



University of Cape Town
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Social Anthropology

ETHNOGRAPHY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

Toward a Progressive, Critical Engagement of Writing Culture

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AXL5407S Exam Essay Question

3. In *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (1973), Clifford Geertz claims that as ethnographers, “we are reduced to insinuating theories because we lack the power to state them” (1973:24), adding that in ethnography, there is “the need for theory to stay...closer to the ground” than in other sciences (1973:24).

Critically assess Geertz’s idea of the relationship between ethnography and theory in the light of your understanding of the themes, debates and readings in AXL5407S in 2013. Draw on material across the three broad sections of the course. you are also free to draw on additional sources of inspiration to make your argument.

1. Ethnography's Potential and Praxis

In *Writing Culture*, James Clifford and George Marcus define ethnography as “an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon; actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders” (Clifford & Marcus 1986:2). Michel Foucault and Claude Levi-Strauss argued that anthropology’s purpose is to be a repository of knowledge about ways of being ‘otherwise’ so as to bring about a transformation of ‘our culture’ and practices (cited in Davis 2006:505). Overing writes that “Humanity comes only through an acquaintance with the epistemologies and ontologies of other cultures, an acquaintance achieved through rich ethnography which is acquired by taking seriously what others say about their social worlds” (cited in Santos-Granero 2006).

Such an attitude entails a deep respect for other knowledge, arguably the most important ingredient for quality ethnography (Stoller & Olkes 1987). This necessitates abandoning the notion of the anthropologist as ‘the one who knows’, and realizing that “the task of the ethnographer is not to determine “the truth”, but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others’ lives” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995:3).

Anthropology is often thought of as the study of ‘others’ (Fischer 1986). Anthropologists travel – although not always far from home - elsewhere to objectify and “know” people and cultures seemingly ‘different’ what we know of in the western world (Geertz 1973). Anthropology is about learning from ideas and other ways of knowing to question deeply embedded assumptions within our own societies, experiencing the world in new ways, and opening up to new perspectives, which point to the problematic things that we take for granted in our own culture (Himes 1972; Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Herein lies the potential of ethnography and the production of knowledge derived from it. It ‘gets up close and personal’ with people and their lives through in-depth fieldwork (Geertz 1973), developing perspectives and analyses from being on the ground that illustrate the complexity and nuance of culture. Ethnography seeks to be critical, to put new questions on the table that challenge taken for granted ways of thinking and being. Yet it is more than a means of studying and configuring critical perspectives of socio-cultural worlds, it is part of the constructive, creative process of *reconfiguring* realities and worldviews (Law 2004), and of ‘inscribing social discourse’ (Geertz 1973).

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Ethnography is a qualitative method that aims to open up and extend understandings of how human beings live in the world. It represents a preoccupation with social imaginaries; values, ideas practices that are elucidated through ethnographic writing. Ethnography is about learning to unlearn, deeply engaging with people, 'stepping in' with an open mind and a humble heart. As much as it is embedded in interpretation, power and subjectivity - and beset by the reductiveness of abstraction and authority - it remains a critical and engaged mode of writing culture of crucial importance.

Equipped with ethnographic methods that serve to produce contextually rich, insightful, complex, nuanced narratives of peoples' lives, anthropologists possess a special set of epistemological and practical apparatuses to engage meaningfully in bettering society (Hymes 1972; Graeber 2006; Shukaitis 2010).

Ethnography is more important than ever. Far from naïve sentimentalism, I argue that ethnography has the potential, through educated critique and methodological dynamism to produce contextually nuanced illustrations of culture that can, through being 'on the grounds of culture' be transmitted to the grounds of culture in meaningful ways. Such a move would help to dissolve baroque, hegemonic forms of ethnography, and stimulate polyvocalic, pluralistic and perspicacious forms of writing and illustrating culture. Is ethnography fated to be a proudly marginal means of depicting culture, or can it adapt, renovate and reinvent itself to develop its potentiality and generate renewed importance? The challenge is to integrate the critical and the engaged aspects of anthropology, so that thoughtfulness and involvement can complement each other.

2. The Handmaiden of Postcolonialism or an Heirloom of the Enlightenment?

Ethnography is not only a method of writing culture, but also a culture of method (Fischer 1986), constituting paradigms not only of culture, but also paradigms of *how* to illustrate culture. What is anthropological theory? What is anthropological practice? These questions have inspired debate for decades, and have wrought relentless and rigorous critique and deconstruction of the discipline. For the first century of anthropology's history, objectivist epistemology was the ink that coloured its written ethnography. There was an 'objective' world out there; a wholly comprehensible reality that human beings were able to make sense of.

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Malinowski argued that anthropology's task was to 'understand the native's worldview' and to 'grasp the imponderabilia of life' (Malinowski 1927), and Durkheim believed that 'the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental principle' (Durkheim in Lynch 2000). Classical anthropological thought (and indeed scholarly thought in general), relied on the idea of social essentialism; that people possess certain essentials that make them what they are (Lynch 2000).

