

### Writeup of Marcus (1995)

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 95-117.

#### Summary

Marcus (1995) presented a review of multi-sited ethnography, “an emergent methodological trend in anthropological research” (p. 95) which “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional [ethnography] ... to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (p. 96). He reviewed views and perspectives on the “world system of capitalist political economy” (pp. 95-96), noting many processes cannot “be fully understood in terms of earlier macro-models of the capitalist world system” (p. 98); instead ethnographers who wish to study such processes have to put aside any distinction between the system and (Habermas’) lifeworlds and conduct multi-sited ethnographic research. Marcus discussed three “methodological anxieties” (p. 99) such research might raise: (a) it would “test the limits” of ethnography since “its goal is not holistic representation” (p. 99); (b) it could reduce the quality and “power of fieldwork” (p. 100), although Marcus argues there are many other factors that also control such quality; and (c) it will cause “the loss of the subaltern,” or traditional “systemic domination” viewpoint in anthropology (p. 101). Marcus next reviewed other disciplines and areas within anthropology—including media studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, and medical anthropology—that had conducted much multi-sited ethnographic research. He also reviewed common “modes of construction” of such studies, the methodology used to study multiple sites. These included following (a) the people, “the movements of a particular group of initial subjects” (p. 106); (b) “the circulation through different contexts of” particular things or objects (p. 106); (c) “the circulation of signs, symbols, and metaphors” (p. 108); (d) the story, plot, or narrative; (e) the life history or biography; and (f) “the parties to conflicts” (p. 110). Marcus also discussed “strategically situated” ethnography, a single-sited study that “may nonetheless embed itself in a multi-sited context” (p. 110) and thus face the same methodological anxieties; he used these as a springboard for further discussion of “what sorts of local knowledges are distinctly probed” in multi-sited ethnography (p. 111). He concluded the ethnographer should be a reflexive and “circumstantial activist” in a way “specific and circumstantial to the conditions of doing multi-sited research itself” (p. 113).

## **Analysis**

I found Marcus's article rather difficult to read, unfortunately. The sentences are quite dense and many concepts are discussed that are not explained well, at least not for an audience outside of anthropology. As such, I am not sure I would necessarily recommend it to someone just beginning to learn about ethnography and qualitative methods, at least not wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, his presentation of multi-sited ethnography is certainly important (as evidenced by its high citation count) and relevant to those (like myself) learning about qualitative research methods. Perhaps because I do not have a background in anthropology, I do feel some of his points are a little strange; in particular it seems relatively obvious that many phenomena will fall somewhere between the ends of the whole-system and lifeworld continuum, that the "systemic domination" viewpoint should not always be held, and that one may follow people, things, metaphors, etc. across sites if they, rather than the site, are the focus of a study. This may also be due to my own particular background, interests, and epistemology, which are in general agreement on these points. Ethnographic methods can be applied to a wide variety of studies, and should not be restricted—at least in my view—to their traditional use in studies of remote cultures in anthropology.

**Keywords:** ethnography, multi-sited, world system, processes, system, lifeworlds, limits of ethnography, quality of fieldwork, subaltern, people, contexts, objects, signs, symbols, metaphors, stories, life history, conflicts, strategically situated ethnography, reflexive, activist

### Writeup of Forsythe (2001)

Forsythe, D. E. (2001). "It's just a matter of common sense": Ethnography as invisible work. In *Studying those who study us: An anthropologist in the world of artificial intelligence* (pp. 146-162). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

#### Summary

Forsythe (2001) discussed the problems surrounding the mistaken belief in some “corporations and research laboratories” (p. 147) that ethnography is straightforward and “common sense” (p. 149). She started by defining ethnography as consisting of (a) “ethnographic data-gathering methods ... [including] participant observation, formal and informal interviewing, and ... analysis of documentary sources,” intended to identify patterns and relationships in what actually happens (p. 147); (b) grounding methods of data collection and analysis in theory; and (c) “a distinctive philosophical stance” which she called “relativism” (p. 148). Next, Forsythe presented “six misconceptions” of ethnographic work (p. 149), correcting each one as follows:

