In search for the essence of ethnography*

*Harry F. Wolcott***

SUMMARY

In june 16, 2003 Harry Wolcott gave "*The Bornemouth talk revisited for Medellin*" lecture. The talk deals with the search for the essence of ethnography and answers the question "what makes a study ethnographic?"

The lecturer in his carreer has identified twelve attributes that can reasonably be expected in a ethnographic report. Therefore ethnography is holistic, comparative, of first-hand experience, conducted in natural setting, requires intimate and long-term acquaintance, is non evaluative, basically descriptive, specific, adaptive, corroborative and finally idiosyncratic and individualistic.

All those attributes are discussed in the lecture with the warning that there is no absolute set of attributes. Then he could conclude that anyone can borrow the research techniques, and we all draw our data from everyday experience, both our own and of others. The result is far more likely to produce ethnography when a researcher sets out to create ethnography and has a clear idea of what is involved

Key words:
Ethography, Context, Ethnograpers, Qualitative Research

This is the story about an anthropological search. Not a dramatic search of the Indiana Jones type, but a search, nonetheless. My search was for **the essence of ethnography**. It culminated with the publication of my book *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, published in 1999. Today I am going to talk about my search: How I went about it and what found.

The idea for writing a book about ethnography came at a lunch meeting in November, 1995, almost eight years ago. I had just published a book with Mitch Allen, editor and publisher of AltaMira Press. I thought our lunch was to be a celebration of that event. Instead, Mitch began our conversation with his usual question, "What are you going to write for us next?"

Mitch Allen has been responsible for the last five books I have written. His question is always the same. He waits about five seconds for my answer, and, if I don't come up with an idea, he presents the idea he already has in mind. Since my earlier books dealt with aspects of qualitative research in general, he jumped in with the suggestion that **this time** I write specifically about ethnography.

I liked the idea and the challenge. I began learning about and doing ethnography more than 40 years

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En búsqueda de la esencia de la etnografía

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RESUMEN

El 16 de junio de 2003 Harry Wolcott dictó su versión para Medellín de la conferencia originalmente presentada en Bournemouth. La charla trató sobre la búsqueda de la esencia de la etnografía y responde preguntas como: ¿qué hace un estudio etnográfico?

El conferenciante, en su carrera, ha identificado doce atributos que pueden esperarse razonablemente en un reporte etnográfico. Es así como nos dice que la etnografía es holística, comparativa, basada en experiencias propias, realizada en escenarios naturales y que requiere una familiarización íntima y prolongada con el tema; no es evaluativa, es básicamente descriptiva, específica, adaptativa, corroborativa y finalmente, idiosincrásica e individualista.

Todos y cada uno de estos atributos se discuten en la conferencia con la advertencia de que no hay un conjunto absoluto de ellos que pueda operar en todas las investigaciones. Wolcott concluye que cualquiera de nosotros puede utilizar las técnicas de la investigación y tomar los datos de la experiencia de cada día, tanto los propios como los que se refieren a otros. Desde luego, para la producción de etnografía, es más propicio cuando éste ha sido el propósito de un investigador que además tiene claro cómo lograrlo.

Palabras clave:
Investigación Cualitativa, Etnografía, Etnógrafos, Contexto.

Lou Smith wanted researchers to feel comfortable with the similarities among qualitative approaches. I guess my reaction has been to keep colleagues from becoming too comfortable. I have worked toward a different, though not totally incompatible goal, to preserve whatever unique contribution ethnography has to make, conceptual as well as methodological.

This is still a concern today, for in the earliest draft of *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, editor Mitch Allen took me to task for writing that seemed to render ethnography inaccessible for all but a select few, a group he estimated at about "30 people, worldwide." Mitch wanted me to help readers to *learn more about* ethnography, not to tell them that they weren't really doing it. In revising the draft, I hope I succeeded in that task without losing sight of my original objective, to show that there is something special and particular about ethnography. I have tried to present ethnography as special but not inaccessible.

But what is it that makes ethnography special? What is it that one can rightfully expect when the claim is to do *ethnography*, rather than to use some other conceptual scheme (conversation analysis, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology), or

ago, and I have been writing about and teaching about it for almost that long. Writing a book would give me a chance to share what I had learned, and would help to further a cause I share with others: to keep ethnography distinct, a clearly identifiable style of research, rather that I watch it become just another synonym for qualitative research in general. Toward that end I have been goaded by comments made by colleagues so anxious to make ethnography "user friendly" that they simply toss it in with all the other forms of qualitative research. They fail to appreciate, and thus try to preserve, what is unique about it, what contribution it has to make.

