

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This book is about reading ethnography. Clifford Geertz has written that “if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do,” adding that in social anthropology “what the practitioners do is ethnography” (1973b:5). The Oxford English Dictionary states that “ethnography” is “the scientific description of nations,” although anthropologists generally define it as the description of behavior in a particular culture, typically resulting from fieldwork (cf. Marcus and Cushman 1982, Boissevain 1985, Van Maanen 1988). Ethnographic accounts usually take the form of an essay, ordinarily published as an article in a professional journal or as a longer monograph, the scholarly report of the culture (or some aspect of the culture) of a specific people (cf. Geertz 1973b:25, Edgerton and Langness 1974:64, Thornton 1983). An ethnographic monograph is often simply referred to as an ethnography.

Given these definitions, readers may understandably approach an ethnography as if it were a simple account of a people, society, or culture. They may assume that an ethnographic monograph portrays directly, in an unfiltered fashion, the subject with which it is concerned. They may read an ethnography as if it were a documentary or a journalistic story, an example of straight reportage or the pretension that Geertz characterizes as “looking

at the world directly, as through a one-way screen, seeing others as they really are when only God is looking" (Geertz 1988:141). When they read this way, however, they miss much of the meaning of the monograph and the significance of the ethnography it contains.

In fact, every ethnography involves interpretation and includes a selection of data, made more or less explicitly within a theoretical framework. Thus, the picture of the people, society, or culture that the ethnography presents must be understood from the perspective of (1) the question or problem that it addresses, (2) the answer, explanation, or interpretation it provides, (3) the data it includes as evidence for the problem, for the interpretation, or for both, and (4) the organization of these elements (problem, interpretation, and evidence) into an argument. To understand even the seemingly most straightforward ethnography, it is necessary to analyze and evaluate the argument(s) it contains. It is the goal of this book to help readers understand how to do that.

Recently there have been other efforts to deal with these issues. Marcus (1980) and his associates (Marcus and Cushman 1982 and Clifford and Marcus 1986), Clifford (1983, 1988), Geertz (1988), and Van Maanen (1988), among others, approach them from the point of view of assessing the rhetorical strategies and narrative conventions of writing ethnographic texts, while Holy and Stuchlik (1983) address them in the context of examining the methodology of anthropological inquiry, although each is concerned with a wider range of epistemological problems than I will take up. Their discussions significantly aid in understanding how to read ethnography, and I will refer to them frequently, especially with regard to matters of levels of analysis and textual organization, the two central topics of this book.

These contributions, however, raise points which call for clarification and further development. For example, Marcus and Cushman (1982:25-27) argue that a concern with the ways in which ethnographies are constructed and with "experimental" reactions to the conventions of presenting ethnography is a relatively recent interest among anthropologists, beginning in the early 1970s. The major problem with this formulation is that many ethnographies published between the 1920s and the 1960s gave explicit attention to the manner of composing ethnographic texts and attempted to experiment with ethnographic argumentation and textual organization (cf. Strathern 1987). These monographs include, among others, the classics produced by Malinowski (1922, 1926, 1935), Bateson (1936), Firth (1936), Evans-Pritchard (1937, 1940a, 1951a, 1956), Fortes (1945, 1949), Leach (1954, 1961), Barth (1959), and the anthropologists of the Manchester school (for example, Gluckman 1940, Mitchell 1956, Turner 1957, Bailey 1960, Cohen 1969).

Indeed, Firth, in reviewing the history of modern social anthropology,

makes the point that the pioneers of social anthropology, as well as their students, were consciously and systematically innovative in writing up their fieldwork materials. He states that in the 1920s and 1930s the handling of fieldwork observations may not have been “highly abstract,”

but in choice of topic, framework of presentation, and organization of data there was a tacit awareness of theoretical issues of a dynamic kind in social process. The treatment was novel if only because it rejected the then current orthodoxy that fact and theory should be clearly separated and the “facts” should be left to speak for themselves. . . . [The] “classics” in social anthropology . . . were experimental: in trying to provide more systematic and more relevant ethnography; in pointing to a range of theoretical problems calling for further exploration; and in testing, less successfully, the market for serious unglamorized information on basic social issues in communities with ways of life alien to the Western world (1975:4–5).

It may be that every generation of researchers thinks that it is not only building on the works of its predecessors but advancing beyond them, sometimes dramatically, and often by challenging the discipline’s basic assumptions and established usages. However, portraying ethnographies, except for those produced by contemporary anthropologists, as uninventive theoretically, and as constrained by rigid conventions, is quite misleading. To fully appreciate current ethnographic accounts, it is useful to place them in context by comparing them with the ways in which the “classics” were written. To understand the construction of both classics and contemporary ethnographies, it is necessary to read them carefully and critically.

INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Understanding an ethnography begins with the recognition that it involves interpretation. Ethnographies do not merely depict the object of anthropological research, whether a people, a culture, or a society. Rather an ethnographic account constitutes the researcher’s interpretation of what he or she has observed and/or heard. Fortes, in introducing what has become a classic ethnography, wrote,

Writing an anthropological monograph is itself an instrument of research, and perhaps the most significant instrument of research in the anthropologist’s armoury. It involves breaking up the vivid, kaleidoscopic reality of human action, thought, and emotion which lives in

the anthropologist's note-books and memory, and creating out of the pieces a coherent representation of a society . . . (1945:vii; cf. Fortes 1970b:129; Edgerton and Langness 1974:58).