- Ethnography is not “common sense” but requires “a good deal of training and experience ... [and also] courage on occasion” (p. 149).
- “An outsider with considerable inside experience” will be the best ethnographer because insiders cannot detect tacit knowledge (p. 149).
- Ethnography uses “systematic method[s] and epistemological discipline” but does not absolutely adhere “to preformulated research protocols” (p. 150).
- Ethnography is not “equivalent to transcription” (p. 151); social scientists work to “understand and analyze what people say,” not just transcribe it (p. 151).
- People do not always do what they say they do; “‘think aloud’ ... ‘cognitive walkthrough’ narratives” (p. 151), “focus groups and surveys” are not as accurate as longer-form, systematic “participant observation and interview data” (p. 152).
- Audio or video recordings are not analysis; “the expertise is in the mind and technique of the analyst, not in the recording itself” (p. 152).

Forsythe then presented two examples from medical informatics, stressing that insiders do not always have an accurate model of what occurs and that “do-it-yourself ethnography” (p. 156) is by nature “superficial” analysis (p. 157). She concluded with a discussion of “the apparent invisibility” of ethnographic work—especially of “the training, skill, and experience” required (p. 161)—to participants, “sponsors and colleagues” (p. 159); the differences in philosophy and

epistemology between ethnographers and those in other fields; and the potential conflicts from the “reflexive” nature of ethnographic work (p. 160).

### **Analysis**

Forsythe writes from an anthropological perspective, clearly favoring and biasing ethnography over other methods—qualitative and quantitative—of data collection and analysis. However, I do not feel this diminishes the persuasiveness of her arguments, which are stated clearly and very well. Many of these echo the discussions of others; in particular I feel there are parallels to Geertz (1973) and Rosaldo (1993) in Forsythe’s points, although she is clearer and more succinct than both and her list of misconceptions is more directly applicable to ethnographic work. Since she is writing in the context of the design and development of software and systems, her article also has particular relevance for the field of library and information science (LIS), which often focuses on information systems. In addition, the examples from medical informatics are very useful, and Forsythe certainly uses them to her persuasive advantage. I found her chapter to be an excellent discussion of ethnography and how it is different from what some (pre-)conceive it to be, and would highly recommend it to prospective qualitative researchers and ethnographers in the LIS field.

**Keywords:** defining ethnography, misconceptions, training, experience, insider vs. outsider, systematic, epistemology, philosophy, observation, interviews, analysis, invisible work, reflexivity

### **Writeup of Clifford (1988)**

Clifford, J. (1988). On ethnographic authority. In *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art* (pp. 21-54). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

#### **Summary**

Clifford's (1988) chapter discussed the history, evolution, and emergence of different strategies towards ethnographic authority; that is, who is responsible for the resulting work from an ethnographic study? He considered the history to be one of "formation and breakup" (p. 22) of authority, the formation coming when professional ethnography originated in the 1890s in the work of Tylor, Boas, and others. Before this, Clifford claimed, "the ethnographer and the anthropologist ... were distinct" (p. 28); bringing together cultural observation and scientific theorizing, and thus conferring authority on the ethnographer-anthropologist, did not occur completely until "the Malinowskian cohort" in the 1920s (p. 28). In this period, "the persona of the fieldworker was validated" (p. 30), it was accepted that ethnographers did not need to be excessively fluent in native languages, there was "an increased emphasis on the power of [participant] observation" (p. 31), "powerful theoretical abstractions" were used to shorten studies (p. 31), and ethnographies became focused on particular institutions and time spans. This era focused on "experience" as the "guarantee of ethnographic authority" (p. 37). However, this approach was attacked by the interpretivist school that emerged later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who instead believed culture should be seen "as an assemblage of texts to be interpreted," based on the work of Ricoeur, Geertz, and others (p. 38). They believed authority came from interpreting one's experience through the use of dialogue, focusing on "the intersubjectivity of all speech ... [in] immediate ... context" (p. 41) and believing there was no "authoritative representation" of observations (p. 44) except as "circumstantial and intersubjective" (p. 43). Others built upon this further, claiming that authority should come directly from dialogue or from "polyphony" (p. 41). They believed in ethnographic research "as an ongoing negotiation" (p. 44) that included "the dialogical interplay of voices" (p. 47), placing authority in this polyphony of voices. Clifford concluded by noting an emerging trend towards this latter approach, a "breakup of monological authority" favoring polyphonic authority instead (p. 52).

