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ETHNOGRAPHY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry

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In memory of our friend and colleague
Donald T. Campbell
Whose larger vision inspired us all
Anthropologist Sir Evans-Pritchard, in a postscript to his book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), reminisces about his disciplinary training in methodology. As a young student in London about to set off for Central Africa, he sought tips about ethnographic procedure from more experienced hands in the field. He went to his teacher Charles Seligman, who told him to “take 10 grains of quinine every night and keep off women.” He went to Edward Westermarck who told him “don’t converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you aren’t bored by that time, he will be.” He went to the famous Malinowski who told him “not to be a bloody fool.” Evans-Pritchard (E. P., as he was known in the profession) then went off to the field and wrote a classic ethnography.

It is not just the British who offer such a rigorous training in ethnographic method. Most American anthropology departments follow the tradition by refusing to require any courses at all in methodology. There are even significant theoretical trends in the philosophy of science which are explicitly “against method.” Methodological advice in anthropology comes more in the form of “lore” than “laws,” of the sort Evans-Pritchard passed on to his readers after returning from the field and writing about what it is like to hunt for a witch in Central Africa: “You cannot have a renumerative, even intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression you regard their belief as an illusion.” Now that is a useful and important piece of advice but not quite the kind of advice that is sought by those who are “for method.”

Many anthropologists are “for ethnography,” which they don’t necessarily think is the same as being “for method.” They harbor the suspicion
that methodological pursuits actually get in the way of participating in the flow of life of a community. They think that if you are really serious and want to get to know a place well then the most important thing you can do is just "muck around" a lot like a good journalist, and follow your nose.

Some anthropologists are neither for method nor against it, but simply innocent of it. Indeed, more than a few Ph.D. candidates in anthropology have had the experience described by Dennis Mcgilvray in a lecture delivered at the University of Chicago on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the university's Committee on South Asian Studies. Reminiscing about his training as an anthropology graduate student at Chicago in the late 1960s, Mcgilvray recounted how he arrived in a remote area of Sri Lanka only to discover that his theoretically sophisticated and fashionable thesis proposal (Erving Goffman's dramaturgy was the rage of the day) was irrelevant to the mundane realities of the local scene, that he had learned the wrong dialect of Tamil, and that he was not going to be able to select his informants. Instead they were going to select him. He wrote his ethnography relying heavily on conversations with his cook, and his postman, and with a few young unmarried men in the community who were eager to talk to him and had nothing better to do.

Mcgilvray and I were in graduate school in the same era, although at different institutions. Let me report that at Harvard University in the late 1960s the methodological scene in anthropology was a bit more complicated than at Chicago, or at least a bit more conflicted. I remember how in those days two professors on the admissions committee could never agree on which students to admit to the Harvard anthropology program. The first professor wanted students with a high mathematical IQ and a strong background in formal methods - componential analysis, statistics, experimental design and sampling procedures. He liked people who could count and decompose complex things into simple elements. The second professor wanted students with a high verbal IQ and a strong background in history, philosophy, languages, and literature. He liked people who could write, easily pick up the local language, and synthesize their field experiences into compelling narratives.

The first professor thought that one day there would be a manual or rule book for doing ethnography. I think he believed that anthropology could develop mechanical knowledge production procedures (some people call this the scientific method) and that, armed with an artificial intelligence, anyone should be able to write a true and literal description of another culture, the way the other "really is." As far as I know, he never did write an ethnographic book.

The second professor preferred insight over technique, imagination over procedure. With an educated contempt for methodical inquiry, off to the field on a vision quest went his literate and well-read students. Invariably they managed to return with a revelation, or a metaphor, about a faraway place. Thinking back I wish less time had been spent in graduate school arguing whether it is scientists or humanists who make the best ethnographers. I wish more time had been spent spelling out the character of a "true ethnography."

Characterizing "true ethnography" is, of course, a hopeless, hazardous, and thankless task. It is sort of like trying to define true love. I am going to try my hand at it in this essay. If the process of getting there is half the fun, and half as much fun as they say, I am willing to settle for that, while braving the anticipated wave of antiesentialist criticism. Along the way I will have some things to say about a series of other issues central to the ethnographic project in anthropology: plural norms (what they are, whether they exist, and how you might go about studying them), the role of authority and power in the maintenance of norms, and the place of mind reading in the construction of an account about what it is like to be a differently situated, differently motivated human being. At the very least I hope this essay will encourage others to wonder about the aims of fieldwork, and about the nature of the regulative ideals that we ought to share as a community of scholars committed to the study and representation of "others." So here goes. The lecture I didn't get (or perhaps didn't attend) when I was in graduate school.

Somewhere Between Solipsism and Superficiality

True ethnography resides somewhere between solipsism and superficiality. Its mission is to gain access to other minds and other ways of life so as to represent what it is like to be a differently situated human being. Its practitioners are people willing to hazard border crossings in pursuit of differences that make a difference for the way lives are lived, developed, and experienced, and for the way competence, excellence, virtue, and personal well-being are defined. Its theories tell us what it means to be differently situated - what it is like to have different preferences (values, goals, tastes, desires, ideals of personal well-being and of developmental competence) and/or what it is like to live with different constraints (information, causal beliefs, abilities, dispositions, resources, technology, systems of domination or control). Its methods make use of the things people say and do to each other in everyday life, as well as the things they strategically and deliberately say and do to us on special "scientific" occasions (for example, when we ask them to answer questions in an interview or to narrate a life history), to construct a plausible and intelligible account about what it is like to be someone else. Yet true ethnography also aims to
It tells us that most women in those communities actively constrain their preferences in such a way that they develop a taste for modesty and downcast eyes and idealize the behavior of the "shrinking violet" as a feminine virtue. It informs us that while downcast eyes, "modesty," and the behavior of a shrinking violet are associated in the minds of contemporary middle-class Anglo-Americans with concepts such as meek, timid, shy, bashful, mousy, sheepish, shrinking, embarrassed, self-deprecating, not ege-enhanced, ashamed, humiliated, degraded, and weak, this is not true in all moral communities. In Orissa, India, for example, downcast eyes, modesty, and the behavior of a shrinking violet elicits a quite different set of associations: unpretentious, unobtrusive, reserved, self-restrained, quiet, having humility, coy, demure, self-effacing, not brazen, decent, elegant, delicate, undefiled, unsullied, powerful, virtuous, and good (see Shweder 1993; Menon and Shweder, in press; Shweder and Menon 1993). True ethnography challenges our willingness to transcend our own habitual modes of moral judgment and emotional reaction. It dares us to view the world in a different light.

True Ethnography: The Culture Concept

A true ethnography is about something called a culture. As everyone knows, there are many definitions of culture. The definition I was taught as a "mantra" in 1963 in my first undergraduate course in anthropology was "patterns of behavior that are learned and passed on from generation to generation" (a "pattern of behavior" was meant to include any kind of habit, "standard operating procedure" or symbolic action—shaking hands, addressing your father as "Sir," reading the New York Times every morning— that had some history or "tradition" behind it and thus could be thought of as having an identity of its own over and above the intentionality and experience of any one individual).

At the time I did not think to ask why the individuals who carry on a tradition would be motivated to simply replicate patterns of behavior, or why they would care to "pass on" their traditions to others. I did not think to ask whether the perpetuators of a tradition were "rational agents" doing what they did because what they did seemed to them, in light of their causal beliefs, to be an efficient or effective way to accomplish some set of worthy goals. The very idea of worthy goals and other questions about the relationship of tradition to the moral order or to a rational order never really came up. It was simply presupposed that the agents of culture have a taste or a propensity to form habits and do traditional things, and that children are inculcated with culture and readily shaped by the desire
for external rewards or the fear of external punishment to “internalize” whatever a group defines as “traditional.”

A bit later, in graduate school, I discovered that Sir Edward Tylor’s late nineteenth-century definition of culture (as all the inclinations, skills, values, knowledge, and mental states acquired by an individual by virtue of being a member of a group) was still in vogue, although by the late 1960s, under the influence of the cognitive revolution, Tylor’s definition was given an “informational” twist: culture was all the information you needed to know to pass or get along competently as a “native.” At least that was the intellectual fashion at Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Penn (although probably not at Chicago, where the cognitive revolution never did arrive).

In more recent times, after several other “revolutions” (the poststructural revolution, the symbolic revolution, the rational choice revolution) and a few “turns” (the interpretive turn, the deconstructive turn, the turn to pragmatics and toward praxis), I have been teaching my own students that a culture is “a reality lit up by a morally enforceable conceptual scheme composed of values (desirable goals) and causal beliefs (including ideas about means-ends connections) that is exemplified or instantiated in practice.” Members of a culture are members of a moral community who work to coconstruct a shared reality and who act as though they were parties to an agreement to behave rationally within the terms of the realities they share. In this essay I am going to develop a case for the truth and usefulness of that particular conception of culture.