Marcus and Cushman, more recently, have made essentially the same point. They state that:

Ethnographic description is by no means the straightforward, unproblematic task it is thought to be in the social sciences, but a complex effect, achieved through writing and dependent upon the strategic choice and construction of available detail. The presentation of interpretation and analysis is inseparably bound up with the systematic and vivid representation of a world that seems total and real to the reader (1982:29).

An ethnography presents the anthropologist's interpretation (of some aspect) of the "reality of human action" and not merely a description of it.

The difference between description and interpretation is illuminated by considering ways in which anthropologists have distinguished between them. One well-known distinction is Geertz's differentiation (1973b) between "thin" and "thick" description. Thin description depicts behavior in the sense of physical motions, as seen, for example, by the eye of a camera; in contrast, thick description reveals its significance. Geertz uses the example of "twitches" and "winks" to illustrate this point (for other examples, cf. Schneider 1976:198, Holy and Stuchlik 1983:17). Both entail the same physical movement—the contraction of the muscles of the eyelid. A wink, however, conveys meaning: it may be a "conspiratorial" signal or some other message possible within the framework of a "socially established code."

According to Geertz, the object of ethnography as thick description is to understand the "frames of interpretation" within which behavior is classified and meaning is attributed to it. He argues (1973b:10) that this involves apprehending and depicting the "complex conceptual structures" in terms of which people behave and in terms of which that behavior is intelligible to them. Ethnography, then, is a matter of interpreting the meaning of behavior with reference to the cultural categories within which it is "produced, perceived, and interpreted." Winking exists, for example, "when there is a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal" (Geertz 1973b:6), and, as he adds, "You can't wink . . . without knowing what counts as winking . . ." (1973b:12).

Although Geertz's formulation of the difference between description and interpretation is shared by many anthropologists, there is another view of the matter. Fortes (1970b [1953]), for example, provides a related but dif-

ferent conceptualization of description and interpretation. For Geertz, anthropological interpretation aims at discovering the cultural categories of a people and the "informal logic" (1973b:17; cf. Ortner 1984:130) of their social life that is embodied in those concepts. Fortes shares that goal, but, in addition, argues for a level of understanding that can go beyond that of the people whose behavior is in question (cf. Bailey 1969:9). Fortes's position extends the possibilities of anthropological interpretation to include an understanding of behavior that might differ from that of the people involved and would permit comparison of behavior in different societies and cultures.

To advance his argument, Fortes draws a distinction between "description" and "analysis." In a description, observations are grouped together as they actually happen. That is, they are included within an account in the order of their occurrence or because they occurred in the same place. Marriage, in an example used by Fortes, may be described as a sequence of customary activities succeeding one another in a set pattern, beginning with dating behavior, followed by courtship, betrothal, wedding ceremonies, and perhaps divorce as the event by which the relationship is terminated. The progression of these activities may be compressed, the periods between them condensed, but their relation to one another over time is preserved. The details of each activity may be presented more or less elaborately, but whatever attention is given to such particulars, the focus is on their sequence.

The procedure in analysis, in contrast to description, is to "break up the empirical sequence and concomitance of custom and social relations and group [them] . . . in categories of general import" (1970b:132). These categories are theoretically based. The task is to examine behavior in terms of these analytical categories and the relationships among them. "Rights" and "duties" are examples of such theoretical categories. They are aspects of a role, the culturally defined and socially sanctioned expectations or claims regarding the behavior of those who interact with one another. What people do, or fail to do, is interpreted in terms of such rights and duties.

The difference between description and analysis can be illustrated in the case of "bridewealth," an event that occurs in marriages in many societies. Bridewealth entails the transfer of wealth from the group of the groom to that of the bride. From one perspective, bridewealth may be seen as compensation paid to one group for the loss of a woman, a view that seems to accord with the observation that such wealth is typically used by the group that receives it to acquire another woman, as a bride for one of its members. This sort of account is essentially descriptive. An alternative account follows from an analysis of bridewealth. It would assert that bridewealth is paid to acquire certain rights with respect to a woman's activities. Bridewealth, from this perspective, is not for the exchange of individuals, but for the transfer of rights or claims upon the services of individuals.

This way of viewing bridewealth helps to make sense of a wide range of observations. It brings out clearly the theoretical meaning of descriptive data. For example, Fortes suggests that if a woman is thought of in terms of the roles of wife and mother, then it is possible to identify several types of behavior expected of her. These include domestic and sexual activities associated with being a wife and childbearing associated with being a mother. In a patrilineal society, in which children are assigned membership in the group of their father, the groom acquires, with regard to his spouse, rights in her as both wife and mother, and, accordingly, the amount of bridewealth is typically large. By contrast, in a matrilineal society, in which children are assigned to the group of their mother, the husband has a claim on the woman only in her role as a wife, while rights to her in the role of a mother are retained by the group into which she was born. Accordingly, bridewealth payments in matrilineal societies are typically smaller than they are in patrilineal societies. Thus, an analytical account of bridewealth relates variations in its amount to the type of society in which it occurs (that is, patrilineal or matrilineal), rather than seeing it simply as one event in a sequence of events that constitute marriage.

