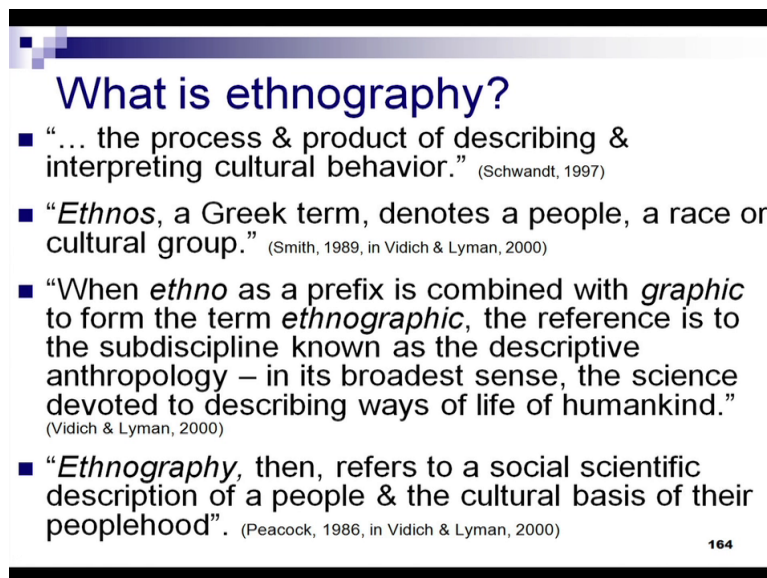


**Qualitative Research Methods**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology - Kharagpur**

**Lecture 19**  
**Ethnography**

Welcome back to the NOC course title qualitative research methods, my name is Aradhna Malik and I am helping you with this course and we have discussed what qualitative research is, we discussed paradigm, we have discussed different things, this session onwards we are going to talk about actual strategies of inquiry using into or actual strategies of inquiry in qualitative research, so we start with ethnography.

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**What is ethnography?**

- "... the process & product of describing & interpreting cultural behavior." (Schwandt, 1997)
- "*Ethnos*, a Greek term, denotes a people, a race or cultural group." (Smith, 1989, in Vidich & Lyman, 2000)
- "When *ethno* as a prefix is combined with *graphic* to form the term *ethnographic*, the reference is to the subdiscipline known as the descriptive anthropology – in its broadest sense, the science devoted to describing ways of life of humankind." (Vidich & Lyman, 2000)
- "*Ethnography*, then, refers to a social scientific description of a people & the cultural basis of their peoplehood". (Peacock, 1986, in Vidich & Lyman, 2000)

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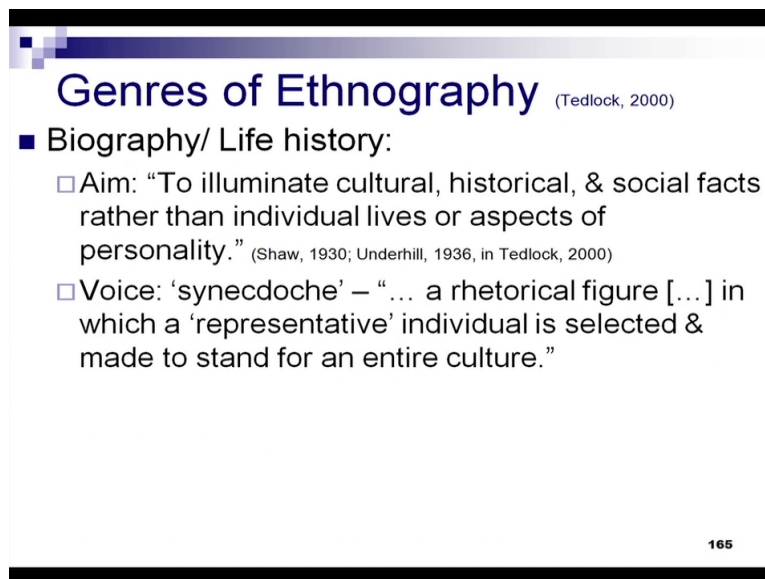
What is ethnography? "the process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behavior," lets dwell on this, for a little bit, it is the process of describing cultural behavior and it's also the product of describing an interpreting cultural behavior. The process itself becomes a finished product, it adds to the finished product.

