

Ethnography and Participant Observation

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ETHNOGRAPHIC methods, relying substantially or partly on "participant observation," have a long if somewhat checkered career in the social sciences. They have been employed, in various guises, by scholars identified with a variety of disciplines. In this chapter we shall not attempt a comprehensive review of the historical and contemporary methodological literature. Rather, we shall focus on several complementary themes that relate to some of the sources and dimensions of diversity and difference in ethnographic research, the recurrent tensions within the broad ethnographic tradition, and contemporary responses to these.

Definition of the term *ethnography* has been subject to controversy. For some it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate. And, of course, there are positions between these extremes. In practical terms, *ethnography* usually refers to forms of social research having a substantial number of the following features:

- a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them
- a tendency to work primarily with "unstructured" data, that is, data that have not been

coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories

- investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail
- analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most

The definition of *participant observation* has been less controversial, but its meaning is no easier to pin down. A distinction is sometimes drawn between participant and nonparticipant observation, the former referring to observation carried out when the researcher is playing an established participant role in the scene studied. However, although it is important to recognize the variation to be found in the roles adopted by observers, this simple dichotomy is not very useful, not least because it seems to imply that the nonparticipant observer plays no recognized role at all. This can be the case, but it need not be. More subtle is the widely used fourfold typology: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and complete participant (Gold, 1958; Junker, 1960). Even this tends to run together several dimensions of variation, such as the following:

- whether the researcher is known to be a researcher by all those being studied, or only by some, or by none
- how much, and what, is known about the research by whom
- what sorts of activities are and are not engaged in by the researcher in the field, and how this locates her or him in relation to the various conceptions of category and group membership used by participants
- what the orientation of the researcher is; how completely he or she consciously adopts the orientation of insider or outsider¹

Moreover, it has been argued that in a sense *all* social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). From this point of view participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers.

Both ethnography and participant observation have been claimed to represent a uniquely humanistic, interpretive approach, as opposed to supposedly "scientific" and "positivist" positions. At the same time, within the ethnographic tradition there are authors espousing a "scientific" stance, as opposed to those who explicitly reject this in favor of an engaged advocacy and a critical stance. The philosophical, ethical, and methodological strands intertwine. They meet and coalesce to form particular "schools" or subtypes of ethnography; they engage with different theoretical movements and fashions (structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, cultural and cognitive anthropology, feminism, Marxism, ethnomethodology, critical theory, cultural studies, postmodernism, and so on). There is never an orthodoxy. Rather, there is a constant process of oppositions, of successive heterodoxies and heresies. Just as the ethnographer in the field often cultivates the position of the "marginal native" (Freilich, 1970), so ethnographers collectively seek to distance themselves repeatedly from versions of "mainstream" orthodoxy. These are enshrined in the creation myths of ethnography itself. They are carried through into contemporary debates and differences over methodology. The particular focus for methodological or epistemological controversy changes, of course. Earlier debates concerned the problems of data collection, inference, and topic. In the later sections of this chapter we examine more recent controversies, including those concerning the textual character of ethnography and the problems of representation and authority associated with that. The fashionable preoccupations of post-structuralism and postmodernism have both stimu-

lated interest in these new issues and provided a new slant on older themes. They have given a new critical edge to the recurrent methodological issues: the tensions between disinterested observation and political advocacy, between the "scientific" and the "humane," between the "objective" and the "aesthetic." Ethnography has, perhaps, never been so popular within the social sciences. At the same time, its rationales have never been more subject to critical scrutiny and revision.

A Historical Sketch

The beginnings of modern forms of ethnographic fieldwork are usually identified with the shift by social and cultural anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries toward collecting data firsthand. Often regarded as of most significance here is Malinowski's (1922) fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, the distinctiveness of which lay in his concern to document the everyday social life of the islanders (Burgess, 1982, pp. 2-4; Kaberry, 1957; Richards, 1939; Young, 1979). However, there are no simple and uncontroversial beginnings in history, and some commentators have taken a longer view, tracing elements of the ethnographic orientation back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophy (Hammersley, 1989), to the Renaissance (Rowe, 1965), and even to the writings of the ancients, for example, Herodotus (Wax, 1971).

Although in its particular style and substance ethnography is a twentieth-century phenomenon, its earlier history can be illuminating. It has certainly been shaped by its association with Western interest in the character of non-Western societies and the various motives underlying that interest (Asad, 1973; Clifford, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). Equally, however, it reflects the influence of historicism, an orientation stemming in large part from the Renaissance, but developed theoretically in the nineteenth century as hermeneutics, the study of the principles of understanding historical texts. At the heart of this was a recognition that people of the past were different in culture from those of today—indeed, that those who lived in different periods in Western history inhabited different cultural worlds. This is not just a matter of the *recognition* of differences but also the judgment that these differences cannot be properly understood by seeing them in terms of deplorable deviation from the norms of the observer's here and now or as signs of cultural backwardness. And it was not long before this recognition of cultural differences was also applied by Westerners to societies contemporaneous with their own, especially to the newly discovered

cultures of South America and the East. Most important of all, historicism posed the methodological problem of whether and how other cultures could be understood, a problem that still lies at the heart of modern ethnography.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the twentieth century in this respect is the increasing recognition that the problem of understanding is not restricted to the study of past times and other societies—it applies to the study of one's own social surroundings too. The application of ethnographic method by Western anthropologists and sociologists to the investigation of their own societies has been a central feature of twentieth-century social science (Cole, 1977). Furthermore, this is not just a matter of the discovery of pockets of "traditional" culture on the peripheries of these societies (for example, see Arensberg & Kimball, 1940), it also involves the recognition that diverse cultures are to be found in their metropolitan centers (e.g., Hannerz, 1969; Suttles, 1968; Whyte, 1955, 1981).²

