

Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self: Implications for Anthropological Epistemology

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It was a muggy August afternoon in Tokyo, so hot the leaves were drooping limply from the trees surrounding my Japanese family's house. My Japanese "mother" and "sister" were at the doctor's, so I was busy helping the grandfather tend his young granddaughter. He quickly tired of his duties, leaving me to entertain her and to see that she not toddle too far afield. Promptly at 4 PM, the hour when most Japanese housewives shop for the evening meal, I lifted the baby into her stroller and pushed her along ahead of me as I inspected the fish, selected the freshest looking vegetables, and mentally planned the meal for the evening. As I glanced up into the shiny metal surface of the butcher's display case, I noticed someone who looked terribly familiar: a typical young housewife, in slip-on sandals and the kind of cotton shift the Japanese label "home wear," a woman walking with a characteristically Japanese bend in the knees and sliding of the feet. Suddenly I clutched the handle of the stroller to steady myself as a wave of dizziness washed over me—for I realized I had caught a glimpse of nothing less than my own reflection. Fear that perhaps I would never emerge from this world into which I was immersed, inserted itself into my mind and stubbornly refused to leave, until I resolved to move into a new apartment, to distance myself from my Japanese home and my Japanese existence.

That an anthropologist's experience in the field is conditioned by his/her culturally and biographically mediated way of seeing—one's distance from one's informants and the inevitable prejudices forming one's baggage of cultural assumptions—is by now an idea of no particular novelty in anthropological circles. Recent experiments in ethnography and anthropological epistemology sensitively examine these issues, based around an awareness of the position of the ethnographer vis-à-vis his/her informants and how this might affect the fieldwork experience and its representation in the ethnographic text (cf. Crapanzano 1977; Rosaldo 1984).

Yet most ethnographies, even of the reflexive kind, are products of contexts in which the observer/ethnographer is a visible outsider. Perhaps as a consequence (and perhaps as a gender difference; see Kirschner 1983), these ethnographies depict the Other as ineffably alien, as separate, distinct beings. The best we can

do, they say, is to engage in a reasoned dialogue with the Other, thereby achieving a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1982), where discourse constitutes threads tenuously connecting two monads (e.g., Rabinow 1977; Dwyer 1982). For anthropologists of the interpretive persuasion such as Geertz, the essentially public, *en plein air* nature of social life leaves no room for any other kinds of knowledge, for knowing the Other is even more distant than conversation: it is like reading a text (Geertz 1973).

Through the analysis of several key moments in the process of my fieldwork, I examine the implications of these events for the nature of anthropological inquiry. Central to the understanding of these events are the hermeneutic concepts of distance and prejudice or foreunderstanding. In the work of Gadamer (1982), distance generally connotes historical distance from a text or work of art; for Ricoeur, “distanciation” seems to be a cognitive (and, although less explicitly recognized, emotional) stance. Here, I interpret “distance” as position (inside or outside the culture) as well as a cognitive/emotional orientation (how removed or alien one may find the Other). Distance is inseparable from “foreunderstanding” or “prejudice,” where one’s assumptions arising from experiences as a particular individual from a particular society, inevitably enter into one’s interpretations. Along with Heidegger (1962), Gadamer, and others, I assume that there can be no understanding free of value or presupposition.¹

The particular degrees of distance I had from my informants and the foreunderstandings we had of one another were instrumental in propelling me toward this “collapse of identity.” As a Japanese-American young woman doing fieldwork in Japan, the Other was not totally Other for me. I am a third-generation Japanese American (Sansei); thus, I look Japanese, and in some ways have incorporated certain “Japanese” cultural characteristics through my parents and grandparents. However, Japanese was not spoken in my home; my identification is first with American culture; my way of thinking, as well, is largely American. It was this combination of looking Japanese and in some ways feeling Japanese, yet not possessing the linguistic and cultural skills of a true native, that were critical in bringing about the moment of breakdown. Following the epistemological implications of such an unusual event may open anthropological inquiry to the possibility of other, more experiential and affective modes of knowing. These, too, form part of our prejudices and can be productive of understanding.