Furthermore, interpreting bridewealth as the exchange of resources for claims on a woman with respect to different roles permits the analyst to make connections between observations that are not obviously or closely associated with one another temporally. For example, it not only implies relationships between types of society and amounts of bridewealth but also between those social facts and rates of divorce. Thus, in a patrilineal society it would be expected analytically that not only would bridewealth payments be relatively high but that divorce would be relatively low. This pattern would be expected because the husband's group would not want to relinquish claims over a woman who, in her role as mother, is or will become the producer of its new members. On the other hand, in a matrilineal society, a woman of the group (a mother, a sister, or a daughter) is the source of new members; an in-marrying wife does not contribute new members for her husband's group. Correspondingly, in a matrilineal society, bridewealth may be expected to be low and divorce rates relatively high.

From an analytical perspective, then, the meaning of bridewealth is to be understood in the context of the rights and duties associated with different roles and the ways in which they can be distributed and combined. Rights and duties are abstractions formulated by the analyst, although, as Fortes noted, they "must have meaning in terms of the descriptive reality of social life" (1970b:132; cf. Schneider 1976:198-99). These categories or concepts are not necessarily those of the actors, and an analytical interpretation of behavior may not be the same as that held by the actors nor as an interpretation based solely upon an explication of the actors' categories (cf.

Geertz 1976:223–24, on “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts and the relationships between them). This is not to say that analysis does not consider cultural categories; rather, it typically takes them as a starting point for analysis, since what counts, for example, as a “marriage” or as “bridewealth” is to be understood in terms of the ways in which people classify such events and behaviors (cf. D’Andrade 1984:90–91).

ETHNOGRAPHERS AS ARGUMENTS

As Fortes noted, anthropologists not only “break up” or analyze the reality of human action, they also attempt to provide a coherent representation of it. This representation is an interpretive conclusion, and the descriptive facts (for example, marriage customs and bridewealth payments) collected in the course of fieldwork and included within an ethnography constitute evidence in support of it. That is, the anthropologist’s interpretation determines his or her selection of fieldwork observations for inclusion in an ethnographic account. The selection and presentation of facts in an ethnography is a result of analysis and interpretation and not simply a record of observations made during the anthropologist’s fieldwork.

Edgerton and Langness (1974) address this issue in referring to the process by which the observations that constitute an ethnographic description are selected. These observations are selected “twice.” First, observations are “shaped” in terms of what anthropologists “see” in the field, which is filtered through the “personal equation” of the ethnographer. This includes, among other things, the anthropologist’s personality, training, and theoretical interests. The interests of the people among whom the anthropologist is doing research also shape what the anthropologist may observe, since they can and do restrict the researcher’s access to people and events. For example, male researchers may not be permitted to talk with women informants or to observe activities that are defined by informants as exclusively for women, and, of course, female anthropologists may be similarly constrained from doing fieldwork among male informants (cf. Whitehead and Conaway 1986).

Observations are also selected in terms of the anthropologist’s representation of a people, culture, or society. This, in the language of Edgerton and Langness, is the second way in which the observations in an ethnographic monograph are filtered. They are chosen in relation to the analytical interests of the ethnographer and to the interpretation he or she is presenting. In other words, an ethnography constitutes an argument.

An argument, following Toulmin, involves “claims,” “data,” and “warrants” (1958:97–98; cf. Toulmin 1979). Thus, an argument consists of a claim or conclusion (C) and the data or grounds (D) that provide a founda-

tion for the claim. It also includes warrants, which are steps that link conclusions and data and which take the form of "If D, then C." Toulmin suggests that these warrants can be expressed more fully and more explicitly as "Data such as D entitle one to draw conclusions, or make claims, such as C, or alternatively, Given data D, one may take it that C." That is, warrants address the question of whether the data or grounds provide genuine support for a particular claim and not just a lot of irrelevant information. Ethnographic arguments consist of claims (conclusions, assertions, propositions, explanations, interpretations) about people's behavior (or about a culture or a society) and data (grounds, facts) that constitute evidence for or against them. An ethnography has a point of view, and it includes and excludes data in terms of their relevance to that point of view.

Thus, reading ethnography means, in part, identifying an ethnographer's claims and evaluating them with reference to the data presented in support of them. In contrast to the perspective embodied in recent accounts of reflexive ethnography (which I address in the concluding chapter), this book takes a claims and evidence approach to assessing ethnography, focusing on what Roth (1989:560) characterizes as "questions of method," that is, the conditions under which "evidence cited supports a claim."