Running alongside and influencing these developments was the institutionalization of the social sciences in Western universities, a process displaying recurrent crises, most of which centered on the possibility, character, and desirability of a science of social life. In the nineteenth century the conflict was drawn between those attempting to apply an empiricist conception of natural science method to the study of human behavior and those who saw a different model of scientific scholarship as appropriate to the humanities and social sciences. For those influenced by hermeneutics, social research was distinct from physical science because in seeking to understand human actions and institutions we could draw on our own experience and cultural knowledge, and through that reach understanding based on what we share with other human beings, despite cultural differences. Others placed emphasis on the difference between the concern of the natural sciences with the discovery of universal laws (in other words, a nomothetic orientation) and the task of the human sciences as understanding particular phenomena in their sociohistorical contexts (an idiographic orientation) (for discussion of these positions, see, e.g., Frisby, 1976; Hammersley, 1989; von Wright, 1971).

There has been a tendency for ethnographers and others looking back on this history to see it as the story of a conflict between two sides: the positivist paradigm on the one hand against the interpretive or hermeneutic paradigm on the other, with ethnography assumed to belong to the latter (Filstead, 1970; J. K. Smith, 1989; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). This is a misleading picture, however. What we find when we look more closely is a diversity of ideas about the character of human social life and how it is to be understood, as well

as about the nature of method in natural science and its relevance to the study of human behavior. To illustrate this point we shall look briefly at two of the key phases in the development of ethnography in the twentieth century: the work of the founders of modern anthropology and that of the Chicago school of sociology.

It makes little difference for our purposes here whom one takes as the key figure in the founding of modern anthropology. All three of the main candidates—Boas, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown—were committed to anthropology as a science, albeit perhaps as a special sort of science. And ethnography was central to their idea of what was scientific about anthropological work: It involved the collection of information firsthand by the anthropologist and the description of the social and cultural characteristics of existing "primitive" societies—as against attempts to infer their history or to judge them in terms of evolutionary level. In other words, the prime motivation on the part of all three founders was the rejection of speculation in favor of empirical investigation, a theme that has always been a central characteristic of empiricism, though not exclusive to it. Furthermore, they all took the natural sciences as an important model for anthropology, though not one to be followed slavishly. Radcliffe-Brown's (1948) aim of creating a "natural science of society" was not discrepant, in broad terms, with the orientations of Malinowski or Boas (see also Harris, 1969; Leach, 1957). At the same time, all three believed that social and cultural phenomena were different in character from physical phenomena and had to be understood in terms of their distinctive nature, an idea that led some of their followers (notably those of Boas) subsequently to deny the appropriateness of the scientific model (for example, see Radin, 1931/1965; see also the discussion in Harris, 1969). But that model, in some form, was never completely abandoned by the bulk of anthropologists, though it probably is under more pressure today than ever before. The tension within ethnography, between science and the humanities, was present from the start; and, as we shall see, it has never been resolved (Redfield, 1962).

Although Chicago sociology of the 1920s and 1930s does not seem to have been strongly influenced by anthropology, its orientation was similar in many respects. Most striking of all, to us today, there was little questioning of the relevance of natural science as a methodological model for social research. Even the debate between advocates of case study and statistical method that raged in the 1920s and 1930s was framed in terms of conflicting interpretations of science rather than acceptance and rejection of it (Bulmer, 1984; Hammersley, 1989; Harvey, 1987). The most influential figure at Chicago was of course Robert

Park, who wedded a newspaper reporter's concern with the concrete and unique to a neo-Kantian philosophical justification for such a focus in terms of the idiographic character of the cultural sciences. And yet he, like William I. Thomas before him, blended this with a nomothetic interest in the discovery of sociocultural laws (Park & Burgess, 1921, 1969). An important influence on this attempt by many in the Chicago school to fuse scientific and hermeneutic influences was pragmatist philosophy, especially the writings of William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. All these philosophers sought to combine a scientific orientation to the study of human behavior with the heritage of German idealism and historicism. Indeed, they seem to have regarded a scientific reading of Hegel as providing a means of overcoming divisions such as that between the sciences and the humanities. Once again, however, this attempted synthesis must be judged to have been by no means entirely successful.³

The subsequent history of ethnography, both in anthropology and sociology, reflects the continuing tension between attraction to and rejection of the model of the natural sciences; yet with few abandoning one pole wholeheartedly for the other. Furthermore, in recent years ethnography has witnessed great diversification, with somewhat different approaches being adopted in different areas, guided by different concerns (from traditional sociocultural description, through applied work designed to inform policy makers, to a commitment to advocacy and furthering political emancipation). And these different goals are variously associated with different forms of ethnographic practice: traditional, long-term, in-depth investigation sometimes being abandoned for condensed fieldwork or primary reliance on unstructured interviews, or for consultancy work or participation in political struggles.