To get things started, allow me to suggest that we think about the thing called a culture as nothing other than a plausible hypothetical model, articulated in a mental-state language (intelligible to the ethnographer’s interpretive audience), which represents the shared and relatively enduring preferences and constraints exhibited in the observable behavior of a designated network of individuals who are tied to each other as members of some self-sanctioning moral community. Accordingly, the methods of true ethnography are designed to reveal things called preferences and constraints, including those that may be taken for granted by members of a moral community, that may be implicit in their behavior, difficult for them to notice, or socially undesirable for them to articulate or disclose under even the most ideal of communicative circumstances.

True ethnography takes time. It requires some degree of rapport and a good deal of trust. Its methods aim to reveal assessments about the value of life that have a ring of authenticity. Because true ethnography is about the structure of other minds, and because it takes time, it resides, quite naturally, somewhere in between solipsism and superficiality, in the vicinity of the discourse and praxis of members of some designated moral community.

In the context of social science methodologies, superficiality can be principled, sophisticated, and predictively useful, and when it is I shall refer to it as superficialism. Superficialism insists that upon demand and “off the top of their heads” the natives tell what they know, know what they are talking about, and keep their answers short. All of us engage in the practice of “superficialism” (for example, whenever limitations of time, resources, access, or courage lead us to rely on interviews to elicit reports from “native” participants about what they think and do, and why, rather than doing it the hard way, by gaining access to the mental states of others through real time participant observation.)

I shall have more to say about superficialism later, when I discuss the way human beings respond to social science survey probes such as, “How satisfied are you with your life on a ten point scale?” or “How would you rate your overall health (excellent, very good, good, fair, poor?” or “Do you believe in God (very much, a moderate amount, a little, not at all)?” First, however, I want to examine the doctrine of solipsism and its implications for true ethnography.

Solipsism in Ethnography: “Let’s Talk about Me for a While”

I learned something about solipsism a few years ago, from a conversation I had with Claude Lévi-Strauss. I met Lévi-Strauss for the first time in Paris in 1990, and part of our conversation went like this. Lévi-Strauss told me that he hears the term postmodern all the time but does not understand what it means. He told me he would have preferred to live in the past, before the twentieth century, before the postmodern era. “But where in the world would you have preferred to live in the past,” I asked, thinking of Athens in the fifth century B.C., India at the time of the Buddha, and all of those cultures of the world—the Nuer, the Trobriand Islanders, the Samoans, the Ifaluk—studied and thereby made famous by anthropologists. “In France, of course,” Lévi-Strauss replied. “Why France?” I asked. “Because French subjectivity is the only subjectivity I can ever understand,” he replied. “But what about all those other cultures you have studied all your life? Can’t you enter into their subjectivity?” “No,” Lévi-Strauss replied, “I can only understand other cultures as objects, not as subjects.”

Solipsism is the view that the only mental life you can ever really know is your own. This view can be derived from two premises: that the only way to understand something that has a mental life is by getting “inside its head,” and that the only head you can ever really get inside is your own. The solipsistic approach to ethnographic method is well represented by the story being told these days in anthropological circles about the
postmodern ethnographer who arrives at a remote field site, recruits an informant, sits her down by a campfire, and says, "Now let's talk about me for a while." The implication is that the only way you can ever get to know what it is like to be someone else is by understanding his or her mental life, and that is impossible. Ironically, despite Lévi-Strauss's apparent antipathy for postmodern thought, it is precisely the postmodern ethnographer who agrees with him that the only subjectivity you can ever understand is your own.

The postmodern "native" seems to agree with Lévi-Strauss as well. I recently had dinner at a storefront restaurant in Chicago, which is owned and run by a Thai family. Prominently displayed on the wall of the restaurant was a poster describing the homeland. It read, "Thailand: The Most Exotic Country in Asia."

Now many of you are probably familiar with the anthropologist's assumption that native peoples experience their own beliefs, desires, and practices as routine, transparent, and commonsensical. That assumption has become old-fashioned. In these postmodern times of cable television, international travel, a global economy, metaphysical jet lag, and hyperreflexivity, the native peoples of the world are more up-to-date. They know all about the international market in solipsism. They have a canny recognition of the taste of others for impenetrability. They have even come to see themselves, through the eyes of others, as strange and alien. And they are ready to trade on the limits of understanding and to publicize themselves as hidden and mysterious. This keeps the westerners coming. "Thailand: The Most Exotic Country in Asia."

Perhaps there is nothing new in this self-conscious representation by others of themselves as puzzling and inaccessible, as a black hole beyond the reach of the mental telescope of the West. Perhaps the native peoples of the world have always been a step ahead of their principal investigators. The history of the encounters of the indigenous peoples of the East and South with the indigenous peoples of the West and North (so-called explorers and other anthropological aliens) has been sufficiently bizarre and inhuman that the natives may have (quite understandably) judged themselves to be impervious to the gaze of the westerner and unintelligible to a Northern subjectivity. Perhaps long ago the "natives" of the world decided to turn exoticism to their advantage and to collaborate with Lévi-Strauss on the thesis that French subjectivity is the only subjectivity that a French anthropologist can ever understand.

It is also possible that they read Descartes. For it is Descartes who managed to draw almost everyone's attention to the quite mysterious appearance and nature of consciousness in the natural world. It is no secret that Descartes reasoned that mental states (beliefs and desires, the experience of seeing red, the feeling of being in pain) are strangers in the natural world. Given that most other things in the world are material, open (in principle) to direct and public sensory inspection and governed by physical laws of causal determination, it is perhaps not too surprising that mental states have the appearance of a singular nonnatural quality: immaterial, inherently private, self-justifying, and bound to a first-person point of view. Whether one refers to this alien spirit lost on a material world as "consciousness," qualia, or the phenomenological side of experience, the subjective states that are the qualia of life are not open, even in principle, for others to directly observe or inspect. Only one person—you—has potential sensory access to your own experienced states of mind. Your conscious experiences qua states of consciousness are indubitable. They are shielded against criticism and against the external objective standards of the third-person point of view.

There is, for example, no objective neurological or biochemical measure, no "external standard" of pain by which to assess the character of the experiences you label "pain" or even to gauge its intensity. In most medically investigated cases of reported headaches, backaches, or chest pains, the brain scan, treadmill test, or X-ray is negative and the clinician has nothing in the natural world to point to as an explanation of, or rationale for, the experience that you named "pain." Typically, the clinician can't even come up with a meager biochemical or neurological (material) correlate of your announced pain. In most cases all the clinician has in his or her hands are your inefable words uttered in some language ("I have a pain in my chest"), referring to some invisible experience. How can the clinician know whether you use your mental-state words the same way he or she does? What is it you experience? Do you experience a lot of it or only a moderate amount? There is nothing there to grasp or lay hold of except your words, and even they, as words, are immaterial and must be interpreted and translated? Your first-person experience (for example, of pain) is as hermetically sealed as it is self-certifying. Like some mystical experience it provides a sufficient warrant for its own authenticity, but only for the person who experiences it. You can never be wrong that you had the experience you had, and we can never quite be sure that you had an experience, or that we really know what that subjective experience was, if you truly had one. In other words, the only subjectivity that Lévi-Strauss can ever really know is his own. Forget about other Frenchmen. Or so the well-known argument in favor of solipsism goes.

Descartes made us aware of the discrepancy between the essential indubitability of our own experienced states of mind, which no one else can experience, and the essentially contestable character of our speculations and projections about what it is like to be a state in another mind, which
only it can experience. "Cosmic exile" is the phrase used by anthropologist Ernest Gellner to characterize this heightened and somewhat terrifying form of solipsistic self-consciousness in which everyone is exotic to everyone else and separated by a valley of doubt.

If "true ethnography" is possible, then either solipsism is wrong or ethnographic authority is not really threatened by radical doubts about the existence and character of other minds. That is because true ethnography aims to represent the *qualia* of otherness, of other minds, of other ways of life. It aims to make insiders intelligible to outsiders. It tries to remove the "veil of ignorance" that obscures the view between differently situated human beings and makes each seem peculiar and alien to the eyes of the other. A true ethnography does not lead us to gaze upon the other only as a material object or a thing. Nor does it shroud the other in mystery. Nor, quite crucially, does it seek to replace the veil of ignorance with a mirror, turning the other into an all too familiar, all too easily recognized reflection of the self (as the subaltern antiracialists, who are so hostile to anthropology and are so uniformitarian and monistic in their moral assumptions, would have it). A true ethnography deprives us of neither our differences nor our humanity. It only deprives us of our oddness. Given such goals to represent the other as different but not odd, as intelligible and fully human but in a different sort of way—it is hardly surprising that some scholars think it is impossible to construct a true ethnography and that the aims of true ethnography are hopelessly incoherent.

