

# Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

## 3.3 Interpretation

Interpretive exercise

What is something you find  
baffling or frustrating about life in  
Stellenbosch?

# Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description"

*Believing, with Max Weber, that man [ugh] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [ugh] has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (5)*

Thick description doesn't mean **a lot** of description. It's not about a quantity.

Thick description means **culturally  
rich** description.

# The difference between a twitch and a wink

*Consider two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera... observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. (6)*

*Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast... The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company.*



# Thin vs Thick Description

- >> Thin description: just *noting that someone's eyelid moved*.
- >> Thick description: noting the *social meaning* of that motion in its context.

# Data is never raw

*What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. (9)*

*The ethnographer is in fact faced with... a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted onto one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (10)*

# Interpreting cultures is like literary criticism

*Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. (10)*

# Making one thing speak to another

*Social actions are comments on more than themselves... where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, **because they are made to.** (23)*

*The essential task of theory building here is... not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them. (26)*

# Things culture isn't

- >> Culture is a context not a power (14).
- >> Culture is not a free-standing system of meanings (17).
- >> Culture is not completely coherent.

# What cultural interpretation isn't

- >> It isn't about proving rigorous **correlations**.
- >> It isn't producing **absolute truths**.
- >> It does not *necessarily* establish **causes**.
- >> Ethnographically documented culture is not a microcosm or a laboratory (21).
- >> Cultural theory is not predictive (26).
- >> It has no well-defined endpoint (29).

# Other people's answers

*The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said. (30)*