In the next section we shall look in more detail at the major debates to which the ambivalent history and diverse character of modern ethnography have led: the question of whether ethnography is or can be scientific; questions about the proper relationship between ethnographic research and social and political practice; and, finally, arguments surrounding the textual strategies used by ethnographers to represent the lives of others, and the methodological, aesthetic, ethical, and political issues raised by these. These various themes are, of course, frequently closely interrelated.

Ethnography: Science or Not?

As we noted in the previous section, the question of whether there can be a science of social

life has preoccupied social scientists for more than a century, and it has been an especially important element in much methodological thinking about ethnography. However, this question is not one that can usefully be answered simply in the affirmative or negative. There is a wider range of possible answers. There are three dimensions structuring this range of possibilities:

- There can be differences in views about which of the natural sciences is to be taken as paradigmatic for scientific method.
- There can be various interpretations even of any method held to be characteristic of particular sciences at particular times.
- There can be disagreements about what aspects of natural scientific method should and should not be applied to social research.

Much thinking about ethnographic methodology in recent years has been based on a rejection of "positivism," broadly conceived as the view that social research should adopt scientific method, that this method is exemplified in the work of modern physicists, and that it consists of the rigorous testing of hypotheses by means of data that take the form of quantitative measurements. Quantitative sociological research is often seen as exemplifying this positivist viewpoint, and it has been criticized by ethnographers for failing to capture the true nature of human social behavior. This arises because it relies on the study of artificial settings (in the case of experiments) and/or on what people say rather than what they do (in the case of survey research); because it seeks to reduce meanings to what is "observable"; and because it treats social phenomena as more clearly defined and static than they are, and as mechanical products of social and psychological factors. This is not to say that quantitative methods are rejected in toto by ethnographers; indeed, structured forms of data collection and quantitative data analysis are frequently employed to some degree or other in ethnographic work. What is rejected is the idea that these methods are the only legitimate, or even the most important, ones. This implies a rejection not so much of quantitative method or even of natural science as a model, but rather of positivism.⁴

However, in recent years a more radical attitude has appeared that *does* seem often to involve rejection of both quantitative method and the scientific model. Whereas at one time ethnographers questioned the frequently assumed relationship between science and quantification, this is now less common; often, the two are rejected together (see, e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; J. K. Smith, 1989). In part, this reflects a general cultural disillusionment with natural science. It is now

widely seen as the source of highly destructive weaponry and of substantial planetary pollution, for example. Indeed, some regard it as an oppressive force that dominates the modern world. Elements of this view are to be found in the writings of critical theorists (see Held, 1981; Wellmer, 1969/1974) and the work of feminists, where science is sometimes associated with male aggression and patriarchy (see, for instance, Harding, 1986). Both of these approaches have become influential among ethnographers and have led many to move away from the model of science toward exploring alternatives that reopen links with the humanities (see, e.g., Eisner, 1985, 1988, 1991).

In part, what is involved here is a questioning of the objectivity of social research, ethnographic research included. For instance, it is argued by feminists that the findings of much social research, including ethnographic work, reflect the masculinist assumptions of researchers. It is not just that they have tended to neglect and occasionally to disparage the activities and experiences of women, but that the whole perspective on the world that they provide is limited by their male point of view. This is not dissimilar in character to earlier Marxist criticisms of the ideological character of bourgeois social science, and analogous criticisms have long been found among advocates of black sociology (for a discussion that draws these parallels, see Hammersley, 1992a).

Increasingly, however, this challenge to the objectivity of ethnographic (and other) research has been developed into a more fundamental questioning of the very possibility of social scientific knowledge. It is pointed out that the accounts produced by researchers are constructions, and as such they reflect the presuppositions and socio-historical circumstances of their production. This is held to contradict the aspiration of social science (including much ethnography) to produce knowledge that is universally valid, in other words, that captures the *nature* of the social world. In the past, ethnographers very often relied precisely on arguments about the greater capacity of their approach to represent the nature of social reality accurately (see, e.g., Blumer, 1969). Such arguments are rarer these days, under the influence of various forms of antirealism, whether constructivism (Guba, 1990), philosophical hermeneutics (J. K. Smith, 1989), or poststructuralism (Clough, 1992; Denzin, 1990; Lather, 1991).

An interesting illustration of the last of these influences is to be found in commentaries by Denzin and Richardson on a recent dispute about the accuracy of Whyte's (1955) classic ethnographic study of Boston's North End. Whyte's pioneering study was concerned with documenting various aspects of the lives of people in this community, especially the "Corner Boys." The accuracy of Whyte's account is questioned by Boelen

(1992) on the basis of some recent interviews, though the original account is defended by a surviving member of the Corner Boys (Orlandella, 1992). Moving off at a tangent, Denzin (1992) and Richardson (1992) effectively dismiss this dispute on the grounds that all accounts are constructions and that the whole issue of which account more accurately represents reality is meaningless.