If true ethnography is possible, then either solipsism must be wrong, or else ethnographic authority is compatible with radical doubt. But what is wrong with solipsism? I do not think the problem with solipsism is with the premise that the only head you can ever get inside is your own. That seems true enough. I do not even think it is wrong to argue that the only mental life you will ever really understand is your own, as long as you recognize that your own mental life is very complex, and that major aspects of your mental life are hidden from your view and direct experience, and stand in desperate need of anthropological excavation. The same is true of the mental life of others. The unity of human beings is not to be found in that which makes us common and all the same, but rather in a universal original multiplicity, which makes each of us so variegated that others become accessible and imaginable to us through some aspect of our own complex self. I like to dub this last proposition the "principle of original multiplicity" (Shweder 1991, 1993c). It is the principle of original multiplicity that makes true ethnography possible. An alternative way to phrase the principle, indeed its slogan, is "universalism without the uniformity."

**An Antisolipsitic Mentalism**

According to the principle of original multiplicity it is not really worrisome if the only head you can ever get inside is your own, as long as the only head you can get inside is complex enough to contain within it everyone else's head as well. The real problem with solipsism, as I see it, is the premise that the only way to understand the mental life of something that has a mental life is by getting inside its head, by experiencing it or observing it directly. I think this point of criticism is what Clifford Geertz (1984) had in his mind when he said that one does not have to be an empath to be a true ethnographer. True ethnography can stand on the assumption that it is possible to understand what it is like to be a differently situated human being precisely because to understand the mental life of a differently situated human being one does not have to get inside his or her head. That is the conclusion drawn by such philosophers as Wittgenstein and Ryle, who are sometimes described as philosophical behaviorists. That is the conclusion drawn by those anthropologists (such as Geertz) who were influenced by Wittgenstein and Ryle.

I hasten to point out that philosophical behaviorism is not the same as psychological behaviorism. There is black magic in the word *behaviorism*. So beware of the illusions produced through associations with the wrong history of the term.

Witness, for example, the difficulty that arose back in 1981 at a planning meeting for a conference on culture theory (Shweder and LeVine 1984:7–8) when Roy D'Andrade and Clifford Geertz fooled us all by seeming to be at loggerheads over the role of the study of behavior and conceptual schemes (or ideas) in the analysis of culture. D'Andrade made the following historical and ontogenetic observation:

> When I was a graduate student [in the late 1950s] one imagined people in a culture; ten years later, culture was all in their heads. The thing went from something out there and very large to something that got placed inside... We went from "Let's try to look at behavior and describe it" to "Let's try to look at ideas." Now how you were to look at ideas was a bit of a problem—and some people said, "Look at language." That notion, that you look at idea systems, was extremely general in the social sciences. Oh, I think, the same afternoon in 1957 you have papers by [Noam] Chomsky and [George] Miller and in anthropology, Ward Goodenough. All signal an end to the era of "Let's look at behavior and see what they do." Before 1957 the definition of culture was primarily a behavioral one—culture was patterns of behavior, action and customs. The same behavioral emphasis was there in
linguistics and psychology. The idea that cognition is where it's at struck all three fields at the same time. I think it was a nice replacement. But the thing is now breaking and we each have different ideas about how it is breaking up.

Clifford Geertz responded as follows:

At the same time the revolution was going on where people were putting things inside people's heads a counterrevolution was going the other way—criticizing the whole myth of inner reality, the whole myth of private language. The one thing that anthropologists hadn't said about culture is that it is a conceptual structure... it's not a psychological phenomenon in the first place. It's a conceptual structure and that is what the whole depsychologizing of the concept of sense, of meaning, was all about and still is about.

Looking back on this exchange a decade later it seems to me that D'Andrade and Geertz were talking past each other because they are speaking for and against two different types of behaviorisms. D'Andrade was speaking against the antimentalist doctrine of psychological behaviorism, which tried to circumvent the scientific use of a mental-state language (references to beliefs, desires, plans, wants, emotions, goals, feelings) through the study of the behavior of organisms. Geertz, on the other hand, was speaking in favor of the antisolipsistic doctrine of philosophical behaviorism, which tried to defend the use of a mental-state language by insisting that mental states are not primarily the inherently inaccessible and private experiences of this or that person's consciousness, but rather derive their meaning from the "external" (and hence intersubjectively accessible) concepts that are exhibited in practices and in the observable "forms of life" that lend meaning to a behavior. For the philosophical behaviorist the study of behavior is not a way of getting rid of mental-state concepts. It is rather a way to identify them without having to get inside someone's head. In fact, D'Andrade tacitly accepted this antisolipsitic philosophical behaviorism with his acknowledgement that perhaps the best way to get at a latent unobservable thing such as an idea or concept is through the observation of linguistic behavior. And Geertz tacitly rejected antimentalist psychological behaviorism when he defined culture as a conceptual scheme.

The two revolutions (antisolipsism and pramentalism) can be joined by insisting that true ethnography is the interpretive study of the sanctionable behavior (the "normal" discourse and praxis) of members of a moral community. The two revolutions can be joined by insisting that the first and most fundamental interpretive act in the study of sanctionable behavior

(discourse and praxis) is the application of mental-state concepts (beliefs, desires) to render such behavior intelligible. For example, to add some concreteness to the idea of the sanctionable behavior of a moral community, in urban middle-class Anglo-America, exclusive husband-wife sleeping arrangements, the family meal, and saying "thank you" are sanctionable behaviors. In rural Hindu India they are not. In rural Hindu India, menstrual seclusion and husband-wife avoidance in public places are sanctionable behaviors. In urban middle-class Anglo America they are not. The first and foremost interpretive act in the study of such sanctionable behavior is to understand the beliefs about persons, society, and nature, as well as the worthy and unworthy motives, desires, and goals that get conveyed to competent members of a moral community by the things other members of the community say and do to each other in everyday life (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992).

The Mind Reading of Mental States

That is not to suggest that the interpretive act called true ethnography is an easy act to follow. It is merely to suggest that the application of mental-state concepts to render the behavior of others intelligible is the only act in town, if we are to understand others as "persons." Precisely how difficult it can be to write a true ethnography is best illustrated with simple materials. Consider, for example, the relatively commonplace anthropological observation that in some culture's (among Tahitians, Orijas, and Chinese, for example) people can be observed responding to apparent "loss" not (as the anthropologist expects them to respond) with expressions of sadness but rather with various kinds of bodily distress such as fatigue, backaches, or sickness. (See Kleinman 1986, Levy 1984, and Lazarus 1991 for a discussion of this type of case; see also Shweder 1993b, a response to Lazarus from which this discussion is drawn.) How do we represent what it is like to be such a people?

I think the way we do it is not by getting inside the other's head but by mind reading. Mind reading begins with conceptual analysis. We begin with an analysis of the concept of a person, which leads us to the concept of a mental life (symbolic capacity, self, will, belief, desire, rationality, feeling, and so on), which leads us to the concept of emotions (self-relevant feelings), which leads us to the concept of sadness, which leads us to the concept of loss. We observe the death of a child followed by the observation that his father or mother are evincing bodily distress but not evincing sadness. Constrained by a framework of meanings internal to our language for persons, mental states, emotions, and sadness, we go beyond what we have observed to generate a series of interpretive possibilities.
One possible interpretation is that the absence of sadness is only apparent, not real. According to this mind read the other has experienced a serious irreversible loss of something that is highly valued and therefore must be experiencing sadness, but either denies it, defends against it via some hypothesized process called somatization, or does not have a vocabulary for describing it or a nonverbal means of expressing it.

A second possible interpretation is that the loss was only apparent, not real. In the ethnographic literature the appraisal of loss is typically a judgment made by the observing anthropologist who has witnessed a circumstance (for example, death of a newborn infant) which he or she thinks of as loss. According to this mind read the other did not appraise things the way the anthropologist did (Schepers-Hughes 1990).

A third possible interpretation is that the loss was real but the other does not respond to loss emotionally. Several kinds of mind reads are possible here. Perhaps others do not respond to loss emotionally because: (1) they are not persons but rather some kind of being midway between robots and persons who can experience fatigue, sickness, and bodily distress but have no mental life (this is not a mind read that anthropologists are prone to make); (2) they are suffering from some kind of psychopathology that has switched off the causal connection between information processing and emotional experience; or (3) in their society a good way to cope with loss is to switch off the processes that bring emotional experiences online, much the way some people in my subculture are able to become fearless, emotionless, and focused when confronted with a sudden and very real threat to their life. Perhaps in their society derealization or dissociation is a normal or realized state of mind.) One mind read we are blocked from making is that among others, irreversible loss is a context for the experience of pride or joy. We are blocked from making that interpretation by the limits of coherency established by the logic of our own mental-state concepts and language.

