Complete-member Ethnography: Epistemological Intimacy, Complete-membership, and Potentials in Critical Communication Research

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Abstract
Within the vast array of ethnographic research methodology, complete-member ethnography (CME) is one ethnographic inquiry whose methodological development is still in infantile in intercultural communication research. Specifically in this article, the author includes four major sections to understand and to advance CME. First, the author reviews the historical development of CME, and realizes epistemological intimacy as the core of CME and as how researchers’ complete-memberships may be established. Second, the author explains the concept and practice of epistemological intimacy in extant literature. Third, the author advances the concept of epistemological intimacy to identify and explain five contextual factors that influence a complete-member ethnographer’s complete-membership to his or her research community. The five factors include historicity of identity, institutional memory, situational (inter)subjectivity, consensual membership, and symbolic codes. In order to elucidate that said factors are essentially interrelated, the author supplements the five factors with her conceptualizations of selfhood/identity. In the end, the author discusses three potential contributions of how CME can advance critical communication research, which pertain to (a) praxis and reflexivity, (b) challenging struggles and inequalities in power and privilege, and (c) promote hopeful social justice from within.

Keywords
complete-member ethnography, epistemological intimacy, historicity of identity, institutional memory, situational (inter)subjectivity, consensual membership, symbolic codes

“What kind of intercultural research would you like to conduct for your dissertation?” my advisor in the doctoral program asked me. “I do not have a clear picture yet, maybe something that connects communication research with my previous experiences and the fellow citizens back home,” I answered with much hesitation. “Sounds like you are going to be a complete-member researcher. Perhaps you can consider complete-member ethnography (CME hereafter) for your research methodology. It can be utilized for someone who is interested in conducting research in and about his or her own culture or country,” my advisor continued and briefly explained. While not familiar with the methodology then, I decided to look it up and found that Toyosaki (2011) calls for more research in CME because “its methodological theorization is infantile in the field of intercultural communication” (p. 64). As someone who concentrates on researching intercultural communication, I was inspired to review this methodology and to advance it further. “Perhaps, I can use this methodology for my dissertation research,” I thought to myself.

In this article, I first illustrate the historical development of CME as a type of ethnographic inquiry. Next, I delve deeper into literature to explain the concept and practice of “epistemological intimacy,” a central element of CME. Further, I propose and identify contextual factors that influence researchers’ complete-memberships to their research community, which can also be seen as contexts for epistemological intimacy. Finally, I present explicit potentials of CME for critical

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communication research. In the section below, I begin CME’s review by laying out its historical development.

**Development of CME**

Among the historical developments and shifts of ethnographers’ positions out of and within the researched communities, the Chicago School of ethnography is considered the initial vigor that pushed toward CME formation. Historically, Adler and Adler (1987) suggest that ethnographers should assume the “complete-membership role” (p. 67) and become “native” (p. 67) with the researched community in order to actively participate in and understand local culture and its communicative acts (see also Adler & Adler, 1994; Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). To echo Adler and Adler’s (1987, 1994) conviction, Ellis and Bochner (2000) adopt the term “complete-member researchers” to refer to those who “explore groups of which they already are members” or have been converted to genuine membership during the research process (p. 740, emphasis added). According to Toyosaki (2011), CME is “usually not named as such” (p. 64). Therefore, to retrieve CME’s historical roots, I searched for similar theoretical and methodological bases across various ethnographic methods.

Among different researchers, Anderson (2006) believes that the Chicago School of ethnography should be where CME originates. Following World War I, Robert Park at the University of Chicago influenced many of his graduate students to take interest in “sociological involvement in settings close to their personal lives, [and in] arenas with which they had a significant degree of self-identification” (Anderson, 2006, p. 375). This was about 100 years ago.

In addition to self-identification, CME is somewhat similar to, yet different from, conventional ethnography; or, the ethnography of communication (EOC), as some scholars call it. At the time when ethnographic work centers on interpretive and descriptive cultural interpretations (Madison, 2005), EOC draws upon “a rich heritage of anthropology, sociolinguistics, folklore studies, and semiotics” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 46); it emerges based on the works from Dell Hymes’ (1968) “The Ethnography of Speaking” and Gerry Phillipsen’s (1975) “Speaking Like a Man in Teamsterville” (a distinction from positivistic research in the 1970s). Heavily influenced by sociocultural and phenomenological traditions, ethnographers of communication focus on the forms, meanings, and codes that are practiced, maintained, and communicated in a community (Cameron, 2001; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Although the research foci of CME differ from ethnographer to ethnographer, certain goals are similar to EOC’s focus on communicative acts. Meanwhile, CME is different from EOC research, in that, EOC is generally more “data-driven” (Toyosaki, 2011, p. 65). Additionally, conventional EOC researcher assume the position as “outsider[s] looking in” (Wolcott, 1999, p. 282) or “breaking in” (Alvesson, 2009, p. 162) the researched culture and community. Alvesson (2009) even metaphorically describes conventional ethnographers as “burglar[s]” and at-home ethnographers (another label for complete-member ethnographers) as “fl[ies] on the wall [inside of home]” (p. 162). CME is also known as a type of “insider research,” which refers to the situation when a researcher “conducts studies with populations, communities, and identity groups of which they are also members” (Kunhu, 2000, p. 439). In other words, at-home ethnography and insider research (see Asselin, 2003; Brannick & Coglan, 2007; Kunhu, 2000) are similar to CME in the way that they focus on being “home-base” with the organization or community under study (Alvesson, 2003, p. 176, emphasis in original).