Also associated with this radical critique has been a tendency to direct some of the criticisms that have long been applied to quantitative research at traditional ethnography itself. It too is now seen by some as reifying social phenomena, as claiming illegitimate expertise over the people studied, as being based on relationships of hierarchy, control, and so on. Indeed, it has been argued that it represents a subtler form of control than quantitative research because it is able to get closer to the people studied, to discover the details of their behavior and the innards of their experience (Finch, 1986; Stacey, 1988).

The epistemological challenge to the credentials of ethnography that is at the root of these criticisms is undoubtedly fruitful in many respects. Some of the arguments used to promote ethnography against quantitative method and to justify its features are open to serious question. To take just one example, the whole notion of what counts as a theory in ethnography is ill defined, and the concept of "theoretical description" that has guided much ethnographic research in sociology is of doubtful value (Hammersley, 1992b, chap. 1). At the same time, there is a tendency for this questioning to lead to skepticism and relativism. It is not always clear how thoroughgoing this relativism and skepticism is. Often it seems to be applied selectively, but without much indication of what principles might underlie the selectivity (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985, refer to this in another context as "ontological gerrymandering"). Where the attempt is made to embrace skepticism and relativism wholeheartedly, on the other hand, the end point seems likely to be a debilitating nihilism. What is required, it seems to us, is a careful reassessment of the methodological and philosophical arguments surrounding the concept of science and of the relationship of ethnography to this. Above all, we must not be misled into assuming that we are faced merely with a choice between dogmatism and relativism, between a single oppressive conception of science and some uniquely liberating alternative.

Theory and Practice

Another area of disagreement and debate that has become of great salience in recent years is the question of the relationship between ethnographic

research and social and political practice. In the past, and probably still today, most ethnography has been directed toward contributing to disciplinary knowledge rather than toward solving practical problems. Although such work may ultimately contribute knowledge of wide public relevance, this contribution has not usually been very immediate or specific. Furthermore, the knowledge produced has often been presented as valuable for its own sake as much as for any instrumental value it has.

Although ethnographers have usually wished to address those beyond the boundaries of their disciplinary communities, very often this has not involved any marked deviation from the sort of research, or even the sort of written presentation, appropriate to academic work. The relationship between research and practice assumed here is what has been called the enlightenment model (Bulmer, 1982; Janowitz, 1971; for a more elaborate conception of the various possible roles of the researcher, see Silverman, 1985, 1989). However, not all ethnographic research has operated on this model. For a long time, the applied anthropology movement in the United States has exemplified a different stance, being specifically concerned with carrying out research that is designed to address and contribute directly to the solution of practical problems. This is a tradition that has flourished and transformed itself in recent years, coming to be applied within mainstream U.S. society, not just outside it (Eddy & Partridge, 1978; van Willigen, 1986). In addition, its practical and political orientation has spread more widely, with the disciplinary model coming under increasing criticism.

Even those anthropologists and sociologists primarily concerned with contributing to disciplinary knowledge have sometimes felt it necessary to engage in advocacy on the part of the people they have studied. Furthermore, there have been calls for this to be developed further—indeed, to be integrated into the research process (Paine, 1985). It is suggested that by its very nature anthropology (and the point can be extended without distortion to ethnographic work in general) involves a "representation" of others even when it does not explicitly claim to speak for or on behalf of them. And it is argued that there are ethical and political responsibilities arising from this fact.

However, neither this argument nor the sort of practice recommended on the basis of it is straightforward. Drawing on their own experience, Hasstrup and Elsass (1990) point out that the context in which any advocacy is to take place is a complex one: It is not composed simply of an oppressed and an oppressor group but of a diversity of individuals and groups motivated by various ideals and interests, and pursuing various political strategies. Furthermore, the group to be "rep-

resented" is not always internally homogeneous and is rarely democratically organized. Also, there is often genuine uncertainty about what is and is not in the interests of the group and of members of it. In particular, there is the danger of adopting ethnographic myths, such as that Indian groups represent "islands of culture" that must be defended against the apparently cultureless settlers, or that informants speak "cultural truths."

In recent years there has also been a growing application of ethnographic methods, by sociologists, anthropologists, and others, in applied fields such as education, health, and social policy. This reflects, in part, a decline of confidence in quantitative research on the part of funders and a willingness on the part of some of them to finance qualitative research. In Britain, ironically, this trend has been more obvious in the field of commercial market research than in government-funded work, though there are signs of change (Walker, 1985). This change is also evident in the United States, where, for example, federally funded evaluations in education have increasingly involved ethnographic components (see Fetterman, 1988; Fetterman & Pitman, 1986; Rist, 1981). At the same time, there has been some debate about whether, and in what senses, this applied research is ethnographic. Some anthropologists, in particular, see it as abandoning key elements of what they regard as ethnography (Wolcott, 1980). And it is true that in several respects this trend has resulted in significant modification of ethnographic practice. An interesting example is the condensed fieldwork advocated and practiced by some researchers in the field of educational evaluation (see, e.g., Walker, 1978; for an assessment, see Atkinson & Delamont, 1985).

