

Reflexivity and ethnographic research

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- fynd at gopi a'i lwytho i lawr;
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Sylwch bod y deunydd hwn yn UNIG at ddefnydd myfyrwyr sydd wedi cofrestru ar y cwrs astudio fel y nodir yn yr adran isod. Caniateir i holl staff a myfyrwyr eraill ddarllen y deunydd yn unig ac ni ddylent ei lwytho i lawr ac/neu argraffu copi

Mae'r Copi Digidol hwn ac unrhyw gopi digidol neu brintiedig a ddarparwyd i chi, neu a wnaed gennych, o dan delerau'r Drwydded hon, i'w ddefnyddio gyda'r Cwrs Astudio hwn. Gellwch gadw copïau o'r fath ar ôl i'r cwrs ddod i ben, ond at eich defnydd personol eich hun yn unig. Bydd pob copi (yn cynnwys copïau electronig) yn cynnwys y Rhybudd Hawlfraint hwn a bydd yn rhaid eu dinistrio ac/neu eu dileu pan fydd Prifysgol Cymru Y Drindod Dewi Sant yn galw am hynny.

Ac eithrio'r hyn a ganiateir gan gyfraith hawlfraint, ni chaniateir copïo, cadw neu ddosbarthu pellach (yn cynnwys drwy e-bost) heb ganiatâd deiliad yr hawlfraint.

Mae gan yr awdur (ac mae'r term hwnnw'n cynnwys arlunwyr a chrewyr gweledol eraill) hawliau moesol dros y gwaith ac ni all staff na myfyrwyr achosi, na chaniatáu, i'r gwaith gael ei aflunio, ei lurgunio neu ei addasu mewn unrhyw ffordd arall, neu ei drin yn ddiraddiol mewn unrhyw ffordd, a fyddai'n niweidiol i anrhydedd neu enw da'r awdur.

Mae hon yn fersiwn ddigidol o ddeunydd hawlfraint a wnaed dan drwydded gan ddeiliad yr hawl, ac ni ellir sicrhau ei chywirdeb. Cyfeiriwch at yr argraffiad cyhoeddedig gwreiddiol os gwelwch yn dda.

Trwyddedwyd i'w ddefnyddio ar gyfer y cwrs HPAN5012 - Theory, Methods and Practice: Critical Perspectives in Anthropology

Teitl: Reflexive ethnography : a guide to researching selves and others

Enw'r Awdur: Davies, Charlotte Aull.

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In doing research of any kind, there is an implicit assumption that we are investigating something 'outside' ourselves, that the knowledge we seek cannot be gained solely or simply through introspection. This is true for both the social and natural sciences, although in the latter the separation of researcher and research object may appear both more self-evident and more readily attainable. On the other hand, we cannot research something with which we have no contact, from which we are completely isolated. All researchers are to some degree connected to, a part of, the object of their research. And, depending on the extent and nature of these connections, questions arise as to whether the results of research are artefacts of the researcher's presence and inevitable influence on the research process. For these reasons, considerations of reflexivity are important for all forms of research. Although the connection between an astronomer and distant stellar events may seem very tenuous indeed, no more than an ability to observe secondary indications of such events by means of sophisticated extensions of human sensory equipment, even astronomers take account of their relationship to these occurrences, for example in discarding assumptions about simultaneity of observation and event. And in the realm of particle physics, questions about the effects of observers on their observations are of fundamental importance. If reflexivity is an issue for these most objective of sciences, then clearly it is of central importance for social research, where the connection between researcher and research setting – the social world – is clearly much closer and where the nature of research objects – as conscious and self-aware beings – make influences by the researcher and the research process on its outcome both more likely and less predictable. These issues are particularly central to the practice of ethnographic research where the relationship between researcher and researched is typically even more

intimate, long-term and multi-stranded, and the complexities introduced by the self-consciousness of the objects of research have even greater scope.

There is a close relationship between reflexivity and objectivity, although the two are not identical. Nevertheless, responses to the difficulties apparently raised by reflexivity frequently involve attempts to ensure objectivity through reducing or controlling the effects of the researcher on the research situation. Such attempts include maintaining distance through using observation and other methods in which interaction is kept to a minimum or is highly controlled. Alternatively, claims to objectivity – or at least to reduce the effect of researchers on their results – are also made on the basis of a very high level of interaction, based on complete participation, in extreme cases even concealing the identity of the researcher. These approaches have been identified with positivist and naturalist methodologies, respectively (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 16–17). However, even the most objective of social research methods is clearly reflexive. Survey research based on structured interviewing, for example, can ensure a form of objectivity through training of interviewers to reduce the effects of their individual attributes on respondents and employing technical tests of reliability. But survey researchers cannot remove another, and more fundamental, form of reflexivity that inheres in their construction of a highly artificial research situation, which is dependent upon a set of cultural understandings as to the nature of interviews, their conduct and appropriate forms of responses to them. At the other extreme, covert participation may eliminate the researcher's influence *qua* researcher but it does not eliminate effects of their presence on their results and may render such effects less visible.

Reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research. These effects are to be found in all phases of the research process from initial selection of topic to final reporting of results. While relevant for social research in general, issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close. The term ethnography is used to refer both to a particular form of research and to its eventual written product. I adopt a broad interpretation of ethnography as a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques

but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time. The eventual written product – an ethnography – draws its data primarily from this fieldwork experience and usually emphasizes descriptive detail as a result (cf. Ellen 1984: 7–8; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1–3).