Beyond the aforementioned titles, CME receives recognition in various disciplines with associations of multiple labels. Wolcott (1999) lists a few labels of ethnographic work related to CME in anthropology, such as “backyard ethnography,” “native anthropology,” “indigenous anthropology,” and “insider ethnography” (p. 171). Despite different appropriations in anthropology, the labels all carry overlapping significance on community, culture, and/or location with which researchers share membership. Wolcott further introduces an anthropologist, Hayano, who developed the idea of “autoethnography” in an article published in 1979. This autoethnographic article involved Hayano’s ethnographic inquiry that derives from his own life as a researcher and a professional (poker) card player. Notably, Hayano’s autoethnography is different from the present day appropriation; his autoethnography is “synonymous with CME” (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011; Toyosaki, 2011, p. 64). In addition to anthropology, CME is also commonly adopted in fields of education and sociology (e.g., Alvesson, 2003; Hawe, 2002; Wagner, 1993).

Among the stated labels, more often than not, CME is associated with autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) claim that autoethnography became popular around 1995 (see also Paechter, 2012), a time frame when ethnographers started to critically accentuate self-reflexivity, self-display, and self-disclosure (Reed-Danahay, 2001). Holman Jones (2005) describes autoethnography as a blurred genre … [and as] getting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art … making a text present … refusing categorization … believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. (p. 765)

Likewise, Ellis and Bochner (2000) emphasize that autoethnography “vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)” (p. 740). Butler (2009), Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), and Goodall (2000) all explicate that autoethnography is a qualitative methodology, specifically a “method of … scholarly inquiry that privileges the exploration of a self in response to questions that can only be answered that way, through … thoughtful reflection about, the lived experiences of that self” (Goodall, 2000, p. 191, emphasis in original). In the pedagogical context, Fassett and Warren (2007) contend that “autoethnography is a reflexive accounting … to subject our
experiences to critical examination, to expose life’s mundane qualities for how they illustrate our participation in power” (p. 103). Touchingly, Smith (2005) even writes, “autoethnography freed me to write reflectively, thoughtfully, and introspectively about a very personal subjective close to my heart” (p. 6). This genre of autobiographical writing is related to more labels, including local (personal) narratives (Bochner & Ellis, 1995), my story (Bowman & Bowman, 2002), personal writing (DeVault, 1997), praxis-oriented autoethnography (Toyosaki, 2012), one of the methods in automethodology (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011), and storytelling (Toyosaki, 2007).

Rather than dwelling on potentially narcissistic or mere self-disclosure drawbacks often associated with autoethnography, I contend that CME connects with autoethnography in ways which they both recognize researchers’ relationships with self and others. Specifically, Anderson (2006) explicates, that “the first and most obvious feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a complete-member in the social world under study” (p. 379). Furthermore, Toyosaki (2011) offers an insight that “contemporary appropriations of autoethnography explicitly position self-reflexivity at the heart of cultural investigation” (p. 65). With self-reflexivity, autoethnographers and CME scholars take on a deeper co-constitutive approach that infers discourse and meaning as intersubjectively and dialogically created between readers and writers as well as between researchers and the researched. In other words, CME offers researchers chances to critically and reflexively engage in and interrogate our lived experiences, such as our selfhood and relationships with others (Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Richardson, 2000).

The most recent development of CME is Toyosaki’s (2011) critical CME (CCME; see also Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). To establish CCME in intracultural communication research, Toyosaki utilizes the label of CME, because CME scholars “offer culturally intimate and proximate interpretations of their research participants” (p. 64). To further develop CME into the theorization of CCME, Toyosaki complements CME with critical ethnography, in that the latter helps reveal both lived experiences and phenomena of oppression and power inequality (Madison, 2005). Methodologically, CCME encompasses three foundations: EOC (a communicative element), autoethnography (a self-reflexive or personal element), and critical ethnography (a critical element). With these foundations, Toyosaki clearly situates CCME as a form of ethnographic inquiry, and he proposes this methodology as “an innovative intracultural praxis which engages in and facilitates social justice and cultural reform through its dialectical and highly personalized communication theorization” (p. 62). He stresses that critical complete-member ethnographers (CCMEers) “employ epistemological intimacy in investigating their and their participants’ communicative practices, which renders their critical self-reflexivity” (p. 65, emphasis in original). Fundamentally, CCMEers value critical and ethical self-reflexivity when studying the communicative practices that they share with the community.

