

THE TRANSLATION OF EXPERIENCE: FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO THEORY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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The author asserts that anthropology is not a science and is therefore not predictive; anthropology is, rather, "the scientific art that generates probability." To accomplish this art, the author advises anthropologists to accentuate subjectivity and to some extent, autobiography in their ethnographic work. Current theoretical perspectives, the author also states, may nullify the ethnographic experience.

Lost, it is buried? One more missing piece?
But nothing's lost. Or else; all is translation
And every bit of us lost in it
(Or found-I wander through the ruin of S
Now and then wondering at the peaceful-
ness).¹

"Hey, Presto!" says Edmund Leach (1964: xii) of the seemingly magical transformation of "facts," "raw data," into concepts and theories by imposing on them a figment of anthropological thought, or perhaps more fittingly, imagination. From "empirical observations" or "observed reality" through the utterance of formulae, the anthropologist then presents some kind of model which is supposed to make sense out of (sometimes) foreign reality. As Needham (1972: 188) puts it, "The task of anthropology is to render accurate reports of alien modes of experience and action." From all that is seen or heard about and all that is done or read about (participant observation and preparation), the anthropologist condenses all possible statements of his experience into those relative few which can subsume and explain his original manifold perceptions. This is accomplished according to his orientation to his material (that is, previous to it), his purpose at hand (contemporaneous with it), and his reflections (after the collection of it) on returning from the "field." Although this framework is not necessarily an immutable given, it seems that according to Geertz (1973: 4), the most centrally important goal aimed at by means of translation procedures of anthropological

research, both ethnographic and theoretic, is to identify in some way this framework with the concept of culture.

The movement from the surface of description to the profundity of understanding delineates this endeavour but, despite the ordering of latter clause, it is not or should not be unidirectional nor should it rest at either extremes, for there lies incomprehension. Whether it is what people say, what people do, how they logically or perhaps illogically go about either, or what symbolically underlies all of these is not only dependent (for accurate representation) on what the anthropologist says, but what the anthropologist says is dependent on these findings (for what kinds of representations are communicated). The layers or webs of significance that Geertz says define the concept of culture, and which must be established, yield intellectual constructs which then yield not laws nor predictions but meaning:

This unpacking of performed meaning is what the symbolic action approaches are designed to accomplish. Here there is no single name to cite, just a growing catalogue of particular studies, some dependent on Kenneth Burke, some on Ernst Cassirer, Northrop Frye, Michel Foucault, or Emile Durkheim, concerned to say what some bit of acted saying — a coronation, a sermon, a riot, an execution — says (Geertz 1983: 29).

As long as the content of description relates symmetrically and symbiotically with the form

of construction that is intermediately between action and abstraction, meaning translates into comprehension.

In this short introduction, I am trying to adumbrate my own synthesis of my experience with anthropological theory, ethnography, and fieldwork, as well as to indicate the basis for the following appraisal of how other anthropologists have dealt with these efforts and how they may be criticized. I have taken my inspiration from Clifford Geertz but have roamed in distant and often obscure realms to see what others – philosophers, literary critics, and even sociologists – have to say that harkens to the observation and interpretation of experience. This, then, is an essay in words, about words which ultimately concern human behavior and ideation, both the anthropologist's and those with and to whom he relates.²

With this in mind, the questions can now be asked: What is ethnography? What is theory? What is the relationship between the two? I must at once make a disclaimer that, rather than trying to evaluate all the ramifications of these questions and attempts to answer them, I want to take the point of view that I most agree with, that of Geertz (1973, 1983). However, in presenting his argument, I will occasionally cast about in other fields to elucidate and perhaps qualify parts of his exposition in light of the definitions of others. Certain of his disagreements with existing anthropological approaches will also be dealt with, in most cases, affirmatively.

Geertz's Argument

Geertz talks about ethnography as "thick description," that it deals with interpretation, that it can be conceived of as webs of significance, and that essentially it is a problem of meaning. To give the source of much of what I have been saying, I will let Geertz (1973: 3) say it himself:

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 laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

This "interpretive explanation," he says, ten years later (Geertz 1983: 22):

... trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are.

Alfred Schutz confirms this point of view in that he says that Weber "postulates the task of social science the discovery of intended meaning – indeed, the intended meaning of the actors." Thus, if anthropology is supposed to be after meaning, then the way it goes about it at a primary level is through ethnography. So, to judge what ethnography is, Geertz suggests we look at what it does.

First, ethnography:

... is not a matter of methods – establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on, ... that defines the enterprise (Geertz 1973: 6).

