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For ethnography

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Abstract: Ethnography is an underused methodology in geography. This neglect is especially injurious to the discipline because ethnography provides unreplicable insight into the processes and meanings that sustain and motivate social groups. These processes and meanings vary across space, and are central to the construction and transformation of landscapes; they are both place-bound and place-making. Ethnography's potential contribution to geography is thus profound. The aversion to ethnography may derive from three major criticisms frequently directed toward it: that it is unscientific; that it is too limited to enable generalization; and that it fails to consider its inherent representational practices. Considered responses to these critiques, however, restore ethnography's significance for geographic study.

Key words: ethnography, meaning, place, process.

I offer here a concise argument for the expanded vitality of ethnography in human geographic research: that ethnography is a uniquely useful method for uncovering the *processes* and *meanings* that undergird sociospatial life. Humans create their social and spatial worlds through processes that are symbolically encoded and thus made meaningful. Through enacting these meaningful processes, human agents reproduce and challenge macrological structures in the everyday of place-bound action. Because ethnography provides singular insight into these processes and meanings, it can most brightly illuminate the relationships between structure, agency and geographic context.

I possess two motivations for advancing this argument. One stems from the fact that geographic research relying upon participant observation remains rare. For instance, in the five-year span from 1994 to 1998, only 3 of 85 articles (3.5%) published on human geography topics[1] in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* used ethnographic field data. In the same time period, in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, an exclusively human geography journal dominated by qualitative research, the total was 8 of 161 (5%). Although there are instances of excellent ethnography in human geography, it persists as a peripheral methodology.

My second motivation stems from a recognition that previous declamations on behalf of ethnography (see, for example, Smith, 1984; Jackson, 1985; Ley, 1981; 1988) did not explicitly emphasize processes and meanings in the manner advanced here. My focus

on processes and meanings is understandable in the contemporary climate, given the current prominence of such approaches as feminism, postmodernism, cultural studies and structurationism.   Despite their differences, each of these emphasizes how social order is embedded in everyday activities, how the meanings and discursive constructions of social life shape its apprehension and enaction by agents. Ethnography explores the tissue of everyday life to reveal the processes and meanings which undergird social action, and which enable order to be reproduced and sometimes challenged.

I proceed through three stages. I first explore just what ethnography is. Here I am careful not to conflate ethnography with other qualitative methods, such as interviews. Ethnography uniquely explores lived experience in all its richness and complexity. Secondly, I explain the contributions ethnography can make to human geography. As mentioned, I focus on how processes and meanings structure sociospatial life. Ethnography is singularly helpful here, because its intensive analysis and fine-grained detail provide the optimal way to illustrate and explicate the oft-stated connection between the life world of a social group and the geographic world they construct. How better to determine how place and agency intertwine and recreate each other than by closely examining how different social groups meaningfully define, inhabit, manipulate and dominate space?

Despite the obvious advantages of ethnography, it is not infrequently criticized. In my third section, I explore three common critiques leveled at ethnographic work: that it is overly subjective and hence 'unscientific'; that it is too limited to enable generalization and broader theory construction; and that it ignores the conditions of its own production, and thus unquestioningly reproduces power disparities and representational practices that deserve interrogation. Although these critiques do not lack merit, neither do they represent cause for abandoning ethnography. Thoughtful responses to these critiques restore ethnography's vitality, and reveal its indispensable potential for human geography.

I   Ethnography defined

Like other methodologies, ethnography possesses different variants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Any attempt to define ethnography precisely will therefore obscure important differences in approach. Still, ethnography is generally recognized to rest upon *participant observation*, a methodology whereby the researcher spends considerable time observing and interacting with a social group. These observations and interactions enable the ethnographer to understand how the group develops a skein of relations and cultural constructions that tie it together. As Ley (1988: 121) puts it, such research 'is concerned to make sense of the actions and intentions of people as knowledgeable agents; indeed, more properly it attempts to make sense of their making sense of the events and opportunities confronting them in everyday life'. Ethnographers unearth what the group takes for granted, and thereby reveal the knowledge and meaning structures that provide the blueprint for social action. Close observations of the group's daily activities separate ethnography from other qualitative methods, such as interviews.[2] The ethnographer gains unreplicable insight through an analysis of everyday activities and symbolic constructions. Said Goffman (1961: ix–x): 'Any group of persons – prisoners, primitives, pilots or patients – develops a life of their own that

becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject.'

There are various degrees to which the researcher actively participates in the activities of the group. Some researchers fully adopt the social role under study: Buroway (1979) became a factory worker, Rubinstein (1973) a police officer, to comprehend better the world view of those they studied. Other researchers strive for a more detached relationship, but their close and continual association means some interaction is inevitable (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Ethnographers typically balance these two extremes (Van Maanen, 1988) or, perhaps better, shuttle between insider and outsider roles – they work to comprehend the scene on its own terms and concurrently apply theory to understand that scene more generally (Lofland, 1976). Ethnographers must occupy the perspective of the actors under study *and* the perspective of a theoretically informed and logically rigorous social scientist; one empathetically gathers data, yet engages those data in an ongoing, reflexive conversation with comparatively 'cold-hearted' theory (Clark, 1998).

