written or graphic nature of the work, and beyond studying cultures, ethnography involves the rhetorical work of documenting research interactions and observations and then re-

presenting those to broader audiences and readerships through writing for publication. This suggests another inroad for considering ethnography as appropriate for transdisciplinary scholarship. If ethnography studies culture and the practice of scholarship is itself a culture, then ethnography could be an appropriate method for studying the culture of scholarship.

The suggestion that the academy itself is a culture worthy of ethnographic study is hardly my own invention. Cultural anthropologist Udo Krautwurst (2013) argues systematic analysis of universities as places of cultural practice is necessary because many reflexive academic studies take a casual approach of considering “corridor talk,” when this seemingly trivial communication can more accurately be understood as professional communication and an important cultural activity in academic workplaces. In *The Uberfication of the University*, Gary Hall (2016) argues that the common trend of universities toward relying on contingent labor for course instruction mirrors the neoliberal cultural trend toward a gig-based economy of contractors rather than enduring employment relations. Further, the methodology of institutional ethnography, originally developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith, has recently gained traction in composition and writing studies as a means of understanding how work in academic settings takes place, including case studies in writing centers (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012) as well as in writing curriculum and assessment practices (LaFrance, 2019). The most basic connections being drawn in these investigations posit academic work as a culture worthy of scholarly study; while the ethnographic methods and sites of study differ, a transdisciplinary rhetorical move makes the initial move that frames academic work in a particular way such that it becomes warranted as a topic of ethnographic study. In a tangible way, this work grapples deeply with a conceptual dichotomy that has been a topic of debate in ethnography for decades – the emic and the etic. These modes of internal self-examination and external examination of “others” also highlight some of the key challenges that come with transdisciplinary scholarship itself.

Viewing What from Where: Considering Emic and Etic Approaches

Beverly J. Moss describes two common moves in ethnographic research as “making the strange familiar” and “making the familiar strange” (1992, pp. 155; 161). Elsewhere, these ethnographic perspectives are known as the emic and the etic, respectively, usually dating to Kenneth Pike’s use of the terms in systematizing human behavior in culture (1967). The emic/etic dichotomy that is

centrally important in ethnographic studies provides a particularly valuable frame of reference for understanding research approaches and considering ways in which methodological work in cross-cultural studies might inform scholarly work across disciplines. While on the surface, the emic/etic divide might appear to be an overly simplistic binary approach to researching culture, for transdisciplinary scholarship they create routes for possibly approaching a number of situations, from presenting a disciplinary concept in an interdisciplinary setting, incorporating a concept from another discipline in one's own, or critiquing a commonly accepted institution on transdisciplinary terms.

Emic perspectives can be illuminating in several ways, but one approach that seems particularly insightful is when analysis on a familiar and typically unquestioned concept is viewed in a new light or destabilized by being described using alternative rhetorics. In *Private Government*, political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson adopts such a view toward to the role of corporations curbing the liberties of their employees. Anderson's central argument that "public discourse and political philosophy largely neglect the pervasiveness of authoritarian governance in our work and off-hours lives," and that we should "return our attention to it," epitomizes a strength of emic analysis (2017, p. 40). By taking something that is familiar and largely unquestioned (in this case, "government" or "corporation") and representing it using a new metaphorical frame, we notice features that have been present all along, but that were otherwise not considered.

The rhetorical move Anderson makes to cast corporations in this new light is to refer to capitalist corporations as "Communist Dictatorships," which is ironic because while she argues a compelling case that corporations function like communist dictatorships, they undoubtedly justify themselves in terms of capitalist freedom (2017, p. 37). Although she never calls her work ethnography, *Private Government* can be understood as an example of emic scholarship on our own culture. While she uses this approach to criticize a widely accepted social institution, an analogous move might be made in autoethnography or similar studies that highlight marginalized identities and experiences.

Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps* (1993) is an excellent example of this in which he highlights his experience coming up through the ranks of the academy and encountering significant challenges along the way because of his race and experience of marginalization. Reflecting on his own experience as a graduate student, Villanueva writes about himself in the third person, "Victor struggles with the doctoral dissertation: not trusting his Latino-literate ostensibly oral ways, trying to maintain the voice of

distance, objectivity, of the researcher, without a race, without a person” (1993, p. 115). Villanueva’s stylistic approach attends to the nuance of emic autoethnography and his perception of scientific objectivity as the epistemic standard of the university. Writing about himself in the third person tenuously creates an objective distance in order to write about his own experience with an outsider view and to simultaneously criticize scholarly expectations of objectivity that erase nonwhite and marginalized perspectives.

