

Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology

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Abstract

Historically, the term ethnography has simultaneously represented both method and theoretical output of the discipline of anthropology. The concept has proven so powerful that it has been extensively incorporated into other disciplines, and defined in

diverse ways, ranging from a detailed descriptions of small group dynamics (Pringle 1994; Fleming 2013), to a broad overview of the human impact on a terrain as a general introduction to the study of other kinds of ecological, biological or mineralogical resources in that terrain (Olsen, et. al. 1992). Yet, while other disciplines have increasingly acknowledged ethnography's utility for both documenting and comprehending cultural diversity, anthropology itself has taken a more reflexive turn that calls into question fundamental assumptions about the aims and scope of the ethnography, and even its relevance in an ever changing world. Those who call into ethnography into question, as well as those who envision creative ways to reinvigorate the discipline of anthropology, consider their critiques to have been built upon ethnography's semiotic underpinnings. What we seem to have lost sight of is the idea that ethnography's efficacy as an explanatory model draws from its role as a sign—or more specifically, an argument—that links the ethnographer's humanistic experience in the field to the discipline's scientific/theoretical output. This article explores the nature of ethnography in light of Pierce's premise that semiotics serves as vehicle for comprehending both human interaction and the natural universe, going beyond suggestions that knowledge can and must only be resolved into assertions of authority or power.

While anthropologists can and have studied the gamut human configuration, stretching from individual biography (Radin 1926; Narayan 1989) to such broad questions as the origins of agriculture or civilization (Netting 1990), there is general consensus that ethnographic research starts with a peculiar kind of microsociology—systematic investigations of small groups of individuals and careful recording and analysis of the minutiae of their social interactions—what Malinowsky referred to as 'imponderabilia of actual life" (1922: 18). Scholars such as LeCompte and Schensul have referred to the ethnographic method as using the researcher him/herself as "the primary tool for data collection" (LeCompte and Schensul 1999: 2). It is expected that the ethnographer become intimately familiar with the subjects in the community of interest through spending a great deal of time with them. Another implied, though not always fulfilled, obligation is that the ethnographer not only systematically record the everyday imponderabilia, but also actively participate in activities, rituals and conversations just like anyone who has actually grown up in the community. This long term meddling in a community not only distinguishes anthropology from journalism, ecology-inspired "duck blind" field observations or demographic analysis, but also enables the ethnographer to, as it were, mimic the manner in which actual members of the culture became adept at it. In other words, unless we are studying a Christian community or aspire to one of the higher Hindu *Varnas*, we cannot be expect to be born again and learn the culture as

Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology by Geoffrey Ross Owens

children who grew up in that culture. But can do the next best thing, and learn by “doing” culture just as everyone else has done throughout his or her childhood (cf. Funnel and Smith 1981).

This research methodology, utilizing the gregariousness of the ethnographer as principal research instrument—or, as Rosaldo put it, the trope of the ‘lone anthropologist’ (1989: 30-31), results in an approach that is deeply personal, perspectival and individualistic. The ethnographer sojourns unaccompanied into the field, submitting her/himself to the slings and arrows of trial and error, as well as the compassion and patience of individuals willing to tolerate such an interloper. As Paul Stoller has suggested (1989: 4-9), this individualistic field experience begins with a ‘sensual openness’ to sounds, sights, tastes and smells that envelopes and at times overwhelms the senses. With gradual habituation to this situation—together with ever increasing linguistic and cognitive command of the speech, gestures and dexterity of our hosts, these direct stimulations from the surrounding environment gradually give way to a higher order comprehension of the situation in we have surrounded ourselves – the beginnings of experience; or what we may call semiosis (cf. Deely 1982: 94-98). Ideally, only when we’ve moved on from sensation to experience to understanding of a geographically specific or socially self-identifying group, we are then given license to ponder over how our favorite group’s shared, socially learned knowledge, beliefs or patterns of behavior (i.e. culture) furnishes us with lessons on what it means to be human in all times and places.

While anthropologists have claimed this brand of cultural immersion as the distinctive method of their discipline, there is generally one other unavoidable requirement before you can consider yourself an anthropologist. After all, we anthropologists have all heard stories of individuals “going native,” settling into a community, and never returning to the institutions that sent them (Ewing 1994). While this may reflect a near total mastery of the nuances of the culture, what is the good of such total immersion for the furthering of our collective understanding of humanity? A true anthropologist must approach, perhaps build bridges, but never completely cross, the chasm represented by total immersion into another culture. Our aim is to stand at its precipice, and subsequently bring these experiences back home. Our ethnographic endeavor is not considered complete until we report back to the community that sent us, about what was learned in the field. For many in fact, ethnography *is* this written account, more so than the process of data gathering (Sanjek 1990; Emerson, et. al. 1995; Ellen 1984). And little wonder, since the final product holds fast to the Greek etymology of the word *ethnography*: “a writing about a people.” It is additionally implied that, in some sense, ethnography informs us, refers back to, or represents that we commonly refer to as a “culture,”—something that exists in ‘the field,’ (Owens 2003: 122), but reaching beyond an aggregate of individuals and their modal behavior. A culture is not experienced directly; rather, its existence can be inferred by comparisons and contrasts to other entities called culture documented by previous anthropologists.