That said, ethnographers typically enter the field more interested in generally exploring particular social phenomena than testing specific hypotheses about them (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). Ethnographers evince comfort with data that are unstructured (i.e., not coded) according to pre-established analytic categories. Theory is often built from the ground up (Glaser and Straus, 1967) by the ethnographer who allows social order to reveal itself through extended fieldwork (Eyles, 1988). Thus the need for sufficient empathy to enable the researcher to see how the social world is understood and made meaningful by its members. Such empathic understanding is impossible if the ethnographer enters the field with rigid categories with which to comprehend social action. Ethnography is thus distinguishable from surveys and tightly scheduled interviews, which require respondents to respond to fixed questions. Ethnographers often argue that order should emerge *from* the field rather than be imposed *on* the field (Silverman, 1985).

Still, it is misleading, and undesirable, to argue that ethnography is strictly an inductive enterprise (Bulmer, 1979). No researcher gathers data without a conceptual apparatus, and most ethnographers engage in a conversation between what they observe and what they theorize (Burawoy, 1991). But ethnographers typically strive to avoid overwrought theorizations that might occlude the processes through which social life transpires and acquires meaning. Their insights emerge from their progressive socialization into the life of the group (Lofland, 1995).

Ethnography is also different from surveys and interviews because it examines what people *do* as well as what they *say*. It thus enables an insightful examination of any discrepancies between thoughts and deeds (Eyles, 1988). Liebow (1967), for example, noted a contrast between the described versus actual intimacy between members of an inner-city group, a reality he found indicative of broader dynamics shaping social relationships there. The ability to contrast deeds and words provides ethnography with insights unallowable by any other methodology, even open-ended interviews.[3]

Ethnography is further distinguishable because it involves an engagement of the researcher's senses and emotions. To engage a group's lived experience is to engage its full sensuality – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations that bring a way of life to life (Adler and Adler, 1994). The ethnographer is 'a fully *human* scientist, whose

own self and relationships with subjects have become important factors in evaluating his observations' (Nash and Wintrob, 1972: 532). This is particularly relevant to geography, because attachments to place are created through various symbolic markers and activities that involve members' senses. Attachment to place is also deeply felt, and thus the researcher must appreciate the group's emotional life. Further, the researcher's own emotions may figure in the analysis. My own experience doing fieldwork with the Los Angeles Police Department included an emotional response at the scene of a suicide (Herbert, 1997). The ridicule to which my sadness and discomfort were subjected revealed how police symbolize their work as a job for tough guys, not the faint of heart.

My analysis of this incident reveals another important, although not distinguishing, characteristic of ethnography – its self-conscious reliance on interpretation. As I argue below, all methodologies rely upon interpretation, but ethnographers are particularly overt about the process. That is because the tissue of social life is not always directly observable. The meanings of objects and events are often revealed through practices, reactions, cursory comments and facial expressions. Again, unlike those who conduct surveys and interviews, ethnographers expect the meanings of social life to emerge indirectly through actions as well as words. These meanings are discerned through inferences, as daily practice is interpreted against the ethnographer's developing understanding of the larger cultural system of which it is a part.

II   Justifying ethnography

These distinguishing characteristics of ethnography are not just methodological but emerge from a particular understanding of the nature of social life. I wish to emphasize two factors here. The first is an appreciation for the manner in which macrological social structures are reproduced and challenged through the everyday *processes* of social life.   The second factor is the intersubjectively constructed sets of *meanings* that code these everyday processes. Because these processes and meanings are central to social-geographic life, they merit the attention ethnography provides.

The notion that social structures and human agency are interpenetrated and mutually determined is now a commonplace in contemporary social thought (see, amongst many others, Thrift, 1983; Giddens, 1984; Pred, 1986). Structures provide human agents with a limited horizon of capabilities and possibilities, but those structures only exist in everyday practices. This necessarily draws attention to the *processes* through which structures and agents are married and, sometimes, divorced. Abstract analyses of social structures are often instructive, but they occlude the thoughts, utterances, practices, beliefs and rituals that more locally constitute and motivate action. One must thus confront the structure-agency debate 'not at an ontological level but at the level of practice' (Smith, 1984: 364). At the same time, a detailed encyclopedia of the minutiae of the everyday is not entirely helpful either. A theoretically informed, structurally sensitive ethnography, however, can uncover how structures are made real in the contexts and commotions of daily life.

In enacting and occasionally challenging these structures, human agents draw upon intersubjective understandings that imbue their actions with *meaning*. The role of meaning in social life is evident in such rituals as weddings, communions and graduations. But meaning is enwrapped in such mundane movements as the blink of

the eye and the shrug of a shoulder. Ethnographers often diagram the grammar of meaning systems to explain the wellsprings of action. Humans are obviously driven by the biological needs to eat, reproduce and remain healthy, but all such activities are necessarily made meaningful by shared cultural systems. Any comprehensive attempt to understand social-geographic life must therefore attend to how meaning systems drive such activities as the construction and symbolic marking of places.