Notice that in constructing a true ethnography the other’s self-report is neither a necessary nor sufficient datum for weeding out these interpretive possibilities. If the other should explicitly deny appraising the death of a child as a loss, that is grist for our interpretive mill, but we are also free to discount the testimony. If the other explicitly confirms appraising his or her circumstances as loss but claims to experience no sadness and gives off no evidence of experiencing sadness, again that is grist for our interpretive mill. We are free to either mind read an experience of sadness that is not expressed, or to take the other at his or her word, while either suspecting some form of pathology or some form of mental discipline that keeps the other from emotionalizing encounters with the world. Which ever interpretation we settle upon, a true ethnography is a mind read in which we rely on our mental state concepts to interpret the discourse and praxis of members of some moral community. Whatever interpretation we settle upon, we do not treat what people tell us in an interview as an incorrigible representation of their inner life but rather as one more piece of information to be made use of, as we construct a model of the mental state concepts exhibited in their behavior.

Building Conceptual Models

What does it mean for a concept or an idea to be exhibited in behavior and for an ethnographer to spell out the concept? Minimally what it means is that ethnography is the attempt to establish a correspondence between behaviors and something exhibited in those behaviors that is analytically external to and separable from the behaviors themselves. I say analytically external to the behaviors themselves because it is in the nature of cultural things in everyday life that often no analytic separation is made between a behavior and its meaning. The interpretation goes through rapidly and self-consciously, and the behavior is apprehended as though it were ready-made. We see in the behavior (shaking hands) that which it exhibits (politeness). The vehicle of meaning becomes its meaning and it seems as though there is nothing to explain.

To clarify this point, let us assume for a moment that behaviors can be analyzed as alternatives in some choice set. Consider a person who is faced with two choice sets, \((x, y)\) and \((x, z)\), and chooses \(x\) from the first set and \(y\) from the second set. Arguing against the idea of “revealed preferences,” economist Amartya Sen (1993:498–99) has pointed out that in and of themselves, acts of choice are not like statements, “which can contradict, or be consistent with, each other.” He argues that the choice of \(x\) from the first set and \(y\) from the second set are not contradictory or inconsistent choices. They only become contradictory when we try to understand these choices in the light of some idea of what the person is trying to do, which means we invoke a frame of reference (motives, goals, concepts, principles) external to the choice. The choices only become contradictory or inconsistent choices once we interpret them as though they implied two statements of a particular kind, with the first choice entailing the statement “\(x\) is a better alternative than \(y\)” and the second choice entailing the statement “\(y\) is a better alternative than \(x\).” It is Sen’s point that “being consistent or not consistent is not the kind of thing that can happen to choice functions without interpretation—without a presumption about the context that takes us beyond the choices themselves.”

Indeed, the context may take us far beyond the behavior itself into the pragmatic meanings of the event. Thus Sen notes that while the statement
“x is a better alternative than y” is inconsistent with the statement “y is a better alternative than x.” The pragmatic action of actually saying or uttering both statements “may not be really inconsistent in the way the two statements themselves are... For example, the person making the statements may want to be taken as mentally unsound to establish diminished responsibility, or be taken as unfit to stand trial. Or simply want to confound the observer. Or check how people react to apparently contradictory statements.” The aims of true ethnography are to construct a model of those statements and purposes that are exhibited in behavior and to turn that behavior into an action that must be read and interpreted, however rapidly, routinely, or unconsciously that reading is done.

Building a Conceptual Model: The Case of “Who Sleeps by Whom?”

Consider for example the universal system of behavior known as sleeping and the praxis of arranging the locations where members of a family sleep at night. “Who sleeps by whom” is not only a classic, if understudied, problem for ethnographers. It is also a universal moral issue that is resolved in quite different ways around the world. Caudill and Plath’s (1966) seminal research on Japanese sleeping arrangements revealed that from birth to death members of a Japanese family rarely sleep in a location or room of their own, and that they prefer not to do so, even when space is available. The praxis is an expression of their preferences and not a byproduct of a resource constraint. Solitary sleeping (the kind of sleeping pattern forced upon young children by middle-class Anglo-American adults) is emotionally and mentally disturbing to the Japanese.

Sleeping arrangements are one of many practices of concern in my ongoing research on the moral basis of family life and life-span development in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India (Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein 1995; Shweder 1991; Shweder, Mahaputra, and Miller 1990; Shweder, Much, Mahaputra, and Park 1994, in press). It is not feasible or permissible for outsiders to enter the interior spaces of Hindu family compounds to photograph who sleeps by whom, or to directly witness in what order, like peas in a pod, family members arrange themselves on cots or mats. What one can do is collect reports from members of households in which informants are asked in detail about where everyone had slept the night before. The ethnographic goal, however, is not only to document the praxis but to spell out the concepts or principles implicit in the choices being made about how to arrange family members in a common sleeping space.

We have recently constructed a cultural model of the concepts and principles implicit in Oriya sleeping practices in the temple town of Bhubaneswar (Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein 1995). Although a record of actual sleeping patterns was at hand, we did not initially try to induce the cultural model from records of behavior. Actual families differ in size and in their age and sex structure, which makes the task of induction quite complex. It proved more fruitful to select a representative hypothetical family consisting of seven members (father, mother, son 15 years of age, son 11, son 8, daughter 14, daughter 3) and to ask insiders (Oriyas and outsiders (Anglo-Americans in Hyde Park, the Chicago neighborhood in which the University of Chicago is located) to arrange and rearrange members of the family into sleeping spaces under different hypothetical resource constraints. You have one sleeping space. How would you arrange the seven family members? You have two sleeping spaces. You have three sleeping spaces. And so forth through seven sleeping spaces. The number of the sleeping spaces available is the resource constraint.

Although I do not have space to discuss the details of the Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein (1995) analysis, I would make the following summary methodological remarks. First, it turns out upon logical analysis that there is a large number of ways to sort seven family members into up to seven sleeping spaces. Of course, there is only one way to sort seven people in one sleeping space, and only one way to sort them into seven sleeping spaces. But there are sixty-three ways to sort them into two sleeping spaces. A particular three-sleeping-space solution, for example—father, mother; son 15, son 11, son 8; daughter 14, daughter 3—is only one of 301 possible ways to sort the members of the family into three sleeping spaces. Overall there are 877 logically possible ways to sort the seven family members into one to seven sleeping spaces.

Second, of the 877 logically possible solutions very few, less than forty, are ever selected by any single Oriya or Anglo-American informant. Fewer than fifteen are selected by more than one informant. The solutions are highly constrained, and the task of the ethnographer is to explain all the missing cells by reference to as small a set of moral principles as possible. This is one way to get at “values”—not by asking directly (although direct questioning can sometimes be instructive), but by positing principles to make sense of actual choices.

Third, Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein (1995) discover that a small set of moral concepts help explain both the missing cells in the hypothetical seven-person sleeping arrangements task, and the arrangements of family members (who slept by whom) in actual families in the temple town. For Oriyas there are four moral concepts implicit in their praxis, which can be listed in a precedence order as follows: incest avoidance, care of the dependent young (children do not sleep alone), female chastity anxiety (sexualized women do not sleep alone), hierarchical deference for males (mature males do not sleep with other males who must defer to them because there
is an implication of disrespectful familiarity; status and familiarity drive each other out). For the Anglo-Americans there are three moral concepts implicit in their praxis, which can be listed in precedence order as follows: incest avoidance, the sacred couple, and autonomy.

Fourth, Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein discover both dramatic similarities and dramatic differences in the moral concepts and principles implicit in this praxis in rural Hindu India and urban middle-class Anglo-America. For example, the single most important principle in both cultures is the same, incest avoidance. Thus, sexualized family members of different genders (father, daughter 14; son 15, daughter 14; mother, son 15) do not sleep together. All the other moral concepts implicit in their sleeping practices differentiate the cultures. Thus the second most important principle for the Anglo-Americans can be dubbed "the sacred couple." According to this principle, the husband and wife must sleep together and alone. This principle plays no part whatsoever in the choices made in Oriya culture about where people sleep, and it is a principle that is rarely acknowledged on a worldwide scale. The sacred couple principle places great constraints on possible solutions to the seven-person family problem (it rules out 92 percent of the possibilities), and indeed Anglo-Americans can conceive of fewer solutions than the Oriyas. For example, many Oriyas are willing to accept a two-sleeping-space solution that divides the males from the females and honors the incest avoidance rule. But this arrangement violates the sacred couple principle for Anglo-Americans and most of them find this "solution" entirely unacceptable. Many Anglo-Americans can come up with no solution under a two-sleeping-space constraint.