Not only the personal history of ethnographers but also the disciplinary and broader sociocultural circumstances under which they work have a profound effect on which topics and peoples are selected for study. Furthermore, the relationships between ethnographer and informants in the field, which form the bases of subsequent theorizing and conclusions, are expressed through social interaction in which the ethnographer participates; thus ethnographers help to construct the observations that become their data. In an early recognition of the need systematically to incorporate reflexivity into ethnographic research methods, Powdermaker argued that participant observation requires both involvement and detachment achieved by developing the ethnographer's 'role of stepping in and out of society' (1966:19). In order to incorporate such insights into research practice, individual ethnographers in the field and out of it must seek to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research. Furthermore, given the contribution of the ethnographer's sociocultural context to the research, these contexts too must be considered. They become a part of the research, a turning back in the form of cultural critique that has moral and political implications as well.

On the other hand, this turning back, or self-examination, both individual and collective, clearly can lead to a form of self-absorption that is also part of the definition of reflexivity in which boundaries between subject and object disappear, the one becomes the other, a process that effectively denies the possibility of social research. This outcome is closely related to various postmodernist and poststructuralist critiques which, in their most extreme forms, are essentially destructive of the enterprise of social research. Nevertheless ethnographers must seek to utilize creatively the insights of these postmodernist perspectives – insights that encourage incorporation of varying standpoints, exposure of the intellectual tyranny of meta-narratives and recognition of the authority that inheres in the authorial voice – while at the same time rejecting the extreme pessimism of their epistemological critiques. I will seek to develop in this book epistemological and methodological foundations that encourage and incorporate genuinely reflexive ethnographic research while suggesting it can be undertaken

from a realist perspective drawing on the work of Roy Bhaskar and on pragmatism, particularly the insights of G. H. Mead.

The purpose of research is to mediate between different constructions of reality, and doing research means increasing understanding of these varying constructions, among which is included the anthropologist's own constructions. Ideally the research is a conduit that allows interpretations and influences to pass in both directions. Final products thus may take a variety of forms and be addressed to different audiences. However, I will argue that the results of anthropological research based on ethnographic fieldwork, informed by reflexivity and assessed by a critical scholarly community, are expressive of a reality that is neither accessible directly through native texts nor simply a reflection of the individual anthropologist's psyche. This means that both good and bad research are possible. The development of criteria – although not in the form of rigid rules – to recognize the difference should provide the basis of anthropological authority. My principal aim is thus to consider critically the actual activities of research in the context of the altered epistemological basis of anthropological knowledge that must be developed from its full incorporation of reflexivity.

Before looking in detail at various ethnographic research processes and methods, therefore, several other topics need be addressed. First, a more careful consideration will be given to the forms reflexivity assumes and its relationship to questions about ways of knowing and the nature of knowledge. Second, I briefly review the ways in which anthropologists have viewed reflexivity, its relationship to actual research practice and the reasons for its altered position within anthropology, particularly over the past two decades. Finally, I consider the implications of various postmodernist critiques for the practice of ethnographic research and suggest an epistemological perspective from which we can carry on social research while continuing to benefit from the sensitivity to issues of reflexivity and the general self-critique of the recent past.

REFLEXIVITY AND KNOWLEDGE

Reflexivity in social research is not a single phenomenon but assumes a variety of forms and affects the research process through all its stages. Babcock (1980) enumerates a series of dichotomies to describe varieties of reflexivity: private/public; individual/collective; implicit/explicit; partial/total. Some of these various dimensions can be placed

along a spectrum: at one extreme is the relatively private, individualist and hence partially reflexive activity of the fieldworker keeping a journal – what has been termed 'benign introspection' (Woolgar 1988b: 22); further along is the public, collective activity of traditional rituals which display a form of 'social reflexivity' (Turner 1981; also cf. Rappaport 1980). But even examples of this level of social reflexivity must still be judged far from total in their implicitness (lack of self-awareness of their reflexive nature), in contrast to the journal writer. Total reflexivity requires full and uncompromising self-reference. Thus, it is argued, no process of knowing is fully reflexive until it is explicitly turned on the knower, who becomes self-conscious even of the reflexive process of knowing – what has been termed 'radical constitutive reflexivity' (Woolgar 1988b: 22). In this fullest form, reflexivity, in spite of its unavoidable and essentially desirable presence in social research, becomes destructive of the process of doing such research; as researchers we are led 'to reflect on our own subjectivities, and then to reflect upon the reflection in an infinitude of self-reflexive iterations' (Gergen and Gergen 1991: 77). It will be helpful to follow this process through by reviewing briefly the various levels of reflexivity and the ways in which they influence social research.

In its most transparent guise, reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it. This has often been conceived in terms of the subjectivity of the researcher, with attempts being made, especially from a positivist orientation, to ensure objectivity. For example, in conducting interviews, techniques are promoted (such as standardized wording of questions and controlling interviewer responses) so as to limit the effect of the interviewer on this particular social encounter. In ethnographic research, fieldworkers have adopted various strategies to make themselves inconspicuous and hence reduce the dangers of reactivity. They may rely on literally being an inconspicuous bystander; or they may take the opposite approach and reduce reactivity by participating as fully as possible, trying to become invisible in their role as researcher if not as human participant. Nevertheless, the impossibility of controlling the social encounters that provide the ethnographer's data during fieldwork based on long-term participant observation has long been implicitly recognized in that claims to objectivity in fact came to be based less on the nature of the research encounter than on the objectifying rhetoric of reporting forms (Crick 1982a; Grimshaw and Hart 1995). Fuller recognition of the role of reflexivity eventually

moved researchers beyond naive attempts to objectify the research encounter and towards an acceptance that in social research, 'the specificity and individuality of the observer are ever present and must therefore be acknowledged, explored and put to creative use' (Okely 1996b: 28). A developing critique of objectifying forms of ethnographic writing has accompanied this recognition (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Rosaldo 1993 [1989]).

