Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology

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Second Edition

Edited by
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CHAPTER 1

Epistemology

The Nature and Validation of Knowledge

Michael Schnegg

This chapter examines the nature of knowledge in social and cultural anthropology and the ways it can be obtained. The philosophical discipline concerned with the nature and validation of knowledge in general is called epistemology and closely relates to ontology, which deals with the nature of existence. Since the anthropological frameworks discussed here share similar ontological positions, I focus on the epistemological foundation of knowledge, which seeks to answer the following three questions:

1. What is knowledge (i.e., nature)? With reference to Plato's *Theaetetus*, knowledge is often defined as *justified true belief*. Not all true beliefs are knowledge. Consider a football game: You may believe that the Steelers will beat the Giants 28–14. Even if this turns out to be true, you did not *know* the result; you guessed the final score correctly. You may, however, actually know the results of a game that has already been played—perhaps because you observed it or read about it in the newspaper. This information justifies your belief. In anthropology, the central question about the nature of knowledge is *not* whether a true belief is justified but *how* we justify that a belief is true. This brings up the second question.
2. How can we obtain knowledge (i.e., sources)? Most epistemologists agree that the quality of the reason given to justify a belief is essential. Not only is it difficult to judge, but different philosophical traditions favor different justifications of knowledge claims: claims based on reason (logics and mathematics), on the senses (experiences), or on introspection.
3. What are the limits of knowledge (i.e., its validity)? Since the beginning of formal Western thought, epistemologists (like Pyrrho of Elis [c. 360–c. 270 BC]) have asked about the limits of knowing and knowledge and whether we can even obtain knowledge about the world at all.

The most basic distinction in the epistemology of the social and behavioral sciences and the humanities is the split between scientific and humanistic approaches (Bohman 1991; Carson 2001; D'Andrade 1986; Franklin 1998; Hollis 1994; Kuznar 1997; Lang 1994). Hermeneutics and postmodernism/radical constructivism are the main contemporary currents of the humanistic approaches; the scientific approach is commonly associated with different branches of positivism (e.g., logical, analytical).

Positivism proposes a unified methodology for different branches of the sciences and the humanities. It aims to objectively explain the causes for and relationships among the discrete phenomena of nature. Positivism proposes the discovery of theories and general

laws as the ultimate goal of scientific inquiry. The cumulative growth of knowledge in the natural sciences is the model for this framework.

Hermeneutics (the more general term, or interpretivism, a more narrow term), the rival framework to positivism, is rooted in the humanities. It tries to establish a special methodology for understanding (*Verstehen*) phenomena in the human and social sciences. The model case of hermeneutics is the interpretation of texts, and its objective is the exploration of common understandings in historically based cultural traditions that are present in their textual products. In the interpretation of texts, understanding is the result of an ongoing dialectical or dialogic relationship between texts and the interpreter. Understanding is not objective or universal; rather, it is subjective and highly contextual. Different interpreters can come up with very different readings of the same empirical material.

Positivist and hermeneutic approaches are creations of the nineteenth century; *postmodernism* and *radical constructivism* are more recent developments. Some consider them radical versions of hermeneutics; others claim that these approaches are true alternatives. Postmodernism questions systematic approaches to the production of cumulative knowledge (which radical constructivism does not reject), and postmodernism and radical constructivism both adopt a relativistic stance that stresses the creative power of scientists to construct reality.

In the next three sections, I present the developments, main tenets, and some strengths and weaknesses of these frameworks. Their answers are not completely different, and the frameworks are internally more heterogeneous than the classification implies. In the discussion, I will move from the philosophical positions to anthropological appropriations and show how they lead to specific methodologies and ways of ethnographic writing. The questions introduced above will guide the comparison. The final section aims to connect positions with arguments and proposes some thoughts for a unifying epistemology of anthropological research.

POSITIVISM AND THE ANALYTIC TRADITION

Today, the term "positivism" is often negatively associated with narrow-minded data collection, number crunching, and acceptance of the status quo. This was not its meaning when it was established by European social scientists and social reformers. Positivism developed out of Empiricism, which emerged in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the works of John Locke (1632–1704) and David Hume (1711–1776). Both opposed the then-dominant rationalist position that knowledge comes from metaphysical agents (e.g., God). On the one hand, they had experienced how the state and the church abused this logic to enforce their interests. On the other hand, they questioned the dominant logic by arguing that, if all knowledge came from reason, a newborn should also know about language and geometry. Since this was not the case, they argued that the brain of a newborn is like an empty container—Locke's *tabula rasa*, or blank slate—that fills through our experiences and guides our interpretation of the world. Empiricists argue that this logic not only applies to everyday learning but to science as well and that scientific knowledge must be obtained through our senses.

Auguste Comte transferred these ideas to the study of society and called this sociology. Comte argued that society was more complex than nature and human thought

and thus needed its own discipline, one that would build on the data and knowledge obtained by other sciences through observations, experiments, and comparisons. His mission was twofold: (1) like Hume and Locke, he tried to get rid of the then-dominant metaphysical explanations for social facts and wanted to establish social laws based on observations and empirical data; and (2) he aimed to spread his knowledge to form a new worldview of humankind to replace religions (Bunnin and Tsui-James 1996; Dancy et al. 2010; Papineau 1996).

After this first wave of positivism in the nineteenth century in philosophy and some related disciplines, positivistic epistemology experienced its main boost in Vienna during the 1920s and 1930s (Achinstein and Barker 1969; Carnap 1963; Geier 1993; Janik and Toulmin 1973). In this context, the self-denomination also changed from positivism to logical empiricism, sometimes accompanied by the establishment of a more general analytic tradition in the various disciplines (Soames 2003). From now on, we will label this analytic anthropology.

As with earlier positivists, the so-called Vienna Circle wanted to free philosophy and the empirical sciences of any speculative assumptions not founded on observation or confirmed by empirical tests. At the same time, they turned away from Comte and argued that he had violated his own paradigm by proclaiming that his ideas constituted a new worldview, thus adding just another metaphysical explanation (Outhwaite 1876, 6). The newly invented methods of formal logic were applied to philosophical and other scientific statements to clarify language, detect and refute metaphysical claims, and create better science. The ideas of the logical positivists spread to other parts of Europe (Berlin, Prague, Oxford, Cambridge) and the Americas before and after World War II and strongly influenced social science in the first half of the twentieth century.

Positivism starts with the assumption that we can describe reality through our senses. For logical positivists, statements make sense only if they can be inferred inductively from statements that have been tested empirically. This principle is known as verification.

Here are three examples:

1. Earth's core does not consist of chocolate.
2. The risk of getting infected with HIV is higher among women than men.
3. The Virgin of Guadalupe is more powerful than Saint Michael.

The first statement can be tested through drilling deep into the earth. The result may be a statement like the following: Person A observed at time t after drilling with instrument X 15 kilometers into the earth that the material obtained was not chocolate. Other observations may lead to similar statements. In sum, they allow us to infer a proposition like the one made above. The second statement is an assertion of probability rather than of simple observation, but the same logic of verification can be applied to the second statement as to the first. The question about whether the Virgin of Guadalupe or Saint Michael is more powerful, however, cannot be verified. It is thus outside this realm of science. To come up with valid statements about the world, science needs criteria to judge whether a statement is true or not (Dancy et al. 2010).

Positivistic thinking is based on the correspondence theory of truth. This theory states that we can determine the truth value of a statement by comparing it with facts.

If the statement reflects the relationships in reality properly, it is said to be true. This raises the problem of how to determine whether a statement refers to facts and marks the border between epistemology and methodology. Within the positivistic framework, conceptual statements are operationalized (e.g., connected to empirical indicators) and finally measured (e.g., through an observational instrument that allows the collection of empirical indicators) (Bernard 2011; Fiske 1986).

Within this framework, theory building is an ultimate goal of science and induction is a process of making general knowledge claims on the basis of verified statements. Wittgenstein (1922, 25) argued that the world can be understood as the totality of verified statements. "The world is everything that is the case," as he states in the first sentence of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. A knowledge claim is considered true so long as the collection of verified statements is consistent with the knowledge claim. However, should verified statements emerge that are inconsistent with the knowledge claim, the inductive researcher must either revise the knowledge claim or question the accuracy of the verified statement itself. The only way to do the latter is to collect additional observations following the same protocol that produced those verified statements that were inconsistent with the original knowledge claim. If this yields additional anomalous verified statements, then the original knowledge claim must be revised to accommodate the new information.