Based on the historical overview, CME is a type of ethnographic method and inquiry interrelated with theoretical and methodological foundations of autoethnography, EOC, and certain pertinent labels of ethnographic work. To reiterate, the commonalities between CME and the aforementioned ethnographic methods include potential research foci on communicative practices, ethnographers’ self-identification with their research community, and research location and organization. Among several labels, I resonate with Toyosaki’s (2011) choice of the term “CME,” in that CME underscores both self and communal memberships, and it foregrounds intraculturality and epistemological intimacy (Smith, 2005) between researchers and the researched. Certain degrees of intraculturality and epistemological intimacy allow CME researchers to be “insider[s]-looking-in-and-out” of their own culture/community (Toyosaki, 2011, p. 63). However, even with the emphasis on epistemological intimacy, it is still unclear how ethnographers may be “complete-members” in his or her research. Therefore, in the successive section, I provide further explications of epistemological intimacy.

Epistemological Intimacy: Concept and Practice in Literature

As Toyosaki (2011) claims, “CME is a practice of epistemological intimacy, predicated upon such mutual intelligibility and shared identity between researchers and their participants” (p. 64). Intraculturality and epistemological intimacy are two fundamental elements in CME. To understand the latter term more in-depth, I discuss and explain the concept and practice of epistemological intimacy found in extant literature.

In general, the discussion of epistemological intimacy is implicit in literature, so I examine this term based on its two independent lexicons: epistemology and intimacy. Among the three fundamental philosophical assumptions (i.e., epistemology, ontology, and axiology), epistemology studies questions of knowledge, knowledge production, or how people know what they know (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Intimacy in ethnographic writings is often connected with autoethnography or autobiography. According to Reed-Danahay (2001), intimacy is an important element in autobiographical genre of ethnographic writing. She articulates that, through life history and autobiographical approach of writing, ethnographers build intimate rapport not only with their readers but also with their informants from the cultures under study. Reed-Danahay insists, “Self-disclosure in ethnographic writing can serve either a confessional autobiographical approach, . . . or one more intellectual, concerned with the epistemology of knowledge” (p. 412). To combine the concepts of “epistemology” and “intimacy,” auto-representational writings from ethnographers’ intimate disclosures communicate epistemological values that knowledge can be conceived experientially, partially, and (inter)subjectively between the self and others.

The concept and practice of epistemological intimacy is found explicitly illuminated first in Smith’s (2005) work and later adopted by Toyosaki (2011) in theorizing CCME. Smith
shares her journey of choosing the most appropriate methodol- 
ogy for her master’s thesis. As a survivor of acquired brain 
innocuous study others who also suffered from the same 
illness. By positioning herself as the researcher and a partici-
part, she discovers that the similar injuries between her and the 
participating survivors render productive bases for ready access 
and rapport for her research. Smith and her participants all 
understand and have knowledge of the “culture” of being sur-
vivors of acquired brain injury. Smith asserts, “Because of my 
unusual closeness to the subject I was researching, I knew that I 
was more than just the researcher” (p. 3). The close and com-
munal intimacy she shares with participants made her a 
complete-member ethnographer (CMEer). Based on Smith’s 
conviction of epistemological intimacy, Toyosaki (2011) 
adopts this term and sums up lucidly that the closeness and 
shared “socialization and a cultural system of codes, symbols, 
and meanings” between CMEers and their participants “[su-
itate] communicative, cultural, and experiential proximity in 
research” (p. 64). In brief, both Smith and Toyosaki center 
their conceptualizations of epistemological intimacy on the 
mutually intelligible intracultural knowledge shared among 
researchers/ethnographers and their participants.

Without utilizing the exact term of epistemological inti-
macy, Alvesson (2009), Asselin (2003), and Kanuha (2000) 
also underscore the intracultural feature of the concept. In 
conceptualizing insider research, Asselin (2003) claims that an 
insider researcher is one who “share[s] an identity, language, 
and professional experiential base” (p. 100) with the partici-
pants under study. Similarly, Kanuha (2000) shares her social 
work research, in which she studies the community she belongs 
to and faces “complex and inherent challenges of being . . . an 
insider with intimate knowledge of one’s study population . . .” 
(p. 439, emphasis added). Instead of using the term insider 
research, Alvesson (2009) coined a method called “at-home 
ethnography” (i.e., conducting research in an organization with 
which researchers are affiliated). He asserts, “Personal invol-
vement . . . is linked with intimate knowledge [with fellow 
participants at the research organization, so such] involvement 
maybe as much a resource as a liability” (p. 156). Insider 
research or at-home ethnography, resource or liability, episte-
omological intimacy entails sameness, familiarity, and joint 
 experiential and knowledge bases among researchers, the 
research organization/location, and the participants.