I think the first person to treat it as "just another synonym for qualitative research" was my colleague Louis M. Smith, professor of educational psychology at Washington University, St. Louis. His remarks alone would have served as my inspiration, had not the same idea reappeared often in the words of other qualitative researchers in other fields. Louis Smith wrote, in 1978, about, quote,

> *"the genre of research that is coming to be known by such varied labels as* ***educational ethnography, participant observation, qualitative observation, case study****, or* ***field study****. For the most part, I will use these terms as synonyms."*[1]

to a generic name that does not implicate a particular disciplinary link-terms like participant observation study, case study, or naturalistic study.

What makes a study ethnographic? When does that question matter? And if you want to make a study "more ethnographic," what do you have to do? I have never felt that I had really "pinned down" the essence of ethnography so that I could explain what any particular study had, or lacked, that qualified it for the label. Writing the proposed book allowed, encouraged, in a way, *forced* me to tease out an ethnographic essence. I accepted Mitch's challenge as a way to think through and find the "true" ethnography.

That is more or less what I was up to during those years, fleshing out a proposed outline for the book, then building an inventory of critical attributes as I went along. I begin here by reviewing this list of attributes as I started identifying them and adding them to my expanding inventory. In all, I identified a dozen attributes one can reasonably expect to find in ethnographic reporting. The list could be shorter or longer, but for my purposes, 12 seemed enough. (And anyway, I like things in 3s or multiples of 3.) I intend to say a bit about each of them and show how it fits into the overall picture.

This is not a technical list; I think you will hardly hear an unfamiliar term or unexpected idea. In one sense we all are doing, all the time, what ethnographers do some of the time, except that we do it to accomplish individual purposes rather than to render descriptions of the collective social behavior of others. And let me suggest a very straightforward purpose for ethnography. We conduct our studies in order to examine how others lead their lives, and thus to get a clearer picture of our own. It is one way, but of course not the only way, to study human potential.

For the moment I will not address the problems that some of these attributes raise for the fieldworker. I will revisit the list later in these remarks to do that. Nor is there any particular order in the way I discuss them. It's just a collection of attributes-reasonable expectations about what we expect in an ethnography.

I recall an anthropologist once summarizing that anthropology is *holistic*, *cross-cultural*, and *comparative*. Since ethnography is the field arm of cultural anthropology, ethnography ought to exhibit those same qualities, so I begin my inventory with those three attributes.

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1. Ethnography is **holistic**. Perhaps the term holistic is no longer in vogue. Better, perhaps is the idea that ethnography is especially sensitive to context, and to multiple contexts. I am greatly influenced by the idea that human behavior is "overdetermined," that there are **always** multiple factors at work in our every behavior. And therefore, we should always consider multiple causes and multiple influences for actions.

2. Ethnography is **cross-cultural**. Ethnography is the study of The Other, another way of life. Hard to argue with that as a general descriptor.

3. Ethnography is **comparative**. Everything we do and understand is based on comparison. Being cross-cultural is one way of providing comparison. But ethnography is comparative in multiple ways, not endlessly listing similarities and differences, but, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz[2] states it, looking for "systematic relationships among diverse phenomena, not for substantive identities among similar ones"

Fieldwork is sometimes described as "living one's way into a culture." The ethnographer takes himself or herself to be the primary "instrument" for data collection. And what could possibly be a better instrument for observing 'human behavior? True, we are chided by colleagues in other disciplines who wonder at us for **making up our own data**. But isn't that preferable to depending entirely on data made up by someone else?

With those three, points to establish a base, it was relatively easy to identify others as the writing progressed. I identified nine additional attributes that collectively seemed to encapsulate the essence of ethnography. Indeed, initially it seemed hard to imagine ethnography without each and every one of them. So, to continue to develop my list:

4. Ethnography reports **first-hand experience**. The ethnographer has been there, the reporting is personal and first hand. Fieldwork is sometimes described as "living one's way into a culture." The ethnographer takes himself or herself to be the primary "instrument" for data collection. And what could possibly be a better instrument for observing 'human behavior? True, we are chided by colleagues in other disciplines who wonder at us for **making up our own data**. But isn't that preferable to depending entirely on data made up by someone else?

5. Ethnography is conducted in **natural** settings. There is nothing contrived in the behavior ethnographers observe and record, no control groups, no hypothetical situations: real people acting as they act in everyday settings. How people *really* act, as well as how they say they act, and how they *say* they *should* act, are the data one works with.

6. Ethnography requires **intimate, long-term acquaintance**. Time works its advantage for the ethnographer. No one can keep up an appearance forever, so the ethnographer eventually sees things as they really are. James Clifford describes ethnography as "an especially deep, extended, and interactive research encounter". I have also see it described more modestly as "deep hanging out."

7. Ethnography is **non-evaluative**. Deferred judgment is the order of the day. The ethnographer wants to see how things are and how they fit together to form patterns. The ethnographer is not there to judge.