Apart from induction, there is a second way to build theory from data. Viennese philosopher Karl Popper (1969a, 1969b [1934], 1972) regarded himself as a critic of (logical) positivism. Nevertheless, he developed critical rationalism in close connection to logical positivism. Popper concluded that positive evidence (confirmation) and the inductive method (the search for rules that leads from limited observations to the establishment of valid generalizations) are not at the heart of science. Rather, negative evidence (falsification) and deduction are at the core. Since our tests are limited, we can never be sure that a (universal) theoretical statement is true. Even if all present evidence is confirmatory, there could always be a refutation in the future. In the spirit of critical rationalism, when choosing between rival hypotheses, we should always select the one that has a higher information content by being more general and thus more challenging due to its wider range of application. And we should keep the one that has survived serious attempts at falsification and therefore has proven less false than its rival.

Against this view of falsification, some philosophers of science, most notably Willard Quine (1961, Ch. 2), pointed out that the test situation is always more complex: A wrong conclusion could imply that the hypothesis at hand is wrong, but it could also falsify any other statements in the premise, including measurement theories and observational statements. Hence, the uses and tests of hypotheses are always based on a holistic understanding of the whole test situation and are guided by inductive (probabilistic) judgments of the development potential of theoretical statements in future applications (Papineau 1996). So, the one-sided critical view of falsificationism has to be supplemented by a more positive heuristic of hypothesis construction and theory development. Today, deduction and induction are rarely seen as true alternatives. All inductions are based on some theoretical assumptions, including assumptions about how to describe and measure phenomena, and deduction is confronted with empirical

realities that modify theories. Deduction and induction are thus more appropriately conceived of as ideal–typical poles of a continuum, and any specific research project should be positioned as being on the continuum rather than at one or the other pole (Beckermann 1997, 32).

POSITIVISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Epistemological Positions

To understand the impact of positivism on anthropology, we consult the work of one of the discipline's founders: Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942). Anthropology was deeply rooted in colonialism and evolutionism when Malinowski got interested in the subject after finishing his dissertation in philosophy at Cracow University in Poland. Like other anthropologists of the time (e.g., Boas, Rivers), Malinowski had trained in the natural sciences and was educated in an intellectual environment that upheld the unity of all sciences.

Malinowski was influenced by positivism when he started engaging with anthropology (Flis 1988, 125). At that time, compared to psychology or sociology, anthropology didn't have a well-developed tradition of empirical research or well-developed standards for data collection, induction, and theory building. The works of prominent anthropologists, including Sir James Frazer and Sir Edward Tylor, were still written in the spirit of evolutionary thinking and based on secondary sources. While anthropologists sat in their home institutions (museums or universities) and wrote their scientific works, travelers collected the data. The problems associated with this approach are discussed in the first edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* in 1874. Tellingly, the subtitle reads: *For the Use of Travelers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands* (Notes 1874).

Malinowski's *Argonauts* is one of the early examples of ethnographic writing that breaks with this separation between data collection and authorships and declares the combination of the two efforts as a research program. In the introduction, setting the empirical tone of his work, Malinowski (1922, 3) begins by criticizing his teachers: "It would be easy to quote works of high repute, with a scientific hall-mark on them, in which wholesale generalizations are laid down before us, and we are not informed at all by what actual experiences the writers have reached their conclusion." Analyzing the works of the past and reflecting on his own ethnography in the Trobriands, he concludes that "success can only be obtained by patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles" (Malinowski 1922, 6). The student of anthropology, said Malinowski, must "possess real scientific aims . . . put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main to live without other white men, right among the natives . . . [and] apply a number of special methods for "collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence" (Malinowski 1922, 5).

For Malinowski and most of his peers, culture could be described as an objective reality. The aim of anthropology was to use the best methods available to collect ample evidence about it and to draw generalizations from there. His plea for a "concrete statistical documentation" of observed events for the collection of behavioral observations and for the documentation of "the native's point of view" mentality all reflect this attitude (Malinowski 1922, 6). His aim to grasp that native point of view was less an attempt to understand the world from the perspective of his informants than an attempt

to document their behavior and attitudes most precisely and reliably through the use of scientific methods. The prevalence of this approach is also seen in Rivers's call for vital statistics as a starting point of ethnography (Rivers 1910).

How does Malinowski—the ethnographer—establish the validity of his statements (i.e., how does he justify that they are true)? He does so through being there and living with the people, through his subjective experience. Malinowski deliberately separates himself from travelers, missionaries, and traders whose involvement "makes a real, unbiassed, impartial observation impossible" (Malinowski 1922, 18). While writing about the *Kula*, he concludes that "Not even the most intelligent native has any clear idea of the Kula as a big, organized social construction, still less of its sociological function and implications" (Malinowski 1922, 83). The objectification of ethnographic facts is thus accomplished through being there (Clifford 1986b, 26; Fuchs and Berg 1995, 29).

Malinowski's work is deliberately inductive (Malinowski 1964, 11). In his early analysis and criticism of the work of Frazer, he concludes that "A precise concept of totemism, like all empirical concepts, is acquired only through induction and comparing phenomena: carefully investigating the characteristics in each case and taking what is common in all these cases as a general notion of totemism" (Malinowski 1993, 127). At the same time, he recognized that "every description, out of necessity, has to be based on a theoretical foundation" (Malinowski 1993, 127). This separated Malinowski from radical empiricists like Ernst Mach (Flis 1988, 126), a prominent physicist and a philosopher of science.

For a time, Mach notoriously denied the existence of atoms whose very existence his colleagues Max Planck and Niels Bohr had proven (Dancy et al. 2010, 540). On the other hand, Mach equally argued that explanations belong to the realm of metaphysics and should be replaced by functional (mathematical) statements that describe the covariance of elements without making a decisive statement of what explains what. Malinowski followed that lead and made it the core of his theoretical model: All parts of culture are related and fulfill a function with respect to the whole, which should be the subject of inquiry. This was to become the kernel of functionalism (Flis 1988, 119). Like many of his contemporary colleagues, he aimed to describe and document culture as the totality of religion, policy, art, economy, and so on.

In sum, much in line with positivistic thinkers, most anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century, like Franz Boas (1961 [1940], 260, 269), Robert Lowie (1959 [1937], 279, 291), Alfred Kroeber (1948, Sect.1, 7), George Peter Murdock (1949), and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1957 [1948], 1968 [1952]), claimed that the sources of anthropological knowledge are our senses (question 2, sources of knowledge). Starting with Malinowski, a strong and lasting tradition developed that may be considered empiricist. In line with the scientific paradigm, improving methods and the transparent communication of data, analysis and results became the tenets of ethnography. Early positivists turned anthropology into a truly empirical science that aimed to explain social and cultural phenomena and its variations through laws or law-like statements.

Today, many agree that it was unrealistic to measure anthropologists and other social scientists against the standards put up for physics. The social world is too complex to find laws of similar scale. As D'Andrade (1986) points out, a search for generalizations is a more appropriate goal for an analytic anthropology, as most of the

anthropological work of the time, done within this epistemological framework, was based on the principle of induction and verification (question 2, sources of knowledge). There was relatively little concern about the limits of knowledge (question 3, limits of knowledge), and many of the first generation of anthropologists did not question that cultures were real and existed independently of the anthropologists whose task it had become to document them.

Methodological Implications

Ethnography in the Malinowskian style follows a certain logic. Malinowski himself identified three steps:

1. The organisation of the tribe, and the anatomy of its culture must be recorded in firm, clear outline. The method of concrete, statistical documentation is the means through which such an outline has to be given.
2. Within this frame, the imponderabilia of actual life, and the type of behaviour have to be filled in. They have to be collected through minute, detailed observations, in the form of some sort of ethnographic diary, made possible by close contact with native life.
3. A collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae has to be given as a corpus inscriptionum, as documents of native mentality. (Malinowski 1922, 24)

The three steps clarify Malinowski's understanding of the ethnographic endeavor and the way to achieve knowledge. Statistical documentation, detailed observations, and qualitative statements allow "recording" the culture to be studied. The ethnographer stays in the field for long periods of time and learns the language. For Malinowski, the application of scientific methods including the presentation of detailed notes, tables, and pictures is at the core of his approach. Stocking (1983, 109) argued that being cut off from the rest of the world was a second major strategy to justify the validity of Malinowski's knowledge claims.

Most of the work done in the analytic tradition is based on the correspondence theory of truth. Empirical research defines indicators for the statements being made and proposes ways to examine and measure those indicators. The epistemological challenge to justify that a belief is true is met through the control of data collection and analysis. In the scientific paradigm, a statement is said to be a *justified* true belief—and, thus, knowledge—if it has high reliability and validity.