In addition to the above-mentioned characteristics, more 
scholars have outlined the concept but still not in the term of 
epistemological intimacy. Tedlock (1991), for example, intro-
duces Jules-Rosette’s (1975) work to explain how she, 
through fieldwork, “began to develop a repertoire of knowl-
edge and expectations, or a common culture, that was shared 
with participants and created in interaction with them” (p. 
21, as cited in Tedlock, 1991, p. 71, emphasis added). Such 
common culture and cocreated knowledge are what Tedlock 
called “human intersubjectivity” (p. 71). Likewise, Bochner 
and Ellis (1995) accentuate the co-constructive nature in 
interpersonal relationships. Although the participants in their 
study are intimate couples, Bochner and Ellis’ two 
assumptions of how interpersonal communication and rela-
tionships are practiced shed light in epistemological intimacy. 
Their first assumption stresses that relationships between peo-
ple are “jointly authored, incomplete, and historically situ-
ated” (p. 204). Their second assumption maintains that 
interpersonal relationship realities are “subjective realities 
that require ongoing affirmation by . . . others” (p. 204). To 
supplement the discussion thus far, I contend that inter-
subjective, co-constructive, and negotiated interpersonal 
knowledge are indispensable and pivotal features of episte-
omological intimacy.

In short, the concept and practice of epistemological inti-
macy in the literature are mostly located in ethnographic meth-
odologies analogous to CME. This concept rests on the bases of 
knowledge, experience, and identity that derived from intracul-
turality, close proximity, and sameness between researchers 
and participants, and also on the communal, relational, and 
intersubjective negotiations. Although complex and amorp-
phous, epistemological intimacy is a central component to 
CME. Based on the discussions on CME’s historical develop-
ment and epistemological intimacy from various scholars, I 
situate the latter as central to teasing out potential factors for 
researchers’ complete-membership in CME.

Contextual Factors of Complete-membership in CME

Toyosaki (2011) holds that, compared to conventional ethnogra-
phers’ position as outside observers, CMEers’ “subjectivity 
is differently situated, and has been left undertheorized in . . . 
ethnographic methods” (p. 63). This notion of “complete” or 
“full” identification of CMEers triggers debatable perspec-
tives. Hence, to respond to Toyosaki’s call and to grapple with 
the subjectivity of CMEers more explicitly, I identify and 
explain five potential (rather than comprehensive) contextual 
factors that may influence researcher’s complete-membership 
to his or her research community. The five contextual factors 
also serve to advance the concept of epistemological intimacy 
and identity.

Contextual Factor 1: Historicity of Identity

Among the vast array of identity research and framework that 
may influence a researcher’s complete-membership, identity 
historicity is essential. To narrow it down further, I foreground 
the spatial–temporal characteristic in identity historicity. His-
tory is a long continuum that encompasses interminability and 
repetitiveness, and it is inseparable from space and time 
(Cavallaro, 2001). Throughout time, Warren (2008) asserts that 
identities of individuals, groups, societies, and nations are 
shaped and formed from repeatedly performing their differ-
ences in relation to others. Historicity of identity pertains to 
the enactment and formation of identity under the constructs of 
history, space, and temporality.

In a similar vein, the conceptualization of a researcher’s 
complete-membership is also related to aspects of history,
space, and time. According to Madison (2011), temporality is associated with “relating to or limited by time” (p. 134). Moreover, Sarup (1996) articulates, “Our identity is not separate from what has happened” (p. 15). How one recognizes his or her own identity is pertinent to the understanding of his or her cultural locations in history. In the grand narrative, past historical events shape our perceptions of who we are and interpellate us into racial, cultural, or ethnic groups (Althusser, 1971). In turn, mostly likely, we perform such identities accordingly (Weedon, 2004). For example, (despite the political tensions) historically and geographically, Taiwan is recognized as a small island and country next to Mainland China. I was born to two Taiwanese parents, so I share the identity as a Taiwanese. I grew up and received Taiwanese education from kindergarten through undergraduate years. I speak Mandarin Chinese, the nation’s official language. The spatial–temporal feature of historicity and my performative accordance influence and affirm my ascribed and avowed identity as Taiwanese. Likewise, Madison (2011) comments, “Each reality [in our lives] combines and competes with the other to supplement what was lived and thought to be known and experienced . . . “ (p. 136, emphasis added).

A researcher’s complete-membership, thus, is inextricable from the historicity of identity. Although historicity implies past events, Cavallaro (2001) asserts, “There is no linear progression from the past through the present to the future…. [F]uture is already buried in the past” (pp. 179-180). Similarly, Bauman (1996) holds that “identity . . . behaves like a verb . . . [which] appears only in the future tense” (p. 19). Hence, identity historicity is not merely disparate temporal dimensions in the past; they continually interact with spatial locations, and further carry actions into the future. Past history epistemologically informs how one’s identity may be a complete and intimate member of a societv and/or cultural group. Additionally, the futurity constituent of identity historicity crosses boundaries of space and time, and it continuously lingers and affects people’s identities even if they may have left their country/community of origin (see Toyosaki, 2007, for examples of the historicity of his Japanese identity).