"Ethnos, a Greek term, denotes a people, a race, or a cultural group." "When Ethno as a prefix is combined with graphic to form the term ethnographic or ethnography, the reference is to the subdiscipline known as the descriptive anthropology - in its broadest sense, the science devoted to describing ways of life of humankind." So it is a science of describing how human beings live, ethnography is the science of describing how human beings live and how they be? How they do? What they do? How they exist?

“Ethnography then refers to a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood.” The cultural reason, the cultural foundations of a group of a people, when we say a people, we are not making grammatical mistake here, we referring to a group, a community, a gathering, a bracket, a cluster of people, so when we talk about ethnography, we are talking about social scientific description of a people.

And what it is that helps them be identified as members of the same cultural group. What they do? What they have? How they live? How they exist? All of that, descriptions of all of that constitute the field of ethnography.

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**Genres of Ethnography** (Tedlock, 2000)

- Biography/ Life history:
  - Aim: “To illuminate cultural, historical, & social facts rather than individual lives or aspects of personality.” (Shaw, 1930; Underhill, 1936, in Tedlock, 2000)
  - Voice: ‘synecdoche’ – “... a rhetorical figure [...] in which a ‘representative’ individual is selected & made to stand for an entire culture.”

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Genre of ethnography, how do we study ethnography? What ethnography is? Different types of ethnography are, the first and the most commonly genre that you are going to discuss here is called biography. Biography or life history, the aim of biography or a biography is “to illuminate cultural historical and social facts rather than individual lives or aspects of personality.”

So we describe the social facts of life, we describe cultural aspects of life rather than individual life, we don't pick one person, we say this is how it is going to be for the entire community and the voice of the method or the approach that we use is here known as synecdoche. And synecdoche is “a rhetorical figure in which a representative individual is selected and made to stand for an entire culture.”

So we take a representative, we describe the representative figures, life and we say that because this one person is like this, everybody is going to be like this, now this has its own flaws, immediately you say well one person cannot be, you just said that everybody is unique, everybody is behaving in different ways, how can we take a representative, we take the things that the aspects of life that can be applied to a larger population and we describe those in details.

So we say this is a not a typical, but this is one typical individual representative of the group, so instead of going through the lives of every single member of that group and then drawing parallels and then drawing categories, and saying hundred people feel this way, so this is how it's going to be, we just take one typical person, we described the whole life that person or I'm not the whole life but then, a slice of life or a behavior or a phenomenon.

In using that one individual as a representative of that group of people and then we say that this is representative not exactly the same but is representation of how different members in the group would do it. For example, let's take the example of how babies' births are celebrated, what happens in a community when a woman discovers that she is going to have a baby, then what are the processes? What are the rituals that are followed?

To welcome this new life into the world, so what happens, in some cultures that our prayers are offered, prayers are offered. When the mother, the new mother discovered that she is going to have a baby. In some community is as soon as the woman discovers that he is going to have a baby, she is not supposed to tell anyone outside of the people, who are going to take care of her, doctor, her immediate family members, immediate family does mean extended family, to the first trimester.

Because and I think the reason for this is the high rate of infant mortality or prenatal mortality, abortions so accidental, you know, to minimize the impact of accidentally abortions, people don't tell others that a going to have a baby and it's a cultural thing. Only when that critical phase of the first trimester has passed, do people then inform others and then celebrations happen.

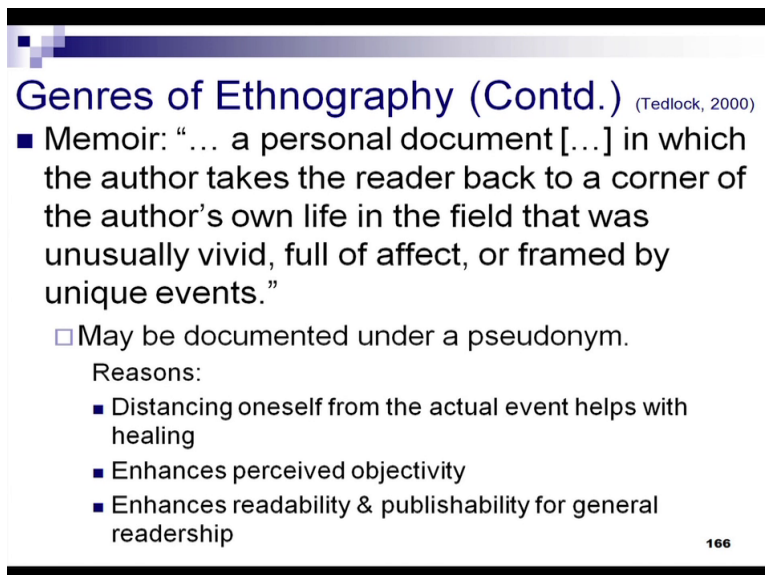
And then in the seventh month in many communities, seventh or eighth month you have something similar to what is called as a baby shower, so you know we have different,

different communities here in India call it different things and then you mother is prepared for the baby to come and she is given tips and you know she is treated really well to prepare her for this for the arrival of the new life.