Validity refers to the quality of the data as an image of reality. We distinguish between different types of validity, most importantly construct validity, content validity, and criterion validity. Construct validity refers to the extent to which the conceptualization and operationalization of a theoretical construct are really measured by the instrument—for example, the extent to which an IQ test actually measures intelligence. Construct validity is tested by using different instruments or methods to measure the same concept. If the results are strongly correlated, construct validity is said to be high (Campbell and Fiske 1959). While the idea was originally developed for quantitative data and psychological tests, Campbell later extended it in an early appeal for the use of mixed methods to explore one construct (Campbell 1970, 67). Content validity

determines whether all relevant dimensions of a theoretical construct are really captured and measured—that is, whether the complexity of constructs like religiosity or environmental awareness is adequately reflected in the instrument designed to measure it. Finally, criterion validity examines whether a measurement is correlated with other measurements that are known to measure the construct adequately.

Reliability—the second measure—refers to the probability that another round of data collection and analysis will reveal similar or the same results (Bernard 2011). In anthropology, this may refer to a restudy of the same ethnographic situation by a different ethnographer or a second application of a data collection method by the same researcher. The former problem was famously raised in anthropology with the restudy of Tepoztlán, Mexico, by Oscar Lewis in the 1940s. Lewis found the people of Tepoztlán to be unhappy and unfriendly, individualistic and uncooperative, conflict ridden and not peaceful—practically the opposite of the way Robert Redfield had described them 20 years earlier (Lewis 1951; Naroll 1970, 928; Redfield 1930). In response, even before the postmodern critique, anthropologists began developing ways to contextualize ethnographic information, taking account of things like the funding agency, the graduate professor, the field team composition, and so on (Naroll 1970, 935). Usually, the reliability of systematic (and thus narrower) data collection methods, like questionnaires and experiments, is higher, making the choice about methods also a choice between validity and reliability.

Writing Ethnography

In his critical analysis of ethnographic writing, van Maanen (2011, 46) identified four characteristics of this realistic style of writing in anthropology. Even though they draw a rather one-sided picture, they help us understand some of the characteristics of the classical ethnographies that emerged as a new literary genre with Malinowski and others around the turn of the twentieth century:

- *Experiential author(ity)*: Perhaps the most distinct characteristic of early ethnographic writing is the exclusion of the fieldworker from the report. Having stayed in the field and collected the data, he or she describes how the people feel and behave. By taking the "I" (the observer) out of the report, worries about the subjectivity of the fieldworker become moot.
- *Typical forms*: The second characteristic element of style is the particularized description of details of everyday lives, including events that are at the center of interest for the ethnographer.
- *The native's point of view* is usually transmitted through detailed description or through extensive quotes.
- *The interpretative omnipotence* of the author refers to the strategy of creating a single line of interpretation of the collected information that often links ethnographic details to the concepts of respected heroes of the discipline.

A fifth point can be added. The *Argonauts* and related works introduce a new way of ethnographic writing by overcoming the separation between the object (people/culture) and the writer. Malinowski argues that, while travelers had only superficial experiences and were not able to overcome lay people's biases, he, as the scientist who

had lived there, could. His detailed, realistic, and objectified description became possible through his subjective relationship with the informants: being there, living with the people, and sharing daily routines.

In sum, the early ethnographic monographs written in the scientific tradition share the conviction that social reality exists independently of our perception and can be recorded as such in the ethnographic report—in a monograph. It soon became evident that perceptions of ethnographers differ and that we can never assess reality in a fully unbiased way. For empiricist ethnographers, the extent to which bias exists can be assessed by applying the concepts of validity and reliability and improving validity and reliability remains a key concern of modern ethnographies written in this tradition (Cancian 1992; Cohen 1999; Hirsch 2003; McCabe 2004; Rao 1998). To practitioners of this school, the transparency of data collection and analysis provides intersubjectivity that distinguishes science from art and other attempts to grasp the world around us (Gingrich 2009, 187).

HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics (from Greek *hermeneutike*, meaning the art of interpretation) has its roots in the classical tradition of Greek antiquity. It originally flourished in the humanities, which were preoccupied with the exegesis of historical texts—like the Bible, philosophical and jurisdictional treatises, historical documents, and literature of the past—often written in foreign languages and stemming from distant epochs (Geldsetzer 1989).

A major problem for philologists in Europe was to understand and unravel the meaning of specific terms and to grasp the meaning of the text at large. This became especially evident when translating texts. Martin Luther's translation of the Bible was so controversial because some of his interpretations were far from consensual at the time. Thus, the translator faces a problem: To know the meaning of the whole (a paragraph, a parable), he or she needs to understand the meaning of its parts (words, sentences). But to understand the meaning of the parts, we often need some understanding of the text (the whole), which provides us with background knowledge. Hermeneutic work on texts or discourses shifts between these two sides of the interpretive undertaking, with the object of grasping the meaning of both the parts and whole. This process is called the "hermeneutic circle" and is one of the fundamental tools in hermeneutic text interpretation.

Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some (mostly German) philosophers and associated humanistic methodologists developed the larger vision that hermeneutic rules of text interpretation could be extended to become general guidelines for research in the humanities, or even all disciplines that dealt with human experiences. In contrast to the positivistic paradigm that emerged with Comte and others, Friedrich Schleiermacher and especially Wilhelm Dilthey argued that human behavior is different from the natural world and thus requires a distinct epistemological and methodological approach. As Dilthey put it in his famous phrase: "We explain nature, [but] we understand the living of the mind" (Dilthey 1900 [1894], 144).

Hermeneutics argues that, while the natural world follows laws, humans seek and create meaning and always act in a specific cultural and historical context. These two

features were seen to be in sharp contrast to those of the natural sciences whose objects do not produce meaning and whose researchers can neglect history. The study of humans and their meaningful products in special historical circumstances should thus describe the particular and proceed along the lines of text interpretation and empathic understanding (*Verstehen*, in the sense of adopting the actor's point of view). Basically, empathic understanding is invoked when we want to know the reasons or purposes underlying the meaningful behavior (including speech) of other people in the present or past. Hermeneutics proposes that the researcher engages in a thought experiment and tries to grasp the actor's point of view by acting as though he or she were in that situation. To be sound, this thought experiment has to rest on validated background knowledge. Otherwise, one risks distorting the decision situation of the actor and mistakenly taking the self for the Other.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger built on the early works of Dilthey, Schleiermacher, and Husserl and became one of the most influential advocates of the hermeneutic approach. Fundamental to his position is the distinction between *Sein* (translated as being) and *Seiendes* (usually translated as beings or entities). Let us start with the latter.

Seiendes refers to the collection of physical objects that constitute the universe. It is, so to speak, the world out there, as positivists would have it. Heidegger distinguishes *Sein* from this physical universe as our understanding (*Verstehen*) of those entities. Our understanding constitutes *Sein*. Hence, things we do not understand or perceive do not exist. For Heidegger, distinguishing between *Sein* and *Seiendes* is an analytical trick to allow us to detect what he calls the "ontological difference": the difference between *Sein* and *Seiendes*/*Seiendem*, or between what there is and what we perceive (Heidegger 1962, 2000, 344).

The *Sein* predates our perception of a given situation. In his lecture, Heidegger uses the statement "The blackboard badly positioned" (*Die Tafel steht ungünstig*) to explain this relationship and thus the ontological difference. The unfavorable position of the blackboard is not a property of the blackboard as such, like its color or its size. It exists only in relation to the subject(s) that perceive(s) it. The unfavorable position of the blackboard predates the situation in which we recognize and state it because we have a common understanding of the meaning and the purpose of sitting in the classroom. The classroom situation is defined by the relationship between the audience and the instructor, the rules of communication, and the technical devices used. This knowledge guides our understanding of the objects and leads to the statement about the *Sein* (unlucky position) of the *Seiendes* (blackboard) (Heidegger 2000).

Heidegger transfers his insights about the nature of knowledge into a more general paradigm of how to obtain and accumulate it. *As scientists, we also have pre-knowledge about the world, which makes it impossible to describe the world as such*. He proposes entering a hermeneutic circle to detect the difference between this *Sein* of the scientist and the *Seiendes* of what she or he is trying to understand (Heidegger 1962, 2000).