**Contextual Factor 2: Institutional Memory**

The second contextual factor that may influence a researcher’s complete-membership is institutional memory. Institutional memory is generated by, maintained, and negotiated through past and present members of an organization or institution, such as corporate, government, religious group, and/or educational system (El Savy, Gomes, & Gonzalez, 1986). Every institution has its unique beliefs, principles, and traditions, and because of the uniqueness, individuals who are affiliated with or immersed in such institutions co-create and acculturate with its organization’s institutional memory. In essence, El Savy, Gomes, and Gonzalez (1986) clarify that institutional memory answers the question, “How do we [as an organization] come to be where we are?” (p. 118) and/or “who are we [as an organization]?” Institutional memory (in a general sense) fosters coherent formation of group membership and identity.

Tsui (2007) and Weedon (2004) offer empirical evidence of how institutional memory and cultural identity co-emerge. Tsui analyzes the identity formation of Minfang, a senior university faculty in China who narrates his experiences as an English learner and a teacher. Tsui concludes that possession of a community’s values and the legitimacy of access to practice core values are “dialectically related . . . and are mutually constitutive” (p. 675). From knowing the faculty community’s core values and practicing such values—special institutional memories—Minfang recognizes himself as a complete-member in the faculty community of the English department in which he works. Weedon also comments on the importance of how institutional memory shapes individual’s and group’s identity recognition. She notes that, in Western societies, organizations such as family and schools sustain and create specific as well as collective senses of identity and belonging to citizens of a nation, residents of a region, or personnel in an educational institution.

With the distinctiveness of each institutional memory, this contextual factor unites and appoints a researcher’s complete-membership to an organization. Just as how numerous alumni from U.S. colleges and universities regard their school mascots or Greek letters as symbols of their belonging, as part of their identity, as pieces of institutional memory of how they establish rapport and connection. Such rapport and connection render epistemological intimacy between researchers and participants when they come from the same institute or organization.

**Contextual Factor 3: Situational (Inter)Subjectivity**

The third contextual factor for a researcher’s complete-membership is predicated upon situational (inter)subjectivity. The study of self is oftentimes understood as study of subjectivity. Weedon (2004) articulates that forms of analysis and knowledge for subjectivity differ across theoretical approaches. Under critical and cultural theories, Cavallaro (2001) notes that subjectivity “frequently designates individual experience and thought processes defined with reference to the ‘I’” (p. 86), and that “subjectivity is insistently constructed on the basis of disunity” (p. 84). Subjectivity is, therefore, bound by social intercourse and is condemned to a divided status. Likewise, Polkinghorne (1988) and Day Sclater (2003) both emphasize that subjectivity and human experience are “processes” of meaning-making rather than static conditions or facts. Combining the processual viewpoint with the interactive conception of subjectivity, self-identity/subjectivity is intersubjectively situated and is constantly in flux.

Brummett (1999) offers key concepts to explicate intersubjectivity, and Collier and Thomas (1988) further complement intersubjectivity with situational salience. Brummett claims that (a) “reality is what experience means” (p. 159, emphasis
in original) and meanings are shared among people, (b) intersubjectivity underscores how we should view reality as defined by contexts, and (c) reality in the intersubjective perspective can be changed. Essentially, intersubjectivity views the discovery of reality as a product and a process with human involvements rather than independent from human interference. Human involvement, social reality, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity are thus equally effective in the formation of identity. The dimension of salience (Collier & Thomas, 1988) further supplements as a component in identity formation, in that identity salience helps individuals foreground particular aspects of identity significant under specific circumstances.

Several scholars have emphasized the relational, situational, intersubjective, and processual aspects of identity. Sarup (1996) insists that we are who we are in relation to others. He writes, “[I]dentity is not an inherent quality of a person but that it arises in interaction with others and the focus is on the processes by which identity is constructed” (p. 14). In line with Sarup and noting the situational salience, Diversi and Moreira (2009) claim that “identity is forever mutant and relational, adapting to the contextual pressures of making oneself feel worthwhile—... advancing images of self that one perceives to be advantageous ...” (p. 20, emphasis added). Moreover, Toyosaki (2007) highlights that identities are intersubjectively constructed; he states, “My identity—everyday performativity—escapes from the private and frees itself and travels into the public sphere, where everyone’s identities are socially, culturally, historically, and politically co-constructing and co-emerging [sic] from each other” (p. 65).

From unraveling this contextual factor, I agree that a researcher’s complete-membership is dynamic in nature, and it can be subjectively foregrounded by individual researchers in specific contexts, be it class, gender, sexuality, or even native language. Equally important, a researcher should also recognize that the construction of complete-membership is predicated upon relational and intersubjective relationships with multiple factors. Notably, in studying the same group of participants, a researcher may avow to be or be ascribed as the complete-member in one salient situation but not in others.