As arguments, ethnographies are problem oriented. Marcus and Cushman argue for this view of ethnography, although they assert that it is more characteristic of current monographs than of earlier fieldwork reports. They write that in ethnography, "the contemporary fashion, dominated by more problem-focused research, is the single volume tied to a period of fieldwork and combining several complex descriptive and interpretive tasks" (1982:27). Again, this seems to underestimate the purposes and achievements of the monographs of an earlier era. Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the nature of anthropological monographs, published some three decades before that of Marcus and Cushman, places this issue in historical perspective. He wrote:

The essential point to remember is that the anthropologist is working with a body of theoretical knowledge and that he makes his observations to solve problems which derive from it. . . . Modern fieldwork monographs are generally intended to give more than merely a description of the social life of a people. . . . They aim at an analytical and integrative description which will bring out those features of the social life which are significant for an understanding of its structure and for general theory. . . . It means that the facts, that is, the observations recorded in the anthropologist's notebooks, are not set forth in his publications as a description of what a primitive people do and say, but to show that what they do and say, apart from its intrinsic interest,

illuminates some problem of one or other aspect of culture or institutional life. In other words, in deciding what he is to put into his book and what to leave out of it, he is guided by the relevance of the material for a particular theme designed to bring out significant features of some system of social activities (1951b:87–88; cf. Fortes 1970b:129).

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

Analyzing the kinds of claims and the kinds of data included within an ethnography and examining the extent to which they warrant each other is one of the central tasks in reading an ethnography. Anthropologists make different kinds of claims about the people they observe. These differences derive from the ways in which anthropologists conceptualize the object of their fieldwork; they study different “domains of social reality” and work at different “levels of analysis” (Holy and Stuchlik 1983; cf. Fortes 1970b:136; Schneider 1976:202). That is not to say that there are different social realities, but rather that anthropologists write ethnographies that reflect different abstractions from observable behavior. The ways in which anthropologists approach social reality shape the kinds of claims they make about it and the kinds of data they include in their ethnographies.

Several observers have noted that there are two major ways in which anthropologists, and other social scientists as well, conceptualize social reality. Firth, for example, differentiates these levels of analysis as focusing on “modes of thought” or “modes of action” (1975:8). Holy and Stuchlik (1983:20–21), to take another example, suggest that some anthropologists focus on “culture,” others on “social structure.” These differences are also described by other sets of contrasting terms, including methodological collectivism and methodological individualism, concepts and actions, theory and practice, structure and process (cf., Fortes 1970c [1949]; Firth 1954, 1955, 1975; Leach 1954, 1961; Goodenough 1970; Barnes 1971; O’Neill 1973; Keesing 1974; Geertz 1976; Schneider 1968, 1976; D’Andrade 1984).

The multiplicity of terms anthropologists employ in referring to these levels of analysis can confuse the reader of an ethnography in at least two ways. One difficulty derives from the use of different concepts to refer to the same level of analysis. Confusion may also follow from the fact that the same term may be used to describe different levels of analysis. For example, some anthropologists use the term structure to refer to an ideational system and others use it to refer to a system of actions (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940a for the former; Fortes 1970c and Firth 1954, 1955 [reprinted in 1964a as chapters 2 and 3] for the latter; cf. Leach 1961:5 on the different referents of the term social structure). Reading ethnography critically requires paying careful

attention to such concepts and to their particular referents in different ethnographic accounts.

Researchers who take modes of thought (or culture or theory, and so forth) as the focus of analysis and description present a system of ideas or notions that is said to guide the actions of individuals and/or provide them with standards in terms of which they interpret or make sense out of their own actions and those of others. Those who make modes of action (or process or practice, and so forth) the focus of study describe the actual behavior of individuals, interpreting such behavior with reference to the ideas of those engaged in them but also with reference to other factors as well, including, for example, environmental constraints on behavior.

Modes of thought ethnographies may focus on two different aspects. One refers to the way in which people classify or conceptualize their world. Anthropologists use different terms to refer to these classifications, including "cultural categories" or "conceptions" (Geertz 1973b:7, 15), "representations" (Holy and Stuchlik 1983:50–54; Schneider 1976:206), and "cultural units" (Schneider 1976:199), which, in Schneider's language, reflect a "body of definitions, premises, statements, postulates, presumptions, propositions, and perceptions about the nature of the universe and man's place in it" (Schneider 1976:203; cf. 206). The other aspect refers to the ways in which people should act, ought to act, or are expected to act. Anthropologists describe these expectations as "normative rules" or "norms" (Schneider 1976:199; Holy and Stuchlik 1983:52–53). D'Andrade states the difference between cultural categories and norms "as a contrast between ideas that create realities and ideas that order or constrain action" (1984:93; cf. Geertz's distinction between "models of" and "models for" in "Religion as A Cultural System," 1973c). Other anthropologists, as well as different social scientists and philosophers, use still other terms to denote these different aspects of modes of thought (cf. Holy and Stuchlik 1983:50; D'Andrade 1984:90–96).

These approaches to social reality are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are complementary, and many, if not most, anthropologists incorporate both analytical levels in their ethnographies, taking as problematic the relationships between them. Yet, it is useful for identifying the type(s) of argument(s) an ethnography contains to consider these different approaches to social reality as the endpoints of a continuum and to examine the extent to which the claims of ethnographies vary, or are differentially emphasized, depending on whether they are more concerned with concepts about or rules for behavior, on the one hand, or with actual behavior on the other. It is useful to identify the level of analysis or the sort of social reality an ethnography depicts, because different levels of analysis or conceptualizations of social reality imply the use of different kinds of data, and different kinds of data warrant different kinds of claims and/or conclusions.