Rather, the object of ethnography is to establish "... a stratified hierarchy of meaning structures" (Geertz 1973: 7). To do this the ethnographer has to continually pick his way through "... piled-up structures of inference and implication" (Geertz 1973: 7); "hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of perpetual motion, into explications of one another" (Geertz 1983: 69). In other words, ... doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations. ... but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior (Geertz 1973: 10).

I may add Becker (1979: 212) saying,

In a multicultural world, a world of multiple epistemologies, there is need for a new

philologist — a specialist in contextual relations — in all areas of knowledge in which text building . . . is a central activity: literature, history, law, music, politics, psychology, trade, even war and peace.

The original operation starts with so-called raw data, and it is important to note that even at this “. . . lowest level, ‘raw’ data, unpermeated by the conceptual organization of an apprehending mind are in the last resort unknowable, even inconceivable” (Beattie 1966: 61). Because it is a contentious issue not explored very much in anthropology, let me digress for a moment to consider perception and conception leaving aside the definition of perception as acute, intuitive apprehension.

It would seem, in a conscious sense, that they are very difficult to distinguish. They both arise out of experience and action which are always elements in process, in movement, in flux. In this view (Lee 1973, Sperber 1980), perception is the interpretation of a presently taken episode of the flux of sense stimulation by means of a rudimentary and vague setting up of vague similarities and repetitions. Conception then merely involves further generalization and symbolization. The result of this is that there is really nothing to distinguish, except perhaps stages in a single process.³ Probably the only truly qualitative difference between perception and conception lies in prelanguage situations. But it is sufficient for my purposes here to say that it may be difficult or maybe impossible to find instances of perceptual knowledge free from all concepts or an instance of conceptual knowledge free from all percepts. While I do not quite find it trite (as the author of the following paraphrase seems to feel), it may seem that Levi-Strauss agrees with the foregoing: “He states that the ensemble of human receptor organs prestructures or predetermines ‘reality’ — cognition is already abstract on a microcosmic level” (Diamond 1974: 302). Nevertheless, Diamond (1960) goes on to assert the inadmissibility of assimilating conceptions to perceptions, referring the reader to a previous article. Yet this article is not altogether convincing (there being

possible objections concerning his rendering of native categories and little explicit perceptual evidence) so that it still seems to me that all knowledge is conceptual knowledge⁴ if for its communication it relies on discursive language. The very word “percept” is, after all, a concept but not the other way around.⁵ In the context of this paper, my digression here tries to make evident that having an experience (which maybe perceptual but on that level indeterminate) is not identical with explaining experience (which is entirely conceptual).

So, to get back to ethnographic data, however “raw,” are already in a sense almost indistinguishably both perceptual⁶ and conceptual — grouped according to their significance and interconnectedness. Nadel (Beattie 1964 : 79) states that “every way in which facts are grouped involve, implicitly or explicitly, theories.” This will again be considered later.

To recapitulate, analysis is the sorting out of structures of significance. Out of the seeming jumble of layers, twists, incoherencies, biases and conflicting motivations, the puzzle must be pieced together and rendered meaningful. Putting the pieces together, what is relative or relevant to what and in what context is the aim and result of “. . . interviewing informants, observing rituals, eliciting kin terms, tracing property lines, or censusing households” (Geertz 1973: 10). Taken as a whole this, then, is ethnography.

Other Perspectives

Before going on to some of the preconditions of fieldwork and then briefly to some specific ethnographies, I wish to consider some of the subdisciplines and specialisms that have proliferated in anthropology that are, in fact, supposed to be marking its disintegration (Burridge 1973: 236). This fact, depending of course on one’s particular outlook, is not to be deplored, nor is it necessary to make a case for traditional, mainstream or consensus anthropology — which will be futilely bemoaning the all but complete passing of structural

functionalism. Nevertheless, even if fieldwork, participant observation and learning a new language are on their way out, there are still some who consider the latter to be the most insightful of the anthropologists' experience. Thus, it is rather the tendency of some of these newly-evolved specialisms to obfuscate, obliterate or trivialize the contributions of the "old" unified anthropology that is deplorable. It is for this reason⁷ that I find it necessary to take a polemic swipe at, for example, cognitive anthropology, again via Geertz. This quote follows statements about the obviousness of this brand of interpretive anthropology; interpreting not only what people say, but also what they say they do, and what they actually do. And yet this obviousness may be obscured by attempts to reify culture, attempts to reduce it to its behavioral or unconscious components, but most confusingly by the reaction of the latter two:

Variouly called ethnoscience, componential analysis, or cognitive anthropology (a terminological wavering which reflects a deeper uncertainty), . . . in . . . this school of thought . . . extreme subjectivism is married to extreme formalism, with the expected result: an explosion of debate as to whether particular analyses (which come in the form of taxonomies, paradigms, tables, trees, and other ingenuities) reflect what the natives 'really' think or are merely clever simulation, logically equivalent but substantively different, of what they think (Geertz 1973: 11).