**Contextual Factor 4: Consensual Membership**

The fourth contextual factor for complete-membership is when a researcher’s ascribed identity meets his or her avowed identity. According to Martin and Nakayama (2010), avowal means how one portrays his or her identity, whereas ascription refers to how others attribute identity to that individual. Sarup (1996, p. 14) calls avowal as “inside/private” identity (how we see ourselves) and ascription as “outside/public” identities (how others have typified us).

Both my and Minfang’s (the same protagonist in the contextual factor of institutional memory) lived experiences and identity narratives provide examples for this fourth factor. Tsui (2007) states that “[i]t was not until [Minfang] was given the responsibility to teach [a core course in the English Department] that he began to identify himself, and felt that he was identified by others, as a full member of the department” (p. 675, emphasis added). In other words, Minfang’s “full membership” is generated when his avowed identity synchronizes with his ascribed identity. Additionally, take myself for example. I avow my identity as a foreign-born international student at a U.S. university. When I engage in conversations with other international students about topics such as cultural adaptations in the United States, the pronouns of “we” and “our” in the discussion meaningfully signify that I am ascribed as an international student by my interlocutor(s). Such pronominal choice represents consensual identifications and complete-membership (see also Alvesson, 2003; Toyosaki, 2011; Wolcott, 1999).

Based on the stated examples, complete-membership is more than what a researcher avows to be; it also needs to reach consensus with how the community under study ascribes the researcher. This factor of avowal–ascription consensual membership also speaks to epistemological intimacy between researchers and the researched, in ways which both parties share the knowledge of group membership based on matching identities.

**Contextual Factor 5: Symbolic Codes**

The final contextual factor I propose for a researcher’s complete-membership pertains to the use of symbolic codes, including speech codes, semiotic codes, and language choice. As mentioned in the historical review of CME, Asselin (2003) explains that an insider researcher shares not only identity and experiential base but also the same language with his or her participants. In speech codes theory (Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005), speech codes refer to the systematic and socially constructed communicative conducts as well as the particular ways of speaking in the community under study (or the so-called “speech community,” Philipsen, 1975). In semiotics, a code means a group of patterned signs which systematically carries significance as a message or a text to a group of users, and it is subject to constant change (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). According to Leeds-Hurwitz (1993), language is the most common model of a semiotic code, along with other codes, such as food, clothing, and objects (e.g., personal belongings). Regardless of slight variations in defining codes, the overlapping element is that a code holds symbolic significance toward a specific cultural group in a systematic way.

Several researchers provide instances to support how codes draw closeness among individuals and between cultural groups. Moloney and Harbon (2008) study students’ self-identities at a language immersion school (that teaches German, French, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish) in Australia. Participating students comment that they speak the language to gain a sense of belonging and group membership to that speech community. Rachel, a sixth-grade female student studying Japanese, explains that her Japanese-speaking ability helps her become a member of the Japanese speakers. She utters, “It’s like a code, you can talk to somebody and communicate and they don’t understand it unless they are Japanese” (p. 120,
emphasis in original). Similarly, Minfang’s identity formation process offers the same perspective (Tsui, 2007). To be fully recognized as a member of an English major in the learner’s community in southern China, Minfang acquired, the abilities “to speak standard Cantonese [i.e., a common regional dialect/language spoken at his college], to code-mix, to use Cantonese slang, and most important of all, being proficient in [spoken] English” (p. 675). Clearly, these two accounts represent how forming a full-member identity involves learning the community’s activities, language, and social discourse.

In addition to four other contextual factors, this fifth factor of recognizing, acquiring, and performing significant cultural symbolic codes is indispensable if a researcher wishes to assume complete-membership to a group. Norton (1997) pin-points that identity and language are co-constitutive constructs. Therefore, language as a code certainly plays a vital role in theorizing complete-membership. Also revealed in this particular contextual factor is how having the ability to competently conform to and perform symbolic codes in a culture/community renders epistemological exclusivity and intimacy that differentiates inside from outside members.

**My Conceptualizations of CMEers’ Selfhood/Self-Identity**

Although the five contextual factors of complete-membership are listed in seemingly linear and mutually exclusive circumstances, they are essentially interrelated. Herein, I offer my conceptualizations of selfhood and identity to steer away from the rigid categorical boundaries. To recoil from modernity—which often “associates with order, certainty, . . . , and absolute truth” (Sarup, 1996, p. 50)—I align my explications of identity/selfhood predominantly with postmodernity. Sarup (1996) iterates, “Identity in postmodern thought is not a thing; the self is necessarily incomplete, unfinished—it is ‘the subject in process’” (p. 47).

First and foremost, I argue that selfhood is not a private possession and self-identity does not remain fully under one’s control. As we assume ourselves to be independent and self-assured individuals, we tend to claim full control over our identities. However, as Cavallaro (2001) cautions us, “misinterpretation plays a central role in the construction of personal and collective identities: what we think we are is often a product of how our culture misrepresents us and of how we misrepresent ourselves” (p. 47). In other words, we cannot escape from the fact that our identities are intersubjectively constructed and shaped by our culture and by our own perceptions—sometimes accurately and sometimes not.