#### **Analysis**

Clifford's article clearly comes from the perspective of an anthropologist, and as such is relatively dense in parts for someone not trained in that field. However, he does provide a useful

overview (albeit a substantially lengthy one) of the major historical, present-day, and emerging movements in ethnography as seen from the anthropological perspective, one that is not present in the other readings selected. His focus on authority serves both as a framing device and as an emphasis on an important issue in ethnographic work, an issue also tackled to varying extents and from slightly different angles by Geertz (1973), Rosaldo (1993), and Forsythe (2001).

Taking what occurs in everyday life surrounding a particular research problem and turning it into a published, qualitative, ethnographic research study requires careful consideration of the viewpoints of subjects, contributors, collaborators, and the ethnographer themselves. Because of this I would recommend Clifford's article to those interested in learning about ethnography; despite its length and denseness at times it provides necessary background and context for the past, present, and future of ethnographic research in the anthropological tradition.

**Keywords:** authority, ethnography, anthropology, anthropological, historical, history, participant observation, theory, experience, interpretivist, texts, assemblage, dialogue, polyphony, intersubjectivity, negotiation, context

### **Writeup of Rosaldo (1993)**

Rosaldo, R. (1993). Subjectivity in social analysis. In *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 168-195). Boston, MA: Beacon.

#### **Summary**

Rosaldo's (1993) chapter discussed issues of objectivism and subjectivism in qualitative research and in ethnography in particular, arguing for a particular philosophical and epistemological viewpoint. His view was made clear in the opening paragraph in the phrase "the myth of detachment" (p. 168); "social analysts," he claimed, "can rarely, if ever, become detached observers" (p. 169). He noticed a disconnect between what followers of Weber believed—"equat[ing] objectivity with an attitude of emotional ... and moral indifference" (p. 170)—and what Weber actually advocated: neutrality in scientific research, but not "without passion ... enthusiasm," emotions, or morals (p. 170); Weber advocated research as a "vocation" and "devotion" (p. 171). Next, Rosaldo related an anecdote from Geertz, who "wrote a seemingly tactful note" to a subject that backfired on him (p. 174), to explain that ethnography is not without "human failings as excruciating as they are mundane" and that these feelings and emotions may lead to "insight[s] into relations of inequality" (p. 175). He related a similar example from Briggs's fieldwork with Eskimos; she had less emotional control than them, which led to awkward outbursts, embarrassment, and feelings of depression on her part. She used reflexive analysis to base her "understanding [of] Eskimo family and emotional life" and her book around her emotions, rather than shunning them for a purely objective view as some might require (p. 178). Rosaldo's next example was of Kondo, a Japanese-American, finding it difficult to distance herself from her subjects while conducting fieldwork in Japan; she was "obliged" by the Japanese "to act like a 'native'" and as such faced both advantages and disadvantages in her ethnography (p. 181). Rosaldo argued ethnographic researchers must "be socially connected" with and within the "partially disjunctive, partially overlapping communities" they both study and speak for (p. 182). It is possible, he stated, to be scientific while still advocating based on "lesser" (p. 193) emotions and morals, taking into account multiple subjective perspectives.