Sometimes associated with the moves toward more applied forms of ethnographic work have been calls for collaborative research. In part, these have arisen out of concern about the lack of impact that ethnographic (and other) research has had on social and political practice. Some believe that its impact would be greater if practitioners were themselves involved in the research process, both because that involvement would be likely to change the research and make it more practically relevant and because they would be more motivated to draw on it as a result of being involved. There have been other important influences pushing in the direction of collaborative research, however, notably Marxist critical theory and feminism. These demand that research contribute to the political struggles of oppressed groups, not merely the working class, but also women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and so on. And the commitment to collaboration stems from a reconceptualization of the central political goal of the Left as the extension of democracy, and the belief that those committed to that goal must exemplify their

commitment to it in the practice of research. From this point of view, traditional ethnographic work has been criticized for embodying a hierarchical and therefore undemocratic relationship between researcher and researched, because it is the former who makes the decisions about what to study and how to study it, and whose voice is represented in the written ethnography (see, for example, Gitlin, Siegel, & Boru, 1989).

There is little doubt of the need for ethnographers to rethink the relationship between their work and social and political practice. However, it would be a mistake in our view to seek to restructure ethnography on the basis of a single conception of that relationship. Above all, it is of considerable importance that we do not lose sight of what has hitherto been the goal of ethnographic research, namely, the production of knowledge. We should not replace this with the pursuit of practical goals that, although sometimes valuable in themselves, are no *more* worthy in general terms of our time and effort than the pursuit of knowledge. This is especially so when these goals are of a kind that we may be much less able to achieve. It is true that conventional research never changes the world at a stroke, and that often it may not have much effect even over the long term. But that does not mean that it is of no value. It is also worth remembering that changing the world can be for the worse as well as for the better. Utopian attempts to do politics by means of research are of no service to anyone.

Rhetoric and Representation

In recent years the literature on ethnography and participant observation has been enriched by a growing corpus of reflections on the rhetoric of ethnographic accounts. Attention has been given, for example, to the aesthetics and ethics of ethnographic texts, including the relationship between authority and authorship, and indeed to the connections among rhetoric, representation, and logic generally. This "rhetorical turn" among ethnographers is part of a much broader movement of scholarship toward an interest in the rhetoric of inquiry that has been manifested in many of the human and social disciplines. It has engaged with various important (if often diffuse) theoretical and methodological tendencies—not least feminism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. The most significant contributions, and the earliest, from social scientists came from cultural and social anthropologists. More recently, attention has been paid to this issue by sociologists. Although the respective disciplines have slightly different emphases, the broad themes have been similar:

the conventionality of ethnographic texts, the representation of "Self" and "Other" in such texts; the character of ethnographies as a textual genre, the nature of ethnographic argumentation and the rhetoric of evidence.

The starting point for this "rediscovery of rhetoric" has been the acknowledgment that there is no perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the natural or social world. For example, however "impersonal" and formulaic the work of the natural scientist, it stands in no "natural" relationship to the phenomena and events it describes. On the contrary, the textual products of natural science are highly conventional. Their apparent guarantee of authenticity and credibility is dependent on readers' adopting shared strategies of reading and interpretation.

In just the same way, the human sciences draw on common sets of conventional devices to construct and convey their characteristic portrayals of social scenes, actors, and cultural meanings. Thus White's (1973) extensive writing on the writing of historical texts has exerted an influence far beyond historiography. Likewise, McCloskey's (1985) wry and erudite commentaries on the rhetoric of economics have provided important benchmarks and exemplars. Among social and cultural anthropologists, the standard ethnography or monograph was—to a considerable extent—a taken-for-granted format. As Boon (1983) points out, however, the typical framework of anthropological monographs imposed a common pattern on, rather than revealing one in, the vast array of human societies they described. He argues that the "classic" form of the anthropological monograph was a direct, if implicit, embodiment of the domain assumptions of functionalist anthropology.

The watershed of critical awareness of ethnographic textuality was the highly influential collection of papers edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986), *Writing Culture*. The works brought together in that collection all emphasize, in various ways, the nature of the textual imposition that anthropology exerts over its subject matter. They emphasize the complex interplay of literary and rhetorical, historical, and ideological influences on the production and reception of anthropological ethnographies.

Clifford and Marcus's volume is partly, but not perfectly, parallel to that of Geertz (1973), who began to assert that anthropological writings could be regarded as "fiction," in the sense that they are made: They are crafted by their authors and shaped by "literary" conventions and devices. Geertz (1988) went on later to document the distinctive literary styles used by a number of founding figures, British and American. In the same way, several contributors to the Clifford and Marcus volume sought to illuminate the "literary" antecedents

and parallels for ethnographic writing. Pratt (1986, 1991), for instance, developed there—and elsewhere—the parallels and self-conscious contrasts between anthropological ethnography and travel writing.

In a similar vein, an early contribution from Atkinson (1982) explored some of the literary origins and parallels for sociological ethnography associated with the Chicago school. In common with many of the anthropological commentaries appearing at that time, Atkinson's work was influenced by aspects of contemporary literary criticism. Structuralist and poststructuralist theory emphasized that the "realism" of realist fictional writing drew on particular conventions of reading and writing. In the same way, it was possible to explore how the authenticity of "factual" accounts, such as ethnographies, was generated through equally (and very similar) conventional means.