In addition to the intersubjective and potentially misrepresented features, my other conceptualization of selfhood/self-identity defends that selfhood/self-identity should be relocated from the central position. Stemming from Ancient Greek philosophies, Cartesian dualism and idealism claim that self is the center of the knowing act, the originator of meaning, and is associated with human powers (Cavallaro, 2001; McKerrow, 1993). Moving away from the Cartesian dualism and Idealism, Cavallaro preludes a different positionality of self in postmodernity, which echoes with (Cavallaro, 2001) proclamation that self is not “a center” (p. 25). Kiesinger (2002) also opines in her description of the narrative framework that “we [need to] step away from our story and hold it before us as a text for study” (p. 108, emphasis added). With the analogy between self and text, deconstructing the text in narrative, hence, is germane to the deconstruction of the self. Such deconstruction not only permits fragmentation of self in postmodernity but also removes the self from the center locus. Similar to the views from Derrida and Keisinger, McKerrow (1993) argues for the displacement of subject/self, because the decentered subject/self allows intersubjectivity to thrive and flourish.

Significantly informed by postmodern thoughts, I theorize CMEer’s identity/subjectivity as intersubjective, dynamic, decentered, and in flux. The conceptualizations of selfhood in tandem with the five contextual factors of a researcher’s complete-membership render my conviction that being a complete member is not a fixed or static position; rather, it is conditional, contextual, and mutable. Sarup (1996) supportively claims, “[I]dentity is a process; it is heterogeneous” (p. xvi). Hence, a researcher’s complete-membership is fluid and is not simply predicated upon his or her avowed ontological status of being; such membership is influenced by the epistemological intimacy among researchers and the researched under the inter-related conditions of identity historicity, institutional memory, situational (inter)subjectivity, consensual membership, and symbolic codes.

**CME’s Potential for Critical Communication Research**

Beyond the five contextual factors, I respond to Toyosaki’s (2011) statement at the beginning of this article, which pointed out the underdevelopment of CME in the field of intercultural communication. As a starting point, I propose how CME can contribute to critical communication research. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), conducting research as an insider (or CMEer) does not make a researcher better or worse; “it just makes [him/her] a different type of researcher” (p. 56). The differences CMEers bring warrant productive potentials in critical communication research.

To explore CME’s potentials for critical communication research, I succinctly review common foci and purposes of critical communication research. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) depict that critical communication theories center on the investigations of resistance and criticism toward “normal forms of life” (p. 32); on identity as contextual, constructed, and performed; and on issues of privilege, oppression, and power system. Warren and Fassett (2011) refer to such “normal forms” as what we have “taken for granted” in our everyday mundane lives. They further urge us (communicators) to question and challenge the normalcy in life and, ultimately, to take actions to promote social justice. Similarly, in intercultural communication, the critical paradigm (a subjective-based approach) addresses issues over context and power and stresses creating positive changes in and for...
culture, identity, and society (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, 2010). Steering slightly toward the context of critical communication pedagogy (CCP), Fassett and Warren (2007) outline ten commitments of CCP, in which they coherently examine the fundamental, fluid, and complex nature among several elements: communication, identity, culture, language, reflexivity, praxis (i.e., the fuse of theory and action), dialogue, social structural system, mundane meaningful context, and subjectivity and agency. In brief, the intersecting themes and purposes in critical communication research, pedagogical and not, challenge systems of power; promote social justice; and examine our everyday mundane life, praxis, emancipation, and transformation.

Based on the stated tenets, I suggest that CME’s first potential for critical communication research is related to praxis and reflexivity. In extant literature pertinent to CME, Toyosaki (2012) proposes praxis-oriented autoethnography that emphasizes the role of praxis in performing critical selfhood (see also Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). He asserts that praxis-oriented autoethnography “understands the autoethnographer self as the implicated and intersubjective self” (p. 250). At the personal level, when CMEers perform critical introspection for selfhood through self-reflexivity, they realize their own positionalities and performativity as a complete-member in a community, and such realization “assists him or her to live in the moment” (p. 250). In another work by Toyosaki (2011), he explicitly theorizes CCME and discusses the potentials of CME for critical communication research, which focuses more on the community level. In CCME, both the researchers and their participants’ communicative practices are critically interrogated. Toyosaki (2011) recognizes that, although as ethnic minorities in the United States, he and his Japanese participants both perpetuate and perform the ideology of White supremacy (see also Toyosaki, 2007). By incorporating praxis and self-reflexivity, the potential of CME is situated at both personal and cultural levels in critical communication research.