Etic approaches, on the other hand, emphasize understanding culture and rhetoric from an external point of view. Kermit E. Campbell’s adoption of George Kennedy’s comparative rhetoric paradigm to study “verbal practices of African civilizations dating as far back as the eighth century BCE” is an illustrative example of etic scholarship (2006, p. 273). Here, Campbell relies on anthropological and archaeological research to arrive at conclusions about these cultures as they compare, in terms of literacy, with Greek and Roman cultures. While etic approaches are limited in scope and sometimes risk generalization, they can also take on the challenging work of expanding the field through greater inclusion. James C. Scott (2017) offers another account of etic scholarship by looking to the cultural practice of agriculture in ancient civilizations to develop a history of the consolidation of state power, taxation, and controlled labor, particularly chattel slavery. His work points to the ways in which etic scholarship can adopt an external view not only by looking to different geographies and cultures, but also different periods of time.

Certainly, the emic/etic distinction has also fallen into question. Writing about the prevalent appearance of the emic/etic distinction in comparative rhetoric, LuMing Mao asks if applying this perspective to working with cultures is like fitting “round pegs into the square holes of euroamerican terms and categories,” comparing the dichotomy to forcing cultural understanding and interpretation onto a “grid of intelligibility”(2013, p. 213). Mao’s primary objection is that the emic/etic distinction seeks to impose an artificial Western objectivity on cultures such that they can be categorized and classified in a systematic manner. While I am sure some ethnographies have adopted this approach, I think more nuanced ethnographic practices can attend to both the unknown dimensions of cultures being studied (etic), the biases of researchers (emic), and the uncertainties and unknowns that still affect situations. In transdisciplinary scholarship, this can appear in expressions of self-parody (as I will later point to in the work of Ralph Cintron). Mao seems to be aware of this possibility of a hybrid or third place for the emic/etic when he argues that researchers seem to use the dichotomy as a “safety mechanism” for

drawing and holding boundaries between internal and external, despite posing the question: “how would one know when the etic stops and the emic commences and vice versa?” (2013, p. 214). In this way, perhaps it makes better sense to think of the emic/etic as more of a gradient of polarities rather than a rigid binary.

Beyond the Binary: Modulating Polarities of Mixed Emic and Etic Approaches

In transdisciplinary scholarship there are many ways to blend emic and etic approaches. Ralph Cintron engages rich etic accounts about Kosovo and the Dominican Republic and emic accounts about his daily life in Chicago. From these rich and granular interview narratives (often quoting individuals), he “ravel[s] back”¹ to make broader conceptual claims about how terms associated with democracy circulate unquestioned through “managerial modernity” (2020, p. 31). His approach is a kind of vacillation between the emic and etic such that both are expressed in balance to highlight broader transdisciplinary themes. Another approach to mixing emic and etic analysis involves the examination of familiar culture (emic), but with an element of extending temporally backward in time, looking to historically distant (etic) moments that preceded the present culture, such as Ara Norenzayan (2013) does in describing the emergence of early monotheistic cultures.

One further practice I might suggest as a kind of blended emic/etic approach centers on language itself, specifically the in ways transdisciplinary rhetoric engages with etymology as a method for tracing meaning and usage of a term, sometimes to point to changes and in other cases to highlight latent meanings. Jordynn Jack introduces the term “*histos*” as referring to both a loom and the fabric woven on it to situate her transdisciplinary methodology of “raveling” through neuroscience (2019, p. 6). Similarly, Cintron takes up the Greek term “κοινωνία,” often translated as partnership in order to point out that the term actually expresses a range of meaning from “city” to “community” to “association” (2020, p. 95). The etymological work exemplified by Jack and Cintron in these cases is just as much ethnographic as it is historic; they are linkages of current contemporary culture

¹ I borrow this term from Jordynn Jack who employs it as a “rhetorical genealogy to move back in time to see how current material-discursive practices are woven out of earlier ones” (2019, p. 13). The rhetorical specificity of this approach is highly fitting to describe Cintron’s move from ethnographic accounts with individuals to his broader theoretical claims.

with cultures from the past through the inherited currency of language.

Although I would be cautious about applying the emic/etic dichotomy to all transdisciplinary scholarship, this field lends itself to this internal/external analysis better than most. By its nature of being across, between, and beyond disciplines, transdisciplinary rhetoric moves fluidly between being at home and exploring new places. As I often return to the question of how transdisciplinary rhetoric works and how those approaches can be justified, I see potential in remembering that ethnography is both a method and methodology, and also that there is a difference between being an ethnographer and doing ethnography. Still, these affordances come with significant limitations and they must be acknowledged.

