The (strange) life of ethnographers

Fiction and incorporation in anthropological knowledge

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What ethnographers do is departing from a familiar environment and moving to an unfamiliar one; therein, they construct a new network of everyday interactions, with the hope of getting familiar with the lives of other persons and their vision of the world. For this purpose, ethnographers spend prolonged periods in the field and share everyday life, practices, and reasoning with their so-called informants. Turning life into a method (Piasere, 2002) enables to collect huge amounts of verbal and non-verbal information, and to eventually incorporate cultural models by the simple fact of “being there” (Hastrup & Hervik, 1994a; Okely, 1992, 1994; Piasere, 2002; Walcott, 1999, 2001). In its peculiarities, the modus operandi of ethnographers highlights aspects that, although appearing in less evident forms, pertain to every qualitative method of investigation in social sciences. Ethnography is thus an interesting standpoint to reflect in general on what social scientists do and what knowledge they produce through their investigations.

The first part of this article inquires into the specificity of the ethnographic method; it discusses the idea of ethnography as an “experiment of experience” and examines the role non-verbal information, time and processes of incorporation play in the acquisition of knowledge. The second part draws attention to the fictional character of knowledge – not exclusively that produced by anthropologists. It discusses the role played by schemes and metaphors in guiding our perception of the world, and demonstrates that anthropological accounts, as any other form of knowledge, can be conceived as metaphorical descriptions that endow reality with a possible form and meaning.

By discussing ethnographic fieldwork, therefore, this paper invites to reflect on the relational character of qualitative research, on the role of the body in scientific investigation, and on fiction as key-category in the production of knowledge in social sciences – where fiction is not deliberate invention but rather an act of giving shape to reality.

Experience and Incorporation

Many handbooks addressing methodological issues in social sciences (see e.g., Creswell, 2007; Davies, 2008; Esterberg, 2001; Silverman, 2005; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) dedicate just few pages, whether not some lines, to the ethnographic method. Ethnography is collocated in the compartment of the qualitative methods in the toolbox of social scientists, but the discussion usually does not go much beyond the presentation of the duplet participation-observation and some practical advices. As Walcott (1999, p. 12-13) noticed, this risks spoiling ethnography of its connotations as a specific discipline, and it eventually confuses ethnographic data with other kinds of data collected through other qualitative methodologies (see also, Holy & Stuchlik, 2007; Walcott, 2001). The aim of the next pages is thus clarifying the concept of ethnographic fieldwork and inquiring into the relations between ethnographic practice and knowledge.
Anthropological fieldwork has been traditionally defined through the duplet “participation and observation” (Fabietti, 1999, p. 33). Especially in the last two decades, this couple occupied a central position in the anthropological debate about methods: many pointed at the potential paradox of participating and observing at the same time, and highlighted the ambiguous intertwining of the two (Duranti, 1992; Gobo, 2001; Esterberg, 2001; Holy & Stuchlik, 2007; Wallcott, 1999); others tried to eschew the paradox and ambiguities implied by the duplet by proposing new expressions, such as “experience and interpretation” (Clifford, 1988) or “shared experience” (Fabietti, 1999; Hastrup & Hervik, 1994b). Although alternative formulations did not resolve polemics and debates (Herzfeld, 2001, p. 21-23), the shift of accent towards experience led to some interesting reflections.

Piasere (2002) for example argued that “the correlation between experiment in natural sciences and fieldwork in anthropology” accompanied the affirmation of prolonged field observation as the method per excellence in anthropology (p. 6). Explicitly referring to Devereux’s (1967) comparison between the ethnographic fieldwork and an experimental laboratory, and developing D’Andrade’s (1984) considerations about “cultural experiments”, Piasere (2002, p. 2-27) defined the ethnographic fieldwork as an “experiment of experience”, in which the ethnographer makes first of all an experiment on her/himself.

Indeed, an ethnographer moves from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one, with the aim of learning language, ideas, values, everyday gestures and practices of persons who do not belong to his/her everyday life. This requires experiencing what other people experience, and thus spending with them an enormous quantity of time, lingering over things, learning how people linger over things, and allowing being transported by their vicissitudes.¹ This is why, Piasere (2002) explained, “dead moments [are] extremely necessary and time is not wasted, when we categorize these moments outside productive-commercial categories” (p. 157). Indeed, it is by being “together-with through an active, non-structured, patient involvement with people” (p. 156) that an ethnographer eventually “finds information and interactions also when not looking for them, because these are all around him” (p. 158).

In other words, ethnographers attempt to maintain some control over their experiment of experience: at first by consulting literary sources and creating the ethnographic setting; on the field, by controlling actions, dialogues, and practices. Nonetheless, fieldwork is predominantly ruled by the logic of serendipity: things mainly occur by chance and often take unexpected turns. Thus, rather than searching around for preselected information, an ethnographer acquires knowledge by living-with, being open and receptive to his/her interlocutors, and by sharing with them existence, thoughts and practices (Hastrup, 1992; Hastrup & Hervik, 1994b; Wikan, 1992).