Reflexivity in this form, while clearly calling attention to the nature of research as a social process, is still very much focused on the individual researcher. Yet even at this individualist level, considerations of reflexivity are compelled to move beyond the notion of the researcher's effect on the data and begin to acknowledge the more active role of the researcher in the actual production of those data. Thus, 'the ethnographic enterprise is not a matter of what one person does in a situation but how two sides of an encounter arrive at a delicate workable definition of their meeting' (Crick 1982a: 25). Steier (1991b) goes further in viewing the research process as one in which researcher and reciprocators (not respondents) are engaged in co-constructing a world.

Ethnographers first came to consider the collective social dimension of reflexivity through identifying reflexive processes among the peoples that they studied. This perspective has been particularly useful and prominent in studies of ritual and performance. Perhaps the most frequently cited example is Geertz's interpretation of the Balinese cockfight as 'a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves' (1973: 448). Such social reflexivity may be explicit, a deliberate and conscious reflection of a people upon themselves, but it is more commonly presented as fully revealed only through the interpretative insights of the ethnographer. However, social reflexivity, especially in this latter form, preserves a privileged, and essentially non-reflexive, position for the ethnographer (cf. Watson 1987).

When the insights of this sort of social reflexivity, especially those that are grounded in a relativist and/or interpretivist perspective, are combined with the reflexivity of the individual researcher in recognizing that data are very much a cooperative product, then they tend to stimulate reflexivity of a more searching and critical form which encompasses the knowledge claims of social researchers themselves. Why should this be so? If we argue that the activities and texts of our informants are really expressing not their obvious surface message but an underlying one about the nature of their society, then, in a reflexive

displacement of this analysis, we may question the researcher's (our own) activities in producing a text about these others. Are researchers' activities and results also really carrying a deeper message, not about those they study, but about themselves and the nature of their own society? Gudeman and Penn (1982) argue, for example, that the so-called local models developed by ethnographers are no more local than is the interpretative model through which their analyses are constructed. This latter model (which they call a Euclidean model) is simply another local model, one based in the Western cultures of the ethnographer, but one with universal pretensions. The question of how proponents of a local model develop and sustain such pretensions to universality is clearly a political one, having to do with differential access to power. In this light, the research process is more clearly perceived as an encounter in which knowledge is constituted in ways which reflect and maintain various power relations, a process with ethical implications to which I return in Chapter 3.

This more radical reflexivity thus contends that the activities and results of social research are constructed from and reflect both the broader sociohistorical context of researchers and the disciplinary culture to which they belong. It must be accepted that 'anthropology is a part of itself. Any statement about culture is also a statement about anthropology' (Crick 1982b: 307). However, the fullest expression of reflexivity in research is realized when the 'also' in the above statement is dropped, and it is argued that social research is essentially about itself. At this point, it ceases to be research or to promote the fieldwork activities usually taken as constituting ethnographic research. We do not undertake to travel great distances, to situate ourselves among other social groupings, to talk to other individuals simply to learn about ourselves and our own cultures. Such activities might be pursued haphazardly in a search for personal enrichment in order to increase introspective insight; however, the more systematic directed activities of even the most open-ended forms of ethnographic research would not be undertaken without some belief that we are learning about something 'other' than, 'outside' of ourselves.

It will be useful to consider briefly the consequences of this full incorporation of reflexivity in an area of research that has moved further than most in this direction, namely, research into the sociology of scientific knowledge. Researchers in this area, inspired primarily by ethnomethodology and following Kuhn's (1962) work on normal and revolutionary science, have developed a thoroughgoing analysis of scientific knowledge as being socially constructed by a community of

scientists. However, the challenge they face is to see the knowledge they themselves produce about the production of scientific knowledge as equally socially constructed. Furthermore, so must their reflexive knowledge about their knowledge be socially constructed, leading to an unending inward spiral, what has been referred to as the '*tu quoque*' argument (Ashmore 1989: 87–111). Such theorists face two related difficulties: how to do research which recognizes the radically reflexive nature of their activities (cf. Steier 1991c; Woolgar 1988a); and how to write about such research in a suitably reflexive manner. Such considerations have not led to much substantive research; instead most of the collections that discuss the potential for research based in this perspective have concentrated on ways of reporting on research, such as discourse analysis, incorporating conversations about the research both between researchers and with research subjects, as well as other so-called new literary forms. This preoccupation leads to a certain defensiveness in presentation – 'We must remind ourselves that we tell our stories through others. Further, our self-reflexive stories need not be trivial' (Steier 1991a: 3) – as well as to a somewhat sterile and precious self-consciousness – 'Do you think we could ever have an adequate introduction to a project which attempts to engage in the kind of reflexivity it endorses?' (Woolgar and Ashmore 1988: 10; cf. Pinch and Pinch 1988 for a critique of these new literary forms).

Thus the question arises as to whether this inward spiral can be broken without losing the insights into the reflexive nature of knowledge. Is knowledge of anything other than knowledge of reflexivity possible? And if so, how is it achieved? The answer may lie in consideration of the dual nature of social research: that it depends both on some connection with that being researched and on some degree of separation from it. I turn to this question in the final section. But first it will be helpful to consider how and why questions of reflexivity became so prominent in anthropology and to examine more carefully some of the 'post-' critiques, of which this reflexive spiral is one manifestation, and how they may affect the conduct of social research.

REFLEXIVITY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Interest in reflexivity as a positive aspect of ethnography has been growing among anthropologists since the early 1970s. Prior to that it was primarily regarded as a problem to be overcome in keeping with the positivist orientation of those who originated and promoted the

method of participant observation (cf. Urry 1984). Thus from this earlier perspective the influence of the ethnographer was to be eliminated insofar as possible from the research findings. Since this was clearly impossible under conditions of long-term participant observation, the alternative that was adopted in practice was to minimize the ethnographer's influence in reported observations, primarily a matter of reporting style. What developed in classic ethnographic texts was the inclusion of some sort of arrival story to give authenticity to the findings (Geertz 1988; Pratt 1986); subsequently personal references were diligently avoided or carefully circumscribed. Such a practice has a clear irony in that the point of arrival is precisely when interaction is likely to be most superficial and open to misinterpretation. 'The anthropologists' opening descriptions focus predictably on the superficial, visible contrasts and first encounters. The account cannot by definition convey the responses and insights from the hosts' (Okely 1992: 14).