I explore and illustrate each of these assumptions in more detail below.

1   Processes

Ethnography can elucidate the linkages between the macrological and the micrological, between the enduring and structured aspects of social life and the particulars of the everyday. Ethnographers principally focus on the latter, and some never take the analysis to the macrological level. However, only sufficiently fine-grained analysis can illustrate how structures are actively constructed, reproduced and resisted (Katz, 1991). Structural analysis can only ever be skeletal; flesh and tissue require intensive analysis. The virtue of ethnography, then, is that it enables, in the words of Jackson (1985: 166), 'the study of the instantiation of structures in particular social practices.'

Take gender. Although gender roles vary considerably, they do exhibit patterned tendencies. Those who resist such roles, such as transgendered individuals, encounter overwhelming pressure to conform to one set of gendered attributes and behaviors or the other. Gagne and Tewksbury (1998) show that transgendered people are roundly castigated by spouses, children, employers, peers and even other transgendered individuals as they fumble toward a new gender identity. In other words, individuals who do not conform to existing gender stereotypes are not easily assimilated into ordinary life. At the same time, the fact that some make the transformation exposes the daily accomplishment of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). These roles are learned behavior, and hence are enacted through myriad activities, mannerisms, speech codes, etc. (Garfinkel, 1967). Many women engage in a course of daily action – linked via the institutions of home, work and school – that helps reproduce their subordinate social position (Miller, 1983; Smith, 1989). Gender is also crucially reproduced in the workplace, where men and women understand each other in particular ways, and consciously and unconsciously reproduce, exploit and challenge their expected behaviors (Wright, 1997). Jennifer Hunt (1984), for example, describes in exquisite detail how she challenged her expected gendered behavior to win acceptance amongst male police officers; she cleverly oscillated between stereotypical male and female behavior to win her colleagues' grudging respect.

Gender is thus both structure and action, enacted and sometimes transgressed in the everyday. Importantly, place is intimately implicated in the production and reproduction of gender. Place provides cues for how men and women are to behave, and thereby shapes how gender roles are staged. The street, for example, can profoundly amplify gender differences. It especially affects how women gauge men, and how they subsequently act to preserve their safety (Painter, 1992, Gardner, 1995). In so doing, women implicitly and understandably reproduce the street as a male preserve.[4]

Gender roles are also replicated and challenged in the manipulation of the landscape. As ethnographies from rural societies demonstrate (e.g., Carney and Watts, 1991;

Cooper, 1997; Schroeder, 1997), the politics of cultivation are often simultaneously a politics of gender. These politics become more turbulent when large-scale development schemes are implemented. Such schemes often reify women's role as primary producer, which can spur resistance. This resistance then intensifies intrahousehold struggles over proper gender behavior. Gender is thus constructed, challenged and spatially inscribed in daily processes that mitigate between macrological processes of economic development and more localized struggles over the sexual division of labor.

Class is another social structure fruitfully analyzed as process. Clearly, the range of possible class positions and the basic dynamics of class relations are structural phenomena. But class positions are cultural constructions as well, and the acculturation of individuals – the habits they acquire, the education they receive – shapes their position within the structurally available economic panorama (Bourdieu, 1984). The classic and intensive analysis by Willis (1977) of a group of English teenaged boys shows how their resistance to upper-class culture condemned them to limited economic opportunities; they reproduced their class positions through the seemingly insignificant acts of telling off a teacher or skipping school. Similarly, Winchester and Costello (1995) show that although homeless teenagers might rebel against the wider society, their sociospatial marginalization is self-replicating.

Finally, consider the state, another institution often considered structural in scope and power; it is seen as a set of institutions whose coercive power can determine the allocation of resources and life opportunities. But the state and its power are processes, asserted in the everyday of such activities as policing, border patrolling, immigration oversight and census taking. Indeed, in-depth analysis of these activities reveals the contingent nature of state power, and the various tensions, fractures and incommensurabilities that characterize state institutions themselves (Calavita, 1992; Herbert, 1997). The state's reach typically exceeds its grasp, as internal incompetencies and external acts of resistance (Scott, 1985) prevent state actors from achieving all-encompassing power. The veneer of a seamless, transcendent entity is stripped away via intensive analysis, to reveal the processual, messy and ever-contingent reality of everyday state action.

Through investigation of these processes, ethnography enables analyses of the important moments when macro and micro interpenetrate, when constraints and contingencies alternately pattern and perturb daily life. Such research is of undoubted significance to geographers interested in how landscapes are constructed and lived, the processes by which structures are made real in the everyday movements and contexts of human action. Indeed, geographers have long argued that spatial analysis draws attention to the concrete moments when large-scale and small-scale intermingle, and that spatial contexts shape how this intermingling transpires (Thrift, 1983; Pred, 1986). This is a point brought usefully to home in the geographic literature by such ethnographers as Myers (1996) and Nigar (1997), who assess the significance of ground-level struggles over street names and commerative structures. These are struggles about how places will be named and built, and thus necessarily involve actors with different degrees of structurally generated power and different ideas of what the place should symbolize. Struggles over place are, willy-nilly, instances where macro and micro intermix.