The ethnographic fieldwork is thus a holistic experience that is lived in the mind as much as in the body. Dissenting from Clifford’s idea (1988) that “fieldwork is significantly composed of language events” (p. 41), Hastrup and Hervik (1994b) claimed that “language events, or the eliciting of information, are but a fraction of what constitutes the material” (p. 6), and that “most of the relevant information is non-verbal […] and has to be experienced and performed” (p. 3). Indeed, as Hastrup (1994) noticed, cultural models are incorporated, in both meanings of being “internalized” (“they become encoded in bodily practices”) and “externalized” (“they are expressed in action rather than words”) (p. 233).

This means that ethnographers learn through processes that might be hardly reduced to conscious and controlled learning, because the source of ethnographic learning lies first of all in the domain of implicit and incorporated (or embodied)

¹ For a thorough analysis of the work of time on the field, see also Bourdieu (1972/1977, p. 281-292).

“An unconscious or conscious acquisition of cognitive-experiential schemas that enter in resonance with already internalized schemas; this acquisition occurs through piling, over-appositions, leaps, explosions, [...] and prolonged co-experience wherein fluctuating processes of attention and empathy, of abduction and mimesis play a fundamental role” (Pasere, 2002, p. 56).

In short, ethnographers turn life into a method. By living the everyday life of other people – thus sharing their vicissitudes, emotions, practices, mundane gestures, ideas, and thoughts – ethnographers learn doing things and thinking in a certain way, eventually incorporating what might be defined – to use one of Bourdieu’s (1972/1977) renowned ideas – the “habitus” of their interlocutors.

Reciprocity of observation and third worlds of meanings

In his work “From anxiety to method” (1967), the ethno-psychiatrist Devereux brilliantly illustrated the transactional character of investigation in what he defined “behavioural sciences”. Devereux defined research as an experiment, in which the “analyst” produces some stimuli on the researched and registers the latter’s reactions to the experimental situation. He also argued that the researched perceives the experimental situation according to his identity – personality, gender, age, profession, etc – and to the analyst’s identity too; using a psychoanalytical expression, Devereux called this transference: “the total sum of the distortions of the perception and reactions of the patient to the analyst” (1967, p. 98). Devereux also sustained that the definition of who observes who is just a convention – usually sustained by an unbalanced relation of power – and, thus, that also the researched observes the analyst. This means that also the researcher produces distortions in his perception of the experimental situation; and these distortions are called counter-transference.

The reciprocity of observation and its counter-transference implications are, still according to Devereux, major sources of anxiety in the analyst; they threaten the analyst’s professional self-image and relation of power with the researched; but also, they question the analyst’s illusion of objectivity. Thus, in order to protect themselves, behavioural scientists adopt a series of “experimental filters” – among which are also methods – framed within the attempt to locate the analyst outside the experimental situation, erase the reciprocity of observation, and thus neutralize anxiety. Experimental filters, nota bene, produce just the illusion of getting rid of subjectivity (of both patient and analyst, researched and researcher) because the subjective element cannot be erased, but just veiled or postponed.

Devereux’s arguments, thus, is that methods are often used to create an illusory denial of the reciprocity of observation and of the consequent counter-transference, because “We don’t know ourselves and our value as stimulation...and we don’t have any wish to know it” (p. 73, Italics in text). Far from representing the key to objectivity, this “neurotic use” of experimental filters suppresses the most precious material. The gross mistake committed by behavioural scientists is that, by ignoring the reciprocity of observation, they consider transference as the crucial data of an experiment; Devereux contents that the researcher’s anxiety and her/his distortions are, instead, the real “crucial data”, their acknowledgement being a necessary step for a correct epistemology of observation: only a conscious use of the “experimental filters” may lead “from anxiety to method” and thus turn subjectivity into an instrument of objectivity.
Although formulated relatively long ago, Devereux’s considerations are quite relevant. In the last decades, anthropologists have been putting emphasis on using “the self – as much of it as possible – as the instrument of knowing” (Ortner 1995, p. 173; see also, Cohen, 1992; Davies, 2008; Walcott, 1999); as well, they underlined the importance of turning the anxiety inherent to fieldwork activity into a heuristic instrument, especially in high-risk situations (De Soto & Dudwick, 2000; Tourigny, 2004). Also, anthropologists insist on the necessity of accounting for field relations in the production of anthropological knowledge. The knowledge produced on the field, it has been repeatedly asserted, results from complex negotiations, in which ethnographers and informants reciprocally manipulate each other, adjust their categories of thought, and produce a fusion of horizons resulting in new meanings – new to all those involved in the fieldwork relation (Geertz 1973, p. 3-30; Hastrup, 1992; Hervik, 1994; Herzfeld, 2001, p. 45-52; Malinghetti, 1998; Steier, 1991, p. 163-181).