I will only add that I find ethnomethodology equally confusing and confused, and personally find it a rather vapid approach. If there is any reason for keeping sociology apart from anthropology then ethnomethodology is a good one. While I agree that it is valuable to question the taken-for-granted and to see how it comes about and how it is maintained, the extent to which these questions are taken lead to such pretentiously intricate, long-winded and mundane meanderings that one is tempted to ask, so what? Just as it still is and has been asked after thirty years "what is ethnomethodology?" so since its inception

has the question been asked "what is ethnomethodology?"⁸ The attempt to achieve rigour in research should not, as Berreman (1966: 354) suggests, lead to scientific rigor mortis.

As Berreman has been evoked, it may be appropriate to see what he says about ethnography. In one article (1968) he talks about approximations to the ideal of what an ethnographer should have as characteristics: he should be open-minded, tolerant, modest, straightforward, able to listen, of mature personality, empathetic, patient, skeptical, inordinately curious and fundamentally creative, among other things. However I do not mean to be entirely facetious. Take, for example, in some contrast, the following characterization of Levi-Strauss as field-worker or perhaps anti-hero: "In *Triestes Tropique* the over-educated, urbane, synesthesia-prone, die-hard rationalist discovers in a sucked-up world enough reciprocal bricoleuring to rescue his esprit from total ennui" (Boon 1974). Since I have introduced, somewhat obliquely, emotion into the discussion, it may as well be followed up. There is, in my opinion, a need in ethnography for what Malinowski over sixty years (1922: 18-19) ago called the "impoderabilia of actual life":

the tone of conversational and social life, the existence of strong friendships and hostilities, and of passing sympathies and dislikes between people; the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behavior of the individual and in the emotional reaction of those who surround him.

Yet even now there are very few ethnographies that have taken up this counsel. There is a relative dearth of feeling or aliveness or the human quality in ethnography.⁹ These are generally only portrayed in novels. And yet just short of spiritual and intellectual default Levi-Strauss analyzes variable social texts, institutions, and codes in spite of it all; observing macro social and religious change, Weberians and pragmatists analyze variable social texts, institutions and beliefs in light of it all (Boon 1974).¹⁰

What is being said here is that there is a fundamental contrast in the underlying assumptions of certain ideal images of man, that is those with and those without affectivity.

In a related manner, let me continue with Berreman's consideration of ethnographic aims. One of these is to present an understanding of a culture such that the reader would be able to behave as a member of that culture in the same way as the ethnographer. Holzner (1968: 23) affirms this in the name of observer reliability "which is the pragmatic test of observer standardization by demonstrating the practical interchangeability of observers."¹¹ Only in the context of science does this seem entirely possible and for ethnography or anthropology, only in so far as it is scientific, not science. The problem is the perennial one of objectivity and participatory values; classically in the contradictory rendering of emotions. Redfield's Mexicans are peaceful, contented, well-integrated while Lewis' same Mexicans are faction-ridden, tense, fearful, frustrated, envious and suspicious. We have a similar problem in George Foster (1965) — all the latter emotional adjectives apply to peasants as an expression of their competition for scarce resources. In Foster's case, we have an example of a theory which tends to bias or at least make one-sided the portrayal of emotions.

In response to the problem of objectivity and bias, Berreman (1968) calls for "an ethnography of ethnography; a description of exactly how ethnography is done;" to make methodology explicit as well as to reveal the bases for inference. In a very brief look at ten of the Holt, Rinehart and Winston case studies, I find only three that make their methodologies explicit and in only one, Chagnon's *Yanomano: The Fierce People*, has this been done to the extent implied as necessary. The others say it in three lines or less.

In terms of content, the sample indicates a close congruence with Berreman's (1968: 338) outline of the typical account. It follows that there is a uniformity in ethnography, at least of labelling practices. For example, commonly included is a section on kinship

and marriage which often belies the extreme diversity within such categories. In fact there is a good case to be made for the undermining of the nominalist tendencies in anthropology (Needham 1974), but I will limit my remarks on content by saying that though there is an element of boredom in this uniformity, it is rather to be seen as a necessary dullness entailed in the informational output of ethnography. Just as, strictly speaking, we cannot have facts without theories, we cannot have theories without facts.