The second potential of CME for critical communication research pertains to troubling notions of struggles and deconstructing inequality in power and privilege. Alvesson (2009) regards at-home ethnographers (synonymous with CMEers) as “potentially better positioned than the outsider to reveal ‘the true story’ …”; moreover, researcher’s familiarity with their research settings and participants are “even more productive [than outsider researchers]” (p. 163). In other words, CMEers not only gain easier access to the research site, but because of the readily established rapport and epistemological intimacy, it is more likely to elicit “real” and “actual” perspectives from participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Paechter, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 2001; Smith, 2005). For instance, Kanuha (2000) analyzes her insider position in examining the struggles and oppressive accounts from people who identity as lesbian and people of color like herself. The familiarity and epistemological intimacy between CMEers and their participants, such as those in Alvesson’s and Kanuha’s research, undoubtedly help render and reveal true, direct, and actual accounts in inequality and power struggles.

The third potential of CME for critical communication research recognizes necessary advocacy for hopeful social justice from within. Integrating Freire’s (1998) rudiments of critical pedagogy (e.g., unfinishedness, always-becoming, and hopefulness), CME’s potential connection with critical communication research can be located in the hopefulness and the unfinishedness. Kanuha (2000) contends that “being an insider researcher enhances the depth and breadth of understanding a population that may not be accessible to a nonnative scientist [or researcher] . . . ” (p. 444). For example, under extreme systems of power, or due to reasons such as self-protection or maintaining reputation, participants are less likely to point out or display problems of oppression in a community to an outside researcher. In such case, a CME already has access to or may have personally experienced the injustice. The chance for noticing and changing the inequality, thus, can only come from within. In addition, just as the intersubjective nature of identity exemplifies, actions taken to promote social justice within one group extend beyond individuals of that particular group; such actions are already connected with and affecting others. In this way, CME helps to reveal the injustice hidden deeply in different communities and, with hope, to bring social justice for the oppressed.

I believe that CME paves special and beneficial avenues that allow critical communication research to take place. The insider status and the epistemological intimacy among CMEers and their participants make it possible to reify emphases of critical communication research, including praxis, reflexivity, challenging the status quo, and promoting social justice from within. Although I have outlined several critical potentials of CME, I do not “essentialize” (Narayan, 1993) CMEers as the only researchers who have access to conduct critical work, neither do I pose “conventional ethnographers/outsiders” as problematic. After all, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) remind us that complete-member researchers are a different type of researcher.

Conclusion

Through reviewing the historical development of CME as a type of ethnographic inquiry and examining epistemological intimacy, I realize numerous potentials and advantages of this methodology. CME opens up windows for subjective experiences, qualitative focus, and intimate and reflexive cultural interpretations for and from one’s own community. CME’s connections with EOC invite CMEers to investigate the meaningful codes and conducts in their own speech communities and cultural groups. In addition to EOC, CME is, to some degree, synonymous with autoethnography. Autoethnographic/CME writings construct intimate rapport not only with their readers but also with participants under study. In essence, CME shares analogous, if not identical, methodological foci with several other labels of ethnographic research methods used in different disciplines, such as backyard ethnography, insider ethnography/research, and at-home ethnography (not an exhaustive list). In spite of the variations in labels, CME stands as an ethnographic methodology that allow researchers and the researched to share
complete-membership and epistemological intimacy in multiple ways.

In particular, I have examined the concept and the practice of epistemological intimacy to identify five contextual factors that influence a researcher’s complete-membership. Just as the case for CME, epistemological intimacy is often not termed as such, except in Smith’s (2005) and Toyosaki’s (2011) research. Even so, the underlying assumptions of this concept among different labels are comparable to intraculturality, human intersubjectivity, and matching bases among identity, language, and experience. The significance of epistemological intimacy contributes to and intertwines with how I theorized the five contextual factors of complete-membership. With no intention to make my theorization comprehensive, the five factors range from historicity of identity, to institutional memory, situational (inter)subjectivity, consensual membership, and symbolic codes. I further supplemented the five contextual factors with my conceptualizations of postmodern-oriented selfhood to elucidate the seemingly mutually exclusive factors. After all, the five contextual factors are interdependent; just as how we, as human beings, already exist intersubjectively.

Finally, I proposed three potentials of the undertheorized CME for critical communication research. Critical elements such as praxis, reflexivity, challenging power inequalities and oppression, and promoting hopeful social justice can be attained through CME. Despite how CME warrants several benefits in critical communication research, I, nonetheless, acknowledged that research findings from this ethnographic methodology do not equal to the totality of the researched culture, nor do they represent the experiences of every individual in the community. Contrasting from the traditional method of EOC, CME offers one distinctive and unique insider perspective because CMEers have ready access to and/or are already part of the research community, which propels critical work from within. Although this paper has come to a conclusion, it is not the end. I embarked on a critical complete-member ethnographic journey home to Taiwan, where I put these endeavors to use for my dissertation research. During the data collection process, I realized how I fluctuated and transitioned across five factors of complete-membership in different contexts to establish rapport with the research participants and to elicit and exchange dialogues and experiences. Studying my own culture, in my country of origin, and with fellow citizens as a CMEer has been a meaningful journey; it has sparked much reflexivity urging me to reexamine my lived experiences and what I have been taking for granted.

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