8. Ethnography is basically **descriptive**; and thick description is obviously better than thin. Consistent with deferred judgment, the reporting is based on

what is observed, not how the ethnographer feels about it. There is room for that in the final account, but personal views are kept separate. Until rather recently, they were not part of ethnographic reporting. In many of the classic ethnographies, the British ones especially, the ethnographer makes no appearance at all.

9. Ethnography is **specific**. It is local and particular-particular people in particular places at a particular time. It is always grounded in instances of specific observed behavior. It is about *somebody*, not about everybody.

10. Ethnography is flexible, **adaptive.** The ethnographer works with an "open" research design, if, indeed, there is any design at all, other than a statement of purpose that is continually being refined as the work proceeds. The assumption is that until you are **present** in the setting, you may not discover what an appropriate question is or how to inquire into it. For the ethnographer, data shape the theory, not the other way around.

One sometimes hears the process described as "dialectic," as in Michael Agar's[3] statement that ethnography is "dialectic, not linear" I am taken with Agar's description, of ethnography as a *selective narrowing* of focus, what he calls the "funnel approach" when he writes,

"In ethnography... you learn something ("collect some data"), then you try to make sense out of it ("analysis"), then you go back and see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experiences ("collect more data"), then you refine your interpretation ("more analysis"), and so on. The process is dialectic, not linear"[4].

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11. Ethnography is **corroborative**. A canon of good fieldwork is that you don't rely on any **single** source of data. A popular term for this is "triangulation." Indeed, triangulation is so popular that I have heard overly enthusiastic graduate students describe "triangulation" as *the method* they intend to follow. How checking your data or confirming your sources could ever become a *method* is beyond me, but that doesn't mean you don't check your sources. In a fieldwork seminar, one might go so far as to declare that we would **never** report on data that have not been confirmed.

12. Ethnography is **idiosyncratic and individualistic**. The approach fits right in with the *ethos* of self-reliance and independence- ethnography is most often accomplished by one person who takes full responsibility for a study, from proposal to final write-up. No two studies are ever exactly alike, and each study bears the stamp of the person who conducts it. Since there are cultural scenes aplenty, there is no need for anyone to go to the exact same place to study the exact same thing at the exact same time. Ordinarily, even a restudy will be conducted by the same person who did the original one.

As my writing continued and I continued to tease out these attributes, I assumed my list would be come more concise. Relatively minor points would be subsumed to make major ones stronger. Eventually I assumed that the list would be "boiled down" to a few powerful characteristics that I could identify as containing the "essence" of ethnography.

But that is not what happened. As my list grew longer at one end, a shadow of doubt began to form over the qualities I had already identified. Each characteristic that seemed, essential to ethnography had some special conditions or problems attached to it, a downside or caution that weakened the case that it was *absolutely essential* as an attribute. Let me go back over my list again, this time in a more critical light that asks whether each of the characteristics identified is a characteristic of *every* ethnography, an absolute necessity without which the ethnographic claim cannot be made.

1. Ethnography is holistic. This seems a worthy goal to strive for, sage counsel to offer a fieldworker. But it is not much of a criterion for evaluating a study. You can be caught out either way. If you are too focused, you are subject to the criticism that you have not provided sufficient context. And if you attend too much to context, you are subject to the criticism that you did not attend sufficiently to focus.

Basically the concern is one of balance in terms of the **purposes** of the study. This is the classic storyteller's dilemma: how wide a swath to cut? Endeavoring to attend to both focus and periphery, perhaps the best strategy is to do what you feel you do best. For the ethnographer, the haunting words that anthropology could become nothing more than history might make us want to insure that out accounts are *always* something more than that.

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2. Ethnography is cross-cultural. We recognize that ethnography got its start in cross-cultural study, and we recognize that it would be ideal if everyone interested in pursuing it either could have **prior experience** in another cultural setting or could initially **pursue fieldwork** in such a setting. But several things mitigate this:

- It is not practical for everyone who wants to do ethnography to have prior experience in a dramatically different culture.
- Opportunities for such cross cultural experience are limited even for those with time and inclination, and there is resistance in some groups to having ethnographers "study them."
- Especially outside the discipline of anthropology, the groups we want to study are often groups in which we ourselves hold membership: educational researchers studying schools, nurses studying hospitals or other health workers, an in-house ethnographer studying social relations within the firm, etc.
- With terms like "autoethnography" floating about, it might even be assume (incorrectly) that these days you can even do ethnography on (or "of") yourself.