However, in the late 1960s anthropology began to undergo a process of self-criticism initiated by a recognition of the ways in which the discipline had been a product and beneficiary of colonial expansion and furthered by considerations of whether and how it may have inadvertently aided the designs of the colonizers (Asad 1973a; Hymes 1969). For example, the concentration of anthropologists on precontact social forms of native peoples meant that they ignored, or attempted to weed out of their descriptions and analyses, any effects that were the result of contact. Thus questions of racism and economic exploitation were ignored, as they would have required study of both the colonizing and colonized societies. Both the structural functionalism of British anthropology, following Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and the emphasis on cultural complexes of American anthropology, following Boas, ignored the contemporary reality of the lives of the people they studied in their attempts to reconstruct 'pure' social structures and cultural forms without regard to the influence of colonial contact, of which the anthropologists were themselves a part. Kuper (1988) has suggested that for a century much of the theorizing of anthropologists was based on an idea of the nature of primitive society that had been developed at the end of the nineteenth century, the source of which was in evolutionary ideas about the progressive development of modern society.

Early reactions to the recognition that anthropologists were ignoring the contemporary lived realities of the peoples they studied tended to concentrate on the ethical dimensions of this blinkered

vision. An early set of essays (Hymes 1969) that developed this self-critique in anthropology was stimulated in part by the then recent uncovering of the use of anthropologists and ethnographic fieldwork more generally as a cover and a source of intelligence gathering in certain parts of the world, in particular in South America and south-east Asia (Horowitz 1967; Saleminck 1991). Berreman (1969), in this same collection, questioned what he perceived as the lack of any human purpose for a discipline that engages in the study of humankind and argued that anthropologists must discard the positivist idea of value freedom for an acknowledged commitment to act ethically on the basis of the knowledge they accumulate and to seek knowledge that is relevant to the problems of the peoples among whom they work.

This is the substance of the searching questions of the peoples of the third world and others: namely, 'What has been the effect of your work among us? Have you contributed to the solution of the problems you have witnessed? Have you even mentioned those problems? If not, then you are part of those problems and hence must be changed, excluded, or eradicated.'

(Berreman 1969: 90)

However, once the distortions in anthropological knowledge introduced through ignoring the effects of colonialism were widely recognized, this led inevitably and very quickly to a recognition that ethnographers could not effectively study simply the effects of colonialism among colonized peoples, but that ethnographic attention must be turned as well to a study of the colonial forms, their interrelationships with native peoples and, finally, to a study of the colonizers themselves. Thus ethnographic research was criticized for being both unethical and false in its attempts to concentrate on native peoples. The critique of its complicity in colonialism led to a call for reflexivity in the sense that studies of others must also be studies of ourselves in our relationships with those others. Thus Scholte called for a reflexive and critical anthropology based on the recognition that 'fieldwork and subsequent analysis constitute a unified praxis, the first results of which are mediated by the "in here" as much as by the "out there"' (1969: 438).

Recognition of the distortions that had been a part of anthropological perceptions due to ethnographers' determination to ignore the nature and impact of colonial societies among the peoples they chose to study led to a critical questioning of the products of this research.

Thus it was suggested that classical ethnographic research was not simply presenting a distorted view of native societies and cultures, but that it was not seeing them at all, that in fact these ethnographies were primarily reflections of the preconceptions of ethnographers, based on their own disciplinary and Western cultural expectations. Anthropologists were perceived as having themselves constructed their objects of study (Fabian 1983; Kuper 1988). This view was given a very powerful impetus in the critique of orientalism by Said (1978), directed not specifically at anthropologists, but arguing that the intellectual and academic discourse about the nature of non-Western societies was really a projection by the West of its own preconceptions and imaginings.

This critique of the nature of anthropological knowledge and its deficiencies based on its own unreflexive perspective is a part of a much broader epistemological critique with important implications for social research that is generally included under the terms poststructuralism and postmodernism. Postmodernism is a broad and diffuse set of ideas about what are perceived to be fundamental changes taking place in society globally, changes that constitute a general transformation affecting all areas of life from aesthetics to economics to science. There is disagreement as to whether such changes are actually transformative in the sense of constituting a move into radically and qualitatively different social forms (e.g. Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992) or whether they are better understood as extensions, a radicalization and universalization, of existing characteristics of modernity (Giddens 1990). Clearly such disparate views on the significance of contemporary social processes produce quite distinctive definitions of modernity and its alleged successor and, in fact, the range of meanings proposed for postmodernism is very broad. I want to concentrate on the significance of the postmodernist debate for social research and will thus consider one of the general characteristics that has been suggested as distinguishing between modernity and postmodernity. Lash (1990), while not a postmodernist, proposes a distinguishing characteristic of modernity and postmodernity which is also accepted by those who consider themselves postmodernists (Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992). Lash argues that the major hallmark of modernization was a process of cultural differentiation particularly embodied in the Kantian distinction between theoretical, ethical and aesthetic realms, which became relatively autonomous. This differentiation and ensuing autonomy made possible the growth of realism in a variety of fields, in particular for our interests here, a form of epistemological realism. This