If the macro–micro link merits investigation, then ethnography seems inescapably important. The abstract categories of survey data and quantitative analysis simply

cannot capture the complex, contextual nature of daily life. Statistical analysis of violent behavior, for example, cannot comprehend the important motivating events that cause it. Much male-on-male violence occurs in very specific settings following a particular sequence of events (Oliver, 1994; Short, 1998; Anderson, 1999). It usually occurs in such public locations as bars and street corners, and culminates an interactional sequence in which one or more party feels slighted and responds with a violent rebuke. Matters escalate, often through audience encouragement, until serious injury or death result. Spatial and cultural context matter heavily here; the public nature of these settings impels men to respond to perceived insults, because shared norms of masculinity demand that honor be defended. Any analysis that seeks to illuminate patterns of violent behavior is thus impoverished if it relies solely on quantifiable, categorizable data. Only intensive, ethnographic analysis can reveal the less visible forces that induce violent action, forces that are more powerful in some places than others.

This discussion of violence underscores the second key analytic advantage of ethnography – its capacity to uncover cultural systems of meaning. The social organization of meaning is only discernible to a social scientist thoroughly immersed in a milieu. Meaning systems are not always overtly presented, but must be slowly grasped through interaction and analysis. And because these meaning systems are central to the motivation of agency, they merit the attention ethnography uniquely provides.

2 Meanings

A second central assumption made by ethnographers is that social life is meaningful to those who enact it. Events and objects are never neutral; they are perceived by human agents with a social calculus conditioned by the cultural and spatial contexts in which these events and objects are emplaced. If one is interested in human action – its wellsprings and its variant expressions across the landscape – one must attend to the symbolic systems that accord it meaning.

As a long legacy of sociological work has demonstrated, meaning systems are inter-subjectively created, forged through ongoing interactions between agents. But these systems are not random; they pre-exist agents and form the ever-present backdrop for interactions. They provide cultural resources upon which actors draw to make sense of the world and their activities within it. This is not to imply that social actors are 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967), because actors do retool cultural schemas as they apply them to new and uncertain circumstances (Sewell, 1992). But action is always understood in cultural terms, and thus action and meaning are irrevocably fused.

Ethnographers frequently work to discern how meaning systems orientate the apprehension and enaction of the social world. Indeed, this task can only be pursued through ethnography, through the process by which an outsider learns the local competencies of the insider. Surveys and interviews conducted with no local familiarity are useless; they can only impose an intellectual order upon the group, they cannot allow a steady unearthing of the layers of meaning attached to daily life. Progressive familiarity with the group necessarily involves developing an understanding of how meaning systems are operationalized by group members. Indeed, all humans are ethnographers whenever they enter a new social scene; one moves from outsider to insider as one comprehends the world from the insider's point of view.

Importantly for geographers, there is an indelible connection between meaning and context. As Holstein and Gubrium (1994: 265) put it: 'Interpretive activities are simultaneously in and about the settings to which they orient, and that they describe.' Meaning systems are, at least in part, locally specific and frequently intrinsic to a particular place; they are both place-bound and place-making. Basso (1984), for example, describes how Apache landscapes possess an instructive role; a place can teach a lesson from the past because of events that occurred there. In this case, morality and place are intertwined. More self-consciously, boosterism at all scales – from the local signage celebrating a successful scholastic sports team to the deliberate grandeur of national monuments – is inscribed in and on the landscape. A social group creates and maintains itself through meaning systems that are made real through their geographic inscription.

The link between meaning and area is thus recursive: just as meaning systems structure the apprehension of place, so does place shape the employment of one meaning system versus another. Social actors display cultural competence by appropriately varying their behavior across space; actions acceptable in a tavern play poorly in church. These subtle behavioral variations reveal a deep and sophisticated cultural knowledge regarding the symbolism of place that cannot be unearthed without abiding familiarity with the group. In the words of Ley (1988: 126):

> The geographer's charge to interpret the complex relations of people and place requires a methodology of engagement not detachment, of informal dialogue as well as formal documentation. There is both an ontological and epistemological requirement that place as a human construction be granted more respect and complexity than the profile it displays from the pages of the census.

Importantly, the two assumptions explored here – that structure and action are linked through process, and that social life is mediated through meaning systems – are connected. Processes are made meaningful in ways that shape their enaction. And these processes and meaning vary by place. Take, for example, politics. The meaning and enaction of political discourse is geographically variant, according to Eliasoph (1996). Her ethnographic analysis of several social groups revealed the curious fact that more open fora inhibited discussion of political issues; paradoxically, the more private the setting, the more public the discourse. The meaning of political discussion thus varies from place to place in a fashion which importantly structures the conversation. Political processes are meaningful, in part because of their emplacement.