So how does Peirce figure into this way of viewing culture? As ethnographers, we take pride, even make pretense to authority, through our direct and deeply personal access to a community somewhere in the world. What is more, our job is incomplete, or at least remains latent, until these experiences are transformed and presented for an audience removed from those first-hand experiences. As Peirce noted in his article ‘On a New List of Categories’ (1867), for conceptions to arise, two things must take place. First of all, as humans navigate in their world, they are bombarded with sensuous perceptions that command attention: though these attention-grabbing experiences direct the mind toward an object, they cannot of themselves truly be considered conceptions until they become associated with some pre-existing quality that connects them categorically to other conceptions. This insight is that it parallels the model used by anthropologists to describe worldview (cf. Hiebert 2008). As the member of a given culture does not perceive the world as a random hodgepodge of experiences, but tends to see the world as making sense, experiences sometimes viewed as boring and repetitive, even though no two experiences are quite alike. That is because as we go through our experiences, we incorporate each new one into our cognitive “map” of reality, lumping experiences together into broad categorical knowledge.

By making comparisons between cultures and the categories into which they sort their experiences, the ethnographer is engaging in an activity not unlike members of a community. Thus, the Nuer engage in something that we call politics, in spite of the absence of a government that many Westerners feel is an essential component of political action (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Americans engage in kinship, without benefit of having that special relationship with their mother’s brothers that is so indispensable to family systems throughout the world (Radcliffe-Brown 1924; Schneider 1968). In this basic sense, the ethnography incorporates these previously unfamiliar experiences gained through fieldwork into broader, gradually more familiar sign categories, making the ethnographer a mediator, or perhaps his/her ethnography an interpretant, to the cultural object and its representamen. I find it no coincidence that Peirce also thought of signs as having a thirdness to them—there is the object, the representamen and interpretant (Peirce c.1897-1902). Likewise, ethnography seems to involve a three-part process, which can be described as data gathering, analysis and theory building—or, put another way, individual experience, the gradual reorientation of the ethnographer’s worldview to align with the people with whom he/she is collaborating, and finally writing up; thereby offering answers to broader questions posed by a community of engaged scholars throughout the world.

In discussing various ways in which ethnographic fieldwork entails a kind of semiosis, I wholeheartedly admit that I am not offering a radical revision of past scholars’ portrayals of ethnography. Anthropologists have long been influenced by the linguistic

Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology by Geoffrey Ross Owens

model of semiotics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (c. 1906-1911). Because Saussure's theories were more narrowly focused on linguistic signs (de Wall 2013: 75), and language represents a basic human capacity found in cultures in all times and places, it has long been assumed that extralinguistic human activities are shaped by, or analogous to, this critical feature of the manner in which the human mind interfaces with its environment (Whorf 1941). Clifford Geertz (1973) thought of culture as being like a text—a “thick” one at that, and thus we are engaging in a very elaborate decoding operation of various signs analogous to the kinds of operations with which sociolinguists are familiar. Sociolinguistics note that signs spill out beyond the simple concepts and sound images—not only are linguistic signs themselves influenced by other signaling activities taking place beyond the scope of language, but words ‘do things’ thus muddling the distinction between language and social action (Austin 1962). Likewise, Levi-Strauss attempted to use distinctive feature theory to infer the existence of elementary building blocks of myth, or the cultural classification of food and kinship (Levi-Strauss 1955) it was considered analogous, but not identical, with language. Thus, cultural description was viewed as a text referring to other texts, and over the years, a number of theorists have used metaphors or analogies borrowed from linguistics to explain the goals of the ethnographer, portraying ethnography as a form of ‘reading,’ ‘translation’ or exegesis of culture (Leinhardt 1954: 97-98; Beattie 1964: 89; Asad 1986).

One of the consequences of this idea that ethnography is analogous to language is a debate that exploded during the 1980s, and continues to reverberate in what is still portrayed as a “crisis of representation” within the discipline (Marcus and Fischer 1999). If ethnography is a kind of text, referring in some manner to other texts or discourses occurring among some community somewhere in the world, and directed toward a literate, even scholarly audience that acts as consumer of such texts in some Western educational context, then to what extent, if any, are we dealing with an authentic, directly accessible culture when reading an ethnography for the first time (Fish 1980)? According to James Clifford, author of the introduction of the now noted edited volume *Writing Culture* (1986: 6), “ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways:”

- (1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieu);
- (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions)
- (3) institutionally (one writes within and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences);
- (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or a travel account);
- (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested);
- (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing).

Thus, ethnography is deemed a “fiction”— Not necessarily a falsehood, but a cobbling together of rhetorical devices aimed at enticing the consumer of ethnographic texts into trusting the authority of the ethnographer to speak of, and perhaps on behalf of, those who possess something we refer to as culture. Ethnographic truths are, in Clifford's view, “inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (1986: 7).