CLAIMS AND DATA

The claims made in an ethnography may be evaluated in at least three ways. Two of these involve comparison with materials outside or beyond the limits of the specific ethnographic account in question. An ethnographic account can be compared with accounts of other societies that are similar, geographically, culturally, or organizationally, thereby providing a framework for evaluating its interpretation. That is, a reader can draw on knowledge of other related societies and estimate the probability of the accuracy of the ethnography in question, always keeping in mind the provision that societies initially thought to be similar may turn out, on the basis of further investigation, to be otherwise. The principle here is that if other systems are similar in some respects, then they may be similar in still others. If an ethnographic account does not make sense in this commonsensical way, then the reader should resort to still other checks on its validity.

Another approach is to compare a particular ethnographic account with reports about the same society (or culture, or whatever may be the unit of analysis and description) prepared by other researchers. Here the reader may consult the entire corpus of information available about a society, including accounts generated by anthropologists as well as others (for example, travelers, missionaries, administrators, and so forth). The strategy here is to place one ethnographic account within a context of others' observations on the same society.

The third way of assessing an ethnographic account is to evaluate the interpretation internally. From this perspective, the reader tests the fit between the ethnographer's interpretations and the evidence presented within the ethnographic account.

The presentation of appropriate and relevant evidence is critical to the construction and evaluation of ethnographic arguments. As Firth put it:

Social anthropology is not just an exercise in speculative reasoning. It is about the actions and thoughts of people over a range of societies. So when any statement is made about such actions and thoughts, a very proper question is, what is the nature of the evidence? (1975:18; cf. Edgerton and Langness 1974:59).

What kinds of evidence do anthropologists present in their ethnographies? Holy and Stuchlik suggest that "there are two broad categories of data: the verbal statements of the members of the society and their observed behavior" (1983:12). Difficulties in interpretation arise when the differences between these types of evidence are disregarded or when the different types of data are taken to refer to the same kind of social reality.

Typically, anthropologists use verbal data to make claims about modes of thought and nonverbal data to make claims about modes of action. That is, interpretations of ideational systems are usually based upon observations of what people say and interpretations of systems of action are based upon observations of what people do. However, drawing this distinction between types of data is a heuristic device and matters are usually more complicated. For example, as Holy and Stuchlik point out, "actions are often accompanied by statements, without which they would be incomplete," and, furthermore, that there is a category of statements, performatives, "which, merely by being uttered, 'do' the intended thing . . ." (1983:56; cf. Searle 1969). This distinction, then, is not to suggest that talk is not a kind of behavior, but rather that anthropologists distinguish between what people say and what they do and use these different types of data to document their claims about different domains or levels of analysis.

MODES OF THOUGHT AND LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

In interpreting a people's modes of thought, anthropologists have relied "largely if not exclusively on linguistic data" (Firth 1975:8; cf. Firth 1985:36–37, Holy and Stuchlik 1983:74). Verbal behavior includes what people say about the way the world is (cultural categories) and what they say about how people ought to act in it (norms).

People's words constitute the primary evidence for cultural categories or representations. In ethnographies these are sometimes referred to as native terms or indigenous concepts. Anthropologists have developed different research methodologies for eliciting and analyzing such data (Holy and Stuchlik 1983:60–68). In most ethnographies, however, native terms (conventionally presented in italicized print) are presented as evidence of a people's concepts and explained or translated by the ethnographer. For example, in the course of discussing what people in different societies think persons are, Geertz (1976) uses native terms as the basis of his arguments about the cross-cultural meanings of self. Thus, he claims that the "Javanese sense of what a person is" is evident in two sets of contrasting terms, *lair* and *batin* and *alus* and *kasar*, glossed as "inside" and "outside" and "refined" and "rough," that refer to "the felt realm of human experience . . . and the observed realm of human behavior" (1976:226). Similarly, Geertz argues that the Balinese sense of personhood is seen in their "terminological system" that constitutes "a set of readily observable symbolic forms: an elaborate repertoire of designations and titles" (1976:228). And for Moroccans, ideas about self can be seen in "a peculiar linguistic form called in Arabic the *nisba*," by means of which they "sort people out from one another and form an idea of what it is to be a person" (1976:231).

In short, the reader of an ethnography should be aware that the inclusion in it of native terms is most likely not accidental or arbitrary, but because they provide evidence for claims about cultural categories. It should be noted that the presentation of native terms as evidence for claims about the ways in which people conceptualize their world has a long history in ethnography. It is not, as Marcus and Cushman suggest (1982:36), only a feature of recent experimental monographs. Evans-Pritchard (1940a) and Leach (1954), for example, do not fall within the group of recent and experimental ethnographers mentioned by Marcus and Cushman, although they certainly engaged in the "contextual exegesis of native concepts."

Although anthropologists use verbal data as the primary evidence for assertions about modes of thought, they also employ other symbols for the same purpose. Just as cultural categories are expressed in words, they can also be concretized in various material objects. As D'Andrade notes, "flags, capitals and uniforms are treated as the embodiments of a nation-state, paper bills are treated as embodiments of wealth, signatures are considered to represent personal commitment" (1984:92). Of course, the meanings of such "physical tokens" do not reside in them and their significance is not self-evident. Anthropologists must interpret physical objects just as they interpret physical movements.