So this whole welcoming the new life could be described, by taking the life of one woman within a community studying every ritual, every custom in detail and with the input of the elders within that family, just taking this one example, a biography could be written and to explain what really happens to welcome this new life into the world and to prepare the new mother to deal with her upcoming responsibilities.

So you know so this is biography or life history, a slice of life that is you know, is different from case study, we will talk about case study another time but then you know this is what a biography would look like, or you study one aspect, a larger size phenomenon, this is a slice of life, but then you study the whole, you know every aspect that phenomenon from different angles and you say that more or less different people within the same culture would follow the same practices for this.

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**Genres of Ethnography (Contd.)** (Tedlock, 2000)

- Memoir: "... a personal document [...] in which the author takes the reader back to a corner of the author's own life in the field that was unusually vivid, full of affect, or framed by unique events."
- May be documented under a pseudonym.
  - Reasons:
    - Distancing oneself from the actual event helps with healing
    - Enhances perceived objectivity
    - Enhances readability & publishability for general readership

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Memoir on the other hand is "a personal document in which the author takes the reader back to a corner of the authors own life in the field that was unusually vivid, full of affect, or framed by unique events. So memoir is a personal document in which the author takes the reader back to a corner of the authors on life, in the fields that was unusually vivid full of affect or emotion or framed by unique events, so maybe a traumatic experience.

For example to find out how people were affected, by say something serious like an earthquake we recently had an earthquake in New Zealand, what happened? How did people deal with the aftermath? What did people experience? Something like that can be documented in the form of a memoir. Extremely traumatic, somebody standing in the doorway, roof falls down, the person is standing on the roof of a building.

And the building collapses suddenly and the person falls down, whatever, various things happen, when there's an earth quake. So that whole experience can be captured in the form of a memoir and depending on the intensity of the trauma, depending on what is the person experienced, it can be summed up in the form of a memoir or during civil strife, you know for lack of a more recent example, I can tell you that you know.

And I can tell you so many stories and there are several projects going on worldwide to capture stories of things like the Indo Pak partition, of events like the Indo Pak partition. An individual memoir constitutes pieces of history, what happened to you? What happened to your life at that point? or maybe the Holocaust or maybe the Civil strife in other part of the worlds, you know so all of this.

Or how local people have been affected because of the war in Iraq or how you know girls lives have changed because of Malala Yousafzai stand to protect her right to education. So you know these personal incidents that take you back into a social phenomenon and you describe it very, very vividly in order to add to the body of knowledge okay, so that is called a memoir. It may be documented under a pseudonym, under a false name.

And the reasons for these memoir to be documented under pseudo names are first is, distancing oneself from the actual event helps with healing. Revisiting a traumatic event is painful for anyone and the first thing we learn in any research on human behavior is to protect the rights, to protect the welfare of the subjects under study, okay and many research studies don't really take care of this but I was trained like that.

So I'm going to share this with you, whenever you are approaching any human subject for any kind of research, please make sure that whatever you do, does not disturb the person so much that it's impossible to go back to the original healed state and this is critical when people go through traumatic events and we will discuss this more you know when we talk

about the Ethics of research, when people go through traumatic events, excuse me, sometimes venting helps, sometimes just forgetting about the traumatic event helps.

And I know that my colleagues in the field of counseling and psychiatry may disagree with me, but then people react differently to different kind of trauma, they deal with trauma differently, dealing with trauma does not always involves speaking about it to an unknown person, dealing with trauma could also involve creating new memories within the same space and overwriting those painful memories.

So whenever we write down, some people just write it and get it out of their system and then they burn that piece of paper, even that seems to help today vent and then they let go, they may not want to share these details with somebody else, with the counselor, with a stranger with the researchers, so as researchers as hard pressed we are to go back, to get stories, to get personal inputs on whatever it is that we are studying from people.