Some aspects of the "literary" antecedents and convergences have been sketched in the literature. For anthropology, commentators have drawn attention to literary as well as biographical affinities between the work of Malinowski and Conrad (Clifford, 1988), between surrealism and French ethnography (Clifford, 1988), and in the poetic writing of Benedict and Sapir (Brady, 1991; Pratts, 1985). To a rather lesser extent, sociological traditions have been explored from a similarly literary perspective. Atkinson (1982) makes a preliminary identification of Chicago school urban ethnographies with the naturalistic and realistic novels of American literature. But if the respective intellectual communities wish to pursue these schemes, there is much yet to do. We still have rather few detailed examinations of the general cultural and—in the widest sense—"literary" contexts within which particular ethnographic traditions have been formed. In Britain, for example, the sociological foundations laid by urban investigators such as Booth and Rowntree have major affinities with several literary models. The investigative journalism of more popular writers, and the fictional products of authors such as Dickens, provide rich mixtures of realism, melodrama, and the grotesque that find their parallels in the tone, style, and sensibilities of the sociological tradition. Likewise, the long and rich tradition of "community" studies on both sides of the Atlantic needs careful reading against the kind of literary analyses of the contrast between the urban and the rural furnished by, say, Raymond Williams (1973).

The point of such "literary" analysis is not merely to create "interesting" parallels and contrasts, nor yet to attempt to trace the literary antecedents of particular anthropological or sociological texts. It is, rather, to remove the false distinction between "science" and "rhetoric." The essential dialectic between the aesthetic and humanist, on the one hand, and the logical and

scientific, on the other, is thus reaffirmed. A recognition of the conventional quality and literary antecedents of the ethnographic text in turn raises questions about the distinctive characteristics of ethnography as a genre of textual product. It is not enough, in the eyes of many contemporary commentators, simply to note that our texts are (in Geertz's sense) fiction. It is important to map the conventions that are deployed in constructing particular anthropological and sociological styles. It is thus possible to explore relationships among schools of thought, traditions, and individual authorship with repertoires of textual device through which scholarly accounts are constructed.

This identification of style and genre has taken various turns. A group of British anthropologists (Fardon, 1990) has explored how different textual styles have accorded with different regional biases and preoccupations. (They in turn criticize several of the "textual" critics for treating anthropological ethnography as a more or less undifferentiated textual type.) Likewise, Van Maanen's (1988) highly influential contribution explores the characteristics of various modes of ethnographic writing. Most notably, perhaps, he contrasts the styles of "realist" and "confessional" accounts by sociologists and anthropologists, the former style typically being central, the latter traditionally being more marginal, perhaps relegated to a methodological appendix. This contrast, which is built into a great deal of ethnographic output, is itself a textually based convention whereby the tension between the "personal" and the "impersonal" has been managed by successive authors and schools of ethnography.

In the "classic" ethnographies of urban sociology and anthropology, the conventions of textual production were not always apparent. The reason is simple: Their authors and readers drew on textual paradigms and devices that were entirely familiar and "natural." Thus the highly "readable" ethnographies, such as Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1955), conveyed vivid accounts of social settings by virtue of their "literary" qualities. As Gusfield (1990), among others, has pointed out in an analysis of Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967), such a realist ethnography achieves its effects through its narrative structures and its rhetorical and stylistic devices. Similarly, drawing explicitly on models from literary criticism, as well as on the work of previous commentators (e.g., Brown, 1977; Edmondson, 1984), Atkinson (1990) identifies the recurrent textual methods and motifs by which ethnographic texts have been constructed. He looks at several standard elements of literary analysis, and thus examines the use of various major devices and tropes. For example, narrative forms are used to convey accounts of social action and causation. Likewise, the "characters" or actors in the account are assembled out

of narrative and descriptive fragments. Hence ethnographers use their "literary" competence to reconstruct social action and social actors. In common with many other critics and commentators, Atkinson traces the use of various figures of speech—tropes—such as metaphor, irony, and synecdoche. The demonstration that the "ethnography" is based on conventional literary resources does not, of course, invalidate their use. It commends a disciplined use of them: The use of ethnographic realism can never be innocent in the future. But there is no reason on that score alone to search out alternative literary forms, although some critics and commentators have advocated and practiced ethnographic writing that departs from the conventional realist text in various ways (for examples, see Crapanzano, 1980; Dwyer, 1982; Krieger, 1983; Shostak, 1981; Woolgar, 1988).

In the hands of many, the textual or rhetorical turn serves not just aesthetic or methodological interests, but has inescapably ethical and political implications. A good deal of anthropological reflection has focused on the textual representation of the Author and of the Other in the ethnography. Here, of course, anthropologists find common interest with more general cultural critics, such as Said's (1978) account of Orientalism, or Spivak (1989) (see Pratt, 1992, for an exemplar that brings the interests together). It is argued that a paradox lies at the heart of the ethnographic endeavor and of "the ethnography" as a textual product. On the one hand is the ethnographer's epistemological, personal, and moral commitment to his or her hosts. The image—often, the reality—of prolonged immersion in "the field" and the emphasis on participant observation commit the ethnographer to a shared social world. He or she has become a "stranger" or "marginal native" in order to embark upon a process of cultural learning that is predicated on a degree of "surrender" to "the Other" (see Wolff, 1964). The epistemology of participant observation rests on the principle of interaction and the "reciprocity of perspectives" between social actors. The rhetoric is thus egalitarian: observer and observed as inhabitants of a shared social and cultural field, their respective cultures different but equal, and capable of mutual recognition by virtue of a shared humanity. The classic texts of ethnography, on the other hand, have (it is claimed) all too often inscribed a radical distinction between the Author and the Other. The "realist" techniques of standard ethnographic reportage may implicitly endow the ethnographer—as the implied Narrator—with a privileged gaze that reproduces the authorial omniscience characteristic of many examples of narrative fiction. The text brings actors and culture together under the auspices of a single, all-encompassing point of view. By contrast, the Other is rendered