Finally, the research makes it easy to see why in constructing a true ethnography it is imperative to analytically distinguish preferences from constraints. On the ground, under particular resource constraints, the behavior of two communities may look more similar than an analysis of their cultural preferences would reveal. Thus, for example, rural Hindus and urban Anglo-Americans tend to converge in their solutions to the three-sleeping-space problem, despite the fact that their choices are regulated by somewhat different moral concepts and principles. Under a three-sleeping-space constraint Anglo-Americans strongly favor father and mother in one sleeping space; son 15, son 11, and son 8 in another; and daughter 14 and daughter 3 in the third. This is consistent with the two most important Anglo-American principles (incest avoidance and the sacred couple). Under the three-sleeping-space constraint, most Anglo-Americans are willing to compromise on the autonomy of the children. It is noteworthy that a plurality of Oriyas find this solution acceptable as well. This is because this solution is consistent with their top three principles (incest avoidance, care of the dependent young, chastity anxiety). Under the three-sleeping-space constraint, Oriyas are willing to compromise the hierarchical deference of males. It is true that even under the three-sleeping-space constraint, Oriyas do generate solutions that Anglo-Americans reject (for example, mother, daughter 14, daughter 3; father, son 8; son 15, son 11). Nevertheless, if one were to only observe the behavior of the two cultures at that (three sleeping spaces) resource level, one might be misled into thinking the two cultures were more or less the same. Only when one looks at behavior across a variety of resource constraints are true differences in cultural preferences (values, goals, and so on) revealed.

Evaluative Discourse and Praxis

In a recent essay called "A Theory of Culture for Demography," Eugene Himmel (1990) takes up the cause of true ethnography. Himmel, an anthropologist and a demographer, has the following things to say about true ethnography. He suggests that the social sciences would benefit from a "greater reliance on comparative studies of relatively small social units, however large and complex may be the societies within which these are embedded." He suggests that more information about social processes can be gathered by intensive investigation of a few cases than by the superficial examination of many. He suggests that cultural communities need not correspond to interest groups or even geographical units.

Himmel suggests that members of a cultural community acquire their culture through praxis; in other words, they resonate to, activate, or absorb unarticulated concepts and principles through exposure to behavior.2 Himmel does suggest that ethnographers can make progress by collecting commentaries about actual behavioral events from focal participants. He suggests that members of the same culture share not only a language and specific customary behaviors but also an "evaluative discourse," and that the "value of culture for social analysis is not so much that the informants speak to the investigator, but that they speak to one another and can be overheard." He cautions ethnographers to make sure that what informants tell us about their behavior is what they tell one another (again the need for participant observation). Most importantly, Himmel suggests a definition of culture as the principles exhibited in the everyday evaluative discourse and behavior of members of some small-scale moral community (for example, a household).
The Moral Community

An important implication of Hamel's essay is that a central aim of ethnographic theory is to identify the relevant moral communities that are embedded within any complex society. Members of a genuine moral community take an interest in sanctioning and regulating each other's behavior. They are usually conscious of themselves, and of their honor, prestige, and well-being as a moral community. As Greenwood has argued, true "social collectivities" (genuine moral communities) are "composed of individuals who are parties to sets of arrangements, conventions, and agreements," and they must be distinguished from mere "aggregate groups" (for example, all Americans who happen to be of Mexican descent).

It can generally be assumed that members of a household are networked in such a way that they are members of the same moral community. Beyond that, as one moves to the level of neighborhoods or politically/economically motivated interest groups or census bureau categories, it is best not to assume. In the United States today global ethnic labels such as African American, Latino, West Indian, Jewish, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, or non-Hispanic white are not likely to correspond to moral communities in the relevant ethnographic sense. The contemporary "tribes" of North America have yet to be properly identified.

It is the wager of many ethnographers in anthropology interested in life-span development that human development outcomes are mediated by behavior and that most systems of behavior are regulated by the norms of some local moral community. For example, it is well known that Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists and other puritanical and abstemious moral communities live about six years longer than other Americans. It is likely that this is the result of certain "right practices" or constrained preferences (such as taboos on smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol) sanctioned by the moral community which have as their unintended consequence and secondary gain a reduction in levels of lung cancer or cirrhosis of the liver.

Or, to cite a second example, the Hindu moral community in rural India sanctions premarital chastity, arranged marriages, and joint family living in the ancestral household of the father of the groom. It is mandated that the bride shift her kinship affiliation and loyalties as she moves into her "mother-in-law’s house" ("sasu ghar") and is inducted into the formal and highly ritualized status hierarchy of the residential kinship group of her husband. This kinship group (the "joint family") may well consist of several coresident brothers ranked by age across and within three generations, along with their status-conscious wives, mothers, and children. The status hierarchy is so ritualized that patterns of interpersonal contact in the family are explicitly regulated by patterns of avoidance and stereotyped joking. A young married woman, for example, must never talk to or be in the presence of her husband’s older brothers, father, or father’s brothers. Indeed, she is not supposed to be witness to interpersonal contact between her husband and the higher-status males in the family, to whom she must defer and show respect. While this is an effective way to protect the self-esteem of the husband, in effect it means that a woman and her husband avoid each other in the "public spaces" of the joint family compound.

Although it is not difficult to construct a plausible and intelligible model of preferences and constraints to explain these marriage and residential practices, it has been observed by anthropologists that young brides are prone to displays of dissociative states such as spirit possession, listlessness, seizures (the kinds of behaviors that get you labeled as a "hysterical" in the pathologizing discourse of Western psychiatry). These young brides have entered a well-marked social status or life stage ("jouvana") that the moral community in Hindu society explicitly recognizes as a vulnerable, burdensome, and rather sad period in life. During this life stage there is a major loss of autonomy, control, power, and social support. Stereotyped weeping songs accompany the marriage rituals. Headaches and other somatic complaints are common among mothers of brides. The young bride, now living in her husband’s ancestral home, is cut off from her natal home and family and assumes a social position at the very bottom of the elaborate and explicit female (and male) prestige hierarchy. This prestige hierarchy is a central reality of family life in rural India. It confers shape, meaning, and dignity to the communal life of these three generational patriarchal families (Menon and Shweder 1995).

In the tradeoff between autonomy and hierarchical community, women in the community value community over autonomy. Yet in the early years of married life they suffer the psychological consequences of this radical reduction of personal control. They suffer whether the official culture explicitly values autonomy and control or not, although, as Usha Menon’s recent research reveals so clearly (Menon 1995), they suffer without losing a sense of the meaning and moral fabric of their lives.

There are other stresses as well. In the context of a moral community that lives by the tenets of a communitarian ethic there is a value placed on contributing to the group, which means that for Hindu women, fertility can be a fearsome responsibility. Infertility or the wrong kind of fertility produces great collective misery. The young daughter-in-law is well aware that her future success and status in the family is closely connected to reproductive success and to the realization of everyone’s socially constrained preference for male children who will man the ancestral estate.
and reap the benefits (rather than suffer the considerable costs) of the dowry system.

Recently Menon and I have been examining the lives of women in joint family households in the Hindu temple of Bhubaneswar (Menon and Shweder 1995). This is a community in which I have conducted anthropological research since 1968, with a special emphasis in recent years on the moral basis of family life practices. The research on women's lives has been carried out in connection with the activities of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development (MIDMAC), on ethnic and cross-cultural variations in the social and psychological context of health, happiness, and social responsibility in middle-aged adults.

One of the more striking discoveries from this research is that moral concepts that have been enshrined in Western academic theories of moral development (for example, autonomy, individual rights, justice as equality) play a rather secondary role in the moral psychology of Oriya Brahmans (Shweder 1990, 1991, 1994; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1990; Shweder and Much 1991; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park, in press). It is not that moral concepts such as rights and justice (as equality) are totally absent, but they are overshadowed by other far more elaborated and salient moral concepts. Indeed, on the basis of this research several of my associates and I have posited a "big three" theory of conceptual domains for moral reasoning and behavioral regulation. We refer to the big three moral domains as autonomy, community, and divinity (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park, forthcoming; Shweder 1990; Shweder and Haidt 1993; Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993; Jensen 1995; Much 1992).

The morality of autonomy is quite puffed up and elaborated in the discourse and praxis of highly individualistic subcultures such as our own. Ideas such as freedom of choice and individual rights, and the moral and legal protection given to the satisfaction of personal wants, needs, and desires make it almost seem natural that every child should be given a room of his or her own or that parents should ask children what they want to eat for dinner before preparing the family meal. Within the framework of a morality of autonomy one of the very best reasons for having something is simply that you want it, and it is precisely that kind of reason that is often cultivated and advanced in individualistic subcultures. That is what the folk and philosophical doctrine of utilitarianism is all about.

However, within the context of family life in Orissa, India, it is the other two moralities that are elaborated in discourse and practice. The morality of community is concerned with obligations of station, social position, or role; its stress is upon the connection between social and personal identity and the embeddedness of the self within a larger community or team. Duty, sacrifice, loyalty, and respect are its central themes. The morality of divinity is concerned with concepts such as purity, sin, and the sacred order; its stress is upon the self as a spiritual entity able to approach divinity, able to be on speaking terms with God. Dignity and degradation, sanctity and pollution are its central themes.