Who have actually gone through those traumatic events, we must find out what it is that the participants want and this is one of the reasons, why a lot of people write down personal memoirs you know using pseudo names. They don't want people to identify them; they don't want people to point out Oh Oh! I am sorry that you went through something difficult like this, no. But they would like to get it out of the system so they just write a story about it and get it out of their system.

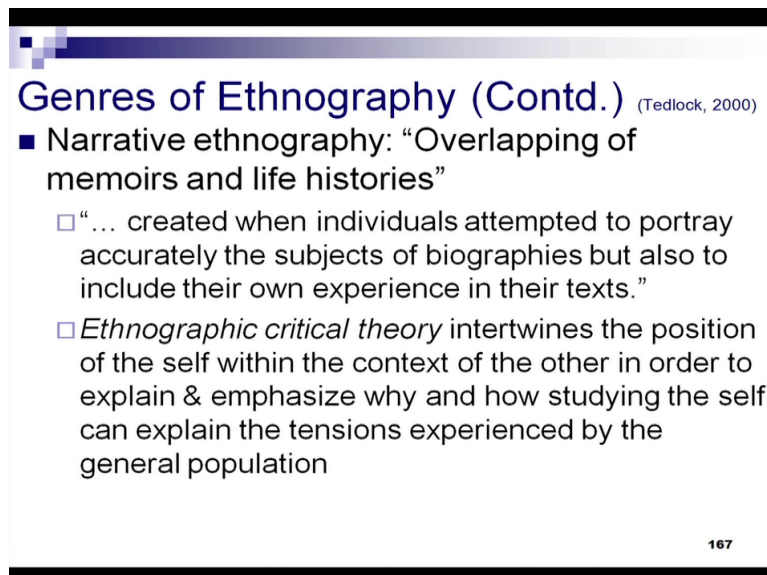
Distancing oneself and still venting gives a person a chance to heal, distancing also enhance perceived objectivity, when you're right answer when you're right from the perspective of an outsider, from the perspective of a third person, but because you have gone through that experience yourself, you can pull out the intricacies of that event from your own personal experience, but you're right it under pseudo name.

So when you see things as a third person who has felt it so has deeper understanding of it, it is supposed to order some enhanced objectivity associated with it. It also enhance is readability and publishability for general readership. It is not only me, me, me, me, I went through this, I went through that, Etc., no, it's not that, it's you know anybody in that situation it could be me, it could be you, it could be a third person, anybody in that situation could have experienced, whatever I experienced.

So you don't write your name, you write somebody else's name, so people can relate to it. So it enhances the chances of whatever you're writing, to be published and to be accepted by a wider group of people, to be read, to be acknowledged by a wider readership and that is one more way of describing the experiences that one went through, we are talking about social phenomena.

We are not talking about replicability of data for the sole purpose of prediction. We are talking about descriptions of unique extremely unusually, vivid, very emotional phenomena, that highlight some event that does not have a very high chance of being repeated, so this is the other end of the spectrum.

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**Genres of Ethnography (Contd.)** (Tedlock, 2000)

- Narrative ethnography: “Overlapping of memoirs and life histories”
  - “... created when individuals attempted to portray accurately the subjects of biographies but also to include their own experience in their texts.”
  - *Ethnographic critical theory* intertwines the position of the self within the context of the other in order to explain & emphasize why and how studying the self can explain the tensions experienced by the general population