cultural
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way

position holds that ideas can give a true picture of reality; it depends on the differentiation of such ideas from the reality that they are held to represent, hence scientific ideas are separate from but truly represent nature. In the same vein, ideas (theories) about society represent the autonomous, separate and objective realm of the social. The autonomy of the social was particularly stressed by the Durkheimian position that explanations of social facts must be sought in the social, not in terms of the individual. This was a major theoretical impetus behind Radcliffe-Brown's development of structural-functionalism focusing attention on the ways in which social structures were interrelated, so that societies were to be analysed in terms of the functioning of their various social structures, without reference to any external influences. Another manifestation of this differentiation may be found in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss with its explanation of a great variety of surface social and cultural phenomena from kinship systems to myths in terms of underlying analytical categories of a universal nature. Similarly, classical Marxist analysis may be interpreted as differentiating infrastructure from surface appearances and explaining the latter in terms of the former. As these comments suggest, poststructuralism, which criticizes the range of such structuralist epistemologies, is a part of the postmodernist critique in anthropology and will be discussed at the same time.

In contrast to this, postmodernism is a process of de-differentiation, of breaking down boundaries and rejecting the autonomy of different realms. One of the first major consequences of this process for social research is epistemological – that is, it challenges the knowledge basis of such research by problematizing the relationship between ideas (theories) and reality. In anthropology this has been glossed as a crisis of representation – that is, a denial that the products of ethnographic research may be legitimately perceived as in any way representing the separate reality of another society. Clearly such an epistemological critique was fundamentally subversive for any and all structuralist accounts, in that the structures they proposed, of whatever ilk – social, economic, or universal binary oppositions – were no longer to be interpreted as representing anything beyond themselves; they were images, no longer representations, that were collapsed on to themselves. This turning back of the representation on to itself, the denial that it is anything beyond itself, also makes clear the fundamental radical reflexivity of postmodernist critiques.

Another aspect of the breaking down of boundaries is to be found in the process of producing ethnographies based on fieldwork, even if

these ethnographies are in an interpretivist rather than structuralist tradition. Such ethnographies are open to the general epistemological critique that denies their being seen as reporting on a separate reality. This involves a breaking down of the distinction between ethnographers and the peoples they study, leading to the contention that ethnographers create their objects of study, they do not discover them. Furthermore, the process of de-differentiation encourages a breaking down of the distinction between author and ethnography; ethnographers are not viewed as pronouncing on something that lies outside themselves but rather are intimately connected to their particular ethnographies. This breaking down of the boundaries between author and text has two implications: the first, and most obvious, is the inherent individual reflexivity of the ethnographies that are produced; carried to its logical conclusion, it could be argued that they are about the ethnographer, not the people ostensibly studied. The second implication is the denial of authority, of a privileged voice, to ethnographers in their presentation of their ethnographies. This denial is part of the postmodern rejection of meta-narratives – that is, explanations of broad historical processes and grand theory. In this view there is no privileged explanation, no basis on which to judge one perspective more correct or truer than another; there are only perspectives. ✱✱✱

This critique has had a particularly profound effect on the ways in which ethnographies are produced – that is, in the general self-consciousness about the process of writing ethnography. Thus there has developed an extensive postmodern critique about the production of ethnographic texts (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Cushman 1982). In its most radical manifestations, this argument contends that writing ethnography is an individual creative act more akin to fictional writing than to any vision of ethnographic research as a basis for a social science. Thus such products are not really accessible to the critical evaluation of an informed collectivity, nor are they to be understood in terms of a realist ontology. One response to this perspective has been the production of highly individually reflexive works – subjective accounts of how fieldwork affected the ethnographer rather than accounts of understanding or perspectives gained about the nature of other peoples (cf. Jacobson 1991: 119–22). As this makes clear, although postmodern ethnographers are uncomfortably aware of the authorial voice and are at pains to minimize it, they do not necessarily take the classical ethnographic approach of expunging it from the text. Instead of making the ethnographer disappear, they make themselves more visible, even central in the production with the idea

that in so doing, in presenting their gropings towards understanding, they undermine their own authority so that their interpretations become simply one perspective with no superior claim to validity. Another favoured approach is to hand the presentation over to the 'other' by employing extensive use of transcripts of recordings with little or no commentary or overt analysis. Such an emphasis on dialogue rather than text still privileges the ethnographer's vision in the selection of such dialogue and in other ways to be considered in subsequent chapters. Other postmodern techniques are efforts to allow the variety of perspectives to appear through attempts to be both multitextual – in their use of less standard, often non-verbal materials such as photographs and films, commodities, the body, poetry – and multivocal – in their presentation of varying perspectives without attempting to order or evaluate them (cf. Fontana 1994: 211–18).

Another major area in which postmodern perspectives have challenged and affected social research is in questions of ethics and the politics inherent in such activity. In the breaking down of boundaries between different realms, postmodernists deny the separation of political and ethical considerations from the analytical considerations of social theories. In this view all perspectives are political perspectives. This particular view accords with the criticisms developed by feminists and Marxist-inspired critical theorists of much social theorizing. They argued that the positivist goal of value freedom was really a disguised political position, one that supported existing power relationships, in particular patriarchal and class-based forms of oppression. Thus these perspectives have argued that social research must be politically committed. However, the postmodern critique, with its according of equal validity to all perspectives and voices, its denial of any privileged ethical perspective, poses a problem for these other positions in that they aspire to action, whether in research or theorizing, which advances the political programme of a given collectivity and, hence, which does privilege a particular political view. I will return to these debates in Chapter 3.