In sum, process, meaning and place are complexly and significantly intertwined, and are all crucial in the intricate mixing of macrological and micrological. Ethnography is singularly capable of disentangling and explaining these interconnections. But despite its clear advantages, ethnography is a frequently maligned methodology. In particular, three criticisms are regularly made. The first is a concern about science. Some suggest that because ethnography relies heavily on interpretation it is therefore an overly subjective, 'unscientific' practice, and thus cannot advance theoretical claims as well as putatively objective methods like statistical analysis. The second is a concern about generalization. The argument here is that ethnography's intensive focus on one or a small number of specific situations prevents the analyst from making any confident generalizations that might apply to other settings. And the third is a more recent concern about representation. Here, the suggestion is that too many ethnographers fail to problematize the means by which they apprehend and describe the cultures they examine. The

translation practices between observation and text deserve greater attention, according to this line of argument, because they may occlude the power relations inherent in ethnographic practice, and because the ultimate narrative may provide an unrealistically tidy picture of the messy and contingent reality of daily life.

Each of these critiques is serious. However, none of them is sufficient to jettison ethnography as a pivotal methodology. Indeed, responses to these critiques help reveal yet again the novel advantages of ethnography to geographic study. I review each of these critiques below, and provide considered responses to each.

III   The critiques of ethnography

1   The concern about science

Although the necessity for interpretation is obvious to ethnographers, it raises questions for those committed to more ostensibly 'value-neutral' and 'objective' social scientific approaches. From this perspective, interpretation can be an overly idiosyncratic and subjective exercise, too reliant on the proclivities and orientation of the ethnographer. Findings are thus unreliable; another ethnographer might well provide a strikingly different interpretation. In the absence more scientific 'tests', any broader findings of ethnography remain specious. Rengert (1997: 469), for example, makes this argument quite explicitly:

> Ethnographic research is the least scientific of the research approaches since, by definition, it involves a small sample size, is difficult to replicate, and contains a great deal of subjectivity and interpretation on the part of the researcher. Ethnographic research needs to be supplemented with carefully designed research projects in which the ideas developed are subjected to scientific rigor.

This critique is valuable if it pushes ethnographers to spell out the bases upon which they make interpretive claims. This helps them justify their conclusions. But there is a fundamental irony with this critique. It fails to recognize that interpretive practices are central to *all* science, and that various social practices structure how data and theory are interrogated to create scientific work. The irony here, of course, is that it is ethnographies of science which teach us this (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Lynch, 1985; Latour, 1987). The interpretive dilemma is unavoidable and hardly unique to ethnography.

Still, the processes of interpretation are of inescapable importance to ethnographic work, especially where meaning is concerned. The significance of an event, a comment or a turn of a head are not always easily explicable by informants. Further, meanings are only revealed in contexts, in the actions that transpire and the reactions they inspire. Because the ethnographer strives to interact successfully in a particular social milieu, he or she continually interprets what he or she witnesses to discern its meaning. Social interaction is impossible without this background knowledge, and strangers to a setting must continually interpret what they encounter against an emerging understanding of what it means. Ethnographers make this process a self-conscious and reflexive act; daily practice is interpreted to unearth broader understandings, and these understandings are then evaluated in terms of daily practice, in an ongoing process. The ethnographer, in effect, becomes a research instrument (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) and uses his or her developing cultural competence to outline the symbolic architecture of the group under study.

However, unless one can demonstrate that some interpretations are better than others, there is little justification for ethnography. But clearly some interpretations *are* better than others, simply because, as mentioned, some interpretations help orientate more successful social action than others. On the mundane level, if one interprets the groggy early-morning mutterings of a partner as a signal not to engage in vivid interaction, one is less likely to be subjected to angry remonstrations. If one interprets the opening words of a priest at church as the signal to mute one's behavior, one will not suffer disapproval from other congregants. A key goal of ethnography is thus to provide those understandings, those interpretations of central behaviors and their attendant meanings, that would enable a stranger successfully to interact in a given social setting (Douglas, 1976).

Of course, few of us will encounter the milieu about which a specific ethnographer writes, and thus need more immediate reasons to accept a given set of interpretations. Ethnographers must therefore be explicit about how they derived their interpretations, how they rendered sensible given sets of actions and reactions with the apparatus of meaning they inferred (Cicourel, 1964). Analysts can usefully describe specific instances, and explain and illustrate the logic of the interpretation. Analysts can also outline other potentially plausible interpretations, and explain why a given interpretation best accounts for the observed phenomena.

It is critical to note here that the ostensive source of scientific tainting, the observer's 'subjectivity', is actually an analytic asset. As Smith (1984: 307) notes, participant observation 'relies upon the fully human self of the analyst to explore the social processes of which he or she is a part.' The observer wants to interpret properly the meanings that are operationalized in a milieu and thus allow him or herself to 'feel subject to the group's code of moral regulations' (Wax, 1980: 273). The observer's reactions, initial stumblings, discomforts, confusions and hard-fought competencies are all instructive in teasing out the broader background knowledges and meaning structures invoked in daily action (Nash and Wintrob, 1972). Reactions to the observer's presence are similarly instructive. My example of the laughter that accompanied my queasiness taught a lesson about the meaning of police work. Weider (1974) felt initially thwarted when a group of incarcerated juveniles refused to speak with him, but came to understand that this silence was part of a broader 'convict code' that structured the juveniles' behavior. In other words, it is only through the interrogation of one's subjective experience within a millieu, and the subjective reactions it engenders, that one can glean the meaning structures that motivate everyday agency.