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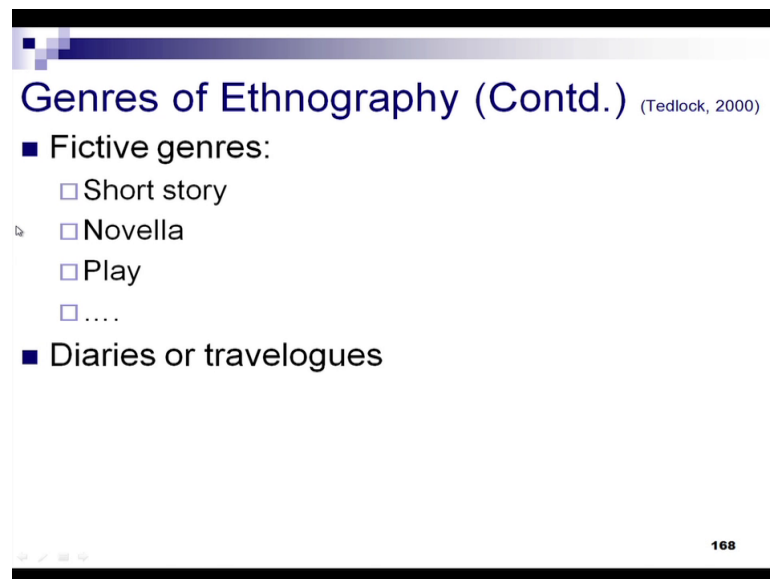
the next genre is narrative ethnography and narrative ethnography, what narrative ethnography does is it helps “overlap memoirs and life histories” so you describe the life history but you also put yourself in it, it is “created when individuals attempt to portray accurately the subjects of biographies but also to include their own experience in the texts.” So it's sort of its, not a pseudonymous memoir, it is not purely a biography, a third person account or somebody else's life, it is somewhere between the two, okay.

Ethnographic critical theory is an extension of narrative ethnography, it intertwines the position of the self within the context of the other in order to explain and emphasize why and how studying the self can explain the tensions experienced by the general population. So critical theories stem from a need to highlight we discussed this earlier, to highlight the

tensions experienced by a group of people, who are possibly disadvantaged and then we put ourselves in that situation.

We are able to explain these tensions in a much clearer, much more thorough manner than we are, from the perspective of a total outsider that is what narrative ethnographic critical theory does. It is an extension of narrative ethnography, okay.

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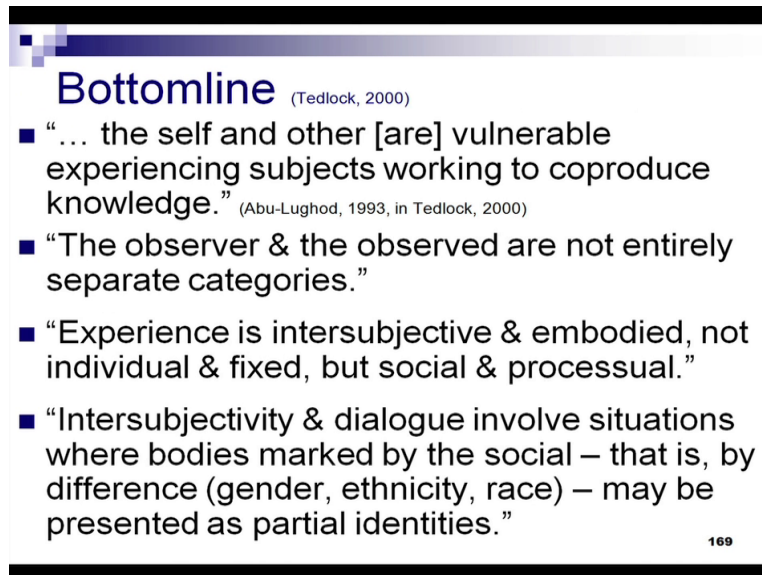
Some more genres are fictive genres, you could write short stories, lots of stories have been written about what happened during the Indo Pak partition, movies have been enacted you know you Novella's, you have play's etcetera or you could write diaries or travelogues. I went there, I did this, I did that, etcetera, so these are some more genres of ethnography, where people describe things of a very nice, very heartfelt, book that come to mind about the Indo Pak partition is Tamas by Bhishma Sahni.

And amazing book very painful and there was a TV series made on it and so you know people have gone through partition can relate to whatever happened or there is a recent movie called Pinjar, in about 10 years, 10 to 12 years back and even that captured, the essence of the Indo Pak partition beautifully. Another book was Train to Pakistan by Khushwant Singh. So we have so many examples of these fictive genres.

Then Diaries or travelogues are very, very good, very reliable sources of ethnographic data, so these are some more ways of capturing real life data, from real life situations and in their dynamic complex chaotic forms okay.



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### Bottomline (Tedlock, 2000)

- "... the self and other [are] vulnerable experiencing subjects working to coproduce knowledge." (Abu-Lughod, 1993, in Tedlock, 2000)
- "The observer & the observed are not entirely separate categories."
- "Experience is intersubjective & embodied, not individual & fixed, but social & processual."
- "Intersubjectivity & dialogue involve situations where bodies marked by the social – that is, by difference (gender, ethnicity, race) – may be presented as partial identities."