Notions of Theory

To introduce the topic of theory, it should be noted that the view of anthropology as interpretation implies the writing of it as fiction—not in the sense of fantasy but in the sense of creation or "construction" (Ileto 1985). Leach (1965:5) insists that "the structures which the anthropologist describes are models which exist only as logical constructions in his own mind." Both Burridge (1973) and Geertz (1973) echo this statement, the latter asserting that anthropological interpretations are second and third order ones, with the former on his pronouncement on theory as a series of rationalizations involving both self and other. This view is mostly expressed in the realistic proposition that "cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses" (Geertz 1973:20); not, I will agree, in "the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe" (Geertz 1973: 18), and not in "discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape" (Geertz 1973: 20).

In the literature, the word "theory" is banded out so much in such a variety of contexts that I am tempted to say that everything anthropology does is theoretical. From orientation, organization, sets of assumptions, frames of reference, summarizing sets of reality constructs, rationales for explanation, models,

paradigms, through low, middle or high range to all the labels emanating from/or in contradistinction to positivism: all this is theory at some time or another. Nonetheless, it seems clear that abstraction or more exactly, levels of abstraction, is the operational essence of theory. Abstraction means literally a drawing from and what is drawn out depends on the nature of interests. Leach (1965:5) asks about relating abstraction to the data of empirical fieldwork: "How can we really be sure that one particular model fits the facts better than any other possible?" Buridge (1973:127) answers: "The virtues and vices of different modes of interrelating the raw data depend on the congruence of the mode with the questions being asked and the kinds of answers required."

Granting, if not substantially, that this is at least essentially what theories are about, it still remains to be asked where they are found. I would posit that they are most commonly in and almost inextricable from ethnography – the kind of ethnography generated from first-hand fieldwork, and notwithstanding the intellectualists, armchair or "if I were a horse" varieties of anthropology. The further theory gets from ethnography, the more unconvincing or vacuous it seems to become (Geertz 1973: 25). The limit of this drift is reached when theories become so general as to explain both everything and nothing. It is more fruitful, on the other hand, to generalize *within* contexts in order not to lose the particularity which is so central to the anthropological undertaking. The former, I assume, is a result in classification, of what Wittgenstein (Needham 1974) has called "a craving for generality." Somewhere between philosophy and fact-mongering, anthropological theory must provide the formulations for a dialogue between cultures. These rest not so much on similarities but on differences for the latter not the former stand in the way of such communication. If the differences can be made comprehensible, then surely there will not be such a tendency to wipe them out through generalities, Western cultures being one such generality.¹²

There is also the uncertainty of going too "deep" – even though there may be the feeling of discovered truth in the underlying indeterminability of certain human conceptions, what then do we do with such a proposition? Needham (1972:246) shows this ironically in his bent towards undermining things: after 246 pages of exploration into the nature of belief, he says "the solitary comprehensible fact about human experience is that it is incomprehensible." (This is surely not positivism, rather pessimism with a dash of sophism.)

At any rate, the most common location of theories is in ethnography where "theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them" (Geertz 1973:25). It follows therefore that theory must be in a position to increase the translability of ethnography. Translation, I think, is the ultimate rationale for theory (see Barth 1966:32-33). Once again, I hold with Geertz (1973:27; 1983) that "in ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action to say about itself – that is, about the role of culture in human life – can be expressed."

Summary

To sum up briefly, I have raised in this paper some of the most basic questions in anthropology: more or less "what is it?" and "what is it supposed to do?" My answers have been based more on assertion than evidence, although they take their impetus from one of anthropology's leading figures, so that the result has been a reflection of an identification with one set of opinions over and against certain others. Thus, the exposition has been admittedly tendentious but hopefully not mendacious (in its originality). Specifically, I have synthesized certain points of view in order to encourage a fuller treatment of emotion and less intellectualist formalism, a conceptual stance that recognizes and retreats from too much abstraction, a focus on

translation rather than over-arching generalization, and perhaps a little inference-revealing autobiography. Also, I have tried to show that the effect of certain theoretical perspectives has been to nullify the ethnographic experience.