Far from a mystical communion or mere projection, I would argue that the collapse was carefully negotiated by the ethnographer and her informants within particular configurations of power. This orchestration was in turn based on the foreunderstandings that both the ethnographer and the informants brought to the encounter. I emphasize here the collusion between all parties involved, for it is important to recognize the ways in which informants are also actors and agents, and that the negotiation of reality that takes place in the doing of ethnography involves complex and shifting relations of power in which the ethnographer acts and is also acted upon.

I examine this complex process through the analysis of my “collapse of identity” and through a moment of “epiphany” in which I first realized the different

relation of self to the social world in Japanese life. In both cases, the pivot of this negotiation of reality lay in various ways of defining identity and selfhood, for both the informants and the anthropologist. In order to disentangle the threads of this complex collusion, let us begin at the beginning, with certain salient features of “identity” in both cultures: race, gender, and age.

Forming the Conspiracy: The Movement Toward Otherness

On Being a Conceptual Anomaly

Most Japanese people I knew seemed to adhere to an eminently biological definition of Japaneseness. Race, language, and culture are interlaced, so much so that any challenge to this firmly entrenched conceptual schema—a Caucasian who speaks flawlessly idiomatic and unaccented Japanese, or a person of Japanese ancestry who cannot—meets with all manner of unpleasant reactions: in the former case, coldness and intimations that such behavior is unnatural and repulsive; in the latter, with exasperation and disbelief.

Indeed, it is a minor miracle that my first few months in Tokyo did not lead to acute agoraphobia, for I knew that once I set foot outside the door, someone somewhere (a taxi driver? a salesperson? a bank clerk?) would greet one of my linguistic mistakes with an astonished “Eh?” I became all too familiar with the series of expressions flickering over these faces: bewilderment, incredulity, embarrassment, even anger, at having to deal with this odd person who looked Japanese and therefore human, but who must be retarded, deranged, or—God forbid—Chinese or Korean. Defensively, I would mull over the mistake of the day. I mean, how was I to know that to “fillet a fish,” you had to cut it “in three pieces”? Or that opening a bank account involved so many intricacies of terminology? Courses in literary Japanese hadn’t prepared me for this. Gritting my teeth in determination as I groaned inwardly, I would force myself out of the house each morning.

Clearly, for both ethnographer and her informants, this was a stressful time, when expectations were flouted, when we had to strain to make sense of one another. For me, there seemed to be few advantages in retaining an American persona, for the distress caused by these adverse reactions was difficult to bear. I felt every effort necessary in order to blend in and to avoid being unmasked as a foreigner. This involved language learning in the broadest sense: mastery of culturally appropriate modes of moving, acting, and speaking. For my informants, it was clear that coping with this anomalous creature was difficult, for here was someone who looked almost like a real human being, but who simply failed to perform according to expectation. They, too, had every reason to make me over in their image, to guide me toward properly Japanese behavior, so that the discrepancy between my appearance and my cultural competence would not be so painfully apparent. I posed a challenge to their senses of identity. How could someone who *looked* Japanese not *be* Japanese? Their response in the face of this dissonance was to *make* me as Japanese as possible, in accordance with their own

preconceptions. Thus, the first nine months of fieldwork were characterized by this mutual attempt to reduce the distance between Self and Other. My anthropological training propelled me toward this goal, and it was reinforced by my informants' unmistakable distress when I acted in an American mode, rather than trying to adopt a predictably Japanese way of being and acting.

By the time I moved in with a family—a temporary arrangement for the summer, until construction was completed on the apartment where I was scheduled to move—my patterns of behavior had become firmly established. During my stay with the Sakamotos, I did my best to conform to what I thought *their* expectations of a daughter might be. This in turn seemed to please them and reinforced my tendency toward behaving in terms of, and identifying with, my Japanese role.

My initial encounter with the head of the household epitomizes this mirroring and reinforcement of behavior. He had been on a business trip on the day I moved in, but came back on the next day, as the wife, daughter, and I were in the process of eating the evening meal. As soon as he stepped in the door, I immediately switched from an informal posture, seated on the *zabuton* (seat cushion) to a formal greeting posture, *seiza* style (kneeling on the floor), and bowed low, hands on the floor. He responded in kind (being older, male, and head of the household, he did not have to place his hands on the floor, nor did he lower his head to the floor), and we exchanged the requisite greetings. He later told me how happy and how impressed he had been with this act of proper etiquette on my part. He told me that many Japanese young people no longer showed such respect, and that my grandfather must have been a fine man to raise such a granddaughter. Of course his statements cannot be accepted at face value; they may well indicate his relief that I appeared to know *something* of proper Japanese behavior, and it might also have been his way of welcoming me into the family. What is important to note is the way this statement was used to elicit proper Japanese behavior in future encounters. Furthermore, his strategy worked. I was left a warm, positive feeling toward the family, and with an incentive to behave in a Japanese way, for clearly these were the expectations and the desires of those who had taken me in and were sharing their lives with me.

