

Thick Description: Methodology

Tanya M Luhrmann, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Abstract

'Thick description' is the term that Geertz used to describe ethnography in one of the most famous and influential anthropology texts in the second half of the twentieth century, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). It has come to imply two different things: on the one hand, good ethnography – what all anthropologists have done and do when they write up the results of solid, careful ethnography – and, on the other hand, what Geertz understood to be the intellectual entailments of this particular methodology.

'Thick description' is the term that Geertz used to describe ethnography in one of the most famous and influential anthropology texts in the second half of the twentieth century, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). The phrase was the title of the first essay in the volume of the collected essays, and Geertz explained at the time that he had written it to state his theoretical position as generally as he could. As a result, thick description has come to imply two different things: on the one hand, good ethnography – what all anthropologists have done and do when they write up the results of solid, careful ethnography – and, on the other hand, what Geertz understood to be the intellectual entailments of this particular methodology.

As Methodology

Geertz borrowed the phrase 'thick description' from the philosopher Ryle (1949), who used it to contrast two different ways of describing the same piece of behavior. Ryle's example was a boy's twitch and his wink. Both could be described as 'rapidly contracting his right eyelids.' That kind of description Ryle called 'thin.' He used the term 'thick description' to characterize the intentional, communicative, interpretative, meaning of the behavior: why it was done, how it was read, and using which social codes. That, Geertz argued, was the object of ethnography, "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parody, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived and interpreted, and without which they would not ... in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids" (1973, p. 7).

Ethnography is the written description of long-term participant observation. Professional anthropologists now typically expect that a person doing serious fieldwork (of the sort required for an anthropological dissertation, for example) will spend at least a year living in the 'field,' in the social setting that they have chosen to study. They expect that fieldworkers will speak the dominant language spoken in that setting, and they expect that fieldworkers will learn about that world not only or even primarily by interviewing its members, but also by learning how to participate as a member themselves: how to joke, to be in relationship, to be an appropriate person of their type (e.g., a woman in her 20s) in this social setting. If you are studying Londoners who practice witchcraft and magic, you learn how to write rituals, to read tarot cards, and to feel the magic running in your blood. If you study Malagasy villagers who plant rice and perform cattle sacrifice, you work in the rice

paddies and offer up a cow. Particularly in recent decades, professional anthropologists have decried their pith-helmeted, informant-paying forebears. They are likely to evaluate the student fieldworker by asking whether the student hung back from human contact or really got to know the people he or she worked among and came to be accepted by them. The point of this emphasis is to make sure that the fieldworker has grasped the realities and the rules of engagement of the world he or she has come to study. As Stephen Hugh-Jones once remarked, there is little point of having an abstract debate about what it means when the natives say that they 'see' their gods during rituals if you have not participated in those rituals and learned that they involve hallucinogens.

Professional ethnographers use at least three criteria to help them judge the reliability and validity of the ethnographic report.

First, they look at the richness of observational detail. Ethnography can be at risk of being dismissed as hearsay or anecdotal. But when the observational detail, reliably reported, is detailed enough – 'thick' enough – these objections no longer seem plausible. Ethnographic monographs are often quite lengthy for that reason: the ethnographer supports an argument on a foundation of thousands of specific observations about thousands of specific events.

Second, they look for external corroboration of the ethnography. In part, this is provided by prepublication peer review by experts in the specific area of the world the ethnography concerns. However, the primary responsibility for external corroboration lies with the ethnographer, who is expected to refer to published materials by field subjects (when relevant) and by other ethnographers to support his or her conclusions. At this point in world history, there are few societies remote enough to be completely unknown.

Third, they look for evidence that the ethnographer knows the ethnographic area well. As in any discipline, the conventions to judge competence are somewhat arbitrary, but still powerful. A year of full-time fieldwork is considered minimal; more years provide more reassurance about the quality of the data. Ethnographies thus present the specific dates and conditions of the fieldwork. To be able to converse in the language is minimal; to command idioms, whether in the spoken language itself or in the metaphorical language of local practice, again provides more reassurance. Ethnographies should display mastery of the local idioms of practice (the intricacies of the sheep trade, for instance). To be accepted in the target social world well enough to have conversational and observation

access to field subjects is also minimal, and so ethnographies typically describe how that access was acquired and maintained; sometimes these accounts are called 'arrival stories.'

There is, however, a hard-to-specify distinction between the competent ethnography and the really good one. Ethnographies do much more than give an account of who did what and when. An ethnographer can sit in a courtyard for one full day and describe exactly what he sees, and his observations will fill a monograph, and the monograph will be unreadable and unintelligible. By contrast, good ethnographies are accounts of a social world that make sense of that world to those who are alien to it. "What the ethnographer is in fact faced with," Geertz explained, "is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knitted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render" (1973, p. 10). Good ethnography describes what is really important to understand about this world, both to the participants and to its observers; it conveys what people mean when they say, 'you really get it.' When anthropologists use the phrase 'thick description' to refer to the ethnographic method, they mean to imply that the anthropologist does serious, engaged fieldwork; that he really grasps the social process of the world being studied; and that he writes an ethnography so detailed and so observant that it is utterly persuasive.