When we take postmodernism as a process of de-differentiation, the breaking down of boundaries that this entails operates on several levels in its effects on ethnographic research. At the same time, all of these levels respond to this process through a greatly increased reflexivity in some form. At the level of the individual ethnographer, the breaking down of boundaries is most evident in reporting styles in which ethnographers try in various ways to show how they are implicated or included in their discussions of other peoples. This often leads to

ethnographies that seem to be more about the ethnographer than the people being studied. At a collective disciplinary level, the recognition of the role of the discipline in constructing its objects of study has tended to turn social theorizing back on to itself with the eventual development of a critique of the possibility of theory or causal explanation. Similarly, boundaries between author and audience are erased with attempts to make subjects into authors through use of extensive 'unedited' transcripts as well as seeking input from research subjects into the texts written about them. Many of the critiques developed by postmodernists provide very valuable insights – such as the exposure of the particular perspectives based in power relationships hidden in meta-narratives and the related authority built into the construction of texts; others, equally valuable, seem almost truisms – in particular the multivocality and polysemic nature of all social activity. At the same time, the logic of these critiques leads us inexorably to the forms of reflexivity that continually spiral inward, a process that is ultimately destructive of one of the two pillars of social research, a belief that we are able through these activities to learn about things outside ourselves, not knowable through introspection. The question that I want to address at a general philosophical level in the next section, and in terms of research practice throughout the remainder of this book, is how we can incorporate these postmodern insights and utilize reflexivity fully in ethnographic research without falling into this ultimately pessimistic, unproductive and completely inward-directed perspective.

RESEARCHING REFLEXIVELY: A REALIST ALTERNATIVE

The search for a philosophically sound basis for ethnographic research which fully accepts its inherent reflexivity while still maintaining that its products are explanations of an external social reality requires both an ontology that asserts that there is a social world independent of our knowledge of it and an epistemology that argues that it is knowable. Such an enterprise also involves overcoming the dichotomy between a positivist understanding of social science and various hermeneutical perspectives, especially the interpretivist position in the ethnographic tradition. The critical realism of Bhaskar (1989; also cf. Outhwaite 1987) offers a philosophical basis for such an integrative position. Some see Bhaskar's realist philosophy as an attempt to develop and transform positivism (e.g. Hughes 1990: 85–6), whereas others regard it

as linking the positivist and interpretivist positions (e.g. Silverman 1985: 33–5). However, I would suggest that Bhaskar develops an integrative perspective out of his critiques of both these positions and provides a philosophical grounding for social science in general that is compatible with the practice of many social researchers. Those working from this perspective aspire to provide explanations, not simply descriptions, which have applicability beyond the confines of their specific research subjects and sites, without sacrificing the hermeneutic insights into the pre-interpreted nature of their subject matter and the reflexive implications of their research practice. While a comprehensive account of this philosophical position is beyond the scope of this book, I want to consider its utility for ethnographic research, in particular the contribution it can make to developing a fully reflexive yet realist basis for research practice that can be expected to yield explanations which are open to informed debate and criticism and which provide qualitatively better understandings of human societies and cultures.

Bhaskar argues that the debate between positivist and hermeneutic perspectives has tended to concentrate on epistemology, on ways of knowing, in that it has been centred on the distinction between the objects of natural science and human subjects. Thus both sides have accepted the self-conscious nature of human subjects as providing the main difficulty in the study of human society, with positivists attempting to reduce the resulting reflexive effects while interpretivists (phenomenologists and, especially, ethnomethodologists) have argued that the understandings of their human subjects are their proper, and only, subject matter. Bhaskar's realism in contrast concentrates 'first on the ontological question of the properties that societies possess, before shifting to the epistemological question of how these properties make them possible objects of knowledge for us' (1989: 25). He argues that both perspectives have over-simplified and misunderstood the nature of the social, with positivists taking it to be 'merely empirically real' – that is only existing in observable behavioural responses of humans – and interpretivists treating it as 'transcendentally ideal' in their insistence that society exists only in the ideas that social actors hold about it. These perspectives give us 'either a conceptually impoverished and deconceptualizing empiricism, or a hermeneutics drained of causal import and impervious to empirical controls' (ibid.: 12). In their place Bhaskar proposes a much more subtle and complex view of society in which human agents are neither passive products of social structures nor entirely their creators but are placed in an iterative and naturally

reflexive feedback relationship to them. Society exists independently of our conceptions of it, in its causal properties, its ability to exert deterministic force on individuals; yet it is dependent on our actions, human activity, for its reproduction. It is both real and transcendent. In this sense Bhaskar likens it to the objects of study of the natural sciences which, he argues, have been misrepresented by the empirical realism of the positivist position. For example, magnetic fields are not perceptually real, in the sense of being directly observable: they are human concepts, yet they exist independently of these concepts (as expressed in their effects on iron filings, for example). This is the transcendental reality that the natural and social sciences share.

This concept of transcendental reality is also at the root of Bhaskar's contention that what he calls naturalism,¹ an essential unity between natural and social sciences, is possible without postulating either an identity of subject matter or a uniformity of appropriate methods. Thus society and human individuals represent different but inextricably interconnected ontological levels, with each dependent on the other for their existence, yet capable of exerting deterministic force on, or of transforming, the other (1989: 36-7). It is this ontological status that then allows us to move beyond the epistemological dilemma discussed above. It suggests that we can neither take behavioural observations as simply representative of some given social world nor fully reveal or reconstruct the social through our understanding of actors' meanings and beliefs. 'Society is not given in, but presupposed by, experience. However, it is precisely its peculiar ontological status, its transcendently real character, that makes it a possible object of knowledge for us' (ibid.: 53).

Another facet of the peculiar ontological status of society as perceived by Bhaskar is the fundamental reflexivity involved in our knowledge of it. He fully accepts the hermeneutical (and post-modernist) position that the production of knowledge about society is a part of the entire process of social production, that it is part of its own subject matter and may transform that subject matter. Yet he argues that such causal interdependency needs to be distinguished from existential intransitivity – that is, the existence of society as a knowable object and hence a genuine practical object of research. The existence and properties of this object are independent of the process of investigation. 'For if it is the characteristic error of positivism to ignore (or play down) interdependency, it is the characteristic error of hermeneutics to dissolve intransitivity. As will be seen, both errors function to the same effect, foreclosing the possibility of scientific

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critique, upon which the project of human self-emancipation depends' (1989: 47–8).