Building on this model, Heidegger's pupil Hans Georg Gadamer tried to establish hermeneutics as a universal theory of interpretation for all the sciences (Gadamer 2004). He made two important points about the ways we obtain knowledge. First, he argues in *Truth and Method* that our notion of knowledge is still largely influenced by

Kant and Enlightenment thinking. Kant had separated the rational (*Vernunft*) from the nonrational, as if they were two sides of a coin. In this view, objective knowledge could only be built through scientific methods (Gadamer 2004, 36; Hekman 1983, 207). Gadamer questions this distinction when he asks rhetorically: "Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but equally certainly is not inferior to it?" (2004, 84).

For Gadamer, there is such knowledge. He perceived it as a great deficiency to exclude all experiences from the realm of truth that have not been obtained through scientific methods. Second, and building on Heidegger, he argues that there are structures that preexist the entities and the way we perceive them in a specific situation. We cannot perceive the world in a neutral, rational way. This leads him to recognize prejudice as an integral part of knowledge construction. To put it in his words: "[T]he fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself" (Gadamer 2004, 273).

Any understanding thus involves the examination of prejudice. With Gadamer, we see clearly how the hermeneutic notion and the application of the hermeneutic circle as its main analytic tool have shifted. In the beginning, it served as a heuristic tool to analyze the relationship between the parts and the whole of a text. The aim was to grasp the meaning of both. Dilthey transformed it into a methodology to analyze the historical and cultural context in which a text and social phenomena more generally were produced. This proved especially fruitful for historical science. It became, so to speak, a tool to overcome the prejudice of the time and the context. Heidegger, and most explicitly Gadamer, moved a step further and argued that it is not possible to enter the minds of those we want to understand. There are no objects external to the inquirer; rather, those objects are produced through our inquiry. This prejudice of the researcher must become an integral part of the analysis.

The works of Heidegger and Gadamer give a different answer to the question of what knowledge is and how it can be constructed. They are still in line with some positivistic claims: Yes, there is a world out there, and scientists can describe it. However, the focus has shifted. While positivists aim to explain human behavior, the focus has shifted to understanding structures of meaning. Understanding generally refers to analyzing the context in which a specific behavior is shown to enable the researcher to follow this logic.

Critics of hermeneutics (Albert 1994; Stegmüller 1979) make two points. First, this is not a vicious circle that we cannot evade or even a principal problem that we cannot solve since we must always distinguish between background knowledge (assumptions) and claims that can be checked. In principle, every element of background knowledge can be criticized (but not all at the same time). Second, this dilemma is not exclusive to the humanities. It applies to any knowledge-making situation, including hypothesis testing in the natural sciences.

HERMENEUTICS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Epistemological Positions

In anthropology, hermeneutical ideas were taken up by Clifford Geertz (1975, 1983, 1988, 1995), founder of an interpretive anthropology. Geertz laid down the theoretical

foundation of this paradigm in the much-cited essay "Thick Description," while his analysis of the Balinese cockfight is often referred to as a best-practice example of how to apply it (Geertz 1973). Let us start with the question of what reality means to Geertz. It may come as surprise to some that his ontological position does not differ significantly from that of Malinowski and others who wrote before him.

> The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said. (Geertz 1973, 10)

Geertz thus does not question the ontological status of human action (a burlesqued wink) or ethnographic observation (a mock sheep raid). He argues that the main point is not their existence but their meaning. Following Max Weber, he contends that culture is the web of significance that people spin and in which they live "and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973, 5). According to Geertz, the main task of anthropology should be guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses (1973, 20).

Geertz borrows an example from the British philosopher Ryle to explain this logic: Imagine two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. This behavior could be an involuntary twitch or a conspiratorial signal to a friend. A camera-like capturing of the scene would not allow capturing the meaning of it. Only an interpretation of the wider context, the behavior that preceded the contracting of the eyelids and the situation in which it happens, allows a proper, or thick description as Geertz called it referring to Ryle (Geertz 1973, 6).

Geertz assumes the existence of the world as given and identifies the task of anthropologists as describing its meaning structure to distinguish the winks from twitches. This poses the problem of verification, or, to use a term favored by Geertz, "appraisal," of an ethnographic description. Geertz argues that the measurement of validity is the "power of scientific imagination to bring us into contact with the lives of strangers" (Geertz 1973, 16). Unfortunately, he gives little concrete advice about how to tell which of the two stories describing the event either as a wink or as a twitch is correct. The essential epistemological challenge to justify that a belief is true is thus dealt with only superficially.

This problem transfers to the next level when it comes to theory building. Having identified understanding and describing as central moments in anthropological research, Geertz rejects a positivistic vision of theory. According to Geertz, anthropological theory that builds on those insights stays much closer to the ethnographic ground than theories in other sciences. Theory building does not follow a cumulative curve but breaks up in disconnected bits and pieces of knowledge that do not take off from the previous knowledge but dig deeper into it. Although the approach starts from the ethnographic example and the description of phenomena, it is not inductive in the sense we have described above. New insights are not used to reject older statements; instead, a new one is included into a modified and presumably more valid version of the theory.

Geertz seems to recognize the problem when he states that a study is an advance if it is more "incisive—whatever that may mean" than those in the past. Geertz provides no specific criteria nor does he even seem to have an idea of what these criteria for giving a more incisive account might look like (Geertz 1973, 25).

The aim of theory building is thus not to generalize across cases, as comparative research in a positivistic tradition would have it, but to generalize within cases (Geertz 1973, 26). Theory provides a vocabulary for description, and concepts for the interpretation.

As we have seen, the ontological question is little debated between positivist and interpretative anthropology. The epistemological position of Geertz picks up many of the ideas articulated by Dilthey and his followers. He identifies humans as the creators of significances and meanings, and identifies hermeneutic understanding (*Verstehen*) as an appropriate tool to analyze them. The approach begins with empirical observation, but it does not assume that the thing observed is independent of the meaning-making observer, the other social actors present, or the history of meaningful social action that preceded the event (question two, sources of knowledge). Unlike positivistic explanation, ethnographic understanding produces knowledge claims that are very much dependent on the standpoint of the ethnographer him- or herself, rendering the search for objective generalizable knowledge claims an epistemological impossibility. Geertz's belief that some ethnographic accounts could be more incisive than others suggests that he is less skeptical of the truth value of anthropological knowledge claims than either Heidegger or Gadamer were (question 3, limits of knowledge). While law-like statements and generalizations across cases are key in the analytic tradition, understanding specific local cultural symbols and practices is the main goal of interpretative anthropology.

Methodological Implications

As we have seen, one main difference between positivistic and hermeneutic thinking lies in the sources of knowledge and the procedures with which knowledge can be obtained. In hermeneutics, *Verstehen* gained center stage. Meaning and symbols became the focus of the analysis. Geertz focused on institutionalized actions, like the Balinese cockfight, that represent some deeper aspect of Balinese culture. Like a Shakespearean play, the cockfight can be read and analyzed as a text that contains knowledge about the author and the time it was written. The notion of culture-as-text put meaning structures at the forefront and finally broke with the behavioristic tradition in anthropology. The anthropologist was to collect those "texts" from the local population and interpret them.

Much of the work done in the interpretative tradition sticks to the general idea of a correspondence theory of truth. However, the judgment of a knowledge claim is based on the believability and convincingness of the interpretation of the observation against the array of other observations that form the context for the interpretive claims. So, "truth" in this sense corresponds to the "right feel" of the interpretive analyst. As we have seen, Geertz offers relatively few criteria to judge whether a statement is true or not. This can be identified as a main obstacle for hermeneutics: sticking to the notion of describing the world without offering criteria to distinguish better from not so good descriptions and thus to justify that a belief is true. There are still more-or-less objective

facts in this tradition, but they do not stand alone as sources of our knowledge claims. Their assembly by the interpreter is the critical difference.

Although partly new, the approach provided by Geertz did not radically question many agreed-on fieldwork practices, including long-term stay in the community, acquiring language skills, and building rapport. In terms of data collection, quantitative techniques were largely abandoned, and the analysis of situations, including extended cases, gained significance. In terms of research design, Geertz argues that the fieldworker must go to the field with a number of questions, adapt them, and leave the field with different questions. He or she should leave when the answers do not surprise anymore.

Writing Ethnography

The style of writing changed with the turn to a more interpretative anthropology. Maybe the most important shift is the turn from realistic to personalized author(ity). The "I" of the fieldworker entered the text (van Maanen 2011, 74). According to the epistemology, the information cannot be separated from the ethnographer who collected it. As a result, ethnographic writing must change to include the observer; otherwise, it would be inconsistent with the epistemology from which it emerges. However, the section that describes this personal involvement is often separated from the analysis and the presentation of the ethnographic account. Again, Geertz serves as an example. His ethnographic description and analysis of the Balinese cockfight begins with a lengthy episode about how he and his wife Hildred were caught by the police as part of a larger group watching an illegal cockfight and how that transformed their relationship with the community. After the incident, the village "opened up to them," and they were "in" (Geertz 1973, 416).