As an Epistemology

"If you want to understand what a science is," Geertz remarks early on in his famous essay, "you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do" (1973, p. 5). Ethnographers immerse themselves in another society for long periods of time, and collect far more bits of information than they could ever report or code or convey. Then they write books that attempt to describe the foreignness of that other world in ways that make it comprehensible to their readers.

As a consequence, Geertz argued, ethnographies are by their nature interpretations. They are not hypothesis driven and predictive. This does not mean that they are unconstrained and undisciplined. "That is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer" (1973, p. 30). But they are not normal science – normal social science – in the style of psychological experiments and economics theories. The anthropologist, from this perspective, is more like a literary critic who writes about a novel that anyone could in principle read. They may write about the novel in many ways – explain it to those who do not understand, praise or critique it, argue that other readers have misunderstood it, suggest that it captures certain human experiences that help its readers to see those experiences differently from before, and insist that one way of thinking about it is more illuminating than another. But whatever they do, that novel exists as an art form independent of their presence, and their job is to help others to appreciate it more deeply. The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in

faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in these places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally arise (1973, p. 16).

What can be interpreted, however, is only what can be 'read.' The power in the comparison of ethnography and literary criticism lay not only in the reasonableness of the general claim – fieldwork is indeed different from laboratory science – but in the pragmatic usefulness of its central metaphor. Following Paul Ricouer, Geertz not only compared the anthropologist to a literary critic, but described culture and social interaction as a text – the metaphorical 'literature' that the anthropological critic interpreted. More loosely, he described culture as discourse and as language. He argued that culture – "this acted document" (1973, p. 10) – was public because meaning was public. As an ethnographer, a watcher of others, you have no access to people's minds. What you can see is that they communicate, and you can interpret what they communicate, and what you are after is in effect the language or discourse that they are using, not the ideas they have in their mind. Geertz used Wittgenstein's private language argument to support the claim that culture, like language, was a public, social phenomenon, but his primary concern at the time was that you did not need to understand psychological process in order to be a good ethnographer. Understanding the mind was a psychologist's job; understanding culture was the anthropologist's.

This central metaphor, of culture as a text, gave the ethnographer something specific to do: to identify symbols that somehow represented the particular social process of that group, and to then explain their meaning. In a much quoted definition Geertz stated, "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973, p. 5). Geertz went on to argue that the kinds of things that anthropologists interpret – rituals, myths, cockfights – are themselves interpretations of the society in which they were found, and so the anthropologist is producing second- and third-order interpretations for a different purpose. "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1973, p. 452).

Because (from this perspective) culture is a semiotic system, so that all representation is in effect interdependent, and because the social behaviors that despite everything anthropologists tended to think of as cultural – rituals, stories, songs; the noninstrumental side of life – are also understood as interpretations of their own society, the anthropologist could focus on some practice that on the surface seemed trivial or irrational, and use that practice to understand and reflect upon the nature of the social whole. Geertz did this most famously in his essay on the Balinese cockfight. The cockfight is a seeming unimportant and irrational piece of Balinese culture in which grown men bet money they cannot afford to watch birds kick each other to death in illegal matches. Geertz suggested that Balinese men were gripped by their cockfights because the matches flung away the restrained, polished, social hierarchy

that otherwise defined Balinese daily life, and through his discussion, this small social practice became the prism through which you came to understand fundamental features of Balinese society.

In the decade after these two essays on thick description and the cockfight were published, Geertz became one of the leading figures of sociocultural anthropology, if not its dominant presence, and his work precipitated a paradigm shift in the field and influenced other fields as well, most notably history. The new approach was called 'symbolic' anthropology and contrasted both with functionalism (a primarily British approach which sought to understand how all elements of social practice contributed to the effective functioning of that social world) and structuralism (an initially French approach that sought to identify the formal logic underlying cultural representation). David Schneider and the midcareer Marshal Sahlins were also associated with this new emphasis on the way cultural practices represented social process, and symbolic anthropology tended to be associated with the department of anthropology at the University of Chicago, where Geertz had been before he left for the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton. Rosaldo's *Knowledge and Passion* (1980), an ethnography that explores the society of the Filipino Ilongot headhunters through a dominant emotion term, is a good representative of symbolic anthropology.

Now, however, the phrase that is associated with thick description is 'interpretive anthropology.' That phrase tends to mean that the ethnographer values serious (in depth, detailed) fieldwork and understands the ethnography as an attempt to

make the foreign world comprehensible to the reader. The phrase also often implies that the anthropologist is self-consciously aware of the literary nature of the ethnographic enterprise: that ethnography is an act of writing, and that successful anthropologists are first and foremost writers. Finally, the phrase often (but not always) implies that this writerly, interpretive act is the primary goal of ethnography, and that anthropology cannot be a hypothesis-testing science, because its methods will not allow it to be so. As a result, the phrase is sometimes used to imply more about what ethnography is not, than about what it is, and the phrase can be used as a battle cry by those who wish to see anthropology associated with the humanities. Those battles, however, take the phrase beyond the domain that Geertz first mapped out.

See also: Ethnography; Field Observational Research in Anthropology and Sociology; Interpretation in Anthropology; Participant Observation.

Bibliography

- Geertz, C., 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, New York.
- Rosaldo, M., 1980. *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Ryle, G., 1949. *The Concept of Mind*. Hutchinson, London.