Before considering briefly one example of a small-scale study that was undertaken from an explicitly critical realist perspective, it will be useful to clarify the implications of such an ontological and epistemological position for the practice of ethnographic research. In the first place, such a position does allow for the possibility of a social science – that is, studies of human society can produce law-like statements – and further there is an essential unity between the natural and social sciences in the sense that they do not represent totally different ways of knowing. Recognition of such unity is based in part on the recognition that the natural sciences themselves are not the paragons of positivism that they are taken to be by interpretivist critics. Neither natural nor social sciences assume theory-neutral observation (Popper 1963) and both are socially organized forms of knowledge (Kuhn 1962). The differences between them are based in two main areas: the more profound reflexivity of the social sciences which recognizes that they cannot legitimately objectify what they study; and the nature of the social as manifest only in open systems where experiments are not possible, which means that social theories cannot have decisive test situations constructed for them and must always be explanatory rather than strictly causal or predictive. Measurement in social theory is thus of limited theoretical utility, often substituting mere generalization for genuinely explanatory abstraction (Collier 1994: 252–6); qualitative forms of research practice are favoured, with a recognition of the importance of understanding based in language and dialogue (Bhaskar 1989: 45–6). Thus we can ask of ethnographic research that it provide explanations, but not strictly causal statements such as those based in constant conjunction or statistical regularity. Furthermore, social sciences must recognize that they are rooted in the specific, in time and place. 'The law-like statements of the social sciences will thus typically designate historically restricted tendencies operating at a single level of the social structure only...they designate tendencies...which may never be manifested, but which are nevertheless essential to the understanding (and the changing) of the different forms of social life, just because they are really productive of them' (ibid.: 53–4). Thus critical realism provides a philosophical basis for ethnographic research to provide explanatory (law-like) abstractions while also emphasizing its rootedness in the concrete, in what real people on the ground are doing and saying. Critical realism promotes a creative tension between the production of explanation without

promoting flights of theoretical fancy. Such a position is ideally suited to ethnographic practice, which in its knowledge-seeking activities is continually forced to evaluate and rework theoretical abstraction in the face of concrete experience.

Another aspect of critical realism that is particularly well suited to ethnographic practice is its recognition of different ontological levels. Both human actors and social structure are accorded ontological reality. Neither is fully determined by or produced by the other; rather they are interrelated in that each level may affect the other. Hence ethnographers are encouraged to explore the phenomenological reality of actors' understandings and interpretations and their effects on social structure, but not to take these interpretations as fully constitutive of social structure. The level of social structure may not be studied directly but only observed in its effects on human actors, yet this is not to deny its reality or to suggest that it cannot be a legitimate object of study and theoretical attention.

In a similar manner, critical realism accepts the reflexivity of the social sciences in the fullest sense, recognizing that they are 'part of their own field of enquiry' (Bhaskar 1989: 47), that in other words 'there is a relational tie between the development of knowledge and the development of the object of knowledge' (ibid.: 48). On the other hand, Bhaskar argues that such 'causal interdependency' – which he distinguishes from 'existential intransitivity' – still allows us to know and study something as an object so long as we are sensitive to and take account of our own implication in and effects on that object. Thus critical realism requires a continuing reflexive awareness as part of the condition of ethnographic practice, without allowing such awareness to blind us to the existence of a reality beyond ourselves which provides a legitimate basis for the production and critique of theoretical abstractions.

Whereas much social research seems to be undertaken from a perspective that is fairly close to this critical realist position, it is not generally acknowledged as such. However, one small-scale ethnographic study (Porter 1993) has attempted explicitly to base itself on such a philosophical argument. This study looks at the ways in which racism and professionalism interact, concentrating on relations between white nurses and black and Asian doctors in an Irish hospital. The study, which is based on three months of participant observation while its author was employed as a staff nurse, develops an explanation that individual doctors are able to use professional advantage, in varying ways (display of superior clinical knowledge, insistence on

formal occupational deference), to overcome the disempowering effects of racism, which was only expressed 'backstage' in some of the nurses' comments on doctors' actions.

In what ways does the methodology of this ethnographic study represent critical realism? First, in its concentration on the bidirectional flow of influences between structure (in the form of racism and professionalism) and human agency (in doctors' use, and nurses' acceptance, of professional resources to subvert racist undermining of their positions). Second, this concentration on particular pre-identified structural factors means that the empirical enquiry is focused on them and the eventual reporting form makes no claim to 'reproduce the social situation studied' (Porter 1993: 607). Ethnographic evidence is provided in the form of brief dialogic sections, with additional contextualizing comment taken from field notes. Third, the study is contrasted with another similar study (Hughes 1988) in which the findings differ in that overt racism was expressed in the relationship between doctors and nurses. Porter suggests that this difference, which he argues can be dealt with in terms of the variable manifestations of theoretical tendencies, shows the inadequacy of positivist concepts of causal explanation based on constant conjunctions. He also displays some reflexive awareness in his use of contextualized dialogue, rather than isolated quotations, in his presentation of the ethnographic evidence for his arguments. However, he fails to develop possible reflexive insights fully. Although he does examine his own position within the research situation in one brief passage, he does not pursue other reflexive issues, such as gender difference and its possible effect on the interactions he observed and of which he was a part.