Other members of the household voiced similar sentiments. The daughter, a married woman living in a distant prefecture, had been visiting her parents when I first moved in. After our first meeting, she remarked that I seemed like a typical Japanese woman (*Nihon no josei, to iu kanji*). Later in the summer, the wife confided to me that she would never have allowed a "true American" to live with them; after all, only someone who was of Japanese descent could adjust to life on *tatami* mats, use unsewered toilets, sleep on the floor—in short, live Japanese style. Again, the message was clear: my "family" could feel comfortable with me insofar as I was—and acted—Japanese.

At first, then, a Japanese American made sense to those around me as a none too felicitous combination of racial categories. As fieldwork progressed, however, and my linguistic and cultural skills improved, my informants seemed best able to understand me by placing me in meaningful cultural roles: those of daughter, student, guest, young woman, and prodigal Japanese who had finally come

home. Most people preferred to treat me as a Japanese—sometimes an incomplete or unconventional Japanese, but a Japanese nonetheless. For my informants, my increasingly “Japanese” behavior served to reduce the conceptual ambiguity and dissonance I embodied and to confirm their assumptions about their own identities. That I, too, came to enthusiastically take part in this remolding of the self is a testament to their success in acting upon me.

Conflict and the Fragmentation of Self

Moving into these ready-made roles may have reduced the dissonance in my informants’ minds, but it served only to increase my own. What occurred in the field was a kind of fragmenting of identity into Japanese and American elements, so that the different strands, instead of interweaving to form a coherent whole, strained and tugged against one another. At times, the cleavage between the demands of each role and each culture became intolerably deep. As an American researcher, I had been taught to *act*: independence, mastery, competence, were deemed key virtues. As Japanese daughter, independence and mastery of one’s own fate were out of the question; rather, being a daughter meant duties, responsibilities, and interdependence.

The more I adjusted to my Japanese daughter’s role, the keener the conflict became. In exchange for the care the family accorded me, I was glad to help around the house in any way I could: cleaning, some laundry, cooking for the head of the household when his wife was away at meetings of the many volunteer organizations in which she participated.² It was this last task, however, that produced profound conflicts for me as an American woman. The cooking in and of itself did not offend me; if he were willing to tolerate my culinary mistakes, I didn’t mind learning how to make simple Japanese cuisine. But the etiquette surrounding the serving of food—e.g., that the head of the household is always served first and receives the finest delicacies; that men ask for a second helping of rice by merely holding out the bowl to the woman nearest the rice cooker, perhaps uttering a grunt of thanks—was irritating to me. I carried out my duties uncomplainingly, in what I hope was reasonably good humor. But I was none too happy about these things “inside.” Moreover, I began to chafe under certain restrictions on my movement, such as having to come home at a certain hour. These are perfectly understandable, given the responsibility the family had for the welfare of their female guest, and I abided by their regulations. But I was still exquisitely sensitive to the constraints of my position, and I felt keenly the deconstruction of the self into various constituents at war with one another.

This fundamental ambivalence was heightened by isolation and dependency. Though my status was in some respects high in an education conscious Japan, I was still young, female, and a student. I was in a socially recognized position of dependency vis-à-vis the people I knew. I was not to be feared and obeyed, but protected and helped. In terms of my research, this was an extremely advantageous position, for there is a tendency in Japan to hesitate to disagree openly, especially with a powerful person, choosing instead to reflect back the views she

or he has espoused. Yet on a personal level, this dependency and isolation increased my susceptibility to accede to the collusion of identifying with my Japanese role. By this time I saw little of American friends in Tokyo, for it was difficult to be with people who had so little inkling of how ordinary Japanese lived. My informants and I consequently had every reason to conspire to recreate my identity as Japanese. Precisely because of my dependency and my made-to-order role, I was allowed—or rather, *forced*—to abandon the position of observer. Errors, linguistic or cultural, were dealt with impatiently or with a startled reaction that seemed to say, “Oh yes, you are American after all.” On the other hand, appropriately Japanese behaviors were rewarded with warm, positive reactions, or with comments such as, “You’re more Japanese than the Japanese.”³ Even more frequently, such actions were simply accepted as a matter of course. *Naturally* I would understand, *naturally* I would behave correctly, for after all I was, *au fond*, Japanese.