Ethnography Comes With Baggage

Stember opens her essay on disciplinarity by recognizing the “influence of academic disciplines in the university is dominant” (1991, p. 1). Dominance, and more specifically, domineering paradigms pervade the academy. Dominance and colonial exploitation is also part of the history of ethnography, with more often than not, European and American researchers embedding themselves in an “exotic” culture of people perceived to be lesser in order to “fetishize” them (Nichols, 2019, p. 8). Among the most dangerous forms of dominance are those that do not even realize how assertive they are; how their being is predicated on persistent tacit marginalization. If this is our baggage to unpack, I promise, the contents will be foul and stinky, and while this initial recognition can be profoundly embarrassing, there is an important rhetorical opening that comes from it. Describing some of the initial presentations of his research to scholarly audiences, James Scott notes, “my ignorance and subsequent wide-eyed surprise at how much of what I thought I knew was wrong might be an advantage in writing for an audience that starts with the same misconceptions” (2017, pp. x–xi). This note comes at a point when Scott realized that recognizing his own misperceptions and ignorance provided a rhetorical point of entry into conversation with audiences who shared similar misperceptions. While there is rhetorical advantage in identification that comes with disarming oneself and exposing one’s limitation is promising, I suggest there are more important ethical reasons for practicing this kind of reflective self-awareness when working with ethnography.

Across various approaches to ethnography, a common practice of situating the researcher’s standpoint is emphasized. Institutional ethnographer Michelle LaFrance explains that standpoint is one of the core concepts of analysis in part because it

“helps the ethnographer to uncover disjunctions, divergences, and distinctions,” particularly as they appear to us in light of our “unique perspectives, attitudes, or position” (2019, p. 35). Standpoint involves an active recognition of oneself in relation to one’s work. Annie Laurie Nichols posits that the first step one should take in being an ethnographer is to “acknowledge their own subject position and participation in the relationship and creation of meaning” (Nichols, 2019, p. 8). This centrality of standpoint for ethnography carries into transdisciplinary scholarship in several important ways.

For transdisciplinary scholars of rhetoric, standpoint involves recognizing other disciplines have knowledge and methods that might not make a lot of sense to outsiders. Just because a specialist had a difficult time explaining the content or significance of their disciplinary knowledge to an outside audience, it does not mean that they lack a deep understanding. More importantly, their inability to communicate across disciplinary lines should not necessarily be viewed as a rhetorical or communicative deficit: if part of participating in highly disciplinary knowledge-building means being able to competently communicate meaning to a small circle, then we should recognize that communicating that specialized knowledge outside of that circle requires a skill that is not part of that disciplinary skill set. In this light, rhetoricians should be careful about approaching these cross-disciplinary collaborations with the mindset of being communicative clinicians set out to fix bad communication.

Understanding disciplines have unique ways of communicating knowledge invites the recognition that disciplinary views are always partial. No discipline is able to see the phenomena it studies from all possible perspectives. When engaging collaboratively with scholars in other fields, this means we should exercise caution in faulting them if they seem to express some kind of ignorance of something that is familiar or obvious to us; rather, moments like this indicate why cross-disciplinary collaboration is so important. From the perspective of other scholars with whom we might collaborate, rhetorical scholars might benefit from recognizing that we will be perceived to be limited and ignorant of disciplinary knowledges beyond our own in ways that we might contend or might not be able to understand.

Keeping standpoint in check is a challenging practice. It requires humility and the willingness to candidly consider what history has brought one to this moment, the motivations and biases one has in moving forward, and most importantly, where one stands in relation to everyone else involved. In the following section, I suggest rhetorical understandings of vulnerability and

velocity as specific ways to take standpoint into greater consideration in ethnographic and transdisciplinary scholarship.

Vulnerability and Velocity as in Response to Liabilities in Transdisciplinarity

Just as ethnography comes with a history of dominance and the potential for abuse, so too does transdisciplinary rhetoric. Specific to the field of rhetoric and composition, Louise Wetherbee Phelps points out that, “Theory is interpreted, reinterpreted, appropriated, criticized, modified, rediscovered, and resituated,” which necessitates a regular re-checking of both the theories we borrow and the contexts in which we use them (1988, p. 226). The problem, she contends is that, “Composition has often failed to do this checking adequately in its enthusiastic and eclectic borrowing of Theory from other fields” (1988, 226). While interdisciplinarity, specifically a willingness to draw insight from other disciplinary fields, has long been a hallmark of rhetoric, an unreflective appropriation of knowledges in other disciplines can lead to distrust and preclude possibilities for future collaboration. Not to discourage such interdisciplinary work, I now consider two strategies developed in rhetoric that could help mitigate the risk of unreflective interdisciplinary “borrowing.”