Colonial, racialized, and political discourse helped to construct the divide between the 'us' and the 'other' – the 'civilized' and the 'primitive' – and thus embellished the belief that people are objects to categorize and classify, not subjects who individually experience being human. Johannes Fabian – a vanguard of postmodernist anthropology – locates the root of naturalizing cultural difference and sameness in the exploitative epistemologies and praxis of western science and colonialism, and argued that anthropology was not about studying objects and products, but production and processes (Fabian 1971 in Caplan 2003). Derided as the 'handmaiden of colonialism' yet also championed an heirloom of the Enlightenment, anthropology has grappled earnestly and critically with its intellectual legacy.

Historically anthropology has sought to mould its identity as the 'science of humanity', yet far too often human agency and relations of power have been brushed under the carpet. Anthropologists have been accused guilty of seeing culture, not *seeing themselves in culture* (Jackson 1990). The postcolonial and postmodern surges of the 70s and 80s have immutably changed the landscape of anthropological epistemology, as well as challenging its *locus standi*. Sally Falk Moore writes that:

"The 'colonial connection' became a political issue among internal critics of Anthropology just at the point at which such connections no longer had any practical relevance, that is, in a post-colonial reaction. Apart from the vituperation of the 1960s and 1970s, which often became as dreary as the conceptual straw man it attacked, there was in addition considerable serious questioning of the models on which so much anthropological theory has been founded. the colonial period mentality critique was only one dimension of the more general proposal that a new set of problematics be addressed" (Bates *et al.* 1993).

Having been objected to intense scrutiny both within and without the anthropological world, the discipline continues to seek legitimation and distinction as a social science. Since the passing of colonialism, anthropology has been brazenly pronounced 'dead' (Mfeje 1998), stigmatized for its epistemological edifices which were exposed to have perpetuated parochial, naturalizing theories of the 'other' and of 'primitive, premodern' culture.

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As the colonial world disintegrated, the governmental, biopolitical structures of power that had mandated and commissioned the academic practice of anthropology – within which its practitioners in large part had been implicated – were laid bare, calling into question the foundational structures of the discipline, and subjecting it to postmodern deconstructionism, as it approached over a century of history.

Many anthropologists strongly disagreed with such inquisition. Raymond Firth, who described himself as ‘a liberal anthropologist with social interests’, staunchly opposed the critique levelled against post-colonial anthropology, claiming that it is not the bastard child of imperialism, but the legitimate child of the Enlightenment (Firth 1972). Setting up such definitional binaries seems however, to oversimplify – to one extreme or the other – the way anthropology is imagined, despite the imperative of critiquing the hegemonic features of the discipline (Himes 1974). It is well true that anthropology – across the globe – was culpable of producing and reproducing certain bodies of theory that played into the hands of the European colonial powers (Asad 1973).

But time goes on, history takes its course. We have entered the 21st century, and I think that it's really time that we moved on. I am in no way undermining the crucial importance of being critical of the ways in which anthropology is embedded in relations of power and hegemony, this is doubtlessly necessary, as it compels reflexivity and rigor. Yet this also seems to have produced a kind of paranoia and a compulsion to vindicate its theoretical and methodological culture.

What of all the other fields that study humanity and the world in general? Philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology – the so-called ‘soft sciences’ – and indeed biology, physics, chemistry, astronomy – the so-called ‘hard sciences’ – all represent particular ways of theorizing culture and nature alike, historically produced paradigms and praxis that attempt to make sense of and understand the world. All academic fields are, to be sure, are partial, contextually produced attempts toward this objective, subject to the evolution of theory and method over time (Kuhn 1962).

Is anthropology really ‘dead’? I shudder to think so. Levi Strauss believed that anthropology will survive in an ever-changing, transforming world, by allowing itself to perish in order to be regenerated in a new guise (cited in Mfeje 1998). Less dramatically, anthropology – like all fields of academia – has always, and will always, undergo change. As the topography of culture shifts, so too does the topography of studying culture shift.

3. Reflexive Ethnography

Reflexive ethnography concerns deepening our understanding of ourselves and our position in the world to better understand the social reality of others. It involves being sceptical of our own views, just as we are sceptical of the views of others. The ethnographer is in many ways like a gold fish in a gold fish bowl. Anthropologists must continually ask; 'do I see culture, or do I see myself in culture' (Jackson 1990). Ethnography is beset with aporias themselves configured in part by the limitless sphere of human culture. MacClancy writes that "If the world is the ultimate geographical limit of anthropology, then nothing less than the nature of humanity is its ultimate intellectual limit" (MacClancy 2002:9).

Ethnography is further problematized by the inherent human limitations of the ethnographer; "the ethnographic situation is defined not only by the native society in question but also by the ethnological tradition "in the head" of the ethnographer" (Himes 1974:438). Moreover, ethnography is produced through human relationships; "In anthropological investigation, objectivity lies neither in the logical consistency of a theory, nor in the givenness of the data, but in the foundation (Begrundung) of human intersubjectivity" (Himes 1974:440). Himes provides the upshot of this foundation, contending that "The comparative understanding of others contributes to self-awareness; self-understanding, in turn allows for self-reflection and (partial) self-emancipation; the emancipatory interest, finally, makes the understanding of others possible" (1974:448).