Our ethnographic methods for studying the morality of family and social life in India have relied heavily on the observation of praxis, the analysis of various kinds of discourses about praxis, and the construction of hypothetical models representing in a mental-state language the principles exhibited in discourses about praxis, and in praxis itself. Manomohan Mahapatra, Nancy Much, Usha Menon, Lena Jensen, Jon Haidt, and others who have worked on moral evaluation in Bhubaneswar have listened to the voices of insiders expressed in well-known texts, in structured and unstructured interviews conducted by insiders and by outsiders, and in everyday household talk. The research goal is to make sure that ideas and concepts that are exhibited when informants talk to researchers are also exhibited when they talk to each other and when they speak with their actions as well as with their words.

The Idea of Plural Norms

The claim that there exist alternative moral goods (for example, autonomy, community, divinity) or a heterogeneous base set of moral ideals (justice, sympathy, fidelity, gratitude, respect) raises the question, What precisely do we mean when we speak about the existence of plural norms for human development? The aims of any true ethnography will be deeply influenced by the answer one gives to that perplexing question. The question is perplexing for the following reasons.

The idea of a norm is routinely analyzed into a descriptive sense (a report about what typically is the case) and a prescriptive sense (a report about what justifiably ought to be the case). A descriptive norm is a summary report made by some observer about what is regularly (or typically) the case for some designated population; for example, that in Bangladesh most villagers in endemic malaria areas do not sleep under mosquito nets, that in the United States wives do a greater share of the housework than do their husbands regardless of who earns a greater share of the family income, that 70 percent of African-American youths have had sexual intercourse by age fifteen, that among the Samburu people of Kenya it is commonplace for adults to perform clitoridectomies on adolescent girls, that marriages are arranged in India, that the slaughter of large mammals is prevalent among the Newars of Nepal for the sake of ritual sacrifice and among Anglo-Americans for the sake of food consumption.

The idea of the plural, of course, implies more than one, and, as every-
one knows, the anthropological literature is in large measure a record of the existence of plural norms in the descriptive sense. It is a standard feature of anthropological research to document the existence of two or more populations, each with a different typical pattern of behavior (for example, arranged marriage versus love marriage), or to demonstrate that within a single population there is a bimodal or multimodal distribution of behaviors of a certain kind (for example, college-educated husbands in the United States differ from other married men in the amount of housework they do).

The anthropological documentation of plural norms in the descriptive sense has sometimes been extended to include documentation of plurality in the prescriptive norms of different populations. Prescriptive norms (the “ought” statements of some local authority: a parent, chief, government, or God) can, of course, be readily examined from a descriptive norm point of view. For example, some investigator might report that when it comes to stated ideas about what is right or wrong, good or bad, correct or incorrect, desirable or undesirable, a majority of adult Samburu women in Kenya think it is good or desirable for Samburu girls to be circumcised during adolescence, or that a majority of upper middle-class Anglo-American husbands assert that husbands and wives ought to equally share the burden of housework, or that ascetic fasting is judged to be pathological by the American Psychiatric Association.

But notice that when prescriptive norms are studied only from a descriptive point of view, claims about plural norms amount to little more than the proposition that there is variety in things that are desired by different people in different times and places. Such a proposition does not come close to touching on the far more controversial topic that is definitive of moral studies and at the heart of the very idea of prescriptive norms, namely, whether there is plurality in what is desirable, not just in what is desired. Critics of pluralism will be quick to point out that just because there is diversity in what people do or desire to do does not mean there is diversity in what is desirable or in what people justifiably ought to do.

Here we enter a territory of critical moral discourse that positivistically oriented anthropologists (the pure descriptivists) have often tried to avoid. The preferred positivistic strategy of restricting one’s interest to the study of plural norms only in the descriptive sense may work tolerably well for the study of language diversity or diversity in systems of kinship classification, but it fails miserably when it comes to the comparative study of human development.

It fails because the very idea of human development implies some desirable state of functioning (a goal or end state) that is not immediately or readily available to human beings but must be achieved or cultivated by means of some process or practice. Notice that the idea of human development can be applied to any domain of human functioning—somatic functioning (physical health), emotional, motivational, intellectual, moral, or spiritual functioning (mental health), interpersonal or social functioning (social health). Notice too that the idea of human development does not permit the reduction of prescriptive norms to mere descriptive or positivist study. Quite the contrary, the idea of human development privileges the prescriptive sense of the normative. Thus within the terms of the idea of human development the descriptive study of human development becomes the study of means or processes for promoting some desirable end state, which presupposes (at the very least) the identification of some prescriptively desirable end state for healthy functioning.

This is true as well of the idea of plural norms for human development, which may be used prescriptively to suggest that there is no uniform or singular account that can be given of the states of functioning that are desirable for all human beings. This prescriptive pluralistic claim amounts to a defense of the proposition that what human beings justifiably ought to strive for in somatic, emotional, moral, intellectual, and spiritual development varies across time (history), space (population or culture), social position (for example, class) and gender.

Of course, the idea of plural norms for human development may be used in a subordinate descriptive sense. As a pure descriptive claim the idea of plural norms for human development merely suggests that across time, space, social position, and gender the processes and practices that in fact work best as a means for promoting some desirable end state can be given no uniform or singular account. But notice here that in the absence of a prior prescriptive pluralistic claim (that there exists variety in the end states that human beings justifiably ought to strive to develop), this descriptive pluralistic claim reduces to the noncontroversial conception of a world in which there are many means to the same end, many roads that lead to Rome.

The idea of taking context into account often amounts to a descriptive pluralistic claim of that sort; for example, that in a tropical rain forest the best way to deliver protein to a young child is through three years of breast feeding, while this may not be the best way in Boston; or that the best way to develop literacy skills in an upper middle-class Anglo-American classroom is with teaching techniques that are laissez-faire and egalitarian, while this may not be the best way in a working-class Mexican-American classroom; or that the best way to develop senses of loyalty, gratitude, and justice in West Africa is through ordeals and hardships imposed on children, while this may not be the best way in Scarsdale, New York; or
that a good way to avoid heart disease in Norway is by giving up cigarette smoking, while this makes little difference in Japan. Notice that in each example the pluralistic claim is a descriptive claim about variety in effective means. Such descriptive claims can be provocative, for they may imply that different treatment conditions should be applied to different persons or peoples to promote their developmental competence. But notice as well that in each example it is a unitary rather than pluralistic prescriptive norm for physical, intellectual, or moral health (the same prescriptive norm for all human beings) that is presupposed by the descriptive claim that there are alternative means to the same (desirable) end.

It is, of course, fascinating and important to document cases where processes and practices for promoting desirable states of somatic, emotional, intellectual, moral, or social functioning are effective for one population but not for another, where different peoples flourish under different treatment conditions, and where aggregate human development is diminished by treating everyone alike. There is, however, a deeper and far more controversial meaning to the idea of plural norms for human development, which arises whenever the idea is used in its prescriptive sense.

I suspect that many ethnographers would like to use the idea of plural norms for human development in its more controversial, prescriptive sense. I suspect they would like to propose that the end states that are truly desirable for human beings cannot be specified in the abstract and without qualification by reference to time, place, social position, or gender, that states of functioning that are pathological for one person may be healthy for another; that states of emotional, social, and motivational functioning that justifiably ought to be promoted in Japan or China are not necessarily those that ought to be promoted in other times or places; that, for example, it might be healthy for Chinese mothers to shame and tease their children or for Japanese parents to sleep with their children until adolescence, while this would not be healthy or desirable for Anglo-American parents.

For the sake of the theoretical development of a defensible prescriptive pluralism it is important for ethnographers to realize that it is not going to be easy to defend such propositions. At the very least ethnographers are going to have to ponder the profound question, What justifies the “ought” implicit in the idea of human development? At the very least they are going to have to show that the plurality of norms that so fascinates them is really a plurality of ends and not just of means (shaming and teasing in China, for example, might be interpreted or represented as merely an alternative means to some unitary and justifiable “higher” end, which the Western anthropologist and the Chinese parent both acknowledge as a “common good”). They are going to have to show that plurality is a termi-

nal (rather than an intermediary) state of moral reality. One strategy for defending the idea of plural norms in the prescriptive sense can be found in Shweder and Haidt (1993), where it is argued that what human beings have in common is a base set of plural goods or virtues (like justice, beneficence, fidelity, loyalty, gratitude, and so on). Yet those multiple goods, which everyone in the world recognizes as goods, at least in the abstract, are inherently in conflict and cannot be activated at the same time or in the same social practices. Much more work is needed to add force and substance to the proposition that what is truly desirable is not the same around the world. Extreme and unqualified formulations of a prescriptive pluralistic proposition are not likely to be cogent, which is why, speaking as a pluralist, I believe we need to reformulate the idea of psychic unity along the lines of the principle of original multiplicity, as discussed earlier. We are multiple from the start. It is that original multiplicity that constitutes our common humanity. It is that original multiplicity which makes mutual sympathetic understanding of differences possible.