It was within this context that the collapse of identity occurred. Such a moment was the result of a complex negotiation of reality within a particular configuration of power. As anthropologist, I was there to “study” these people, and yet I was also a young woman in a relationship of dependency. Wanting to participate in “real” Japanese life, and having certain foreunderstandings and predilections that could be attributed to socialization as a Japanese American,⁴ I was a willing conspirator. My informants, at this stage, were able to force me into their own definition of Japaneseness. In a sense, I was their text, to write in Japanese by erasing all traces of Americanness.

“Identity” can imply unity or fusion, but for me what occurred was a fragmentation of the self. The whole was decomposed into its constituent elements, where the “Japanese” part of the self, the element of Otherness, seemed to grow over time. This fragmentation was encouraged by my own participation and by the actions of my informants. At its most extreme point, there was a total identification with Otherness, where the identity I had known in another context simply collapsed. That this moment could occur attests to the success of our conspiracy. At the same time, it was a moment intolerable to my definition of self as an American and as an anthropologist. It led to a sense of vertigo, and to a fear of the Otherness—the Japanese elements—in the self. Though participation and rapport are all highly laudable goals for the anthropologist in the field, in my case participation to the point of identification led also to a disturbing disorientation, an uncertainty as to which role I was playing.

In the end, the collapse of identity was a distancing moment, for only then did I realize the depth of the rift separating the roles of Japanese daughter and American career woman. In the dissonance, experienced with startling impact in the moment of collapse, the respective meanings of each role and each cultural identity were brought into stark relief.

For me, this tension between similarity and difference, “participatory belonging” and “alienated distancing” (Ricoeur 1981), led me to remove myself physically from this exclusively Japanese environment where I made sense to myself and to others only as a Japanese. Had I no firm notion of even my own identity

as Japanese *American*, I felt I had slender hope of appraising what was going on around and inside of me. It was time to extricate myself from the conspiracy. Accordingly, despite invitations to stay with the family for the coming year, I politely stated my intention to fulfill the original terms of the agreement: to stay just until construction on my new apartment was completed. In order to reconstitute my identity as I had known it in American culture, I had to distance myself from this moment of identification with Otherness, and to resist my informants' attempts to recreate me in their own image.

Both the fragmentation of the self and the collapse of identity were the result of a complex collaboration between ethnographer and informants. It should be evident that at this particular point, my informants were not inert objects for the free play of the ethnographer's desire. They themselves were, in the act of being, actively interpreting and trying to make meaning of the ethnographer. In so doing, the informants asserted their power to act upon the anthropologist. Here we find the informants also engaging in a kind of "symbolic violence" (Rabinow 1977:130),⁵ seeking to dominate the anthropological encounter through control of the ethnographer's behavior. This, in turn, helped them to preserve their own senses of identity. Understanding is thus multiple, plurivocal, and pervaded by relations of power. For one's informants are also subjects who possess certain fore-understandings of the ethnographer and the power to shape and control the ethnographer and the ethnographic encounter.

"Epiphany" and the Emergence of the Problem

This moment of collapse was followed by a distancing process. I returned to the States for a month, and upon returning to Japan, I moved into the apartment that had been promised me. My landlady, an acquaintance from my tea ceremony class, became one of my closest friends. I lived next door to her and her family, thereby enjoying the best of both worlds: the warmth of belonging to a family and the privacy of my own space. I immersed myself in research: interviewing at various firms in the area, working for three months at a hairdresser's, working for a year in a small, family-owned confectionery factory.

I have written, "collapse of identity" and "distancing process." But the distancing was only relative, for the same pressures were there, both internal and external, to be unobtrusively Japanese. In most cases my informants still guided me into these roles and at times refused to let me escape them.⁶ In moving to a different neighborhood and away from the Sakamotos, I had simply exchanged the role of daughter for other culturally meaningful roles: student, worker, young woman, resident of my neighborhood. These too, demanded involvement and participation.