It is also critical to note that interpretation and subjectivity are inherent in any scientific practice, regardless of any possible pretensions toward objectivity (Ley, 1988). Data are never naive, and are only apprehended through specific social processes. Neither are data unproblematic; questions of relevance, reliability, appropriateness and accurate measurability plague any scientific enterprise. Tests of data are similarly never naive, and always involve a recursive and evaluative interaction with broader, theoretically based understandings. And all these scientific processes occur within a particular social millieu, which is perhaps more important in determining what are appropriate and reputable data, analysis and findings than the reality that exists outside scientific practice (Law and Williams, 1982; Demeritt, 1996; Gieryn, 1999). Ethnographies of science demonstrate this, and thus render suspicious any claims for methodological superiority; they teach us that 'objectivity' is itself a social construction (Holstein and

Gubrium, 1994), maintained through the processes and meanings that sustain a scientific group.

Finally, it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of ethnography should be the improvement of theory, the validity of which will be determined by its utility to others. Social scientists are engaged in a conversation with theory and data, but also in a conversation with one another. The goal is a high-caliber conversation in both realms, but the latter is nearly as important as the former. The best test of a conceptual apparatus is its transportability and longevity; if it helps others explain a range of phenomena, then it is good social science. Thus, a critical test of an ethnography is not just whether it outlines the cultural competencies of a given social group, but whether it provides conceptual tools that others find useful.

One might question, however, whether ethnography is capable of producing a conceptual apparatus of any significance. Because its empirical focus is typically narrow, can it explicate broader social processes that occur elsewhere? I turn now to this concern.

2   The concern about generalization

Ethnographers typically focus on a single or very small number of cases to understand better processes and meanings. Ethnography requires an intimate familiarity with the studied group(s) that develops only after sustained exposure. Many ethnographies, further, are filled with descriptions, perhaps a legacy from anthropologists, whose early ethnographies were the first catalogs of given peoples and their ways of life. Because of this intensive focus and this historical emphasis on description, ethnography is sometimes criticized for failing to provide few, if any, generalizable propositions.

But ethnographers regularly avoid the digress into excessive empiricism through four means, none of them mutually exclusive. One option is to choose a site that can plausibly stand in for other cases. Dynamics in inner cities, in classrooms, on college campuses or in corporate boardrooms are likely to be similar across locales. If an ethnographer can demonstrate that the dynamics he or she studies occur elsewhere, he or she can confidently generalize. Alternatively, he or she may find an instance of a phenomena that will likely become more widespread. Gans (1967), for example, studied the early Levittown, an exemplar of the now ubiquitous American suburb, to discern the contours of a developing way of life. This strategy enables the ethnographer to make generalizations about the shape of things to come.

Comparative analysis is a second means to enable generalization. By exploring the similarities and differences between two or more groups, one can understand about what motivates one set of processes or meanings versus another. In the example cited earlier, Eliasoph studied political conversations within different social groups. This comparative analysis enabled her to generalize that political discussions became more animated as the setting became more intimate. She learned that the public sphere ostensibly central to democracy was not so vibrant, a broad proposition enabled by her comparative analysis.

A third strategy is to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis. Surveys or census data might reveal a general pattern, the dynamics of which can only be revealed through intensive, qualitative analysis. A survey of urban residents might, for example,

reveal a considerable change in levels of fear over time, or demonstrate sharp differences between contiguous areas. A considered explanation for these dynamics requires an intensive analysis of residents' assessments of each other and of the area as a whole (see Merry, 1981).

A final strategy is explicitly to use the ethnography to improve upon existing theory. The task here is first to develop a notion of what existing theory suggests would occur in the situation to be studied. Field experiences can then be evaluated to determine whether they confirm or deny what the theory predicts (Buroway, 1991). This strategy thus runs counter to the more purely inductive approach championed by some ethnographers. However, if the goal is to improve the scope of existing theory, it is sensible to enter the field aware of what theory would predict, and to evaluate observations accordingly.

In short, intensive single case studies can be as or more instructive as broad canvases of multiple situations. The critical factor is the logical reasoning employed in explaining the single case (Mitchell, 1983), the rigor of the suggested connection between general theory and data. As Walton (1992) argues, single case studies have brilliantly illuminated the general dynamics of closed institutions, workplaces, neighborhoods and bureaucratic organizations, to name just a few, by uncovering the oft-occluded processes and meanings that constitute those milieu. Besides, ostensibly 'unique' cases are always contingent upon interdependent phenomena, and thus are not all that unique (Sayer, 1991). Social analysis must therefore explicate how broader social dynamics are made real and given particular inflections in the everyday. This, of course, returns us to geography's emphasis on context. The broad scope of surveys and census analyses may provide a salient generalization, but they are contextually impoverished; they say little about how place matters in the enaction of social life (Abbott, 1997). In other words, even if a case is 'unique', the ethnographer's task of explaining that uniqueness requires an explication of both the broad social dynamics and the specific contextual realities that constitute the setting. If this is done rigorously and logically, the resulting analytic payoff is significant.