At the same time, Geertz recognizes the problem of the relationship between the object of ethnographic enquiry and its representation—be it a book, a lecture, or a film—much more profoundly than did his predecessors. While he points to the difficulties of drawing a line between the object and its representation, he clearly rejects the position that the source of anthropological knowledge is not social reality but scholarly artifice (Geertz 1973, 16). As he says: "The thread is hollow" (p. 16).

In general, fieldworkers who work in a hermeneutic tradition provide much more information about: (1) their relationship to the main informants; and (2) the context in which the data collection took place. Ideally, and in the hermeneutic tradition, that would allow judging and evaluating the information against the context in which it was produced. It may also convince the audience that the author's account is more valid or more informed than accounts written by others. It is the ethnographer's human qualities of which the reader must be convinced. Those qualities allow him or her to recognize, reflect on, and overcome the hardship of fieldwork and the biases entailed (van Maanen 2011, 74).

EXCUSE: SYMBOLS AND UNIVERSALS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Geertz was neither the first nor the only one who turned away from a more rigid scientific approach. Interpretation and meaning became key to many of his contemporaries, including David Schneider and Marshall Sahlins. Along with Geertz, Victor Turner,

and McKim Marriott, they are sometimes referred to as the Chicago School since all of them taught at the University of Chicago at some point in the 1970s.

Through his study of the American kinship system, Schneider had concluded that many of the assumptions made in anthropological theory were deeply rooted in our own understanding of kinship. He argued that our definition of kinship is largely based on assumptions that derive from the Western folk model that "blood is thicker than water." Through defining kinship as a category, we order the world of the people we study. We classify behaviors as kinship that the people we study may conceive very differently from us. For Schneider, the solution to the problem is not to redefine kinship by including other dimensions or by focusing on doing kin instead of being kin. He turns away from kinship as a category and his aim becomes to understand the ways different definitions of kinship shape its articulation with various ethnographic data (Schneider 1984, 132). In the end, this analysis may show that kinship is a "special custom, distinctive of European culture, an interesting oddity at worst, like the Toda bow ceremony" (Schneider 1984, 202).

Sahlins launched a similar attack and equally argued against universal classifications. Cultural practices are not a reaction to material circumstances and thus cannot be explained by positivistic thinking. Nothing in the material world could explain why Americans eat beef and abandon horse meat or why women wear skirts and men trousers. Not practical reason but culture orders the world. Symbolic systems are largely reproduced through the process of production and related to other processes within culture (Sahlins 1978, 207). In *Culture and Practical Reason*, Sahlins (1978) argues against a utilitarian interpretation of human action and shows that the rationalist paradigm had emerged with capitalism and is unsuitable for understanding societies that operate outside the logic of the market. Even further, it is misleading to distinguish the West from the rest, and perhaps the most decisive difference is that the West lives with the illusion that society is pragmatically constructed (Sahlins 1978, 210).

Unlike Geertz, Sahlins and Schneider (and other symbolic anthropologists including Turner and Mary Douglas) did not relate explicitly to hermeneutics and its epistemological assumptions. Their point of departure came from within the discipline arguing that anthropology had long imposed Western categories on other societies. In doing so, they too turned away from the search for universal laws and intercultural explanations and tried to show how particular meaning structures guide and shape the daily lives of people. The consequences for doing and writing ethnography were similar.

RADICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Radical constructivists doubt that scientists are really finding things out. Most constructivists agree with positivists that we rely on our senses to comprehend the world. However, they disagree on what consequence this insight has. Remember that positivists called for improving validity and reliability to improve measurement. To constructivists, the senses are not the precise microscopes through which we can see the world clearly. Instead, they are more like a pair of sunglasses we cannot take off. We can only perceive the world through those glasses and have no possibility to grasp an unfiltered view of reality. If we cannot say anything about the world behind those glasses, all we can do is make statements about our perception of the world. Those can be compared

and combined. The argument takes up the proposition introduced by Kant that we can never transcend the bounds of our own mind to see the world as a "thing-in-itself" (Kant 1998). In this view, science is viewed as just another construction or pair of sunglasses.

One of the most influential radical constructivists is Ernst von Glasersfeld (1917–2010). Von Glasersfeld did not have a university education when he started to engage with the issue of subjectivity as part of the working group of philosopher Silvio Ceccato in Milan. The group's work on computer-aided translations was funded by the U.S. Air Force. When the funding agency asked his research group to move to the United States, von Glasersfeld followed and was hired as a professor for cognitive science after the termination of the project. In his book *Radical Constructivism* (1996), von Glasersfeld gives the following example to underline his point about the limits of our perception: Imagine a man born blind walking through a forest. He will most likely construct a world of obstacles and barriers (von Glasersfeld 1998). He may distinguish these barriers according to their texture and size, but the construction he has will be very different from that of a sighted person.

Von Glasersfeld argues that we all construct idiosyncratic views of the world and that this construction is not an image of reality but only stimulated through it. Thus, he does not deny the existence of a world outside our imagination. *However, since there is no way of knowing how closely a particular construction of reality matches reality, it becomes useless to search for the true representation of the world.* This is where it becomes radically different from what I have introduced so far. To replace the search for truth, von Glasersfeld proposes the concept of *viability*.

> Actions, concepts, and conceptual operations are viable if they fit the purposive or descriptive contexts in which we use them. Thus, in the constructivist way of thinking, the concept of viability in the domain of experience, takes the place of the traditional philosopher's concept of Truth, that was to indicate a "correct" representation of reality. This substitution, of course, does not affect the everyday concept of truth, which entails the faithful repetition or description of a prior *experience*. (von Glasersfeld 1996, 14)

Von Glasersfeld uses the difference between Newton's and Einstein's physics to explain the concept. Einstein showed that Newton's physics describes the world properly only for speeds significantly lower than the speed of light. It can predict the flight of an aircraft and a missile. Thus, Newton's theory is viable though substantially limited. A viable statement is useful for predicting an outcome that will happen. To come back to the example above, a construction of the world that avoids running into trees is a useful, but limited, construction of reality (von Glasersfeld 1981, 91).

According to von Glasersfeld, objectivity cannot be achieved in the classical sense. He thus redefines objectivity as the intersubjective construction of reality. This shared construction emerges from similar experiences (von Glasersfeld 1996, 119) and understandings of what a useful theory would be. Using our example again, suppose a number of blind people experience the forest in similar ways and communicate, negotiate, and construct a view of the landscape that is shared by most of them. This would be a kind of understanding of reality that transcends the individual but is still in no way objectively true. So, different collective understandings of reality are possible, depend-

ing on the degree of similarity between people in terms of the ways they perceive and process the information about the world available to them.

The idea that the world is *socially* constructed was largely developed by the German sociologist Alfred Schütz and later extended and deepened by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Schütz 1964). Like von Glasersfeld, Berger and Luckmann argue that the world does not exist independently of our perceptions. At the same time, we understand our acquaintances and our kin talking about business or the family. Berger and Luckmann call this the construction of social knowledge (e.g., what everybody knows about a social world) and argue that it derives from shared experiences and is tested and reinforced through communication.

What holds true for common people must hold true for scientists as well. They, too, are trapped in their inability to look beyond their sunglasses, or—as Gadamer would have it—their prejudices. For radical constructivists, the knowledge-seeking process itself becomes a matter of empirical investigations—just another construction of reality. To them, epistemology was largely a theoretical science. The insight of the constructivists transformed epistemology into a partly empirical one. Science and the production of knowledge became a key interest, and, with the works of authors like Latour, Marin, Peña, and others, an entirely new discipline was founded: science and technology studies (STS), to which anthropologists have made significant contributions (Latour and Woolgar 1986 [1979]; Martin 1998; Peña 1997). Within this context, the divide between human and nonhuman entities was blurred, and Latour argued in his actor-network-theory (ANT) that nonhuman entities should be considered as agents that shape human behavior and constitute its reality (Latour 2005).

Like Latour, Michel Foucault analyzed the relationship between knowledge and power. He argues that until the eighteenth century, power was exerted through the rulers and their ability to kill. This has since shifted, and power is now exercised through knowledge that defines bodily issues including mental illness, reproduction, and health status. The term "biopolitics" refers to this new practice of power through the regulative mechanisms of health and education policies, and equally important, through shaping public discourses. While the powerful shape the discourse, the discourse again defines what is powerful. In this sense, postmodernism has a stark political perspective. Postmodernists argue that the purported value freedom and the denial to engage politically make science a silent supporter of the ruling powers and existing social inequalities. In this perspective, social research must be politically committed and help deconstruct those discourses and the powers that constitute them (Foucault 1998, 136, 2008).