solely as the object of the ethnographer's gaze. The voice of the ethnographer is privileged, that of the Other is muted. As a consequence, there have been various moves to produce ethnographic texts that replace the "monologic" mode with more "dialogic" forms, in which the text allows for a multiplicity of "voices." This perspective brings together a textual, methodological, and moral commitment. Dwyer's (1982) self-conscious adoption of a dialogic textual format is a benchmark contribution to this style of presentation, although it falls short of a full-fledged dialogic approach.

The moral concerns of commentators on ethnographic rhetoric have been echoed by advocates of feminist points of view (see Stanley & Wise, 1983). The textual practices of a privileged "Western" observer may be compared to the inscription of a privileged masculine discourse. There have, therefore, been attempts to produce feminist texts that subvert the taken-for-granted formats. Krieger's (1983) "stream-of-consciousness" style is offered as an exemplar (see Devault, 1990). The feminist appraisal of ethnographic writing is in turn part of a more general appraisal of social scientific writing and an interest in various genres—most notably biography and autobiography (see Stanley, 1990, 1992; see also D. Smith, 1987, pp. 105ff.). Stanley and Wise, Smith, and others provide an interesting link between a feminist standpoint and a readiness to treat textual forms as problematic. The concern is epistemological and ethical, personal and professional. From the feminist standpoint, of course, they are all implicative of one another.

The rhetorical turn is also intimately related to a "postmodern" tendency in the construction of ethnography. The postmodern ethnography explores the discontinuities, paradoxes, and inconsistencies of culture and action. In contrast with the supposed "modern" ethnography, it does so not in order to resolve or to reconcile those differences. The classic modern ethnography (the postmodernist holds) brought the various fragmentary representations of social life under the auspices of a dominant narrative and a single, privileged point of view. The postmodern author seeks to dissolve that disjuncture between the observer and the observed. The trope of "participant observation," which captures the ambivalence of distance and familiarity, is replaced by one of "dialogue," showing "the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation" (Tyler, 1986, p. 126).

Moreover, the postmodern ethnography is held to adopt a radically alternative attitude toward its textual character. Tyler (1986), for instance, rejects any claim that the ethnography can be said to "represent" the social world. He prefers the terminology and imagery of "evoking" (though

he omits consideration of just what is being evoked). A sophisticated discussion of evocation and ethnographic "complexity" is also provided by Strathern (1991). The subject matter of postmodernity and postmodern ethnographic texts are dialectically related. This is aptly illustrated in Dorst's (1989) account of an American town, *Chadd's Ford*. There Dorst describes how this Pennsylvania suburb creates itself through various forms of representation and acts of identification (not least identification with and through the paintings of Andrew Wyeth). Dorst collates various local devices whereby surface appearances of the locality itself are contrived.

Rose (1989) has written an even more extreme version of such a postmodern text. Again, it depends on the collation and juxtaposition of strikingly different collections of materials. It incorporates not just radical shifts of subject matter and perspective but also strikingly different styles of writing. (As has been pointed out, Bateson's ethnography *Naven*, 1936, was an early example of a textually variegated ethnographic account; see Clifford, 1988, p. 146.) Although the "realist" ethnography clearly remains alive and well, it is also clear that—for better or worse—the postmodern turn will encourage some sociologists and anthropologists to experiment with textual styles and formats. In doing so, they will help to focus attention on the conventional character of all ethnographic reportage. It will become part of the craft knowledge of ethnographic authors that textual forms and styles will be self-consciously recognized and explored (see Atkinson, 1990). In this way, a variety of textual styles may become characteristic of the genres of ethnography.

In recent years there has been such a consistent emphasis on the rhetoric or "poetics" of ethnography that there has been some danger of undue attention to these literary and aesthetic issues. Problems of logic and inference have been obscured. Recognition that scholarly texts have conventional and literary aspects seems to have led some practitioners to undue extremes. As we have noted, textual experimentation—sometimes to the point of obscurantism—has now been undertaken, particularly in the name of "postmodernism." This emphasis on textuality is, however, in danger of privileging the rhetorical over the "scientific" or rational. Hammersley (1991, 1993) suggests that we need to pay attention to strategies of reading and writing ethnography, but primarily in order to evaluate the quality of arguments and the use of evidence. Like most of the "textual" commentators, he acknowledges that much of the sociological or anthropological argument proceeds implicitly. It is conveyed in the textual arrangement of narrative, descriptions, and tropes. But he advocates explicit critical attention to those textual elements in order to evaluate the quality of the

arguments—however conveyed. He thus reaffirms the more "scientific" aspect of the overall evaluation of the ethnographic enterprise.