The flow of knowledge activated on the field is thus not mono-directional (from the informants to the ethnographer) but rather assumes the traits of a hermeneutic circularity. Anthropological knowledge can be thus conceived as a metissage, a “third world of meanings” (Fabietti 1999, p. 7-17) that are co-constructed and eventually shared by both the ethnographer and her/his informants – who, it is worth noticing, should be rather defined as “co-interpreters” (Thomas, 1991, as cited in Herzfeld, 2001, p. 49) or “reciprocators” (Steier, 1991).

In light of this discussion, it is easy to understand why Hervik (1994) individuated in the relational and interpretative nature of anthropological fieldwork the possibility to transcend the idea of reflexivity as just a subjective introspection – “a matter of investigating the position of the author and the production of texts” (p. 94). Hervik asserted that “reflexivity cannot be reduced to a mental process of the individual, or be separated from reflexivity in interaction” (p. 88). On the field, an ethnographer gains “insight into the collective beliefs stored in cultural models” only by sharing social experience and reasoning; in this holistic experience, the self-reflexivity of the ethnographer interacts and evolves with other self-reflexivities – those of the persons s/he encounters on the field. The result is a new kind of reflexivity, or better “shared reflexivity”, which becomes “the experience of relativism not as a form of anti-objectivity but as our only mode to objectivization” (Arderner, 1989, p. 212-221, as cited in Hervik, 1994, p. 96).

Fiction and the metaphorical description of the world

The interpretational nature of anthropological knowledge brought some scholars (see e.g., Clifford, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973) to consider anthropological accounts as fiction. I will not incur into the exaggerations produced by some post-modernist drifts, which – as Jackson (1983/2006), Malinghetti (1998) or Herzfeld (2001) noticed – detached anthropological knowledge from the field and the body experiencing it, and reduced it to the desk and the linguistic models produced at the desk. Nonetheless, the next pages are dedicated to develop and elucidate the fictional character of anthropological knowledge.

The link between fiction and knowledge was suggested by existentialist philosophers such as Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1960/2004), who argued that reality does not exist outside the finite comprehension of finite beings – as we are. In other words, there is no world “out there” independently from the way we see it, and there is no discourse on the world either, but rather the “world configured by

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2 The reference is especially to Clifford’s and Tayler’s radical positions (in Clifford & Marcus, 1986), where fiction is discussed in terms of simulation, illusion, when not deliberate invention opposed to an objective reality.
discourse” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 94). Knowledge is thus not a mimetic reproduction of the world; it is a “poiesis” creating the world by giving it shape through symbolical constructs.

If knowledge may be intended as the construction of possible worlds, on the epistemological level the question concerns “the conditions for the presentation of objects in human sciences” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 99): that is, how do we objectify reality? The old debate opposing human and exact sciences may help unravelling this issue. The object of the exact sciences – it was once sustained on the tracks of the Linnean project – would exist in the outside world; thus, it could be presented through the “extensional form” of a law, that is a “universal enunciation describing the properties of a group of objects” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 117). In other words, exact sciences would objectify the reality so-to-say “out there” through what Kant called cognitive representations (Vorstellung): these would classify objects found in the world on the basis of logical procedures dominated by the principle of non-contradiction.

In the case of human sciences, instead, the configuration that transforms phenomena into objects of knowledge would be rather an intuitive representation that, having interiorized the thematic of the absence of the object, would present objects indirectly, as if they actually existed. Historical events, for example, would not be objectified through a cognitive, mental representation proceeding by the means of classifications and taxonomies; rather, they would be made visible through what Kant called “presentation” (Darstellung), that is an “imaginative exhibition” of something that cannot be represented because it does not exist per se: an “argumentative procedure grounded not on logical forms, but on the imaginative forms of inference” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 99, Italics in text).

The divide between human and exact sciences, and between the categories and procedures by the means of which they operate, has been surpassed long ago; thus, what was once asserted about the objectification of historical events can be assessed about objects (of knowledge) of other nature too. The relevant point for the analysis I am hereby proposing, nonetheless, is that the absence of a world out there implies that knowledge is closer to a presentation (Darstellung) —“a symbolical function of an absence” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 117, Italics in text) — than a representation (Vorstellung) — “an iconic image of things in their presence” (p. 118). Roughly speaking, when talking about an ethnic group, a cultural meaning or a value, anthropologists recur to figurative presentations (Darstellungen), which present these objects indirectly (as if they actually existed) and operate within the analogical-differential domain.