Cross-cultural settings may have been where the action *was*, but today we've brought those methods home. Even for anthropologists, the *ideal* of prior cross-cultural study, at least in a dramatically different society, remains something of a desirable, but not always obtainable, goal. In the absence of dramatic cultural differences, today we make more of micro-cultural differences, recognizing,

with anthropologist Ward Goodenough, that we **all** participate in multiple cultural systems, that multiculturalism is the "normal human experience." Alas, recognizing that employees in the local market, or restaurant, or firehouse have a "culture" of their own somehow lacks the dramatic aspects of the kind of perspective that a Margaret Mead or Branislaw Malinowski –or Indiana Jones– could bring to their work.

We console ourselves that where ethnographers once sought to **make the strange familiar**, today's ethnographer more often needs to **make the familiar strange** (For those of you who took the workshop, think of the problem of making a school principal "strange enough" that I could see his own "annual cycle" as different from that of his teachers. Thus making the familiar "strange").

3. Ethnography is comparative. If ethnography is supposed to be comparative, what is it that you are supposed to compare? Cross-cultural comparison was once the marching order of the day. Matter of fact, in an era of armchair anthropology, when dialogues were based on the first hand reports of someone else, such as missionaries and adventurers, endless comparisons were made of peoples among whom those scholars had no firsthand experience.

That kind of comparison went out of fashion years ago, and precisely how we can and do employ comparison today baffles me. I advise beginning fieldworkers to **do as little comparing as possible** rather than as much. Comparison tends to draw one's attention away from what is being observed. In itself, comparison can become an endless as well as pointless task.

In North American anthropology, a distinction is often made between ethnography and ethnology. Ethnography is the description of the way of life of one human group, ethnology the comparison of two or more different groups. Since everything we do is comparative anyway, I think that explicit comparison is best left to others. Your task as ethnographer is to attend to careful description, at least until you go on to conduct your second or third inquiry; or, to study one group over an *extended* period, as British ethnographers have tended to do.

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I think comparison is given too much credence in qualitative research, especially to doing comparisons on a scale of what a beginning student can accomplish in conducting a descriptively oriented master's thesis or doctoral dissertation. Too often I have witnessed students being urged to "increase their Ns," that is, to do two, three, five "little" cases instead of restricting their observations to *one* site studied in depth, The belief is that this will make a study stronger or more scientific. But what happens instead is that those larger Ns act as denominators. They reduce the time that can be devoted to each individual case. If you do three "little" cases, each one will get 1/3 as much attention as it might have had if you focused on one. That's OK if you want to look for a range of possible practices -but there goes context, for you will find that you are really only conducting a survey. Ethnography is a very inefficient way to conduct a survey!

When it does come time to compare, as it inevitably does even as you try to resist it, you can be guided by Clifford Geertz, who advises us to look for "systematic relationships" rather than yield to the temptation simply to inventory similarities and dissimilarities.

So here I am, trying to explicate a tradition that exhorts you to be **holistic, cross-cultural**, and **comparative**, yet coming up instead with questions as to whether these attributes are part of the solid foundation upon which contemporary ethnography stands. They are among a number of desirable features ***often*** found in ethnography but not **critical** attributes. Their importance seems to diminish as ethnographic research is adapted to present circumstances. We would like to pursue them, but we can't always accommodate them. To continue examining the list:

4. Ethnography reports first-hand experience. Well, here at last is a feature that characteristic of *all* ethnography: the presence of the ethnographer in the scene being reported: That's virtually a must!

And even if you *are* there —on site and in person— your presence hardly guarantees the accuracy or completeness of your data. You can't be everywhere at once, your own biases limit and distort what you observe, and your very presence makes demands on your time and energy when it entails making arrangements for eating, sleeping, attending to personal matters, and even getting away from the people you are there to study so that you maintain some perspective of your own.

Except, of course, in situations where "being there" is impossible, impractical, illegal, and, alas, sometimes just inconvenient. Ethnographers have often gone to remarkable lengths to "be there," but we can easily think of limits where we are satisfied with interview data and do not insist on firsthand observation. Studies of prison life or prostitution come quickly to mind, but even for the ethnohistorian there is no way to get at the past except through the **memory cultures** of elderly informants. We may regard this as a recent turn of events, with ethnographers driving to their field sites early in the morning, or even taking the subway. Yet Franz Boas, the so-called *father of American anthropology*, is reported to have waited impatiently in his hotel room at Port Hardy, British Columbia, Canada, for his Kwakiutl informants to show up, and to fume when they failed to keep their appointments. That was more than a hundred years ago!

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Archivo fotográfico Graciliano Arcila Vélez. Museo Universitario de la Universidad de Antioquia

The *idea* of being there represents an idealized and romantic view of how fieldwork should be conducted, some-

thing we can all agree on as highly desirable. But it is often impractical, especially in our own case. Time alone may preclude the possibility of being there, and there may not be any "there" there at all, as, for example, studying communities that exist without face-to-face interaction, such as e-mail correspondents or ham radio operators or people engaging in telephone sex.