Power and the Idea of Moral Authority

So far I have been discussing culture as a characteristic of a moral community. Now I want to clarify the relationship between power and moral authority, and make the point that while a moral community is never merely a power order, any social ordering of human beings that is a moral ordering must be a power ordering as well. In other words, with due respect to those culture critics (Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist) who think otherwise, power is not necessarily a dirty word.

Try to imagine a society lacking both power and moral authority. The thought experiment is not difficult because all one has to do is imagine a society of fully developed and autonomous human beings in which each and every member of society recognizes that he or she is fully developed and autonomous and that everyone else is as well. In such an ideal society everyone is fully developed and autonomous in the sense that everyone pursues worthy goals, possesses accurate knowledge about how to reach those goals, and control the means or instrumentalities for doing so. In such a society there is no place for the exercise of power or moral authority because there is no need or capacity for any one to be under any one else’s governance.

So much for the thought experiment. The societies that ethnographers study are always peopled by vulnerable and only partially developed human beings whose autonomy (in the sense just described) is always compromised to some greater or lesser degree. Real human beings do not always know what is in their true interests or how to accomplish their goals.
They act under duress, lacking perfect foresight or information about the consequences of their actions. More often than not they lack total control over the resources they need to get what they want or ought to have. It is largely because human beings are vulnerable and only partially developed (in the sense just described) that the social order has evolved as a moral order, and as a power order as well.

Between power and moral authority, power is the more encompassing and general notion. Power is defined by a person's ability to get others to do what one wants regardless of the means used to get others to do it. The means might include intimidation, muscling, bribery, or other means for creating and manipulating the emotion of fear. It is conceivable that the force associated with power is ultimately explainable in terms of a theory of human emotions. Indeed, it would be fascinating to classify forms of power on the basis of the type of emotion (fear, shame, guilt, humiliation, sympathy) that ultimately motivates one person to comply with the wants of powerful others.

Moral authority can be distinguished from power, but the distinction is not one of opposition or contrast. Moral authority is a specific or particular type of instantiation of power, because when you have moral authority you can get others to do what you want, and that is what power is all about. Moral authority, however, is that special form of power that is empowered by virtue of its connection to ideas about what is right and good. That means there is an asymmetry between moral authority and power. Not all forms of power have moral authority, because some forms of power are disconnected to acknowledged ideas about what is right and good. (It should be noted, however, that even moral authority may work most effectively when it is connected to emotions such as fear, shame, disgust, and guilt.)

To the extent a true ethnography is a characterization of both preferences and constraints it must take account of the power system of a community. Although these systems vary in numerous ways, at least the following three types of power orders can be conceptualized, which I shall label "pure moral authority," "paternalism" (or "parentalism"), and "authoritarianism."

Pure moral authority refers to a power order where agents do what others with moral authority want them to do because agents recognize that it is in their own true interest to do so. In such a case, the power of the person with moral authority derives from his or her ability to augment the development and autonomy of others. And such power of moral authority is held by virtue of the recognition of others that this is so. Moral authority comes from knowing things others do not know or being able to make available to others resources or instrumentalities that others do not control. The idea of expertise (the expert is the prototype of a person with pure moral authority) is relevant here. Also relevant is the forthright recognition, so commonplace in many of the world's religious traditions, of the limits of one's own power and knowledge and the need for complementarity and interdependence in social life.

A paternalistic power order contrasts with a power order based on pure moral authority. Paternalism refers to a power order where agents do not do what others with moral authority want them to do, because agents do not recognize others as having moral authority, even though they do. In such a system those with moral authority are in fact in a position to promote the "true interests" of others; those with paternalistic power have the power to force others "against their will" to do what is right and good. If you are a paternalistic moral authority then you have two choices vis-à-vis those who refuse to acknowledge you as a pure moral authority: coercion (you can strong arm others to do what is in their true interests) and benign neglect (you can allow others to act against their own true interests, with the hope that they will come to recognize the limits of their own autonomy and ultimately freely choose to augment their capacities in various ways, perhaps even by acknowledging the pure moral authority of those who have it).

Finally there is authoritarianism. Authoritarianism refers to a power order where agents do not do what others want them to do because those with power do not have the agents' true interests in mind and the agents know it. In other words, those in power lack moral authority; they act to negate rather than augment the autonomy and development of others. In authoritarian power orders, those in power act in such a way that only their own interests are served, and no one can stop them from doing so.

Notice that the very idea of pure moral authority, paternalism, and authoritarianism as categories of power rests on the presupposition that it is reasonable to distinguish between a person's true interests and a person's mere wants or preferences. For a social or cultural theorist to even conceptualize such power categories and distinctions between forms of power and authority, he or she must assume that not all wants and preferences are good or worthy. He or she must reject the claim that merely wanting something is a good reason for having it. To the extent that true ethnography provides an account of power at all it must do so by first putting forward some moral conception of the good, some moral conception of the worthy goals of life. In other words, the analysis of culture as a moral order and the analysis of culture as a power order are not hostile enterprises. Quite the contrary, they depend on each other.
Life Satisfaction in Another Cultural World

What is it like to live in another cultural world, with a different set of preferences, under a different set of constraints? Alas, only a true ethnography can answer that question. The best I can do in this essay is talk about true ethnography rather than produce one. I would mention in passing, however, one aspect of some research Usha Menon and I have been conducting on life satisfaction and successful adult development among women in rural India (Menon and Shweder forthcoming; Menon, 1995).

The most satisfying periods of life for women are patterned somewhat differently in India and in the United States. In Hindu moral communities in rural India, at least among high-caste communities, the taboo on divorce is a preferred constraint (despite the laws of the land). Thus women have a more secure license to engage in conflicts with their husbands. By the time a reproductively successful woman has reached the culturally specified life stage of mature adulthood ("prauda") (approximately thirty-five to sixty years of age), she has moved up in the family prestige hierarchy and has gained considerable control over her life and the lives of other women. She is deeply embedded in family social networks, the value of which she perceives to more than compensate her for the culturally acknowledged "sadness" produced by the intense social constraints on her mobility and autonomy during the earlier life stage of "jouvana" (the stage between marriage and mature adulthood).

A typical Oriya housewife in a Brahmanical joint family compound is acutely self-conscious about matters of social standing and social position and far less concerned about matters of physical appearance and psychological well-being. Indeed, the life course tends to be defined into five stages primarily on the basis of the kinship-based social statuses and responsibilities associated with fertility, marriage, childbearing, and family management.

One big life-course divide is between life in my father's house ("hapa gharo") and life in my mother-in-law's house ("sasu gharo"). Life in my father's house is divided into life before versus life after the time (approximately seven to nine years of age) when a child begins to pray for itself and knows the difference between right and wrong. At that time the undisciplined child ("piya") becomes a morally formative youth ("kishoru"). Life in my mother-in-law's house begins as a newly wed daughter-in-law ("jouvana") and ends with the explicit social markings and restrictions of widowhood ("briddha"). The burdens and social responsibilities of life peak in young adulthood. Widowhood is a socially formalized period of perpetual mourning and ascetic renunciation. Remarriage is prohibited. No cosmetics and only white saris are worn. A series of food taboos are imposed; there are prohibitions against fish, meat, garlic, onions, or any other food that might (by the lights of the local theory of hot and cold foods) stimulate the senses or arouse feelings of sensuality. Life is spent in penance and prayer and in absolving oneself of spiritual debts (or what we call sins).

Mature adulthood ("prauda") contrasts sharply with the burdens of early adulthood and the penance of widowhood. In between a period of monotonous drudgery and fateful asceticism is a stage of life where one is likely to be an experienced mother-in-law, with a high standing in the prestige hierarchy and with the capacity to manage and control the family and to be somewhat withdrawn from the laborious demands of the daily family routine.

Oriya women in extended family households have idyllic memories of life in their father's house. Indeed, I would predict that a surprising number of them would say that six to ten years of age is the very best age to be. Aside from early childhood, however, it is the years of mature adulthood, after raising children and before sixty years of age, that they view as the most satisfying and happiest years in a life.

The reverse seems to be true for Anglo-American women. In the United States the autonomy and freedom of young married life is frequently followed by a period of vulnerability associated with foreboding signs of aging and an intense concern about attractiveness. Given the absence of any major social constraints concerning divorce, there is for many women a sense of anxiety and disappointment over the lack of reliability and loyalty of middle-aged males. For others there is the sense of isolation from children and other kin. There are the mental and physical costs of divorce. For midlife Anglo-American women in the United States, self-esteem is measured against many yardsticks, but not typically or primarily against the yardstick of social responsibility within a hierarchy of coresiding kin. This contrasting trajectory of perceived life satisfactions between Oriya and Anglo-American women can be seen in figure 1.