Toward a Conclusion: Contemporary Crises and Renewals

Ethnographic approaches to social research have been adopted in numerous disciplines and applied fields: social and cultural anthropology, sociology, human geography, organization studies, educational research, cultural studies. It is noteworthy that in none of these disciplinary areas is there a single philosophical or theoretical orientation that can lay unique claim to a rationale for ethnography and participant observation. Across the spectrum of the social sciences, the use and justification of ethnography is marked by diversity rather than consensus. On that basis, it is arguable that it is futile to try to identify different types of "qualitative research." Rather, one has to recognize different theoretical or epistemological positions, each of which may endorse a version of ethnographic work. It is certainly a mistake to try to elevate "ethnography" (or some equivalent category) to the status of a quasi-paradigm in its own right. There are some common threads, of course, but it is noticeable that many recent or contemporary advocates define their activities in terms of what they are not—in opposition to less preferred perspectives—rather than in a positive way.

Historically, for instance, there has been little in common between the methodological appeals of sociology and anthropology. And those appeals in turn are not very accurately grounded in the actual histories of the respective fields. Many sociologists have claimed an elective affinity (at least) between participant observation and symbolic interactionism (Williams, 1976). One can indeed find many points of contact between the interactionists' view of the social actor, social action, and social order and the practical accomplishment of fieldwork. Both stress the extent to which meanings and understandings emerge through processes and transactions of interaction. In that context, Chicago school sociology is often invoked as the originating inspiration. It is, therefore, ironic that Chicago sociology itself was not especially dominated by ethnographic fieldwork; that early Chicago school urban ethnography was not necessarily very similar to more recent approaches; that earlier Chicago urban sociology was not exclusively predicated on "symbolic interactionism"—which was largely a subsequent codification of presuppositions.

Likewise, others identify an ethnomethodologically informed ethnography. Here the stress is on

the investigation of everyday methods for the practical accomplishment of social life. It often involves something of a relaxation of a "pure" version of ethnomethodology. The latter is drawn on, often eclectically and in combination with other perspectives, to illuminate topics and problems of interest to a more conventional, mainstream sociology. Whether or not ethnomethodology can be shown to live up to the claims of some of its practitioners that it is a uniquely fundamental or "foundational" discipline, there is no doubt that it has furnished significant subject matter, and new research questions, for ethnographic orientations. It has, however, introduced some specific limitations. With their emphasis on the detailed analysis of spoken interaction, some versions of ethnomethodology have tended to encourage a rather restricted view of what constitutes "the field." If too great reliance is placed on the analysis of spoken interaction, then the field of investigation may become reduced to those settings and situations for which audio or video recordings can be made. By the same token, the special contribution of participant observation is negated, or reduced to a very minor role in the acquisition of background knowledge of the social context (Atkinson, 1992). The same point may be made about the contribution of discourse analysis (see, for example, Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Close attention to the forms of language and social interaction are undoubtedly important adjuncts to more general, holistic ethnographic approaches. But they cannot fully substitute for ethnographic inquiry.⁵

In other quarters, an emphasis on semiotics or hermeneutics has informed ethnographic data collection and analysis. Here an attention to culture as a system of signs and texts provides the major impetus. In ethnography the textual metaphor of culture has found its major proponent in Geertz, whose formulation of "thick description" stresses the interpretation of cultural meaning. This interpretive perspective in cultural anthropology contrasts clearly with more formal and—according to the interpretivists—reductionist views such as structuralism or ethnosociology. The interpretive approach implies a relativism that eschews a nomothetic approach, while warranting the capacity of the ethnographer to interpret cultures and their local manifestations. Interpretivism in this mode conceives of "culture" in terms of its own poetics—its metaphors, tropes, and other forms of representation. This sense of the "textuality" of social life has in turn been linked to a heightened awareness of the textual character of "the ethnography" itself, as we mentioned earlier.

There are common threads and recurrent motifs running through the entire ethnographic tradition. Yet there is no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnography and any given theoretical

perspective. It is not the case that all ethnography has been undertaken under the auspices of one epistemological orthodoxy. Rather, the distinctive characteristics of ethnographic work have been differentially appealed to by different disciplines and tendencies. As we have tried to show, this has produced a highly complex and contentious discursive field.

Notes

1. There are researchers who have intentionally "gone native" for the purposes of research, for example, Jules-Rosette (1978).
2. We should not forget the nineteenth-century precursors of this work, the writings of Engels (1845/1968), Booth (1889-1902), and Webb and Webb (1932), though they were more concerned with documenting living conditions than culture.
3. Its instability is exemplified in the disputes about how their work should be interpreted and what lessons should be drawn from it for sociology. See, for example, Bales (1966), McPhail and Rexroat (1979), Lewis and Smith (1980), Stewart (1981), Blumer (1983), and Fine and Kleinman (1986).
4. Blumer's methodological writings exemplify this (see Blumer, 1969; for discussions, see Baugh, 1990; Hammersley, 1989).
5. Their appeal for some researchers undoubtedly rests on the appearance of greater precision and rigor, analysis being restricted to what can be validated on the basis of the availability of permanent recordings. And, indeed, some ethnomethodological writing has a strongly empiricist streak, see Atkinson (1988).

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