> **5.** Ethnography is conducted in natural settings. It is certainly true to say that ethnographers do not contrive the settings or situations which they study, but it is not so easy to establish exactly what constitutes a "natural" setting. Schools, hospitals, prisons, offices, factories, all are such commonplace settings as to seem "natural" to us, yet there are some natural qualities about them. Perhaps natural settings are themselves part of memory cultures, how things were in "old days" that are idealized against the realities of the present.

We would have to say that there is a *preference* for studying things in their natural state, but what we settle for are settings that we as ethnographers do not manipulate and cannot control. We may at times *wish* we could control them, to keep out other external influences (like ourselves) and maintain them in their pristine condition. Our efforts in this regard are sometimes transparent, as when we write about a people as though they have little or no contact with the "outside world," or write about them" in a third-person way that suggests that *not even we ourselves* were there to study them.

> **6.** Ethnography requires intimate, long-term acquaintance. Exactly what constitutes an intin l ate relationship in fieldwork, however, or how long an acquaintanceship must survive to qualify as "long-term," seem never to be addressed in discussions of fieldwork criteria. So this attribute is something of an abstraction. Yet it has a satisfying ring. "Perhaps in comparison to other styles of research, we could reach agreement that ethnographers are simply "more" intimate, their acquaintance "more" long term, than that of any other kind of social research. So, as a broad descriptor, and stated comparatively, this one is fine.

But the terms 'are not readily operationalized. How intimate is intimate, as recent volumes concerning sex and the fieldworker, With titles like *Taboo* (Kulick and Willson 1995) or the companion volumes (by Lewin and Leap, 1996 and 2002) *Out In The Field* and *Out in Theory* are asking? Is intimacy it self necessarily desirable, when the threat of betrayal lurks in every ethnographic report, revealing things told in confidence or inadvertently reporting something that embarrasses the teller. Further, not all ethnographers handle intimacy well or have any wish to become intimate with informants. They may be fearful of the loss of objectivity that they feel professionally obliged to maintain. They may be lacking in social skills of their own.

Length of time in the field is often a two edged sword. Length of stay is itself no guarantee of better fieldwork. It seems reasonable to assume that fieldworkers are as apt to overstay their welcome as to leave too soon. In a sense, the longer you stay, the greater chance to screw up the relationship, antagonize someone, take a giant misstep. Mistrust is far easier to achieve than trust. Because

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we are there to gather information, most fieldworkers can "act their best selves," at least for awhile. But the longer we stay, the less likely we will be able to "keep up a front" or play only the researcher role.

Perhaps the best way to accomplish long-term acquaintance is to spend an extended period that is not continuous but is achieved through intermittent visits. That is possible in the course of a *career*. However, it is not the kind of advice one wants to hear when setting out the first time. Attention is directed instead to the **minimum** time necessary. But when such questions become a burning issue, we can worry about efforts to short-circuit ethnographic practice. How do you answer the question, "How **short** can a long-term study be?"

7. Ethnography is non-evaluative. The ethnographer is enjoined not to rush to judgment. But it is difficult to withhold judgment even under the guise of learning about how other people live. We study The Other, no disrespect intended, but we agonize over what always comes down to the privileged position of the observer. We change our language; now we study *with* you; we are careful not to call you our *subjects*. Nor do we like calling you our *informants*, even though you inform us Even our relativistic stance has become relative. As occasion has arisen for ethnographers to accept assignments specifically to assess or to evaluate, suddenly admit to being adept at evaluating after all. We simply claim to approach such assignments another way, with a focus on trying to understand what is rather than what should be. And we approach out studies without malice.

Thick description is clearly better than thin, but when is enough? And if we recognize attending to context as one of our special strengths, how far should we go, to what level of detail, when any attention we give to context detracts from the focus.

But we certainly do not want to be left out if evaluation is where the action is. And regardless of an expected *professional* stance, it is human nature to have preferences, even when it not a good idea to reveal them. Ethnographers have found a way out of the dilemma by contrasting being objective and being neutral, taking the position that one does not need to be neutral in order to be objective. In short, we make judgments if that is what is wanted, we don't make them if that is what is wanted. "Deferred judgment" proves a handy label, conveniently imprecise, maybe as near as one can come in fieldwork to having one's cake and eating it, too.

8. Ethnography is basically descriptive. The best way to be non-evaluative is to be highly descriptive, to attend to what is, and what those in the setting make of it, rather than become preoccupied with what is wrong, or with what ought to be. But description is endless. Margaret Mead and Branislaw Malinowski, two of our most prominent exemplars, have been accused of "haphazard descriptiveness," and anyone who has tried to provide a *complete* description of anything recognizes that potentially it is a run-away activity. Thick description is clearly better than thin, but when is enough? And if we recognize attending to context as one of our special strengths, how far should we go, to what level of detail, when any attention we give to context detracts from the focus.