In order to understand this point, it should be noticed that figurative representations are nothing else than schemes. Borutti (2003/2005) argues that a scheme can be intended neither a “form found in the world”, or as “a mental thing contained in the mind” (p. 118); rather, it is a model showing “the relations by the means of which a multiplicity of objects are reciprocally connected (p. 107). This perspective is close to D’Andrade’s (1995) idea of scheme as organized structure of objects and relations, which functions as a method because it produces expectations by anticipating the virtual multiplicity of all the possible objects of that type.

An interesting aspect of a scheme is that it “contains one or more prototypical exemplifications” (Piasere, 2002, p. 71), where for prototype we should intend the exemplary object, “that [object] which displays all or the majority of the traits constructing a category [...] or the majority of the traits shared by the majority of the members of that category” (p. 63-4). The fact that the categories, by the means of

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3 Actually, Kant himself clearly assessed that the cognitive representation (Vorstellung) belonging to the exact sciences is intimately belonging to the imaginative exhibition (Darstellung), because “also the application of categories [thus, of taxonomies and laws] requires an imaginative function that presents the objects” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 101).
which we comprehend and give shape to the world, have a prototypical structure
bears important implications. A category of objects constructed around a prototype
does not follow Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction: it comprises central
elements (that is, prototypes or exemplary objects) but also marginal members – that
is, members that are so-to-say less members than others, because they display only
partially the traits constructing a category, and/or because they display also traits that
construct other categories.

The prototypical structure, therefore, produces semantic fuzziness: the presence of
marginal members blurs borders between categories and makes them permeable; this
in turn allows semantic shifts by the means of analogies and differences, and thus
enables establishing connections between heterogeneous objects and concepts

Knowledge can be thus conceived as “the typically human capacity to construe and
mould the perceptive world, to endow it with a shape, […] which makes seeing
possible” (Borutti, 2003/2005, p. 94). But seeing is made possible by the means of
exemplary objects, that is, by putting the world in relation with models that guide our
comprehension and endow reality with form and meaning. As a consequence, “seeing”
is always a “seeing as”, and our perception of the world is first of all a metaphorical
description of it (Borutti, 1991; Lackoff & Johnson, 1980).

This does not necessarily mean overestimating the power of the verbal domain,
with the consequent depreciation of the role non-verbal and unspoken elements play
in structuring our perception and comprehension of the world. Indeed, echoing
Heidegger’s argument about language being only one – and not necessarily primary –
onontological key of access to the world, Jackson (1983/2006) argued that the
metaphors, by the means of which we shape and signify the world, have an embodied
character. A similar idea was proposed by Lackoff (1993), who argued that metaphors
are “grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge” (p. 243) (see
also Lackoff & Johnson, 1980).

That the world is created under a metaphorical description thus means, on the one
hand, that anthropological accounts create a world through a narrative that endows
reality with a possible shape and thus makes it visible and comprehensible. On the other
hand, it means that through metaphors and analogies, anthropologists try making sense
of the metaphorical description of the world they lived and incorporated on the field;
and they do this by making use of the metaphorical language provided by scientific dis-
course, and by making it interact, intertwine and eventually blend with the metaphors
and analogies proposed by the persons anthropologists got to know on the field.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued that the practice of ethnography is an “experiment of
experience” (Piasere, 2002); and that extended periods in the field being receptive and
engaged, sharing experience, emotions, reasoning and reflexivity (in short, sharing life)
with our interlocutors, are necessary conditions for the acquisition of a precious
knowledge that lies beyond elicited verbal information, as it is “encoded in bodily
practices” and “expressed through the body” (Hastrup, 1994, p.233). The discussion
of the incorporated nature of ethnographic knowledge intertwined with a discussion
of its hermeneutic character; it led to examine the concept of fiction in anthropology,
and to conceive it not in terms of deliberate invention, but rather as an act of shaping

4 In a hermeneutic circularity, the model in turn is reshaped and reorganized at the light of every new
experience of interpretation.

These considerations go beyond the ethnographic method and the anthropological knowledge. The discussion of the corporeal and fictional character of the knowledge produced during ethnographic fieldwork can be extended to the knowledge produced through other qualitative methods of investigation in social sciences. As well, the reciprocity of observation, the anxiety it provokes, the neurotic use of experimental filters, and the consequent risk of distorting materials characterize, mutatis mutandis, also other experimental situations, such as interviews, questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, or collection of life stories.

I conclude with a last consideration. As here discussed, “life as a method” is a motto shared by ethnographers (or at least some of them). Without doubt, this idea also captures the meaning the Romá I met during my ethnographic fieldwork assign to life, viewed as the best teacher, the learning method par excellence. Probably, also some philosophers of education and ordinary parents might agree on the pedagogical value of life. Turning life into a method, however, requires epistemological and methodological awareness; and this applies indistinctly to the strange lives of the ethnographers, to those of the Romá I know, and to our ordinary, everyday lives.

References


