

Thick Description: Methodology

From the article: Luhrmann, T.M. (2015). Thick description: Methodology. International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences (2nd ed.) (pp. 291-293). Elsevier.

The concept of “**thick description**” was introduced by anthropologist **Clifford Geertz** in his influential work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Geertz’s idea of thick description became a key method in cultural anthropology, referring to the way anthropologists should describe not only what people do but also the **deeper meanings** behind their actions. It is a way of going beyond simple observations to understand the **cultural context** in which those actions take place.

What is Thick Description?

The phrase **thick description** comes from **Gilbert Ryle**, a philosopher who used it to explain two ways of describing behavior. He gave the example of a **boy's twitch** versus a **wink**. Both actions might look similar if you only describe the physical behavior, but a wink has a **social meaning**. It can be a signal, a secret message, or a joke. This is what Ryle called “thick description”—describing the deeper significance of actions and understanding why they are done in a certain way.

Geertz adopted this idea and argued that ethnographers (anthropologists who study different cultures) should aim to understand the **meaning** behind people’s behavior. He believed that observing and describing **behavior** alone is not enough. Instead, ethnographers should seek to interpret the **cultural symbols** and social codes that shape how people act. This kind of deep engagement allows researchers to understand cultures from the inside, rather than just from the outside.

The Ethnographic Method

Ethnography is the research method most commonly used in anthropology. It involves **long-term fieldwork** where the anthropologist spends extended time living within the community they are studying. **Ethnographers** are expected to **learn the local language**, observe daily life, and become a **part of the community**. They do not only rely on interviews with people but also on participating in daily activities.

For example, an anthropologist studying the **Malagasy farmers** in Madagascar would not only observe how they plant rice and raise cattle but would also actively participate in these activities. This immersion helps the researcher understand the local way of life in a more personal and authentic way. Similarly, an anthropologist studying a religious

community might attend religious ceremonies and understand their symbolic meaning by **participating** in rituals.

This form of fieldwork is essential because it allows anthropologists to understand the **realities of the culture** they are studying. It goes beyond superficial observations and ensures that the ethnographer truly **grasps** the cultural practices and **social relationships** within the community.

Criteria for Good Ethnography

Ethnography aims to provide a detailed and accurate description of a culture. To make sure the ethnography is reliable and valid, professional anthropologists use three key criteria:

1. **Richness of observational detail** – Good ethnography provides a lot of specific, **detailed observations**. For example, instead of simply saying "people dance," the ethnographer would describe the **specific dance movements**, the **music**, and the **meaning** behind the dance. This level of detail helps to bring the culture to life for readers.
2. **External corroboration** – The ethnographer must also support their findings with information from other sources, such as studies done by other anthropologists or **published materials** from the people being studied. This helps to confirm that the observations and interpretations are accurate.
3. **Thorough understanding of the culture** – The ethnographer must spend a significant amount of time in the field, learning not just the language but also the **local customs** and **social practices**. A good ethnographer needs to become accepted by the community and build relationships with the people they are studying.

These three criteria ensure that the ethnography is not just a list of events or activities. It is a deep, meaningful interpretation of a culture, based on both **detailed observations** and a **strong understanding** of its context.

Culture as a Text

Geertz used the metaphor of **culture as a text** to explain how anthropologists understand and interpret societies. Just like literary critics read books to understand their meaning, anthropologists “read” cultures to understand the social significance behind the behaviors and practices they observe.

Geertz argued that culture, like **language**, is a system of shared meanings that people use to communicate. As an ethnographer, you cannot directly access people’s minds or

thoughts, but you can observe their actions and try to **interpret** what those actions mean within the culture. Geertz emphasized that anthropologists are not interested in understanding the **psychological processes** behind actions (this is the job of psychologists), but instead, they focus on interpreting **social behavior** and the **symbols** people use to communicate with each other.

A good example of this approach is Geertz's famous study of **Balinese cockfighting**. On the surface, cockfighting might seem like a strange or trivial activity, where men bet on roosters fighting. But Geertz showed that this practice reflects much deeper social dynamics, such as the **struggles for power** and **status** in Balinese society. Through this detailed description, Geertz was able to explain the symbolic meaning of cockfighting within the culture.

Symbolic Anthropology

Geertz's approach to ethnography, called **symbolic anthropology**, focuses on understanding cultures by interpreting the symbols and meanings within them. This approach contrasts with other anthropological theories, like **functionalism** (which focuses on how every part of society helps it function) and **structuralism** (which looks for the deep structures of human thought). Symbolic anthropology places emphasis on how culture represents social processes and **human experience**.

Geertz's work greatly influenced anthropology and other fields, such as history. His approach showed that even small, seemingly insignificant practices could provide important insights into the **social structure** and cultural beliefs of a society. By focusing on the symbolic meaning behind social practices, anthropologists can gain a deeper understanding of how people in different cultures live and think.

Conclusion

Geertz's idea of **thick description** continues to be an important method in anthropology. It stresses the need for **in-depth** fieldwork and detailed observations that help explain the **meaning** behind social practices. Through this approach, anthropologists can make sense of complex social worlds and present them in ways that help outsiders understand them. Geertz's work also reminded us that culture is not something fixed, but a dynamic, **living system of symbols** that people use to communicate and understand their world.