Rhetorical vulnerability could be thought of as a skill, practice, and perhaps mindset or ethic for ethnographic research. While the term “vulnerability” usually connotes weakness or the capacity for being injured, Richard Marback describes rhetorical vulnerability as “a strength, an attitude of care and concern that connects us to the world and to each other” (2009, p. 1). In this light, rhetorical vulnerability might be thought of as the predisposition toward changing one’s mind or belief. If standpoint is at least partly about disclosing one’s position in relation to others, then rhetorical vulnerability might be the expression of how or what one is willing to change because of this relationship.

A personal anecdote comes to mind from the very first philosophy class I took. The professor told the class we would be studying ethics through a discussion of capital punishment and asked us to write a short essay about our views, but to keep an open mind. I initially adopted the stance that the death penalty seemed warranted in some cases and I cited economic and retributive rationales. During the class discussion, I listened to several classmates deliver thoughtful and well-reasoned cases opposing capital punishment; they were strong enough to make me change mind. Besides experiencing a sense of freedom that comes with the willingness to change, I think I also made an impression with some of my classmates because I disclosed my

change of mind to the group. This points to another important capacity of practicing rhetorical vulnerability: when rhetors show that they are willing to be affected by the rhetoric of others, they build ethos for themselves and the discipline. Historically, rhetoric has been synonymous with trickery, pandering and relentless persuasion. To demonstrate through rhetorical vulnerability that it can be something else builds goodwill and fosters relations conducive for transdisciplinary collaboration.

Rhetorical vulnerability as a model for interaction can also be extended to include not only rhetors, but also readers and audiences. David Riche elaborates “that rhetoric is premised upon an always prior availability, not only of means, but also rhetors, audiences and others” (2017). A similar sentiment is expressed by Kendall Gerdes in her explanation of rhetorical sensitivity with respect to trigger warnings in classrooms as giving us “our respons/ability, and with it, our responsibility to respond” (2019, p. 17). In this light, although vulnerability implies a kind of powerlessness and susceptibility to external forces, it equally implies the positive connotation of being responsive to and changed by those forces.

The responsiveness implied by rhetorical vulnerability could take a variety of forms. As Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss describe in *rhetorical velocity* (2009), a theory of delivery, rhetoric must take into consideration a plurality of future possibilities in interpretation and reception. The example offered by Ridolfo and DeVoss concerns the way a news story might be received in a positive, negative, or neutral light. Their argument holds that composing and delivering the news message should take these possibilities into account. In an analogous way that we might compose messages with a plurality of interpretations in mind, we might consider that rhetorical vulnerability invites us to practice composing ourselves in such a way as to be open to being influenced in our transdisciplinary collaborations. From a standpoint of equitable reciprocity in working relations, this makes sense. When we collaborate with others in hopes that our ideas influence theirs, then we should be equally open to the notion of our ideas being influenced by theirs. One way to foster this kind of pluralistically responsive rhetorical vulnerability might be to consider ways in which it is actively practiced.

Rhetorical vulnerability can be described as a state of being, but it could also be that rhetorical vulnerability is an active state of practice. Annie Laurie Nichols describes an essential quality of her ethnographic work in Azerbaijan as not just being a passive observer of culture, but of working to be “as present as possible” (2019, p. 8), an activity that Nichols likens to Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening (1999). There are a few reasons why

ethnography and transdisciplinarity need this additional effort. Without it, the risk of falling back on the complacency of personal bias is just too predictable.

Vulnerability and Bias Awareness

If rhetorical vulnerability implies a willingness to change belief, we might wonder what might make a person change their beliefs? Research in cognitive science suggests that a number of common biases persistently work to shape what we perceive and the meanings we ascribe to it. Availability bias, for example, results in beliefs and conclusions being developed based primarily (or solely) on information that is readily available to us (Kahneman, 2011, p. 129). The pitfall in availability bias is that we form beliefs based on a partial and very incomplete view, and often assume that our limited view accurately represents the so-called big picture. Countering availability bias then either involves introducing new information or providing reasons for us to think there is relevant information to which we just do not yet have access. If rhetorical vulnerability opens us to the possibility of changing currently held beliefs, it is worth considering that this need not necessarily mean changing from a belief in one thing to a belief in another; it could also simply mean taking a skeptical step back and realizing that whereas I might have once felt certain, I now see there is room for wonder and doubt.