While these general philosophical positions influenced anthropological thinking, the impact was most profound in analysis of the fieldwork situation and the question of how to represent the Other.

POSTMODERNISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Epistemological Positions

A tipping point of the discipline was the posthumous publication of Malinowski's diaries. They revealed an unsympathetic and often impatient fieldworker. Even more, they showed that Malinowski was well aware of the role he played in representing the Trobrianders. He put it frankly when he wrote on December 1, 1917: "Feeling of

ownership: It is I who will describe them or create them" (Malinowski 1967, 140). This and other passages of his diaries allowed some to fundamentally question the image of the analytical fieldworker who—unlike the travelers and the natives—was able to describe culture in objective terms, an image that Malinowski himself had created through his methodological claims and the realistic style of writing he employed (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

In the debate that followed, it became evident that the fieldworker plays a very active—and sometimes even conscious—role in shaping the representation of the people and the phenomena studied. More recently, Alvarez Roldán has questioned this radical interpretation. He compared the structure and the content of *Baloma*, Malinowski's first publication—written after 10 months of fieldwork—and the corresponding field notes. Alvarez Roldán argues that Malinowski clearly linked fieldwork, field notes, and the final report in a way that is reliable and valid (Alvarez Roldán 2002).

A second stimulus for questioning the validity of ethnographic knowledge was Derek Freeman's book about Margaret Mead and her work on Samoa. Five years after Mead died, Freeman argued that Mead did not really understand her informants. The same women, when interviewed by him, swore that they had lied to Mead and that she could not tell jokes from truth (Freeman 1983; Mead 1949). Much has been said and written in support of both authors. It is futile to repeat the arguments here, but on an abstract level, the discussion demonstrated once again how insecure anthropological knowledge may be and how difficult it is to make and question claims made in ethnographic monographs.

Writing Culture was the first collection of essays that systematically collected those doubts and summarized the critiques (Clifford 1986a; Clifford and Marcus 1986). James Clifford, a historian, analyzed ethnographic writings not only as field reports of faraway realities but as a specific literary genre that had developed rules and strategies to communicate its messages and to claim authority. Clifford and others showed that anthropologists tend to homogenize the phenomena they study and to ignore the intracultural variations among the Nuer, the Trobianders, and the Other in general. In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, Clifford coined the much cited-term "partial truths" to refer to this phenomenon and to capture it analytically. He argues that "Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete" (Clifford 1986a, 7).

The postmodern debate in anthropology thus connects to the constructivist debates by pointing out that people perceive the world idiosyncratically and that we have no way of telling which perception is more and which is less true. At the same time, they deny the overlap of those perceptions and the consequences this may have, which both von Glasersfeld and Berger and Luckmann acknowledged (Berger and Luckmann 1966; von Glasersfeld 1996).

Clifford takes idiosyncrasy as a starting point to call for a new way of writing ethnographies. As an example of the creative handling of different viewpoints, he cites the monograph *First-time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Price 2003 [1983]). Richard Price, who had worked in Saramaka for a couple of years before starting the project, aims to reconstruct and combine the knowledge people have about their more distant past. The Saramaka had won their liberation in 1762 after a century-long fight and were among the first slaves to become emancipated in Latin America (Price 2003 [1983]).

Price uses a twofold strategy to analyze and present his findings. In the beginning, he introduces a set of characters who told him the stories about the past. The book is divided into two parts running simultaneously across two channels that divide each page horizontally. The upper part carries the texts and the lower part the interpretation by Price, who had done extensive fieldwork in the area before turning to the project. Those stories are combined, resulting in a collection that "would amaze (and be new to) any single living Saramaka" (Price 2003 [1983], 25). Partial truths thus combine to form a totality.

An earlier and not less impressive attempt to combine different voices and interpretations is the *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* by Clifford Shaw (Shaw 1968 [1931]). In this astonishing book, the author combines statistical information from a census, case records from the court, live histories, and lengthy chapters written by Sidney, a delinquent, during his third year of imprisonment. Those chapters carry titles like "How I Learned to Lie and Steal" or "Becoming a 'Big Shot'" and are not changed grammatically and orthographically. In his "tentative interpretation" (1968 [1931], 224), Shaw tries to combine these different perspectives, before he hands it over to two colleagues (Ernest Burgess and Mary Bartelme) to offer additional interpretations and discussions in the final two chapters.

The two examples emphasize a shift in terms of the sources of knowledge claims. Malinowski spoke on behalf of those he studied, often representing them in modal terms rather than recognizing the internal variability. Shaw, however, uses multiple sources, statistics, informant narrative, case records, his own interpretations, and the interpretations of a well-known expert. In his book, the stories of the people studied share space with the interpretations of the ethnographer.

The shift is thus from the objective single source purveyor of anthropological knowledge to a collective, multi-source set of knowledge claimants. What is at work here is not the ability to translate other cultures but rather the ability of the lone ethnographer, using a standard mode of writing and representation of the fieldwork observations, to be a justified source of knowledge claims made. This shift is toward providing multiple sources, possibly justifying multiple knowledge claims within the same piece of ethnographic writing (see also Zenker and Kumoll 2010).

As we have seen, postmodernists and radical constructivists argue that we cannot describe the world in an objective manner (see Eriksen [2002] for the political dimension of the issue). In sum, postmodern anthropology has questioned our ability to translate other cultures, what Geertz proclaimed to be the anthropological endowment. The postmodern critique takes up many of the impulses from Heidegger and Gadamer. That is, all representations including science are prejudiced. Science is only one construction of reality, and not a privileged one, and must be put alongside other stories about the world. This was radicalized when not the world out there but the scientific discourses about it became the focus of the enquiry.

Methodological Implications and Writing Ethnography

The postmodern critique has largely focused on the professional author and his or her authoritative role in constructing a representation of cultural phenomena. Consequently, it tried to decenter the author. To do so, it needed to develop new styles of

writing, and a number of different approaches have been proposed, including multi-vocal representations and shifting from ethnography to fiction.

I have already given a number of examples of the first strategy, the multi-vocal representations (Price 2003 [1983]; Shaw 1968 [1931]). A second alternative are dialogue-based accounts. Although these forms have been long and famously proclaimed, relatively few anthropologists have actually used them (Tylor 1986). A third way that has been explored argues that the only way to get rid of the authoritative "I" of the ethnographer is to concentrate on the creative aspects positioning the account close to fiction. This transforms the ethnographic voice as one among many—and one that does not claim to be a better or more suited representation than any other. Through positioning the author center stage, the ethnographer cannot count on science as a source of power and legitimacy and becomes more vulnerable (Jacobson 1991, 119).

More influential and lasting than those experiments were attempts to include the Other into the process of writing ethnographies. These and more traditional ethnographic writing can be grouped along two axes: (1) whether the author is writing about his or her own cultural context and (2) whether the author is a professional anthropologist or not (Reed-Danahay 1997, 4). The two axes produce four cases.

1. In the classical ethnographic account, the professional wrote about the Other (case 1).
2. In case 2, nonprofessionals write about their own culture. In those cases, the professional ethnographer is often involved as a coauthor. A good example of this second strategy is *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan*, in which the U.S.-based anthropologist and her local assistant coauthor an account about the history of an Indian province. The collaboration was largely a division of labor between data collection and writing (Gold and Gujar 2002), with the assistant checking the interpretations of the anthropologist. It is obvious that the coauthor relationship in such a dyad is unlikely to be egalitarian and that this may shape the degree to which interpretations are challenged. Nevertheless, it offers a new perspective and serves as an example for a number of approaches that have been taken to include local voices into the production of texts (Bernard and Salinas Pedraza 1989; Fischer and Abedi 1990; Price 2003 [1983]; Werbner 1991).
3. In the third combination, the professional writes about his or her cultural context (case 3). Among the earliest and most famous works of those so-called autoethnographies is *Facing Mount Kenya*, in which Malinowski's Kenyan student Jomo Kenyatta describes his own ethnic group, the Kikuyu people (Kenyatta 1938). Much later, in *Under the Medical Gaze: Facts and Fictions of Chronic Pain*, Susan Greenhalgh (2001) analyzes the eight months she spent as a patient of a highly recommended male rheumatologist, who diagnosed her fibromyalgia, a new and little understood medical disorder. With heavy medication prescribed, she drifted into a depression from which she could only escape when her former doctor convinced her that the diagnosis was wrong and that she should stop the treatment. Based on detailed diaries written during this time, Greenhalgh analyzes how she became an object of a medical system and how that medical system constructs its authority to exercise this power over her (Greenhalgh 2001; Hayano 1983; Reed-Danahay 1997).
4. The forth combination, nonprofessionals writing about other cultural situations, has not been explored in this context.