To conclude this section, I want to look briefly at a theoretical argument on the nature of the self which is both highly reflexive and at the same time intrinsically social, and which I would argue thus fits well and complements the critical realist ontology and epistemology I have been discussing. Questions about the self seem to go to the heart of the postmodernist ethnographic dilemma regarding the knowability of other cultures and peoples, and the dangers of projecting our own cultural assumptions on them in our analyses. Marcus and Fischer (1986: 45-76) have taken this area of the self and the expression of emotions as one of the areas in which experimental ethnographies – what they call ethnographies of experience (*ibid.*: 43) – have been most active and effective in developing ways of writing that go beyond conventional reporting techniques. They suggest that 'focussing on the person, the self, and the emotions – all topics difficult to probe in

traditional ethnographic frameworks – is a way of getting to the level at which cultural differences are most deeply rooted: in feelings and in complex indigenous reflections about the nature of persons and social relationships' (ibid.: 46).

However, such concerns beg the question of how we can know individual persons in other cultures any more readily than we can know the cultures themselves without projecting on to them our own selves and cultural understandings. One theory of the formation of the self and its relationship to society which seems both to be consistent with a critical realist perspective and to provide a way out of this dilemma of reflexivity is that developed by G. H. Mead (1934). As with critical realism, Mead is both critical of positivism and yet sees the possibility of a science of society based on pragmatic philosophy which recognizes the contingency of all knowledge (Baldwin 1986). He argues that the formation of the self is dependent upon symbolic social interaction. The self is distinguished from individual subjectivity in that the latter is based in experience to which individuals alone have access. The self, in contrast, depends upon the existence of symbolic forms of interaction, of which the most important is language, and the self emerges and develops in reflective experience – that is, through an ongoing inner conversation. 'The internalization and inner dramatization, by the individual, of the external conversation of significant gestures which constitutes his chief mode of interaction with other individuals belonging to the same society – is the earliest experiential phase in the genesis and development of the self' (Mead 1934: 173). There are two important features of Mead's description of the self: first, it is social in origin and hence recognizes the causal powers of social structure in the development of, indeed the very existence of, the individual self; and, second, it is continually in process, never complete, and in this respect provides both for individual freedom and creativity and for the possibility of causal effects moving in the opposite direction – that is, for human agents to affect and transform social structure.

Mead develops these two aspects in his description of the two parts of the process of creating a self as the 'I' and the 'me'. The 'me' is that part of the process that is easier to comprehend, in that it is constituted of the individual's social experiences and reflections on these experiences. It is the most clearly socially based of the two parts: an individual's 'own experience as a self is one which he takes over from his action upon others. He becomes a self in so far as he can take the attitude of another and act toward himself as others act' (1934: 171). This is the 'me', the set of attitudes interpreted and taken over as a

result of reflecting on social interaction. But social interaction and reflection upon it is ongoing, so that the 'me' is never complete but always in process; and the outcome of this process is never fully determined by what went before. The creative part of this process, that which is indeterminate until it has occurred, is the 'I'; thus the 'I' can only be glimpsed as its responses become a part of the 'me'. 'We distinguish that individual who is doing something from the "me" who puts the problem up to him. The response enters into his experience only when it takes place... That movement into the future is the step, so to speak, of the ego, of the "I". It is something that is not given in the "me"' (ibid.: 177).

This twofold depiction of the self provides a basis and a rationale for ethnographic studies that seek to understand the nature of selves in other societies. Because the development of one aspect of the self, the 'me', is through symbolic social interaction, understanding other selves is inextricably bound up with understanding other societies. At the same time, because the other aspect of the self, the 'I', provides for creative variation no matter what the social and cultural determiners, we avoid the overly mechanistic and deterministic presentations of other selves as fully predictable and representative of other societies. Furthermore, Mead's conception helps ethnographers to overcome the objection that they cannot possibly have access to the selves of people from other radically different cultural backgrounds. If the self is continually under construction, then ethnographers' experiences when they participate in social interaction in another society clearly alter their own selves in accordance with the cultural expectations of others. Attention to this process of transforming the ethnographer's 'me' can provide genuine knowledge of the nature of others' selves and societies. So the reflexive bent of such experimental ethnographies seems justified on good realist and pragmatic grounds, so long as they do not lose sight of their responsibility to seek explanatory abstraction and not primarily to report on individual experience. The utility of this concept of Mead's further suggests that theoretical entities not directly observable may be both ontologically real and explanatorily useful, and this utility can survive movement to other societies without predetermining understanding or erasing their genuine cultural difference.

SUMMARY

This chapter seeks to establish a philosophical foundation for doing ethnographic research which embraces its intrinsic multi-layered reflexivity without turning inward to a complete self-absorption that undermines our capacity to explore other societies and cultures. It also suggests that such research incorporate insights from postmodernist perspectives, such as their attention to multiple perspectives and their critique of meta-narratives, while avoiding the extreme relativism and antipathy to generalized explanation that is essentially destructive of the research enterprise. Such a philosophical foundation, I argue, is to be found in Bhaskar's critical realism, which accepts the existence of a separate social reality whose transcendently real nature makes it a possible object of knowledge for us. In its recognition of the separation, yet interdependence, of the two levels of social structure and individual action, critical realism encourages a form of explanation that builds on the creative tension between theoretical abstraction and descriptive detail. I consider two brief examples of the application of this philosophical perspective: one is a specific empirical study deliberately undertaken from a critical realist position. The second is an interpretation of G. H. Mead's theory of the development of the self from a critical realist position. In the chapters which follow I will consider the process of doing ethnographic research – selection of topics, a variety of methods, through analysis and writing up – using this philosophical foundation to address specific questions about the significance and utility of reflexivity and the bases of ethnographic authority.

NOTE

- 1 This should not be confused with another common usage of the term naturalism to refer to research methods which eschew 'artificial' settings, such as experiments and interviews, and advocate studying the social world in its 'natural' state (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 6–10).