If solipsism makes ethnography seem impossible, superficialism makes it appear far easier than it really is. Superficialism is the view that the only way you can ever know anything about someone who has a mental life is by asking him or her the same English question that you are going to ask everyone else in the world, and by insisting that the responses be kept short. In figure 1 I engage in a bit of superficialism, which I hope can now be deepened or thickened or fattened up by all the contextualizations and local meanings I have tried to provide in my very brief summary of the moral world of Hindu joint family life.

In the course of conducting very detailed and intimate interviews with sixty-six Oriya women of various ages, Usha Menon asked them to assess
their past, present, and future life satisfaction on a five-point scale. She asked about the ratio of positive and negative events in their lives five to ten years ago, now, and as anticipated five to ten years hence. Comparable data, surveying American women about past, present, and future life satisfaction (how satisfied are you with your life on a ten-point scale) had been previously collected by Paul Cleary and his associates at the Harvard Medical School.

The American findings (fig. 1) suggest that (on the average) adult women report the same level of life satisfaction (seven on a ten-point scale) no matter what age they are. Female adults less than fifty years of age remember a past that was less satisfying than the present and anticipate a future that is more satisfying than the present. The younger the female adult the greater is the discrepancy between past, present, and future life satisfaction. The promise of the future in comparison to the present slowly declines in a linear fashion until, somewhere between fifty and sixty-four years of age, the past is no longer remembered as worse than the present and the future is no longer anticipated with optimism. I want to use these unpublished results from Cleary’s research as a point of comparison with the local Oriya scene.

The data on Oriya women are based on very small samples compared to the American survey research. Nevertheless, a very suggestive pattern is revealed that highlights both similarities and differences with the American results. The pattern makes good cultural sense, given all the things I have said about what it is like to be an Oriya housewife in a traditional joint family household.

The results in figure 1 suggest that, just like American women, Oriya women less than fifty years of age remember a past that was less satisfying than the present and anticipate a future that will be more satisfying than the present. And just like American women, they eventually stop looking toward the future with optimism somewhere between fifty and sixty-four years of age. That much is the same across the two cultural worlds.

Nevertheless, two striking differences appear in the life-course phenomenology of these Oriya women. For one thing, Oriya women do not exhibit a linear decline in anticipated future life satisfaction as they move from their twenties into their thirties and forties. Quite the contrary, it is the period of mature adulthood that excites the greatest anticipation of positive life satisfaction. Second, the Oriya women exhibit a dramatic decline in both present and anticipated life satisfaction as they enter old age. Given all that I have said about the burdens and responsibilities of low-status brides and about the culturally marked and elaborated requirements of a mournful ascetic widowhood, it should be possible to contextualize these results. It should also be possible to suggest that evaluations of per-
sonal well-being are not driven only by the universal reality of aging, but are driven as well by the institutions and meanings of one’s local moral community.

The Native’s Point of View

In this essay I have suggested that a true ethnography is a hypothetical model representing the preferences and constraints exhibited in the behavior (discourse and praxis) of members of a moral community. This is not to say that a true ethnography must adduce good reasons for the customs of others which they cannot adduce for themselves. Long before any ethnographer arrives and tries to move in, members of most moral communities have constructed models of and for their own behavior, which they display to one another through that common form of behavior that Hammel and many others have labeled “evaluative discourse.” By means of evaluative discourse members of most moral communities comment on their preferences and constraints, socialize and sanction their members, and seek to maintain their honor, prestige, and well-being. The observation of everyday evaluative discourse by members of a moral community offers the ethnographer a glimpse of the official cultural model constructed by insiders to represent to themselves and (sometimes) to others the meanings exhibited in their own behavior. So it is a mistake to assume that insiders cannot speak for themselves.

On the other hand, it is also a mistake to assume that the official cultural model constructed by insiders must be the best or only way to model the preferences and constraints exhibited in the behavior of members of a moral community. While the insider is entitled to the first say (and may well turn out to be an expert at constructing a model of the preferences and constraints exhibited in observed behavior), not all members of a moral community are experts about their own way of life.

In one recent study of narrated meanings about a core religious icon in Bhubaneswar, Menon and Shweder (1994) discovered that knowledge about the Great Goddess of Hinduism is culturally structured yet quite unevenly distributed across ninety-two members of the temple town community.

The meanings were culturally structured in the following sense. The twenty-five most frequently mentioned meanings associated with the icon of the Goddess Kali formed a rather neat Guttman scale. That is to say, it was possible to predict which meanings would be mentioned by any particular narrator by simply knowing how many meanings were mentioned, and those meanings which were mentioned by the fewest narrators were mentioned by precisely those narrators who knew the most about the icon.

Yet the meanings were also unevenly distributed. Less than 25 percent of the members of this rather close-knit community were highly expert in the meanings of one of the most important symbols in their local moral world.

In other words, when it comes to representing the “native’s point of view,” there is no solipsistic privilege accorded to what insiders say. Like the thing called culture itself, the native’s point of view is nothing more than a theoretical model, articulated in a mental-state language (a folk psychologese) intelligible to the ethnographer, and constructed as a theoretical representation of the hypothesized preferences and constraints exhibited in the observed behavior of some “other.”

It is the native’s point of view because it is the native’s behavior that is being modeled, not the ethnographer’s. That model of the native’s behavior is mentalistic. It personifies and represents the other as a subject, not as an object. The model is derived from a theory of true ethnography that is antisolipsistic and promentalistic. The native’s point of view is a construction. No one has to actually climb inside anyone else’s head to understand that point of view. It does not really matter who constructs the model, us or them, as long as it provides a plausible and intelligible account of the concepts and ideas exhibited in the behavior of a designated moral community.

Every attempt to understand what it is like to be another person or people runs the risk of going too far in the direction of solipsism, or, alternatively, too far in the direction of superficiality. A truly true ethnography stays on course between a self-indulgent narcissism and a shallow humanism, making it possible for us to contemplate the meaning of life in a premodern frame of mind. A true ethnography may even make it possible for a French anthropologist to understand what it is like to live outside a Gallic world.

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Notes

1. Alas, there is this deep irony inherent in the ethnographic enterprise, for one is likely to become bored with otherness as soon as the other is so well understood that his or her behavior, which once seemed astonishing, comes to seem commonsensical, commonplace, and merely routine. Fortunately for ethnography, one can never be everyone at once—otherness will never be in short supply.

2. Perhaps it is for this reason that one would not want to construct a grammar of a language by relying on what speakers of a language might tell you about their grammar. That would be data for the study of ethnographical “theories” but not necessarily data for the study of the grammar of their language. To get the latter type of data one would want to go through some type of dialectical process whereby spoken sentences were judged for grammatical “acceptability” by “competent” speakers, while at the same time speakers were judged for grammatical competence by reference to sentences known to be grammatically acceptable. Yes, the process is circular, but not necessarily vicious.

3. Recent research conducted in Zaire by Robert Aunger (1994) on the reliability of repeated interviews about food taboos provides some justification for a heavy reliance in data collection on the interpersonal and linguistic skills of insiders. A visiting anthropologist may not be as good as indigenous native interviewers at eliciting stable and reliable verbal responses. Aunger discovers that the information provided by indigenous folk about their food taboos in two repeated identically formatted interview sessions is more likely to be the same information when the interviewer is a cultural compatriot rather than an anthropologist. On the other hand, I would suggest that the role of “outsider” may have certain benefits in that informants may be willing to disclose to a temporary visitor information that would threaten their reputation if offered to a cultural compatriot.

References


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3

The Epistemology of Qualitative Research

HOWARD S. BECKER

Qualitative and Quantitative

It is rhetorically unavoidable, discussing epistemological questions in social science, to compare qualitative and ethnographic methods with those which are quantitative and survey: to compare, imaginatively, a field study conducted in a community or organization with a survey of that same community or organization undertaken with questionnaires, self-administered or put to people by interviewers who see them once, armed with a printed form to be filled out. The very theme of this conference assumed such a division.

Supposing that the two ways of working are based on different epistemological foundations and justifications leads to asking the question posed to me by the conference's organizers: What's the epistemology of qualitative research? To me, it's an odd question. I'm an intellectual descendant of Robert E. Park, the founder of what has come to be called the Chicago school of sociology. Park was a great advocate of what we now call ethnographic methods. But he was equally a proponent of quantitative methods, particularly ecological ones. I follow him in that, and to me, the similarities between these methods are at least as, and probably more, important and relevant than the differences. In fact, I think that the same epistemological arguments underlie and provide the warrant for both.

How so? Both kinds of research try to see how society works, to describe social reality, to answer specific questions about specific instances of social reality. Some social scientists are interested in very general descriptions, in the form of laws about whole classes of phenomena. Others are more interested in understanding specific cases, how those general statements worked out in this case. But there's a lot of overlap.