The change in the focus of my research lay precisely in this participation. As time wore on, it seemed to me that the relationship of kinship and economics in these family-owned firms—the problem I had originally set out to study—was always filtered through an emphasis on personal relationships. An awareness of this person-centered social life pressed itself upon me in myriad ways. I was in-

volved in several different social networks, with acquaintances from work, from community activities, and with relatives. After some time, the hospitality and graciousness that were my initial due as guest were tempered with growing demands on my time. As I grew to be more of a participant in these relationships, rather than a mere observer, it came my turn to reciprocate. I was bombarded with requests to teach English (no doubt a familiar story to Americans who have been to Japan). I was asked to take part in many social gatherings, commensurate with my position in these social networks; e.g., the funeral of a relative, the coming of age of a neighbor's daughter, my landlady's daughter's graduation from elementary school. Though at the beginning of fieldwork I gladly welcomed any invitation, the requests and the solicitous care shown for me by others occasionally created a feeling of invasion. I felt bound by chains of obligation to my informants, my sponsors, my relatives, and though I appreciated their concern for me, I simply did not have enough hours in the day to accommodate all of them.

The situation came to a climax one day when I received a phone call from a local teacher who had arranged a number of interviews for me. He began with, "*Jitsu wa . . .*," "actually," a phrase that almost always precedes the asking of a favor. My antennae went up, sensing danger. Well, said he, there was a student of his who would really like to learn English conversation and well, he would like to bring her over to meet me the following evening. Since he had been of so much help to me, I knew I could not refuse and still be considered a decent human being, so I agreed. But I was in a foul mood the entire evening. I complained bitterly to my landlady, who sympathetically agreed that he should have been more mindful of the fact that I was so busy, but she confirmed that I *had no choice* but to comply. She explained that the teacher had been happy to give of his time to help me, but by the same token he considered it natural to make requests of others, expecting that they should be equally giving of themselves, their "inner" feelings notwithstanding. "*Nihonjin wa ne,*" she mused, "*jibun o taisetsu ni shinai no, ne.*" The Japanese don't treat themselves as important, they spend time doing things for the sake of maintaining good social relationships, regardless of their inner feelings. I gazed at her in amazement, for this statement struck me with incredible force. Not only did it resonate perfectly with my own personal feelings of being bound and trapped by social convention and living my life for others, it also indicated a profoundly different way of thinking about the self and its relationship to the social world. The Japanese conception of the self seemed to recognize the uniqueness of each human being, while giving primacy to social relationships. This realization, arising once again from intense participation in social life, led me to shift my research problem from kinship and economics, to an even more basic cultural assumption: the nature of the person, and his/her connection to social groups.

In no way do I mean to imply that only a Japanese American could have an experience of this kind. Anyone who has lived for a length of time with a Japanese family will undoubtedly recognize many commonalities. Reflexive ethnographies set in Japan, written by white female ethnographers, echo many of the same refrains (cf. Bernstein 1983; Bachnik 1978).⁷ It is possible that my Japanese-American background provided me with a certain receptivity to Japanese life; perhaps

it also enabled me to more quickly become an unobtrusive “quasi-member” of the culture. Yet for all these ethnographers, participation as a member of a located group was productive of understanding, albeit existentially trying. Full engagement and involvement were necessary before the ethnographer could step back conceptually to discern the meaningful order in everyday life, and thereby to understand its significance. Through participation, one had to open oneself fully to Otherness, with a willingness to change one’s perceptions through this intimate contact (Gadamer 1979:152). Only then could difference be truly realized.

Writing, Violence, and the Reconstitution of the Self

Participation in the field is a necessary step in the process of understanding, but in the cases cited, it also produced a threat to the Self: one of fusion or dissolution in the first, and invasion from without, in the second. For me, the threat to the ego may have been particularly acute, due to my ambiguous insider/outsider position in the field. The ways in which my informants preferred to treat me, my increasing sense of comfortableness and ease in “belonging” to Japanese society, the recognition of cultural skills I had retained as a Japanese American—all led to the weighting of my Japanese side, to the detriment of my American self. During the fieldwork experience itself, my informants often tried to recreate me as Japanese. I collaborated in this attempted recreation with various degrees of enthusiasm and resistance. The play of identities was constant in the field, changing with time and with context.