Furthermore, a call for description implies that it is somehow a pure act, that when we describe, we free ourselves from judgments or preconceived ideas. Yet as William Jamesonce observed, –you can't even pick up rocks in a field without a theory–[5]. Description requires making choices-what is to be described, at what level of detail, while something else is ignored or

described in less detail. Pure description is sometimes referred to lightheartedly as "immaculate perception." Ethnography puts an emphasis on description; but when you find yourself actually "doing it" you may be surprised at how uncertain you are about how to go about it, and how impossible it would be to provide either *pure* or *complete* description.

At the same time, you still end up with more description than you can possibly include. And the more thorough you are, the more likely you are to uncover matters deemed personal and private. So the more you know, the greater the problem you may have in deciding what needs to be reported, what might be omitted, and what definitely should be omitted. "Basic description" is not such an easy path to follow after all.

9. Ethnography is specific. Clifford Geertz[6] described ethnographic description as "microscopic," stating flatly: "There is no ascent to truth without a corresponding descent to cases." Another strength that also becomes a weakness. Our instances are single instances. "What can you learn from a single case," we are asked repeatedly.

It was years before I realized a straightforward answer, **"All we can."** Nevertheless, our generalizations are always suspect, our efforts at theory are gigantic leaps from what we observe in everyday interaction to universals describing human behavior. In their efforts to stay relevant with the times, one hears today of anthropologists whose specialty is the "ethnography of the state." I find that a curious effort to have it both ways. I feel more comforted by Geertz's[7] words on that score: "It is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something".

I think the resolution for ethnographers, and for social scientists of every ilk, was summed up more than 50 years ago by Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray[8] in their edited collection called *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture* when they wrote

[in the gendered language of fue day],

Every man is in certain respects
a. like all other men,
b. like some other men,
c. like no other man.

What they were saying about individuals holds true for micro-cultures and National cultures as well. Being particularistic feels "natural" to most ethnographers-but not all ethnographers are alike, and neither are their ethnographies. Some approach the groups they study as though there were no individuals in them, only "a people" seeming to act in unison, while others build their accounts around a single individual through the anthropological life history or "ethnographic autobiography."

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10. Ethnography is flexible, adaptive. Well, if we can't seem to get ethnography to hold still, perhaps we can commend it for being flexible and adaptive. And indeed it is. From the ethnographer's perspective, that can be one of its finest features, allowing him or her to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise. Serendipity, we call it.

But so flexible and adaptive an approach can leave one in serious doubt as to how to proceed. It is not unknown among the ranks of anthropologists- the lesser known ones, I hasten to add-that some are so struck with the limitless possibilities of things that might be studied that they **never actually get around to studying anything at all**. Even for those who thrive on the opportunities of whatever setting they find themselves in, to outsiders it is never quite clear what the ethnographer will come up with. If you hire an ethnographer to work on a project, or send a student off for a year of fieldwork, you never know for sure what you are going to get as a result. That makes both the ethnographer and ethnography something of a wild card. I have seen ethnography defined as **what ethnographers do**. When you are beginning a study, that kind of advice can prove remarkably unhelpful.

11. Ethnography is corroborative. One of ethnography's strengths is that we use multiple sources of data. The long-term nature of fieldwork adds immeasurably to the feeling that our accounts are reliable. We ourselves can be unaware of how those accounts are often dependent on few informants-perhaps only one or two individuals willing to talk to us at length and answer our questions. Those long-term stays in the field are also liable to fix us into a few channels for gathering data, to narrow rather than to broaden our sources of information.

As desirable as triangulation seems when talked about in seminar, just how do you go about checking up on what your informants are telling you without creating tension, even rivalries in the community: "Who told you *that*?" We are at the mercy of our informants, although we are not anxious to admit to our vulnerability and not anxious to suggest the tenuousness of what we can report. It has been suggested that we dwell a bit more on the "confirmability" of what we have to say, but you can over do the tentativeness in an account if you begin every statement with the reminder that of course, this is but one instance at one particular point in time.

In the end, it seems that readers themselves are left to decide on the "truth value" of our accounts, assessing them as more-or-less accurate on such qualities as "internal validity" that call not for everything to be "true" but for the plausibility of the total account. As Paul Kutsche[9] reminds novice anthropological fieldworkers, "Remember that you are constructing a model of a culture, not telling the truth about your data; there are numerous truths".