Interpreting or translating a cultural category or concept, or its embodiment in a physical token, is, however, a complex task. It involves understanding the ideational system of which it is a part. Beidelman draws attention to this point in his discussion of Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the Nuer concept of marriage. He writes:

The term marriage, as used by Evans-Pritchard in reference to the Nuer, obviously does not stand for the customs, rights, and obligations which we associate with marriage in our society. But this is only the beginning of the problem. For to understand Nuer marriage we must also understand the more basic Nuer notions which support and rationalize Nuer norms surrounding the various aspects of marital relations, such as notions of fertility, paternity, maternity, masculinity, femininity, descent, and physiology. As Evans-Pritchard has shown, these, in turn, involve complex association with Nuer concepts of time, death, spirit, and morality. According to this point of view, then, a complete exegesis of an alien cosmology is required before one may even begin to fathom the norms and goals held by members of a society (1970:511; cf. Fortes 1970b:137; Geertz 1973b:9; Holy and Stuchlik 1983:59; D'Andrade 1984:93).

Understanding a concept within a context that is itself a system of concepts poses certain methodological problems that will be discussed in more detail in

later chapters. For the moment, however, it is important to note that such concepts constitute data in support of claims about the ways in which people think.

Claims about norms also entail verbal data, but usually they involve people's statements about how they and others should or should not act. Such statements include naturally occurring prescriptions and proscriptions as well as responses to questions posed by others. Sometimes a normative rule is stated as though it were a description of what people do. For example, people may say that "drivers stop at red lights," which is an obligation or an expected pattern of behavior, but which is not necessarily or actually what they do.

Anthropologists are concerned with the relationship between norms and actions, although there are different perspectives on that relationship (cf. Holy and Stuchlik 1983:71–75, 81–98). Some anthropologists, following Durkheim, argue that norms cannot be simply inferred from actions, since actions may also be shaped by nonnormative factors. For example, Peristiany, in commenting on the work of Durkheim, points out that one level of social reality does not directly mirror the other. Thus, he notes, observations that most marriages are monogamous does not permit the inference that polygamy is not allowed or even that it is not the ideal, since monogamy may result from nonnormative factors; that is, it "may be due to reasons which are fortuitous in relation to the system of social beliefs" (Peristiany 1974:xv).

Others contend that norms can also be inferred from observations of what people do. Holy and Stuchlik, for example, hold this view. They write:

While representations . . . are available to the researcher, by and large, only through people's verbal statements, . . . norms, rules, etc., can be inferred from both verbal statements and observed actions. . . . Assuming that all actions are guided by relevant knowledge, and are meaningful to others because the actor and the others share the same notions, it follows that by observing actions . . . and by accounting for them as meaningful, the anthropologist should be able to infer the notions guiding these actions (1983:68).

This assumption is not shared by all fieldworkers, and most anthropologists appear to base their claims about normative rules primarily on verbal data, and especially on what people say about how they and others should or ought to act.

MODES OF ACTION AND BEHAVIORAL EVIDENCE

To support claims about what people do, anthropologists resort to a different kind of evidence. They use censuses and statistics that summarize

people's actions by frequency and distribution. For example, Fortes (1970c) describes variations in household composition as part of his analysis of the developmental cycle of domestic groups. They also use "case" material, which includes observations of particular individuals interacting in specific situations. These observations may be made by the fieldworker, by others (as reports of actions), or both.

Case material, in turn, includes various kinds of observations. A case may illustrate a particular norm; that is, it depicts individuals behaving in relation to cultural ideas about how people should act. Cases may also depict social processes. Thus, a case might show how individuals choose to behave when faced with alternative norms and/or when constrained by nonnormative factors such as ecological conditions. This use of case material depicts action at one point in time. Cases can also be used to document action over time, a procedure called "situational analysis" or "the extended case method" (cf. Gluckman 1961, Van Velsen 1967). When used in this way, the same individuals are described acting in different situations. By holding constant the individuals involved in interaction (and assuming that they have not undergone a significant change of personality or personal style of behaving within a particular role), the extended case method enables the researcher to analyze the influence of different social situations or contexts on behavior. It also permits analysis of the impact on present behavior and relationships of past events and interactions as perceived by those involved in them, as well as that of future events and relationships as anticipated by actors.

It should be emphasized that the description of actions, whether as outcomes or as cases, implies cultural analysis. Describing what a person does is not simply an account of that individual's physical movements, but rather an analysis of the meaning of those movements. And although the meaning(s) of a movement may be attributed to it by the actor, by the analyst, or by both, in practice anthropologists take the actor's classification of behavior as the starting point of ethnographic description. Otherwise, the task of ethnography would be either impossible or its results inconsequential. As Holy and Stuchlik state:

no study of action is possible without paying attention to the notions, concepts, and ideas related to it. . . . To circumscribe the study of actions . . . [without reference to cultural analysis] would mean that the whole research would be reduced to trivial descriptions of physical movements. . . . If we do not want simply to observe and report physical movements of people in temporal and spatial sequences, but to study and explain their actions, we can do it only by relating them, implicitly or explicitly, to some notions about such movements, to knowledge, beliefs, ideas or ideals, etc. In practical terms, this means

that even when we talk about the study of actions we are necessarily talking about some relationship between actions and notions (1983:35–36).