Finally, however, fieldwork must culminate in the construction of the ethnographic text. This process is one of drawing away from the immediacy of the ethnographic encounter. Writing thus becomes a way of freezing the disturbing flux, encapsulating experience in order to control it. Writing ethnography offers *the author* the opportunity to reencounter the Other “safely,” to find meaning in the chaos of lived experience through retrospectively ordering the past. It is a kind of Proustian quest in which the ethnographer seeks meaning in events whose significance was elusive while they were being lived. The writer, then, addresses her/himself in an attempt at self-reconstruction.

This process of distancing has been described in the language of violence (in, e.g., Crapanzano 1977, this reencounter is termed an “exorcism”). In searching for structure to impose on experience, one all too readily reduces the complex to the readily apprehensible, assuming authority and control over one’s informants to make them fit into one’s own categories, according to one’s own motives. For now, it was my turn to write the text. Just as my informants in writing me tried to excise all traces of Americanness, so in the act of writing I could fix ambiguity by violently purging the Otherness, the Japanese elements, from the self.

Writing is violence in yet another, more critical sense. The very process of engaging in social scientific research often involves violence, born of the pursuit of referential information, where dubious means justify our ends: the transcendent goal of “knowledge.” Indeed, feminist scholars have seen the typical social sci-

entific research project as based on the “rape model” (Reinharz 1979), where the salient metaphors are of penetration and withdrawal:

They intrude into their subjects’ privacy, disrupt their perceptions, utilize false pretenses, manipulate the relationship and give little or nothing in return. When the needs of the researchers are satisfied, they break off contact with the subject. [Reinharz 1979:95]

Even the interpretive or reflexive ethnographies engage in these acts of symbolic violence.⁸ One sees, for instance, Lévi-Strauss (1971) encouraging members of a society to violate their own rules, in order that he may obtain forbidden knowledge: people’s proper names (described in Derrida 1974). Rabinow (1977) describes a similar incident where he obtained information by using the secrets told him by one informant to elicit cooperation from others. In the work of Crapanzano (1980), we find a more psychoanalytic and sensitive account of a relationship with a single informant, but here the model is one of intense involvement and then abandonment.

The violence of the ethnographic encounter culminates in the creation of the ethnographic text. The narrative authority of the text gives us the power to “know” and to “represent” as we see fit. Many have written of the explicit links between anthropology and colonialism (Asad 1973; Said 1978; Hountondji 1976), but colonial hubris seeps into the very process of cultural representation, leading the ethnographer to affirm that “I know you better than you know yourselves.” We intrude; we perpetrate symbolic violence; we satisfy our needs; we leave; we achieve a final domination of the Other in the text.

Most ethnographic inquiry, even the most sensitive, tends to reduce human beings to “data bearers” who provide us with “information,” what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the “colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval” (1982:262). Although these human beings may also be friends and companions, caring human relationships in ethnography are always secondary to information. Our preference for referential content leads us to downplay other aspects of meaningful interaction: the phatic, the emotive, the conative (Jakobson 1960).

Anthropologists—either “indigenous” or in a position not completely outside the culture—are in a particularly advantageous position to criticize this tradition from within. Admittedly, if she or he is trained in the methods of Euro-American social science, there is no reason to assume immunity to this proclivity toward obtaining information at any price. Indeed, power may be inherent in the act of knowing and in writing itself, for to represent Otherness requires authority and control (cf. Clifford 1983; Said 1978). Still, for some anthropologists, the Other is *not* totally Other. Those in-between can identify with the violence done to the richness of human experience by the coldly distant, so-called “objective” language of social science. Anthropological approaches and epistemologies based on more humanistic sympathy, less dogged pursuit of purely referential information, more solicitous attention to relationships with informants (including giving them a more active role in shaping the research and, if they wish, fashioning

the ethnographic text), could result from this internal critique. Certainly we are in a position to criticize the ways ethnographies commonly convey a subtle sense of superiority over the “people studied,” treating human beings as specimens. All too often, standards of scientific objectivity in ethnography have masked points of view that are merely distant and unsympathetic.