There have been many critiques of the *Writing Culture* debate of the late 80s and early 90s. Perhaps the most poignant set of critiques is that the claim “ethnography is a ‘partial truth’” is itself partial. As Graham Watson pointed (1991: 81), this assertion assumes that there is a whole truth out there somewhere, which is not necessarily something that even the most rigidly scientifically-minded anthropologist is prepared to admit, being aware of the hermeneutics of nearly all knowledge. There is also a general sense that the general emphasis on the rhetorical qualities of the written ethnography is somewhat lopsided—that the discussion of how best to create a more transparent ethnography through unfiltered dialogue, poetry, personal reflections of the fieldworker leaves the basic question unanswered of how this final product relates to the experiences of the community it purports to portray. Most sensible adults can recognize already that when they hold on to a copy of *The Nuer*, they are not actually grasping in their hands a group of people of the Southern Sudan. But this observation needn’t lead us to see the Nuer as mere subjective constructs either (Deely 1982: 96).

Overlooked in the whole debate in the 1980s and 90s is a piece of folk wisdom passed from mentor to student within anthropology, but not always clearly codified in the plethora of written guides to ethnographic research over the past century. Ethnography, almost from its inception, was understood to be, first and foremost, an argument—or at least an argument or arguments must be embedded within its cultural descriptions. There is a common a misunderstanding, on the part of anthropologists and non-anthropologist alike, that ethnography is largely a descriptive narrative, rather than a generative process aimed at developing new knowledge. While Peirce is respected among anthropologists for, among other reasons, his anticipating the linguistic theories of Saussure. But by not limiting his semiotics to linguistic signs, he has bequeathed to us an explanatory model that reaches beyond both mere description, but also beyond the tyranny of formal logical models that stifle rather than expand our capacity to understand the nature of humanity and the universe we occupy.

Peirce thought of an argument as a symbolic legisign capable of allowing the object to affect its interpretant. In formal logic, the ultimate goal is the syllogism: propositions leading to a conclusion. Peirce’s logic was more diverse in what it sought, spanning from what he referred to as speculative grammar to inductive and deductive reasoning. Though we now know that other living organisms are capable of semiotically analyzable communication, Peirce’s statement of the primacy of the human mind in processing symbols still resonates within cultural anthropology. As Peirce stated: “The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist.” This is because associations between symbols and their respective objects and interpretants are established prior to and exterior to the individual. The existence of so-called ‘natural signs’ suggests that some signs have

Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology by Geoffrey Ross Owens

autonomy from the human capacity to generate them. This observation protects us from the temptation of viewing experience as mere solipsism, or as the dream of Brahma—an imagined reality generated by the machinations of the powerful. Symbols, not to mention legisigns, also depend to some extent on preexisting recognition of their properties as signs.

There may be a nearly unlimited number of arguments that potentially could be made—hence, we think of the goal of argument ultimately as generating new knowledge, including questioning existing assumptions in an iconoclastic way. A classic example of this new thinking is Margaret Mead’s calling into question whether there existed a male or female temperament cross-culturally, or whether adolescence, with its accompanying anxious tension, is a necessary phase through which all human beings must pass (Mead 1928; 1935). There are many instances in which the breaking up of the linguistic universe is finite, as in the case of such things as basic color terms, number systems, ideas of direction or first or second person pronouns (cf. Berlin and Kay 1969). Each can be distilled into finite sets of rules that govern what kinds of numbers, colors or directions can be discerned within a given linguistic community. Likewise, there may be a plethora of arguments, but they often share commonalities that overlap in different communities. This is what makes cultures learnable, and enables us to communicate something of the qualities of that culture to an audience removed from those experiences.

A legisign is a sign that is a law because, as Peirce has described it, “This law is usually established by men. It is not a single object, but a general type which, it has been agreed shall be significant.” The law that Peirce presents as characteristic of arguments may be compared to what Stephen Toulmin called the ‘warrant’ of an argument: the general rule of which an argument is but a specific example (1958 87 ff.). Peirce in a similar vein said, “every legisign signifies through an instance of its application.” Thus, argument can produce new ideas, but through a finite set of operations previously established by humans. Is it possible that arguing represents a kind of intellectual imperialism? After all, the various species of arguments may fall into a finite number of forms that connect the premises to their conclusions. An objection might be raised that the finite nature of arguments may choke off human creativity. This is not to suggest that non-Western people think in non-rational ways; when I was in Tanzania, people loved to debate about culture amongst themselves, offering eloquent and intellectually thought-provoking explanations for why their culture operated as it did. Some of my deepest understandings of the workings of culture came from such debates. Thus, it is possible to utilize our recognition and diversity of cultural expression throughout the world to present an ever expanding group of arguments, while at the same time knowing that this plethora of arguments might themselves be made possible by a finite number of warrants graspable by the discerning mind.

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Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology by Geoffrey Ross Owens

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Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology by Geoffrey Ross Owens

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