Another common form of cognitive bias stands in direct opposition to rhetorical vulnerability, although those of us who are susceptible to it are often still convinced we are meeting the world openly. Confirmation bias involves a belief state coupled with a testing and evidence-collection approach that seeks to confirm the existing belief state (Kahneman, 2011, p. 81). When we want to believe something, we are inclined to seek out evidence that supports it and to overlook, ignore, or even refute evidence that contradicts what we want to believe. At the center of this bias is reluctance to adopt a standpoint of rhetorical vulnerability. Perhaps more insidious are cases in which rhetors assert the view that they are openminded and willing to change but in reality make these statements to cover or compensate for a deeper held belief driven by confirmation bias (i.e., *see, I always knew that!*). Perhaps the most significant factor in both availability and confirmation biases is that personal ego can be held up and buttressed by these belief structures. The following rhetorical strategy describes the paradox in which a little healthy self-parody helps to establish a stronger sense of self.

Self-Parody, Self-Awareness, and Standpoint

One textual strategy for authors to express a felt sense of vulnerability or to actively make themselves appear more vulnerable to readers is to make fun of themselves or to engage in “self-parody” or a kind of “emptying out of conviction” (Cintron, 2020). As an ethnographer, one way Cintron incorporates self-parody in *Democracy as Fetish* is by opening the book with a scene in which describes himself walking in Chicago, the city where he lives, to notice people along the Chicago River who are taking time to be outdoors and enjoy the pleasant weather. The parody here is that many ethnographers open their books by describing their grand “arrival scene” in the exotic culture and Cintron’s is just a mundane stroll through his hometown where none of the rich people seem to care about him being there. This vignette postures his role as an ethnographer not at as a venerated scholar, but more as a passive observer of the quotidian. Yet as Cintron describes his conversations with Mexican American and Puerto Rican residents of Chicago and people he meets during his time in Kosova, we see that his persona makes people comfortable enough to converse with him and make deep disclosures about personal beliefs and attitudes.

As a writer, researcher, and practitioner of ethnography, I think it is important for me to also include some of my own standpoint and reasons for writing about ethnography and rhetorical vulnerability in transdisciplinarity. For a long time, I have worked to distance my personal voice from formal writing because, as some disciplines and teachers of writing point out, this detracts from the appearance of objectivity. But when I turn to ethnography, I see a practice predicated on disclosing researcher partiality because who we are and where we stand determines what we perceive, and what we are capable of perceiving. In this line of thinking, it is better to take a vulnerable and transparently subjective approach rather than to feign scientific objectivity.

Part of my standpoint involves learning about ethnography by actively practicing it. The activity of learning and structures of formal education intrigue me, in part, because they open themselves to critique though practice in ways other careers do not. Whereas careers in other structures like corporations or the military generally permit significantly less internal self-reflective criticism, it seems that thriving academic communities are sustained by this critical self-reflection. Moreover, it is important for me to write about my institutional and transdisciplinary interest in ethnography to situate my social position.

As a researcher, it would be much more convenient if my biases and blind spots were made obvious and apparent to me. Since they are not, my most responsible route of practice is to comport myself with the rhetorical vulnerability to attend to them once I am made aware, and to cultivate collaborations with others who will help bring that which I do not notice to my attention. I am highly privileged to be able to study and write in the way I do. I am a multiracial cisgender male with an upper middle-class background. Because of this identity, I recognize the importance for me to step back to hold space for more marginalized people to speak and be heard. Positionality matters and should be disclosed in rhetorical ethnography because slipping into a neutral standpoint or becoming an invisible observer is not possible and often serves to conceal or normalize positions that shape what we view and how we choose to interpret and report it.

Standpoint leads to another place where the emic and etic gets muddled. As a culture, scholarship in the university is diverse because scholars themselves are diverse. This is, after all, part of the draw of the university, that people from all backgrounds can come to one place to share in a community of learning, even if access is not distributed equally due to factors such as the financial ability to pay tuition or access to collegiate preparation programs. This means that even if we take a deep view from within this culture, we see influences and reflections of other places and times. I have confidence that ethnographic approaches can enrich transdisciplinary rhetorics, even if this only means communicating problematics and complexities that have not been acknowledged before.

Conclusion

By opening this article with a recapitulation of Stember's topology of disciplinarity, I have sought to attend to differences in variety of disciplinary scholarship and the kinds of collaborative and communicative stakes they carry. At the transdisciplinary level, I suggest there are many opportunities for rhetorical ethnographic methods to facilitate scholarship that speaks to questions beyond the disciplines. If a large part of transdisciplinary rhetoric and rhetorical ethnography is starting from a standpoint that acknowledges intellectual limitations, then rhetorical vulnerability and an attention to standpoint can be motivated as tools to practice these methods and methodologies more ethically.

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