#### **Analysis**

Rosaldo's points are well-taken and the examples he uses are certainly persuasive; in particular the experiences of Geertz, Briggs, and Kondo noted above are evocative of the need for subjectivity in ethnographic research. However, I did find the chapter to be a little dense in

parts—especially nearer the end—and a little longer than it needed to be to make a persuasive argument. While not all ethnographers would likely argue as strongly for subjective considerations in their research (if at all, as evidenced by the mistaken followers of Weber that Rosaldo mentioned), it is clear from Rosaldo—as well as Geertz (1973), Clifford (1988), and others—that ethnographic research requires considering multiple perspectives as valid to some extent, albeit not necessarily always completely “right” (G. Burnett, personal communication, June 17, 2010). The ethnographer is not omnipotent and should not be dispassionate and detached from their research site and subjects; instead they should carefully balance scientific neutrality with their emotions and morals. While certainly presenting somewhat of an extreme view and perhaps being a bit longer than necessary to make this view clear, Rosaldo’s article is a useful discussion of the need for this balance and I would recommend it to both beginning and established qualitative researchers.

**Keywords:** objective, objectivism, objectivity, subjective, subjectivism, subjectivity, ethnography, epistemology, philosophy, detachment, emotions, morals, neutrality, scientific, passion, enthusiasm, vocation, devotion, social activism

### **Writeup of Hine (2000)**

Hine, C. (2000). The virtual objects of ethnography. In *Virtual ethnography* (pp. 41-66). London, UK: Sage.

#### **Summary**

Hine's (2000) chapter—not surprisingly—discussed the ethnography of virtual (i.e. Internet- or computer-based) settings and objects. She started by noting ethnography has changed a lot from its initial anthropological basis in “develop[ing] an understanding of cultures in distant places” (p. 41). She examined “three crucial areas” (p. 43) raised by virtual ethnography. The first was the typical lack of face-to-face interaction; unlike traditional ethnography, virtual ethnography “does not necessarily involve physical travel” (p. 45) but still includes “extensive and sustained experience of the field site” (p. 46). Face-to-face interaction “should be used with caution” (p. 49); this is because “it may threaten the experiential authenticity” from observing and “understand[ing] the world” as informants see it online, where they may have different identities (or facets thereof) than they do offline (p. 49). The second area Hine raised was “text, technology and reflexivity,” where she noted that the Internet does not entirely consist of social interaction, but also texts that “could be thought of as a temporally shifted and packaged form of interaction” (p. 50). She argued that both interaction-based and text-based approaches to analysis would be fruitful; ethnography and other approaches “could usefully coexist” (p. 54) through “active engagement” and “reflexivity” (p. 54) that includes and considers alternative perspectives, especially those of informants. The final area Hine discussed was “the making of ethnographic objects” (p. 58); the object of study in virtual ethnography should not be the bounded, physical community but the multiple, unbounded social connections present, especially in relation to the technologies and artifacts used. In particular, Hine argued for the usefulness of examining “flows of people, information, money,” and so on through these connections (p. 61). She concluded with a summary of “the principles of virtual ethnography” as she saw them (pp. 63-66), particularly noting that virtual ethnography is “necessarily partial” and may be “not quite” true, full-blooded ethnography, but certainly will be “adequate” and “adaptive ... to the conditions in which it finds itself” (p. 65).

#### **Analysis**

Comparing Hine's chapter as a whole to her summary of the principles of virtual ethnography, the parallels are evident but are not entirely obvious; the organization of the latter

is somewhat different than the organization of the chapter as a whole. Nevertheless, both the body of the chapter and the principles include many useful and insightful points on virtual ethnography, with particular emphasis on its adaptability to new and different situations that do not fit the usual anthropological mold. However, I could see some more traditional ethnographers, particularly those based strongly in older anthropological traditions (see Clifford, 1988), arguing that Hine proposed a new approach, one that borrowed heavily from ethnography but was not actually ethnography itself anymore because of the changes she suggested. Whether this is true or not, Hine's overall discussion was more epistemologically and theoretically driven than method-driven, and I expect her principles could be applied to other qualitative methods of observation with only minor changes. For ethnography of the Internet and other "virtual" settings her suggestions are definitely worth consideration and I would recommend her chapter—albeit probably combined with other readings and perspectives—for those conducting qualitative research in, of, and around these settings.