Those for whom the latter is not centrally important may be the vanguard in anthropology, but until such time that ethnography disappears entirely, taking "anthropology" with it, there is justification in urging a more meaningful realization of its potentials. To back up my claim to partisanship and my possible effrontery in this paper, I quote an unlikely ally, Marvin Harris (1975:65): "I don't see how you can write anything of value in social science if you don't offend someone."¹³

A few afterthoughts about theory, science and prediction: prediction is one of the things with which anthropology has considerable difficulty. I have urged that anthropology is not science and therefore is not predictive: more realistically, it is the scientific art that generates probability. If I can, for the moment equate science, positivism, empiricism, and prediction, consider the following little story which marks the end of this essay:

A highway, in its materiality, is wholly positive. But the traffic regulations that make it viable are negatively infused. Presumably, the many animals killed on a fast cross-country highway had perceived the road in its positive physicality — that is, they had presumably distinguished the sheer sensation of the pavement from the sensation of dirt nearby; but they were unaware of its 'rules,' some of them negatives established by traffic law, some negatives set by men's knowledge of the inconveniences imposed upon a car if it leaves the road. The animals apparently assume that car, like animals, are likely to go in any direction, not just along the road... The confinements of the road are also the conditions of its freedom; by its regulations it is made serviceable... Empiricism seeks to approach reality through sheer sensory immediacy, rather than through the stress upon the symbolic element that, like 'god-head,' inevitably infuses all experience possible to man, the essential symbol-using animal. In this regard, the empiricist approach to reality would be as close as the empiricist could come to the kind of perception we have attributed to animals just before they get run over (Burke 1966:472).

Notes

I wish to thank Josie Dongail. She not only copy-edited the draft but also read it with great care and with no less insight.

¹ James, Merrill, "Lost in Translation," *Divine Comedies*, 1976:10.

² The multifarious use of words must be emphasized for the terms used by the preceding references reflect a diversity of approach to experience that in turn reflects a fundamental insecurity in any anthropological undertaking.

³ Just as similarly, "ethnography and anthropology correspond to two stages in the same research" (Levi-Strauss 1963:285).

⁴ There are, I assume, various theories of perception and the one I am outlining here does not include the research in psychology on the problem. However even psychologists do not, as yet and as far as I am

aware (my presumed ignorance here reflecting another's: Spradley, 1972:9) know what happens when the brain transforms a sensation into a percept. On the other hand, an objection may be raised as to what any of this really has to do with ethnography. Admittedly, it is somewhat tangential, but I think the roots of the enterprise should be explained as well as the products. It is the former impulse that has led me to draw some of the implications of the following paragraph and put them in the text of my essay:

Even if ordinary language does not acknowledge it, there is a theoretic thread woven into all direct perception: it is the proto-generalization, the interpretive factor in all direct perception. The theoretic factor is at a minimum but it is there, and affords the continuity running through direct perception, perceptual knowledge and more highly generalized theoretic knowledge. The difference between perceptual and highly theoretic knowledge is not an absolute difference (Lee 1973:68).

⁵Thus, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Lander 1966:51).

⁶For a critical appraisal of the logic of others' theories of how conceptions determine perceptions (including Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), which the author refutes as "Believing is not seeing," (Kordig 1971). It seems to me, however, that Kordig has seized upon possible semantic confusions that are so perhaps only for himself.

⁷And also perhaps because "it is an accepted notorious dictum that an anthropologist may be bored by ethnographic facts; but what is less well admitted is that social anthropologists may even be more bored by analysis. What anthropologists really like to hear about, apart from other anthropologists, is anthropology" (Needham 1974:15).

⁸For an attempt to bring ethnoscience and ethnomethodology together through phenomenology, see George Psathas (1972:206-219).

⁹"But if ethnography is merely a rhetorical agent of ideology or a research tool of 'social engineering' whether conservative or revolutionary, then we will turn from a human to an inhuman confrontation of human differences. To hope for an ethnography that combines immediacy and understanding, particularly with the audiences we have and standards we need today, may be beyond the capacity of the ethnographic tradition. It is not even clear that the audiences we have could tolerate an ethnography that genuinely communicated the living perceptions of another people in another condition of life" (Reisman 1974:10).

¹⁰See also Boon (1982).

¹¹See also Spradley (1979).

¹²For example:

Structural anthropology, which in theory posits itself as a universal and comparative science, is in fact a particular and ethnocentric version of Western ideology. Its hyper-theoretical, antihumanistic, and inauthentic objectivism are *ethnological* symptoms of an intellectual imperialism, scientific reductionism, and bourgeois false-consciousness which structuralism uncritically takes for granted and unconvincingly incorporates within its own anthropological praxis" (Scholte 1974: 424).

All this is, of course, debatable but it does quite nicely illustrate my point. (See Rossi 1974: 456-458).

¹³Harris (1975:69; 1980) also says that emic approaches, phenomenology and structuralism "have the supreme virtue of being useless. The main school of anthropology. . . merely operates in an ethereal realm of ideas, listening to what people say

they think." I leave it to the reader to decide on the validity of this opinion.

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