If 'human intersubjectivity', – derived from relationships forged in ethnographic fieldwork – reflexive awareness and interpretation then configures the writing and illustration of culture through ethnography, then exoneration of the theory it produces is potentially undermined. The ethnographies that anthropologists craft are rendered 'too blurry', caught up in hyper critique, interpretation and reflexivity. As Mfeje writes, 'an Anthropology which is constantly questioning its cultural, social and epistemological foundations is an intellectual cognition without affirmations' (1998:10). Critique of epistemological structures and being reflexive impels open-mindedness and awareness of the partiality, the 'moving-towardness' of ethnography.

Are the theory and method of ethnography seriously crisis? Clifford and Marcus argued over 25 years ago that "ethnography is in the midst of a political and epistemological crisis: Western writers no longer portray non-Western people with unchallenged authority; the process of cultural representation is now inescapably contingent, historical, and contestable" (1986:4). Does such a discontinuity genuinely warrant concern?

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Or is the stating of the 'crisis' as such not simply something that we have long perceived about epistemology, that knowledge cannot be absolutely equated with internal (mental) interpretations and perspectives, that the quest for reason should not be confused as the quest for certainty (Rorty 1979). Philosophers like Feyerabend, Heidegger and Wittgenstein had seriously doubted the legitimacy of western epistemological culture, which since the ancient Greeks and from the dawn of the Enlightenment, has rooted its production of knowledge in rational mental processes that necessarily proclaim universalist, generalizing theoretical representations (Rabinow 1986:236).

At the same time we have also realized that all is not lost. The baby need not be thrown out with the bath water. Foucault for example argued that the deconstruction of epistemology need not entail the rejection of truth and knowledge, but rather it opens up other possibilities which have been rejected. Through the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses and paradigms, alternative ways of doing ethnography can emerge (Rabinow 1986). By dedicating ethnography to exploring and being aware of the processes and historical influences that make and transform the particular, "that reciprocally shape subjects and contexts" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:31), what could emerge are more insightful, contemplative, multi-dimensional, representations of culture.

The refutation and deconstruction of 'ethnological reason' does not necessarily dissolve the grammar ethnographic texts (Mudimbe 1994). It is precisely in being critical and reflexive that writing and illustrating culture becomes increasingly contingent on being aware of theoretical and methodological contingencies. In stepping back in this way, ethnography gains awareness, as it does so, moves forward with deeper, more nuanced awareness and insight into culture.

This kind of modality is embedded in the multifarious, pluralistic ways in which culture manifests and moves. Culture "always contains within it polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images and actions...it is a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:27). Commenting on the future disposition of anthropology, the Comaroffs contend that "What should define us is a unique analytic stance, less our locus than our focus. Whether our topic be head-hunting in the Amazon... or voodoo exorcism in the Caribbean...we should approach it from the same perspective: as meaningful practice, produced in the interplay of subject and object, of the contingent and the contextual". (1992:32).

4. Writing Culture

Human culture is the distillation of over a billion years of biological evolution on earth, our homo genus progenitors only being in existence from about 4 million years ago. And it little less than 1 million years ago that the first transcontinental explorers, Homo erectus, began migrating out of the Great Rift Valley of eastern Africa, spreading Palaeolithic human culture throughout the old world. Outlasting our homo Neanderthals during a series of ice ages, Homo sapiens emerged as the only human species on the planet, and had by 30 000 years ago inhabited the Americas and Australasia.

Sprung forth since the dawn consciousness, the human social legacy is a rich tapestry of culture, a diverse topography of spirit. Writing culture, the practice of ethnography endeavours to illustrate this tapestry, and has come a long way over the course of the last 100 years, ever since Malinowski pioneered the practice in the Polynesia. The theosophies of the ancient world developed over centuries, millennia, and remind us that all ways of thinking about world, and making sense of it are shaped gradually over long periods. Ethnography then is still nascent, unbridled in potential.

In contemporary times, critical and reflexive cultures of doing anthropological ethnography have, and are become increasingly in vogue as the discipline moves into the 21st century. These have served to destabilize any sort of epistemological *terra firma*, calling into question the socio-political structures and discourses of power – both inside and outside the ethnographer - that affect the legitimacy of ethnography. At the same time, there is a move toward “free styles of thinking and the breaking of disciplinary boundaries” (Mfeje 1998:27). It is the very deconstructing of epistemologies that creates spaces for emergent, new styles of thinking (Mfeje 1998:30).

Anthropological ethnography, more than ever, is in the 21st century positioned - and has the potential - to deepen and broaden the way culture is theorized. It is intricately shaped by the complexities and nuances of social worlds, constantly in flux. Ethnography seeks to denaturalize naturalizing theory, complexify it, and generate critical insight and perspective into the pluriverse of socio-cultural realities. Ethnography attempts to make sense of, interpret and understand as far as possible the complexities of human culture, and despite its quagmires and challenges, is poised to refine and develop its praxis in continually ever more comprehensively. Anthropology, and so ethnography, its cornerstone, is not ‘dead’, it is developing and transforming through critical engagement and reflexivity, and through deconstruction, reconstructing itself in new, progressive ways.

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