**Keywords:** virtual ethnography, interaction, face-to-face, virtual, online, texts, reflexivity, ethnographic objects, social connections, artifacts, flows, connectivity, principles of virtual ethnography

### Writeup of Geertz (1973)

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (pp. 3-30). New York, NY: Basic Books.

#### Summary

In his chapter, Geertz (1973) made what amounted to an epistemological argument for ethnography as thick, interpretive description of the context of actions. He started by noting that “the whole discipline of anthropology” was based around the concept of culture (p. 4), and thus having a clear theoretical and conceptual definition of it was crucial to the field and science as a whole. He argued for “a semiotic” approach to culture (p. 5), one where it is a “thick description” (p. 7) of the “context” (p. 14) of a particular observation or action—what it signifies or symbolizes—that is important, not the actual physical action itself. He provided (borrowing from Ryle) the example of three different children twitching, winking conspiratorially, or winking to make fun of; all three were “rapidly contracting [their] right eyelids” but this is a “thin description” that does not tell of the different interpretations (significations) of that action (sign; p. 7); “analysis ... is sorting out the structures of signification” (p. 9). Geertz continued to set out his epistemological and theoretical viewpoint on culture, dismissing psychological and cognitive views: stating that “knowing how to wink is winking,” he argued, “is to betray a deep a confusion as ... to identify winking with eyelid contractions” (p. 12). He further argued that “anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot ... only a ‘native’ makes first order” interpretations (p. 15). In addition, Geertz maintained that ethnographers must attend to behaviors and social actions, since “the flow” of these, through which “cultural forms find articulation” (p. 17), is what must be interpreted to “fix it in perusable terms” (p. 20). He concluded that cultural theory is (a) “not its own master,” having built-in tension between observation and analysis (p. 25); (b) not strictly “predictive” (p. 26); (c) heavily grounded in observation, interpretation, and one’s prior epistemological and theoretical viewpoint; and (d) “essentially contestable,” because an ethnographer will never truly get to the very bottom of things (p. 29).

#### Analysis

Geertz’s chapter turns out to both be *about* thick description and to actually *be* thick description of his epistemological and theoretical viewpoint on culture and ethnography. While far from a succinct statement of such, the additional context he provided surrounding this—and

particularly his examples—does aid understanding and comprehension. At the same time, his major point—that ethnography is interpretive, based on thick description of the context of actions and what they signify—is fairly clear by page 7 (certainly by page 10) and much of the middle of the chapter simply provides further argument, persuasion, and context towards this. This point is certainly stated persuasively, and elements of it are further explored in the middle section of the chapter; however, those pages (pp. 10-23) are probably not vitally important to understanding. Geertz's point is also echoed in most of the other readings, and Hine (2000) also proposed that ethnographic research (in virtual settings, in her case) should focus on flows. Nevertheless, for its role in setting out the epistemological and theoretical viewpoint of most—albeit probably not all—ethnographic researchers Geertz chapter can certainly be recommended; however, I feel readers would be best served by focusing on those beginning (pp. 3-10) and ending (pp. 24-30) sections that carry the thrust of Geertz's arguments and points.

**Keywords:** ethnography, thick description, epistemology, culture, anthropology, semiotics, sign, signified, interpretive, theory, cultural theory

### Writeup of Turkle (1995)

Turkle, S. (1995). TinySex and gender trouble. In *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet* (pp. 210-232). New York: Simon and Schuster.