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The bottomline here is that "the self and the other are vulnerable experiencing subjects working to coproduce knowledge," as researchers we are not different, we are not totally distanced from the subject under study, we are connected and we together create knowledge, we don't create knowledge independently of each other, we don't you know we don't let the phenomenon continue.

The phenomenon once the phenomenon knows that is being observed, the phenomenon changes, the observer as distance as one might want to be the observer gets connected with the observed and together in an through this connection a new set of knowledge is created and that is the bottomline, in ethnographic research.

"The observer in observed and not entirely separate categories," we can try and distance ourselves we can try and be as objective as we want but we are going to be influencing each others, so we have to go with that assumption.

"Experience is intersubjective and embodied, not individual and fixed, but social and processual." It is not fixed in time, it is not an individual phenomenon, it is a phenomenon that is dynamic, it is happening in connection with everybody else that is in the environment, in connection with everything else in the environment that is constantly changing.

Anyone who has had any training in qualitative research, who has studied qualitative research and use qualitative research methods can tell you that it's just impossible to capture at least at

this point in time now I will have to qualify my statements, at this point in time it is impossible to capture any slice of life, you know honestly saying that is static in time and space, no, everything is moving, so that slice of life and then that that phenomenon will not be or is not likely to be the same the next time you studied.

So everything is being experience is embodied experience comes out of people. People are the ones who are doing this experience and its not individual, it is social and it is in and through the process and as processes change as human beings evolved, as experience, as we move on in life, experience changes and the description of the experience also should change.

“Intersubjectivity and dialogue involves situations where bodies marked by the social - that is, by difference - may be presented as partial identities.” Intersubjectivity and dialogue, so we are constantly, you know involves situations where body is marked as social, when we talk about the social, we are talking about differences, we are talking about different genders, we are talking about different ethnicities we are talking about different races.

We are talking about different age, we are talking about different communities, different cultures, different ways of behavior, everything that is influencing you is going to play out in your experience and that is going to affect what is being studies and how it is being studied, okay.

And when we talk about dialogue, we are talking about dialogue within these situations, where these difference, these differences may be presented as partial identities, so the identity of a person cannot be captured in photo, identity is only partially and is constantly changing, is constantly evolving, as a result of its interactions with its environment.

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## Bottomline (Contd.) (Tedlock, 2000)

- “The experience of being [anyone] can never be singular. It will always be dependent on a multiplicity of locations & positions that are socially constructed.”
- “These positionings are different for each individual, as well as for each culture that ethnographers come into contact with as field-workers, observant participants, & collectors of life stories.”
- “Theory is not a transparent, culture-free zone, not a duty-free intellectual marketplace hovering between cultures, lacking all connection to embodied, lived experience.”
- “Writing for & about the community in which one has grown up & lived, or at least achieved some degree of insider status, should produce engaged writing centering on the ongoing dialectical political-personal relationship between self & other.”

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“The experience of being anyone can never be singular. It will always be dependent on a multiplicity of locations and positions that are socially constructed.” The experience of being “these positioning are different for each individual, as well as for each culture that ethnographers come into contact with as field-workers, observant participants and collectors of life stories.”

So these positioning different positions that people place themselves and change when ethnographers you know come into contact with different cultures and how you place these different positions changes. “Theory is not a transparent, culture-free zone, not a duty free intellectual marketplace hovering between cultures, lacking all connection to embodied, lived experience.”

Theory comes from lived experience and lived experiences constantly changing and being affected by everything around it. “Writing for and about the community in which one has grown up and lived or at least achieved some degree of insider status, should produce engaged writing centering on the ongoing dialectical political-personal relationship between the self and other.”

And that is really the bottom line of ethnographic research we are talking about representing the connection between the self and the other, representing the connection between the observer and the observed within the dialectical tensions, between the political personal relationship between self and the other. So we are essentially talking about capturing reality as it happens from the perspective of the observer.

And the observed, from the perspective of the relationship between the observer and the observed and how this affects the reality that is taking place and how the reality that is taking place affects this relationship between the observer and be observed, very complicated but this is what it really is, real life is complex, its chaotic, it is crazy for want of a better word, you know two oversimplified, real life is very complex.

And that is what the complexity of real life is what ethnography tries to capture through its various strategy. So that is all we have time for in this class, we will continue in the next class, thank you very much for listening.