As mentioned, these four strategies are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the explanatory power of any ethnographically derived generalization is only increased if these strategies are combined. Alone or together, each provides a means for ethnographers to increase the validity of the broader propositions they assert. In short, generalization and ethnography are not incompatible.

3   The concern about representation

The final critique of ethnography I wish to consider comes from within the fold. A group of ethnographers, influenced by various strains of postmodernism, have in recent years criticized some of the commonplace assumptions that undergird much ethnography (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Sangren, 1988; Marcus, 1994). They argue that ethnographers are often insufficiently self-conscious about the activities of observation and representation. These activities are neither straightforward nor unproblematic, but instead involve questions of power and bias that too many ethnographers ignore. A power differential typically exists between observer and observed, particularly when the latter belongs to a marginalized

group. Ethnography can thus serve, wittingly or not, as a handmaiden to broader colonialist projects that inventory oppressed groups as a means of controlling them (Pratt, 1992). In both the colonial and ethnographic projects, the argument goes, the 'natives' are passive and powerless; the scientist's gaze is just one manifestation of the wider skein of dominance relations in which they are enwrapped.

There is also a potential problem when ethnography is produced. These products may be driven less by the need to provide a rendering of the cultural group under study and more by the textual conventions found in the ethnography of the day (Atkinson, 1990). As a result, ethnographies may present a vision of a social world that is far tidier than what actually exists. The social order the ethnographer describes may be more a consequence of the need to find order than a social production of the group under study.

Thus, there is a suspicion that ethnography's occlusions are as significant as its insights. These arguments provoke a necessary self-examination of the practices and purposes of ethnographic research. In effect, these critics are doing an ethnography of ethnography; they are asking how ethnographers constitute themselves through their work. They are also doing quite good ethnography, because they are asking large questions about how this particular social group is enmeshed in such broader social dynamics as colonialism. This is thus an explicit attempt to link the micro-level activities of the lone ethnographer with macro-level processes and imperatives.

There are no simple responses to this line of critique. As it happens, these critics are not dismissive of ethnography *per se*. Indeed, many of them articulate a goal of saving ethnography through transformation (see Marcus, 1999). They encourage ethnographers to be more self-critical and to interrogate the conditions under which they produce ethnographic knowledge. For my part, I think this line of critique should push ethnographers to puruse three related practices: forthrightness, reflexivity and modesty.

a   Forthrightness: It is necessary that ethnographers be forthright with those whom they study and with the audience of their written work. Although eliminating the power imbalances between student and studied is impossible – indeed, Stacey (1988) argues that a connection to people necessarily means a capacity to hurt them[5] – it is nonetheless essential that the ethnographer explains, as clearly as possible, the goals and purposes of the project without ever being misleading (cf. Leo, 1995). If the ethnographer has an overt political agenda which he or she will use the ethnography to pursue, then this must be revealed to the group. And if the ethnographer wishes to enter into collaborative ventures, the nature and goals of that collaboration need to be spelled out. As Smith (1988: 26) summarizes it, 'The extent of the analyst's intervention is immaterial so long as it is clearly acknowledged and built into the analysis.'

This suggests the need for the ethnographer to be honest also with the audience. There is thus a need for clarity about how access to the group was gained, how relationships in the field were developed. The ethnographer thus makes implicit the extent to which his or her knowledge of the group is partial, and how his or her presence in the field may have affected the activities observed. The group's reactions to the ethnographer's presence, as mentioned earlier, are themselves grist for the analytic mill, but they should be acknowledged to complete the audience's picture of the research process.

b   Reflexivity: Implicit in these points is a recognition that one's position affects one's knowledge. Hence, the need, in the terms of Katz (1994: 498), to strive for 'conscious knowledge of the situatedness of our knowledge' (see also Harraway, 1988). In other words, the ethnographer needs to be reflexive about how his or her own cultural and intellectual position shapes his or her apprehension and discussion of data (see Jackson, 1991). If some aspect of the social world of the studied group strikes the observer as exotic, it is essential to recognize that this says as much about the cultural milieu from which the ethnographer springs as it does the group under observation; ethnographies are as much about the culture of the student as they are of the studied.[6] This tacking back and forth between cultural understandings is the very essence of ethnography; cultural awareness develops from perceived differences. But the analyst must always foreground the intersubjective field created in the ethnographic encounter (Smith, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1990; Pile, 1991), and eschew any pretension toward some objective viewpoint from which the definitive account can be rendered. The ethnographer thus never stands completely outside either his or her own culture or the culture of the group under study. By contrast, ethnographic effectiveness requires creating a space between the cultures where similarity and difference can be explored and explained in an ongoing reflexive process.

c   Modesty: This rejection of an Archmidean standpoint illustrates the need for modesty in ethnography (or any other social science). If knowledges are always positioned and partial, it follows that our claims for them should be moderate. Academic ethnography is intended for an academic audience, and thus is tailored accordingly (see Keith, 1994). The best ethnography improves our understanding of a specific group and enhances our ability to think with concepts, but it always reflects a particular perspective and a particular historical moment. Ethnographers, like other social scientists, can only hope to add constructively to ongoing conversations about the dyanimics of social life, hopefully in the most critical and incisive way possible. But even the best such efforts are partial accounts and thus explanatory claims are best kept modest.