Located Understandings and Anthropological Knowledge

The epistemological implications of such a critique are vast. First, knowledge is always knowledge from a particular perspective. Understandings are situated within culture, history, and biography. In order to assess the epistemological status of our interpretations, we should take into account certain crucial parameters of our understanding. One factor is the degree of distance—personal and cultural, emotional and cognitive (the split between the two terms are themselves artifacts of our own language and cultural categories)—from one’s informants. Here, ethnographers should consider seriously the factor of inside versus outside the culture, and how this affects the negotiation of reality in the field and thereafter. This distance is not fixed, for one can move along a continuum from a moment of complete identification, such as I have described, to unsympathetic, even hostile, alienation and distance, on the other. At no time, however, is this distance or positioning a neutral “fact” to be sifted out like so much troublesome chaff. Distance is constitutive of the fieldwork experience and the writing of the ethnographic text. In my case, I found that a lessening of distance through intense participation in everyday life, combined with a generally sympathetic orientation toward most aspects of Japanese culture, was productive in many ways. Yet the complete elimination of distance through identification proved to be too extreme and led to distressing conceptual ambiguity. Some degree of remove from the Other was necessary in order to recover meaning from the experience. Nonetheless, the openness to Otherness, and the willingness to traverse the distance were crucial determinants of the field experience in general, including the “intellectual task” of defining the ethnographer’s research problem.

This location in context—though not fixed—did describe certain limits and potentialities for understanding. Being Japanese American, young, and a woman may have speeded my entry into the society and made me relatively unobtrusive. These factors perhaps gave me a certain kind of participatory understanding of certain aspects of Japanese society. It also meant that, once I became an active participant in various groups (family, factory, etc.) my knowledge was circumscribed. For example, I therefore did not have free access to certain people, and I could not ask certain questions that a foreigner less aware of indelicacy could have posed with impunity. (Cf. Bachnik 1978, for a discussion of the epistemological consequences of belonging or not belonging to a group in Japanese society.)

Second, this implies that ethnographic knowledge is intrinsically incomplete and relative. Traditional ethnography perpetuates an illusion of the omniscient participant-observer, and the possibility of objective comprehension of a culture.

Yet, if understandings are located in a particular vantage point, the intellectual arrogance of this assumption becomes apparent. For if it is impossible to “really” know oneself or another person within the same culture, how much more elusive then, is understanding of a whole society! Events wriggle free even as we try to capture them. A certain humility is thus necessary, a realization that the gaps and silences in our knowledge cannot but leave their traces of “absence” in the “presence” of the text (cf. Derrida 1974).

Finally, such a critique may open anthropological inquiry to a more explicit recognition of the various modes of knowing that are part of what we do as ethnographers. We must recognize that our emotions and sympathies are inevitably implicated in our foreunderstandings. These too can be legitimately productive of knowledge, for knowledge is not purely cognitive. It is also the product of our emotional sensibilities and affinities. I am not suggesting that anthropologists attempt a Romantic fusion with the Other, for this is not only impossible but merely perpetuates the two poles of our own conceptual oppositions: tight-lipped reason and *Sturm und Drang* emotion, objectivity and subjectivity, mind and body. What I am suggesting is that knowing involves the whole self (at least as we define it), and not simply what we think of as “the intellect.” Accordingly, moments of identification, as well as moments of distancing, may occur during *all* phases of knowing, from the definition of the problem, to the experiences in the field, to the writing of the ethnographic text. A more honest appraisal of the anthropological enterprise would take these other elements—so often treated as illegitimate, unscholarly, “soft”—as integral to the process of understanding.

As anthropologists, this points us toward a more serious recognition of the epistemological significance of experience. For a discipline so solidly rooted in the empirical and experiential that the process of fieldwork is treated as an initiatory rite, it is particularly ironic that these modes of knowing virtually disappear in the usual holistic, traditional anthropological monograph. Experience serves the function of establishing the “I was there” authority of the account (cf. Clifford 1983 for an extensive analysis of ethnographic authority), furnishes an illustrative anecdote or two, but the rootedness of theoretical discourse in actual life experiences in the field or in other arenas of the ethnographer’s life are generally denied or treated as epiphenomenal.⁹

Throughout, I have been concerned with depicting the process of understanding as embedded in a particular series of interactions between ethnographer and informants. I have been equally concerned to argue that these encounters are not completely innocent, but that knowledge also emerges from particular configurations of power. The process of trying to make sense of one another sometimes involves an active attempt to force others into preconceived categories—an activity in which informants, as well as ethnographer, are heavily implicated. And the process of writing itself can be a way of controlling threat and ambiguity, for the power to represent rests, in the end, with the editorial authority of the writer. These efforts at domination and counter-domination are inescapable in social scientific inquiry, and they are constitutive of the meanings and understandings we achieve in the texts we write.