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12. Ethnography is idiosyncratic and individualistic. Well, finally, a criterion that holds up. But it hardly points the way except to declare: **In the long run, we most judge each effort on its own**. There is no standard mold, no absolute way to assess all ethnographies. And what holds true today was true even "back then." Roger Sanjek reports that in 1927 Margaret Mead wanted to write a second, more scholarly monograph to complement the work she had just completed, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which was aimed at a popular audience. Before beginning, Mead identified and read a handful of what we recognize today as ethnographic "classics." In her words, "I gathered together a pile of the famous monographs of the period ...and studied their arrangements." And what Mead discovered, as Sanjek reports, was that the "arrangements" in each of these works was unique. Quoting Sanjek,

> *There was no single all-purpose model to which her Samoa data could be affixed and a monograph result. Each author presented a mass of material, and each had designed an infernal architecture upon which this mass was hung. These two properties-rich ethnographic detail and cohesive supporting framework-continue to animate the anthropological aesthetic*[10].

Well, there you have it. After searching for ethnography's essence for much of my professional life, and making a concerted effort during the years I had already spent preparing the first drafts of *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, I had finally discovered what Margaret Mead realized in 1927: **There is no single all-purpose definition of, or model for, ethnography**. And my criteria did not supply the firm guidelines I had been looking for. **Most** of them were present **most** of the time; but not a single one seemed to be absolutely essential.

I decided that what I needed was a different analytic. I am hardly the first person to go wrong trying to identify the list of critical attributes or traits-of anything.

I am drawn to **analogies** to help examine and explain things. Analogies are a handy tool for the qualitative researcher. They offer a way to make comparisons without having to make judgments. What I needed in this case was an analogy which allowed for conditions comparable to those I found characteristic of ethnographies in general:

> *A number of ingredients **usually** present, none of which is absolutely essential, the final product in each particular instance reflecting the unique combination of ingredients that went into it.*

Serendipity found me at the county fair that summer, and a suitable, indeed, fortuitous analogy presented itself while I took a casual stroll through the entries at the baking exhibit. What if I likened **the making of ethnography to the making of bread?** Bread has a number of customary ingredients but no single essential one. It is something that takes shape in each instance according to the purposes of, and at the hands of, the individual who prepares it.

I am not about to introduce you to the art and science of breadmaking, at least beyond exploring the analogy I have drawn. I have never baked a loaf of bread by myself. And I hope you don't find serious problems with the analogy, since I am now hopelessly committed to it in print. You also may wonder why. I want to explore the analogy rather than tell you more about ethnography. I don't want to give the impression that with this concluding lecture you have heard everything there is to know about ethnography. (If you're interested, read some ethnographies.) But if you understand the analogy, you may appreciate why ethnography's attributes are a bit ambiguous and why ethnography itself includes more than simply gathering data. You need to understand why ***ethnography is more than method***, although method is part of it.

Breadmaking as we know it usually requires yeast, sugar, salt, fat, and various so-called *improvers*. These ingredients are added to flours, ground from wheat and other starchy seeds, and combined into a workable mass whit the addition of one or more of any number of suitable liquids. But if you think about it, while these are the customary ingredients, there is no *particular* ingredient common among our breads, not even the seemingly essential flour ground from a grass

seed, since both buckwheat and quinoa (keen wa), starchy seeds as far as the baker is concerned, are not members of the grass family. No single ingredient is common to all the breads of the world.

The ethnographer in the field gathers the equivalent of grains, in the form of tiny kernels of "truth" or "perceived fact," based on observational data, often augmented with data already collected by others. The data-gathering stage involves selecting among what is available, with some special purpose in mind, or collecting whatever is at hand to see what can be made of it. The collected grains, like tiny bits of data, must subsequently be *sorted* -you can't possibly use all you collect. Some of them are discarded, some put aside for possible use another day. What is to be used is variously refined according to purpose and preference. As with some bakers, some ethnographers prefer to work with highly refined material (they are the closet quantifiers, as I like to think of them). Other ethnographer -like other bakers- insist that the ingredients they use be as close to their original, natural state as possible.

Matter of fact, that is another distinguishing characteristic of mast ethnography. These are not accounts of heroic individuals performing heroic feats, but of ordinary folk going about their ordinary affairs. It is what is done with the raw material that turns **some** accounts into ethnography, some into biography, some into the kind of product characteristic of other social sciences or arenas of practice. It is what' someone **does**, with the **explicit intent** of producing ethnography, that makes ethnography out of some accounts and not others.

It is not the materials themselves that are special, either in breadmaking or in ethnography. As Geertz[11] observes of the latter, "It is not their origins that recommend them" They are rather ordinary, everyday materials, collected in rather ordinary, everyday ways. Matter of fact, that is another distinguishing characteristic of mast ethnography. These are not accounts of heroic individuals performing heroic feats, but of ordinary folk going about their ordinary affairs. It is what is done with the raw material that turns **some** accounts into ethnography, some into biography, some into the kind of product characteristic of other social sciences or arenas of practice. It is what' someone **does**, with the **explicit intent** of producing ethnography, that makes ethnography out of some accounts and not others.