In sum, then, the 'crisis' of contemporary ethnography is never completely resolvable, but it should push ethnographers toward more forthrightness, reflexivity and modesty. These practices are necessary if one acknowledges the difficulty of conversing across cultures, and the inherent partiality of any knowledge claim. But these practices also reveal the exciting challenges and possibilities of ethnography. It is the courageous ethnographer who acknowledges the potential for self-knowledge in the practice of fieldwork, who can interrogate his or her own cultural assumptions through study of another group. And it is the articulate ethnographer who can reveal how thoughtful moments of honest reflection can spawn greater cultural understanding and clearer conceptual vision. As the best ethnographers demonstrate, the intersubjective field between cultures can be usefully cultivated for insights into the processes and meanings through which sociospatial life is enacted.

IV   Conclusion

Geography's neglect of ethnography diminishes the discipline. If Gregory (1989: 358) is right to argue that 'one of the greatest betrayals of modern geography was its devaluation of the specificities of place and of people', then there seems no better way to correct this disciplinary sin than to engage in more and better ethnography. No other methodology enables a researcher to explore the complex connections that social groups establish with one another and with the places they inhabit, cultivate, promote, defend, dominate and love. If sociality and spatiality are intertwined, and if the exploration of this connection is a goal of geography, then more ethnography is necessary.

This is especially true in the contemporary period. A number of perspectives, despite their differences, concur with the proposition that the link between macro-level social phenomena and micro-level dynamics represents one of the pivotal moments in social life. Here ethnography provides an important methodological way forward, because it enables an exploration of the processes and meanings through which everyday life is maintained. It therefore provides understandings of how daily life is connected to – or disconnected from – the broader structural imperatives that create the horizon of possibilities for human agents. And because these processes and meanings are context-dependent, the ethnographer is uniquely able to detail place's role in the reconstruction or deconstruction of social life.

This is not to say that ethnography is a flawless methodology. I have reviewed three potent and sometimes accurate criticisms leveled against ethnography. Yet these criticisms are not fatal if their admonitions are taken seriously; the careful ethnographer can acknowledge these pitfalls and produce work that simultaneously considers the micro and macro levels, work that informs us of both the particulars of a given group and the general, theoretical lessons the group can teach us. As Strathern (1991: xx) puts it: 'If one can ask "big" questions of "small" data, then the difference between big and small disappears.'

The task for ethnography that I have sketched here is as strenuous as it is significant.[7] It is much easier to focus on either structural analysis or more descriptive discussions of everyday life (Katz, 1991). To draw connections between macro and micro requires both theoretical sophistication and empathic observation. It further requires the ability to develop a vibrant, recursive conversation between theory and data. But the benefits merit the challenge. A geography that seeks better understandings of how social structures and human agents are stirred and separated in everyday spatial contexts must embrace more, and more rigorous, ethnography.

Notes

1. Presidential addresses and forums were excluded from the tally of articles. Articles that focused on human–environment interaction were included in the count, articles on cartography and cartographic consciousness were excluded.

2. Ethnographies and interviews, unfortunately, are too often conflated. Staeheli and Lawson (1994: 97), for example, refer to 'interviews and other ethnographic methods', Brown (1997) labels his work an ethnography even though the data upon which he draws are almost exclusively taken from interviews. Open-ended interviews are akin to ethnography because they enable respondents to take the analysis in directions unanticipated by the researcher (Schoenberger, 1991) but they still do not enable a comparison between what respondents say and what they do.

3. This is not, of course, to disparage work that relies upon open-ended interviews, much of which illuminates processes and meanings with great effectiveness. Two examples of such outstanding work in geography include Western (1992) and Brown (1997), amongst others.

4. Fear on the street is not limited to women. As the intensive ethnography of Ley (1974) demonstrated, inner-city residents develop a sophisticated ability to read the landscape for signs of danger, and adjust their time-space paths accordingly.

5. On the other hand, this greater connection sometimes means power to help. Myers (1988) assisted a remote group in the Australian Outback negotiate the demands of an ever-encroaching nation-state.

6. Western (1992) illustrates the value of this activity by fruitfully contrasting his own experience as an immigrant with those of the Barbadians in London whom he studied.

7. I do not have the space here to discuss the important question of how one develops the skills of ethnography. Fortunately, several sources are helpful here (see, for example, Thomas, 1993; Emerson *et al.*, 1995; Denizin, 1997; Fetterman, 1998).

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