In terms of anthropological interpretation, a recognition of the role of experience, power, and of the involvement of the entire self, cognitive and emotive, in all that we do implies that context is, so to speak, of the essence. Stated baldly, there is no universal essence, no abstract meaning that remains when context is stripped away. This does not mean we must therefore plunge into nihilism and wring our hands in despair of ever being able to know or to understand. Nor does it mean that anthropologists interested in this sort of critique of ethnography are simply enmeshed in messy details that keep us imprisoned in contingency, forever prevented from realizing universal, pristinely transcendent knowledge. Rather, such grounding in context should endow us with humility and draw our attention to the embeddedness of our understanding in human relationships and human finitude. These reorientations should instead be *celebrated*, for they may lead us to other, relatively unexplored pathways to knowledge.

Finally, I would suggest that our quest for anthropological understanding should be animated by an openness to Otherness, even if it exists in the Self. This would leave us open to the possibility of difference—one born of sympathy and affinity—rather than a Sameness based on the projection and confirmation of our own prejudices. Being in an insider/outsider position forces serious consideration of these fundamental issues, but they are of profound ethical and epistemological significance for all social scientists. To merely observe the Other as exotic specimen, or, equally unacceptable, to see the Other as a clone of the Self, is the worst sort of projection. Instead we must constantly aim for a critical awareness of our assumptions and those of our informants, to trace the parameters, the limits, and the possibilities of our located understandings. To do otherwise would be to gaze in fascination at our own reflected image, only to mistake it for the face of the Other.

Notes

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¹I also make no distinction between “understanding” and “interpretation.” In everyday life as well as in academic discourse, each implies the other.

²It is important to note that I was assigned cooking duty when I had no other plans. That I did not *have* to be home in order to get the meal on the table is indicative of my quasi-guest status: a real daughter, daughter-in-law, or wife would have been charged with that daily responsibility.

³A black colleague told me of his similar experiences in Japan. He does not fit the stereotype of the loud, aggressive, gauche American, and at times he, too, was told that he was “more Japanese than the Japanese.” Again, this indicates that his informants were also trying to preserve their senses of identity. They were making active attempts to understand,

and to fit others—anomalies—into their own conceptual schemata.

⁴For example, some other American friends of mine, not of Japanese descent, would feel awkward with Japanese gift-giving, seeing it as demeaning, a sort of bribery, etc. Having been raised to appreciate this “Japanese” mode of behavior, it seemed to me a natural part of human social interaction.

⁵My usage differs from Rabinow’s, where it arises in a context of information-seeking and “duplicity,” using tensions among informants for one’s own ends: the pursuit of knowledge. Here, I use the term more broadly, to mean domination for one’s own purposes, the imposition of one’s own will on others.

⁶The most obvious case was when I began work at the factory. I had been introduced to the head of the division as an “American student,” but it soon became clear that he had remembered “student,” but not “American.” A week or so later, at one of our daily noon meetings, where we read from a pamphlet published by an ethics training center, the owner commented on the theme of the day, *ketsui* (determination). He said, praising my resolve, that had I been an ordinary young woman, I might never have come to Japan. After we all returned to our work stations, the division head approached me with a puzzled expression and asked, “*Doko desu ka?*” “Where is it?” (i.e., “Where are you from?”) and after my reply, he announced loudly to all: “She says it’s America!”

⁷Of course, the possibility exists that gender, combined with a position of dependency in these cases, may be equally critical.

⁸One could also argue that it is precisely because they are reflexive that this violence becomes apparent, that it is merely masked in traditional ethnography, and that the violence is, to a certain extent, an inevitable concomitant of doing research.

⁹Renato Rosaldo (1984) is an outstanding exception that relates events in the ethnographer’s life to the understanding of other people in other cultures.

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