Accounts of what people do build upon accounts of what they think.

OTHER KINDS OF EVIDENCE

Ethnographies often contain data about a people's environment and their ecology. These facts are included because they are relevant to an account of what people do. Just as social norms influence actions, natural constraints define alternative courses of behavior and limit or facilitate particular choices. Indeed, it is important to consider both environmental and cultural factors when interpreting what people do; otherwise, significance may be wrongly attributed to, or undue emphasis placed upon, one or the other of these factors as a cause of a particular pattern of behavior. This is not to suggest that the natural environment automatically determines behavior, but that people choose from among alternatives as these are shaped by it. Moreover, visual data, such as photographs and line-drawings, may be incorporated into ethnographies as evidence for claims about ecological and environmental factors as well as about the people themselves, their artifacts, technologies, and activities. Evans-Pritchard, for example, included in his study of a pastoral people (*The Nuer*, 1940a) a number of drawings (Figures 7 and 13) and photographs (the Frontispiece and Plates III, V, and XVII), as illustration of the "identification of man with cattle," suggesting that they "present a classic picture of savagery" and "convey to [the reader] better than I can do in words the crudity of kraal life" (1940a:40–41). It should be noted, however, that although photographs can depict persons or settlement patterns, they do not provide direct evidence of the ways in which people think about how they ought to behave toward one another. Thus, while a profusion of visual material in an ethnography could support propositions about environment, material culture, and activities, it does not follow that propositions about social relationships are thereby documented.

WARRANTS

The two levels of analysis, modes of thought and modes of action, are not necessarily in a one-to-one relationship with one another. Barnes has made the point that verbal evidence supports claims about what people "would like to do, think it would be right to do, or expect they will do"

(1971:31). Yet he also indicates that there is often a discrepancy between the ideal and the real, and that the “picture of social life built up from one point of view may differ radically from that built up from another” (1971:31). Thus, the reader of an ethnography has to sort out kinds of claims and kinds of evidence, making certain that the type of evidence provided is appropriate to the type of claim made: that is, that linguistic evidence is used in relation to propositions about modes of thought and that behavioral data are used to support claims about actions. The presentation of verbal data is irrelevant to a conclusion about what people do (except when the claim is about the frequency and distribution of speech events) and evidence about what people do does not necessarily reveal what people think is ideal or preferred behavior. Correspondingly, rejection of a claim about a mode of thought on the basis of the absence of behavioral data is as inappropriate as is acceptance of propositions about action on the basis of what people say about what they do or should do.

ARGUMENT AND TEXTUAL ORGANIZATION

Although a primary consideration in reading an ethnography is to comprehend its level of analysis and the relationship between its claims and data, it is also essential to examine its textual organization, that is, the ways in which its problems, interpretations, and data are put together. This approach to reading ethnography is based on analytical frameworks suggested both outside and within anthropology. For example, Adler has drawn attention to it in his classic, *How to Read a Book* (1940), and, within anthropology, Marcus and Cushman (1982), Clifford (1983), Strathern (1987), and Geertz (1988) have addressed these issues.

According to Adler, there are two central tasks in studying the textual organization of any book. One is to identify its “unity” or its “theme,” which is what the book is about. He also conceptualizes this as specifying a book’s “problems” or “questions,” in the sense that a book is written to solve a problem and that it “ostensibly contains one or more answers to it” (Adler 1940:183). This may be more difficult to do than it sounds, since, as Adler points out (1940:183):

The writer may or may not tell you what the questions were as well as give you the answers which are the fruits of his work. Whether he does or does not, and especially if he does not, it is your task as a reader to formulate the problems as precisely as you can.

Moreover, as he also states (1940:166–167):

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Sometimes an author obligingly tells you on the title page what the unity is. . . . Sometimes the author tells you the unity of his plan in his preface. . . . Do not be too proud to accept the author's help if he prefers it, but do not rely too completely on what he says in the preface. The best-laid plans of authors, like those of other mice and men, gang aft agley. Be somewhat guided by the prospectus the author gives you, but always remember that the obligation of finding the unity belongs to the reader, as much as having one belongs to the writer.

The other task is to identify a book's "parts" and their relationships to its theme and to one another. Adler expresses this task in a rule for readers: "*Set forth the major parts of the book, and show how these are organized into a whole, by being ordered to one another and to the unity of the whole*" (1940:163). He argues (1940:171) that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to understand a book unless he or she grasps the relationships between a book's unity and its parts: "You cannot apprehend a whole without somehow seeing its parts. But it is also true that unless you grasp the organization of its parts, you cannot know the whole comprehensively."

Reading ethnography confirms Adler's analysis of the architecture of textual construction. Ethnographic arguments are arranged in different ways, but each reveals a pattern of relationships between a problem and its solution. For example, the functionalist goal of representing a culture as a system of related, if not integrated, parts led ethnographers to "the obvious solution to the problem of textual organization," which was, according to Marcus and Cushman (1982:31; cf. Kaberry 1957:76–80, Edgerton and Langness 1974:65–66),

to traverse, in sequential fashion, the units (cultural complexes or social institutions) into which cultures or societies were conceived, on theoretical grounds, to be divided. The result was the minimally orthodox table of contents (geography, kinship, economics, politics, and religion).