I press the analogy. The grains and other ingredients for breadmaking are formed into workable mass only with the addition of liquid. I was surprised to realize the wide variety of liquids that can be used: skim milk, whole milk, or buttermilk; water; soup or vegetable water; fruitjuice; sour cream; yoghurt; cottage cheese; coffee or tea; beer, stout, or ale; in addition to the liquid forms of other possible ingredients such as molasses or honey, melted butter, vegetable shortening or oil, vinegar, eggs, etc.

It occurred to me that whatever liquid or liquids are added to make it possible to combine the otherwise dry ingredients (those lifeless little bits of observed data) are what distinguish one approach from the other. That is, all qualitative researchers obtain their data from common, everyday scenes in human social life. **How we select among, combine, and shape those data are what make the difference**. That selecting and shaping is done at the hands of the individual researcher. Variation is not so much a consequence of the data themselves but from **how they are combined**, through the addition of something added, that allows them to be formed into a cohesive mass.

For the ethnographer -or for the ethnographer from the States, at least- those data are worked into a cohesive mass with the addition of the **concept of culture**. Culture is not "there," waiting demurely to be discovered it is **something the ethnographer adds** because that is one way to make data workable. (British ethnographers, by contrast, have traditionally achieved comparable results with social structure, which, of course, we Americans don't feel works quite as well)

In a technical sense, a la anthropologist Ward Goodenough, an anthropologist. "attributes" culture, or social structure, to a group. Other social scientists working in related disciplines have their own preferred concepts for making their accounts "cohere." They may add a dash or two of culture, just as ethnographers draw on concepts used predominantly by other social scientists, such as "institution" in sociology. But if the end product is to be ethnography, "culture" or some equivalent concept- such as social structure, worldview, or Jean Lave's interesting notion of "community of practice"-must be there. To data drawn from everyday sources, economists, historians, sociologists, etc. add the **concepts that characterize their disciplines**. They add the same concepts that their colleagues use in order to get comparable results. And they shape them into the familiar shapes or forms that we expect in different arenas of practice.

Although there are quick breads and quick ethnographers, we ordinarily expect the dough to go through a series of stages. Developing accounts, like developing dough, need to be punched down so they aren't full of holes -the analogy invites a host of comparisons. What I want to stress is that the ethnographer **adds** something that makes a study ethnographic, the symbolic interactionist or phenomenologist or feminist researcher adds something different to come up with a slightly different result, and so forth. And their accounts are variously seasoned with compassion, humor, insight, to suit the tastes of their various audiences.

One does not have to be formally trained as a baker to bake a loaf of bread; one does not have to be formally trained as an ethnographer to come up with ethnography. But one does need a pretty good idea of the customary ingredients, the possible substitutions, the improvers, the acceptable range of variation, and so forth, as well as a clear idea of how the end product is supposed to look.

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The final judgment is reserved for the finished product. There are old-fashioned bakers and old- fashioned ethnographers (like me) who tend to stick to the old ways, the tried and true recipes, the standard treatment. There are others who like to experiment or push the limits. Often the lines are drawn between generations. Old timers may become rather fixed in their ways and decry new-fangled technologies that seem to ignore the character-building qualities associated with the old ways-such as bread-making machines to do the sticky work, or computer programs to speed up the processing of data.

Ethnographies traditionally have been, and as circumstances allow, continue to be characterized as studies that are:

- Holistic
- Cross -cultural
- Comparative
- Based on first-hand experience
- Conducted in natural settings .
- The result of intimate, long-term acquaintance
- Non- evaluative
- Basically descriptive
- Specific or "particular"
- Flexible and adaptive
- Corroborative
- Idiosyncratic and individualistic

Yet none of these attributes seems to be indispensable, and satisfying them all does not assure ethnography. The person who does ethnography needs to have a feel for which ingredients are appropriate for meeting intended purposes and to have a general idea of expectations and limits. It is how one's data are drawn together to make a cohesive account that gets at the essence of ethnography. It is something the ethnographer **puts in**, not exotic bits of data themselves but how they are combined into a cohesive whole allowed to rest and rise, worked over, and finally shaped into a satisfactory-and identifiable-form. Mindwork; not fieldwork

I began my search by looking for an absolute set of attributes. Those I identified proved to be customary, not inviolable. It is how data are softened and worked into a cohesive mass, and what must be added in order for this to happen, that brings about the intended result, Anthropologist Paul Bohannan[12] summed it up with the observation that "without an ethnographer there is no ethnography" Anyone can borrow the research techniques, and we all draw our data from everyday experience, both our own and of others. The result is far more likely to produce ethnography **when a researcher sets out to create ethnography** and has a clear idea of what is involved.

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