Independent of the form of writing and representing, others have turned away from long-term anthropological fieldwork and defined the task of anthropology as one of deconstructing, in a Foucaultian analysis, dominant discourses about the world. These discourses are thought to be produced in the center of the world system and are often written in official documents. They shape and legitimize behavior at the local level or serve to suppress the marginalized. Ethnographic fieldwork that follows this line of thought takes place where these discourses are produced and reproduced including—for example, NGOs, UNESCO, and other organizations (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Scheper-Hughes 2000).

Overall, the postmodern critique has had an impact on ethnography and on ethnographic writing. It became evident how inappropriately the internal diversity of other people is represented through generalizations about the Nuer and the Samoans. At the same time, the most radical calls for writing ethnography as poems or dialogues did not become prevalent. Ethnography has—looking at it from the present—experienced an evolution, not a revolution.

CONNECTING POSITIONS WITH ARGUMENTS

Before I offer some ideas to connect the various epistemological positions, it may help to dispense with some of the common prejudices in the emotional debate about the nature and validation of anthropological knowledge. Some say:

> *Radical constructivists and postmodernists deny the existence of a physical world. One should beat them or throw them out of a window, and they will see the world is real.*

None of the approaches introduced here claims that there is no physical world surrounding us. Constructivists argue that this world stimulates our senses and the perceptions we have. However, we cannot perceive it in an unbiased way, and any attempt to do so is doomed to fail.

Others respond:

> *Positivists really believe that the world exists exactly the way we perceive it and is entirely independent of social constructions.*

None of the approaches introduced here would claim that. It is entirely clear that phenomena are to a different degree constructed by human actors. While this may be less the case for a primary forest or a hill, it is certainly the case with money, with rituals, and with many other subjects of ethnographic enquiry.

Question Three: Limits of Knowledge

The positions discussed differ largely in the way they access knowledge and truth (Morris 1997; Myhre 2006; Wilson 2004). The main issue in the debate is the degree to which we can sense and describe the social world as such. The issue is pretty clear for positivists: Yes, by and large we can describe the social world and need to improve our methods to better our descriptions. Adherents of hermeneutics insist that the observer cannot be separated from the information and that we have to deal with this situation

analytically to describe the social world. In contrast, postmodern ethnographers have argued that we all construct our own realities and that truth is idiosyncratic. Hence, it becomes useless to search for *the* truth value of a statement and for ways to justify it.

Social constructivists are less pessimistic than most postmodern anthropologists. Von Glasersfeld (1996) argues that people construct intersubjective realities, which he refers to as objectivity. Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Schütz (1964) had developed similar positions before and offer a bridge between realistic and relativistic positions. To explain why interpretations are shared, they argue that people who grew up under similar circumstances perceive the world in similar ways. Some of it can be explained through the similar biological makeup of humans. In addition, von Glasersfeld refers to Piaget and to the power of similar experience to explain observed similarity (von Glasersfeld 1996, 119). Berger and Luckmann (1966) name the dominance of daily interactions (*Alltagswelt*), which is nothing more than a cipher for experiences, day-to-day interactions, and the negotiation of interpretations in social relationships (von Glasersfeld 1996, 119). Both approaches follow the same logic and argue that the world, as such, makes some perceptions more likely than others.

Independent of this and following a different epistemological position, Romney and others have developed a model of culture that they called "consensus theory" (Romney and Moore 1998; Romney et al. 1986). Starting with the assumption that there is an underlying cultural truth, they argue that those who agree more know more. The model can also be used to determine when a consensus does not exist. The nonexistence of a consensus may result from: (1) each person having an idiosyncratic interpretation; (2) two groups (men and women, for example) having largely different views; (3) many sharing one view and few deviating from it; and so on (Schnegg and Lang 2008). This model was developed for analyzing very specific quantitative data, but it can serve as a blueprint for dealing with different constructions of the world methodologically and theoretically (for a somewhat comparable approach, see also Reyna 2010). Agreement may be interpreted as cultural truth, though this does not address its relations to reality as observed and experienced through other senses and data. This becomes especially evident when we are confronted with the collective denial of guilt and violence in cases of genocide (Wilson 2004).

I agree that the prediscursive world exists and that it shapes our perceptions. At the same time, people—including ethnographers and informants—have different takes and produce different accounts. The main anthropological challenge now becomes to understand where and why those constructions differ and to uncover the bias they entail. As we will see below, this includes the informant, the ethnographer, and the wider academic context in which knowledge is produced. To me, this is much more challenging than stopping with Clifford's insight that truth is partial. It is also not that different from the approach Price—cited as a best-case example by Clifford—employed: Listen to many stories and try to combine them to document what they can tell us about the underlying reality, here a past event.

The postmodern critique has shown that the relationship between the ethnographer and the people interviewed is crucial and must be incorporated into the analysis. Recently, Hastrup has argued that this makes anthropological knowledge relational. It is relational because the relationship is so close that we cannot separate the objective of

the study, the anthropologist, and the object itself. Through the intensity of the relationship, the objective gets inscribed into the object and stains the evidence we produce (Hastrup 2004, 468).

The transmission of information between objects and people and between people and people is translation. In a similar manner, differentiated between three stages of "errors" in cross-cultural research are the mind of the informant, the ethnographer's mind, and the mind of the code (Naroll 1962, 1970).

The ethnographer's sensing of the field (e.g., our observation of a festival or a landscape) is a first-order translation. In contrast, the information given by someone being interviewed includes the informant's interpretations of the world and is a second-order translation. I use the term "bias" to refer to the modification that takes place through the translation. In any ethnographic analysis, we must acknowledge that we are confronted with information that has been translated any number of times and contains different biases. All information is thus biased—though in different degrees. How do we move on from here?

To get beyond this, we can draw on the general idea proposed by Heidegger and Gadamer and encourage an approach comparable to the hermeneutic circle to understand the relationship between the world as such and the different perceptions of it. This approach contextualizes: (1) the informants and the information given by them; (2) the context, including the ethnographer, in which the information is gathered: (3) the senses and methods used to obtain it; and (4) the particular academic context in which the information is generated and analyzed. While the first three points derive more or less directly from the hermeneutic and postmodern critique of positivism, the last point has been prominently made by Bourdieu in his *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu 1988).

Bourdieu argues that social scientists are biased by their social origins, their adherence to a certain academic field (e.g., the specific modes of knowledge production, theories, and methodologies), and their bias as intellectuals (see also Kuhn 1970 [1962]). The latter point refers to the fact that scientists tend to perceive the world as a spectacle to be interpreted rather than a set of concrete problems to be solved (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 39). These four points combined—position of the informant, context of the information, methods used, and academic context—provide the basis for a reflexive anthropology that allows us to understand and interpret the biases involved and to deal with the relational nature of anthropological knowledge that Hastrup identified (Hastrup 2004).

To return to an earlier metaphor, we can only see the world through sunglasses, but the glasses are not all the same, and we have other senses. The property of those glasses is also not randomly distributed but structured by the experience and the learning of the people involved and by larger discourses. Not only do different stories told by different people or to different people contain different biases. The same holds true for different sources of evidence—like observations and introspection—that produce different accounts of the world. Comparing and communicating the statements we make, and combining them with information gained by other senses, allows us to understand the strength of those sunglasses, to incorporate this in the interpretation, and, eventually, to grasp the world beyond them by assessing the biases.

Communicating and reflecting this process is a key precondition to make the translation intersubjective and reliable, thus distinguishing it from art and other ways to make sense of the world. This understanding has a number of specific methodological consequences:

1. The approach calls for an actor-oriented methodology, in which we start from the individual actors of the world. We use the structural information we have to understand what may have brought the actor to tell this specific story, be it personal involvement, position in the kinship network, economic position, and the like.
2. This also implies triangulation or a mixed methods approach, using as much different data as we have. All information is biased in specific ways, and we can only understand the world behind the bias if we analyze and understand it in an interactive and reflexive way (Denzin 2005).
3. This approach would profit from making use of all our senses in ethnography, not only our eyes and ears—a strategy that Spittler termed "deep participation" (Spittler 2001).