Although this seriatim formula characterized many ethnographic texts for many years, and continues to do so today (primarily in a popular series of abbreviated ethnographies), other formats have been developed, including that of posing a problematic feature of the society or culture in question in the beginning of an ethnography and unfolding a solution to it in its subsequent chapters (cf. Marcus and Cushman 1982:31).

While it may be true that these particular efforts depart from the traditional organization of ethnographic monographs, it is not the case that such innovations are limited to recent works (cf. Strathern 1987). Several older

ethnographic accounts (e.g., Malinowski 1922, Bateson 1936, Gluckman 1940, Wilson 1951, Evans-Pritchard 1962), employed a strategy of interpreting an apparently unintelligible behavior (a practice, a ritual, an event, a social pattern, or a concept) by placing it in a wider context, although what constituted that context varied. Still others (for example, Evans-Pritchard 1940a) reversed that strategy by first describing a social context and then placing some behavior in it (in this instance, the institution of the feud), thereby explaining its function or meaning. Marcus and Cushman acknowledge these pioneering and experimental ventures in ethnographic textual organization (1982:40), although they downplay both the number of these studies and the impact they had on the practice of writing ethnography.

In sum, the problem and the solution of a book shape the organization of its parts, and the order of its parts reflects its problem and solution. Analyzing the textual organization of an ethnography raises several questions: Why is a particular topic or chapter included within an ethnographic monograph? What is its role in the overall argument? Why is it placed in its particular position (for example, in the beginning, middle, or end of an ethnographic account)? and What are the relationships among the constituent topics or chapters of an ethnography? In short, it is essential to read an ethnography as an argument, and to view the arrangement of its chapters as steps in support of its interpretive conclusions.

A brief examination of Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967) provides an illustration of ethnographic textual organization.

I use it as an example not only because it is a well-known and well-written ethnography, but also because the people it describes are low-income black men living, at the time of Liebow's fieldwork, in Washington, D.C. Their language and their customs are not foreign to us, and analyzing the architecture of the monograph is made easier since we do not have to sort out unfamiliar cultural categories and social norms.

Tally's Corner is about a "shifting collection" of men who hang out on a ghetto street corner. Tally is one of those men; in the course of the fieldwork, he and Liebow become friends. It is also about the social and economic conditions that influence men's lives. Indeed, it is Liebow's argument that the behavior of the men whom he came to know is explained by a combination of conditions of poverty (a lack of education, job skills, and material resources) and a system of values common to society in general, rather than by "mute compliance" with a pathological "subculture" which sets them apart, ineradicably, from their fellow citizens. To support this interpretation, he develops his argument along two lines. One is to describe the circumstances of a life of chronic material deficits. The other is to describe the values of these men, including the desire for respectability, as essentially the same as those of middle-class Americans.

Liebow's initial step is to establish the facts of their economic deprivation. Early in the book, in a chapter entitled "Men and Jobs," Liebow presents the data for his claims about their work experiences and economic resources. There he also begins his account of their values by analyzing the meanings that they attach to their jobs. In both cases, Liebow demonstrates that their standards of evaluation are similar to those of the middle class; only their job experiences and the occupational opportunities they envision are different. The prime position that Liebow gives to poverty as an explanatory factor suggests that he thinks that it is (and should be) the first target of intervention for public policies intended to change the lives of lower-class Americans, a theme to which he returns more explicitly in the conclusion of the study.

Thus, in the beginning of the ethnography Liebow develops his view that behavior is to be understood in terms of an interaction between responsibilities (as these are evident in the work role), the resources necessary to fulfill them, and the respectability that accrues from doing so. When resources are inadequate for discharging responsibilities, the result is, typically, a loss of self-respect and the respect of others. The combination inevitably influences the individual's behavior in a number of ways.

Having shown this to be the case in man-job relationships, Liebow continues the examination of this proposition in succeeding chapters on other relationships, namely those in which men play roles as fathers, husbands, lovers, and friends. As Liebow reiterates in his conclusion, "The way in which the man makes a living and the kind of living he makes have important consequences for how the man sees himself and is seen by others; and these, in turn, importantly shape his relationships with family members, lovers, friends and neighbors" (1967:210). The particular sequence of these chapters reinforces Liebow's interpretation as he progresses from ascribed roles to achieved roles, from those in which the obligations (or responsibilities) to provide resources is strongest—legally, publically, and socially—to those in which it is weakest.

For these men, the relationships in which they are most expected to be providers are those in which they are least likely to succeed. Their perception of such a dismal prospect pushes them into various self-defeating courses of action. For example, Liebow writes: "In theory, marriage is a "big thing"; it is the way to manhood with all its attendant responsibilities, duties, and obligations, which, when discharged, bring one status and respectability" (1967:115). Yet, Liebow argues, it is a goal that commonly escapes these men, since chronic poverty undermines their attempts to provide for a wife and children.

Liebow's analysis of the broken marriages of these men reveals most clearly his argument that it is an inadequacy of resources in conjunction with