#### Summary

Turkle's (1995) chapter provided an excellent example of virtual ethnography, exploring issues of gender and identity in online life as the Internet gained public consciousness. She started her discussion with issues of gender identification, noting that attitudes often change depending on whether a man, woman, or "neuter" is encountered online, and that in many cases appearances (such as they are) will be deceiving (p. 211). She presented a number of ethnographic examples that explored gender-bending online, noting repeatedly that those who take "a virtual role ... may discover things about [themselves] that [they] never knew before" (p. 213). One particularly evocative example was a man who had been playing a female character in a MUD (a text-based, real-time virtual environment) "for nearly a year" and had gotten into an extremely complex and difficult role-played relationship; he felt solving the issues in this relationship would be "very interesting" for him personally (p. 212). Gender-swapping and all its intricacies is not new; Turkle noted that Shakespeare's *As You Like It* had two female characters that disguise themselves as males, one then proceeding to role-play as a female in her disguise; thus, a male actor might be cast as a woman disguises herself as a man who then role-plays as a woman, a multi-layered twisting of gender and identity. Many of Turkle's examples were of individuals playing as the opposite sex online in order to evoke characteristics (such as helpfulness) that they felt they could not easily portray as their natural gender offline; these were due, Turkle claimed, to the accepted norms and types of society and/or in their childhood. Playing with and changing one's identity allowed, as one individual noted to Turkle, the ability "to do something in the virtual that you couldn't in the real" (p. 219), at least not without violating social norms, types, and expectations. Turkle also explored issues of (cyber-)sex and deception as they related to gender (and gender-bending) and identity online. In particular, the "near-legendary" story of one man making up and playing the identity of another to have "relationships of great intimacy" with females (p. 228)—which has echoes of other stories of deceptive identity on the Internet—was a particularly notable example. Turkle concluded that taking only a "utopian, utilitarian, [or] apocalyptic" view of the Internet (p. 231) would be wrong; it presents too many social effects to be looked at in only one way.

## Analysis

Turkle's virtual ethnography goes beyond gender and sexual issues in role-playing in MUDs; it raises issues of identity both online and offline. Indeed, I feel she is completely on target in considering identity to be something we present differently in different environments, contexts, and situations, to different people, and at different times. One of the gender-bending individuals Turkle encountered summed this perspective up nicely when discussing his experience revealing he was a male playing a female to players of the MUD he frequented. He said playing his natural gender again after being (so to speak) a female for so long "would be like going to an interview for a job and acting like I do at a party or a volleyball game ... in a way that doesn't feel right for the context, although [being male] is still as much me as it ever was" (p. 218). Another, after Turkle's prompting, used the concept of "aspects of the self" (p. 220) which is also a good description of this perspective. When Turkle conducted her studies, in the relatively early days of the Internet and "cyberspace," there was likely more room to carve out drastically different identities for oneself online. More recently, however, online and offline identities are often more directly linked, although one still has different "aspects" and elements of one's identity/ies that are emphasized in different places, contexts, at different times, and with different people or groups.

When comparing to the other readings, Turkle does not directly provide practical advice for conducting research (as one can find in both Forsythe, 2001; and Hine, 2000), and the particulars of her method and research design are also not discussed, at least not in this chapter. Nonetheless, any researcher studying humans in a social setting—especially online, but offline as well—would, I feel, find Turkle an interesting and thought-provoking read on the role of gender and identity in such settings. Her conclusions also echo the writings on interpretation and subjectivity of Geertz (1973) and Rosaldo (1993) respectively. I would certainly recommend her chapter to beginning qualitative researchers who have even a fleeting interest in social interaction, gender, identity, and/or related issues; the discussions of sex and gender-bending might be slightly risqué and could offend more sheltered types, but I feel the risk would be worth the potential benefits.

**Keywords:** virtual ethnography, gender, identity, multiple identities, online, Internet, MUD, gender-bending, relationships, sex, social norms, social types, role-play, deception, false identity, context