The reflexive approach taken here has some similarity with what has become known as "critical realism" (Bhaskar 1997 [1975]; Brereton 2004). The term must not be confounded with "critical rationalism," coined by Popper (1969a). Critical realism developed as a way to overcome some of the pitfalls of realism and relativism. It argues that the structures that underlie human behavior cannot be perceived. Different structures interact and produce specific instances of behavior. This is the only way they come to be. As Porter put it, if we accept the causal criteria of reality that to be is to be able to do, the very existence of those effects demonstrates the reality of the underlying structures (Porter 1993, 593). The analytical task becomes getting from the behavior (e.g., a murder of a migrant in the subway) to the underlying structures (e.g., racism). Structures understood in that way are a synonym for the world as such. Critical realism focuses very much on observations (Porter 1993).

The approach is compatible with what I have said so far. However, it differs in its ontological premise. While critical realism does not deny the existence of a world out there, it introduces two ontological levels: social structure and human agency. Although structures and actors both have an ontological status and are interlinked, only actors and their behavior can be observed. Davies has developed detailed guidance to show the methodological implications of this approach. Many of these techniques can be helpful in deciphering the four biases introduced above (Davies 2008, 18).

Question Two: Sources of Knowledge

All of these discussed approaches share the understanding that knowledge is constructed empirically. Some authors have argued that ethnography unites even the most divergent theoretical approaches in anthropology (Mintz 2000; Murdock 1971). This could have an epistemological basis and be related to the subject of our enquiry: It is hard to claim that one can understand/explain the cultural Other by ratio or introspection alone.

In the anthropological debate, the most important divide runs between understanding and explanation as two strands of the empirical position. But how are they related? Stegmüller (1979) argues: (1) Conceptually, both procedures are not polar

opposites. A valid contrast to explanation (embedding a case in a larger, generalizing model, typically using laws or law-like statements) is description (singular statements specifying what the case is in particular entities). (2) The dichotomy of *Verstehen*/explanation does not lead to a fertile classification. Explanation is possible in the medical sciences, psychology, economics, and other social and behavioral sciences, including anthropology; interpretation also plays a role in the natural sciences. In addition, not all natural sciences can conduct experiments (e.g., astronomy), and they are not confined to the invariant aspects of their subject matter (as Dilthey had it), but take history into account as well (e.g., natural history in biology or astronomy). So the simple distinction between the natural and the human sciences according to explanation and *Verstehen* disappears. (3) A more productive methodology in social sciences attempts to integrate *Verstehen* and explanation. In this new perspective, we can first use (empathic) understanding to develop hypotheses on the subjective meanings of actors and then consider meanings as well as the conditions of the larger context in which actors are embedded in more encompassing explanations of social and cultural phenomena (Stegmüller 1979).

In this respect, some interesting methodological ideas have been put forward by sociologists, most notably Esser (1991, 1993, 1996), Lindenberg (1989, 1990, 1992), and Lindenberg and Frey (Lindenberg and Frey 1993). Following some of Weber's early concerns, these analysts begin with the "logic of the situation" at the level of individual actors: Using *Verstehen*, they investigate the actors' view of their situation, including cultural preferences, which yields information on actors' goals and expectations. Then analysts study the economic, political, and social restrictions of the context that enable and constrain individual action. Finally, they use a refined rational actor model (as a law or law-like statement) to explain the actors' strategic actions. They also trace the purposeful and unintended collective outcomes of individual choices on the larger system.

The refinement of the rational actor model refers mainly to the fact that the economizing scheme has to incorporate social constraints to avoid the flaw of the undersocialized actor and has to include social approval in addition to material well-being as a maximizing goal (Lindenberg 1990, 1996). In a diachronic perspective, one can study the embeddedness of actors in previous institutional and cultural arrangements, and, contrastingly, the emergence of new norms and institutions as an effect of present actions (Cashdan 1990; Ensminger 1992; Ensminger and Knight 1997; Netting 1993). Thus, in a major reconstruction, sociologist Hartmut Esser (1991) demonstrates how the *Verstehen*-oriented social theory of Alfred Schütz (1964) corresponds with rational choice theory and can be incorporated into rational choice explanations.

These social theories use empathic *Verstehen* as a bridge between a very general and abstract social theory, on the one hand, and information on the concrete decision situation of actors, on the other. Siegwart Lindenberg discusses heuristic strategies for cross-fertilizing these two approaches to arrive at more precise and more realistic, but still sufficiently general explanations (Lindenberg 1992, 1996). This theoretical approach challenges the former inappropriate distinction between *Verstehen* and explanation and the accompanying idea that both procedures exclude each other. Better theories capture both subjective meanings (i.e., the actors' views

and social constraints and the institutional context and shared beliefs prevailing in society at a certain time). By integrating both kinds of information, they arrive at more grounded, in-depth explanations.

This links to a much larger debate about structure and agency (Ortner 1984, 2006). Although it is beyond the scope of this analysis to give a detailed overview of this discussion, I want to underline that this counts among the most challenging and important problems in social theory. I have taken it up here under the rubrics of methodology (the link between micro/macro and *Verstehen*/explanation) and epistemology (critical realism), but it must also be seen as a theoretical problem that deals with the question of how structures enable and constrain social action.

Historian William Sewell has offered a model to conceptualize the duality of structure and agency building on the works of Giddens and Bourdieu. The latter two both proposed that structure and agency are not opposites but two sides of a coin (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979). Sewell defines structures as follows: "Structure, then, should be defined as composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual. Structures may only be perceived through social action, as Porter argues" (Sewell 1992, 13).

Sewell goes on to argue that structures are not static and that many of the existing theories fail to explain how structures can change. This is where agency comes in, since "the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts . . . is inherent in the knowledge of cultural schemas that characterizes all minimally competent members of society" (1992, 18). This capacity to transform structures again relates to the resources an actor has access to.

This model opens up a way to link micro and macro phenomena, structure, and agency. Social action is carried out on the basis of a certain interpretation of the situation (logic of the situation) and with certain resources and schemata at hand. It can only be understood in this context. However, when aggregated, it may lead to phenomena, like the transformation of a schema, that can be explained. Esser has referred to this type of explanation as "deep explanation."

Question One: Nature of Knowledge

As we have seen, in the anthropological debate the question about the nature of knowledge is closely related to the question about its limits. While the philosophical debate focuses on the question of what needs to be added to true beliefs to turn them into knowledge, the main anthropological concern is to justify that a belief is true and to provide better justifications than our colleagues do. I have referred here to a number of strategies commonly employed in an empirical tradition. This is where research design and methodologies enter the game. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that justification can be improved by using multiple data and multiple senses, by ensuring transparency, and by reflecting on biases that may be entailed in the translations and perceptions of both the ethnographer and the informant. This will ultimately lead to reliability and intersubjectivity and thus to statements that are more likely to be true than others.

This also means we need to reflect on how our attempts to validate a statement as true translates into specific research designs and methodologies. I advocate making

these linkages more explicit and broadening the epistemological debate in anthropology beyond the current focus on the relationship between the ethnographer and the informant. This would include analyzing the biases that occur at different stages of knowledge production and calls for enhancing methodologies, improving transparency, and reflecting about the role of all actors involved. The insight that we cannot have the whole truth should not make us despair that we cannot have any truth at all (Pina-Cabral 2009).

THE FUTURE OF KNOWING IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropologists have long faced a challenge that affects the way we produce and conceive of knowledge: Our informants may read our work and may or may not agree with our claims. Today, Internet-based technologies make it relatively easy and inexpensive to draw a larger public into debates about the validity of anthropological knowledge. David Mosse (2005), for example, describes the quarrels that surrounded the publication of his ethnography of a British NGO operating in India. People involved in the NGO, especially many of his former colleagues, urged him to drop some of his claims and to substantially rewrite the book (Mosse 2006). In his later analysis of the dispute, Mosse shows that the separation between field and desk is increasingly blurred and that our writing influences our social relationships with informants and collaborators—possibly strengthening, damaging, or even severing relationships in the field (Mosse 2006).

This vanishing gap between field and desk is likely to start even earlier in future research. Many of our publications are now accessible via electronic sources, and more and more of our informants are connected to Internet devices, providing new opportunities to contextualize the ethnographer and know about his or her prior work, publications, and postings. At the same time, blogs and other publishing platforms open up new ways to put our knowledge claims to the test.

These developments raise questions about the *anticipated perception of our research* by research subjects, which may impact the way knowledge is produced and presented in ways we are only beginning to explore. Thus, for the next generation of anthropologists, Bourdieu's (1988) call to reflect critically on the structure of academic knowledge production takes on new significance and urgency.

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