

See also Geertz, Clifford; Hymes, Dell; Róheim, Géza; Turner, Victor W.

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THICK DESCRIPTION

Thick description is an approach to cultural analysis popularized by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the introductory essay of his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures*. This method involves densely textured descriptions and explanations of social acts and activities, which strive to uncover the layers of cultural significance underlying them. This effort by social researchers to construct actor-oriented understandings of meaning is necessarily interpretive. Geertz's position that ethnography (cultural anthropology's principal method of inquiry) is fundamentally a project of thick description and his definition of culture (anthropology's chief organizing concept) as interconnected webs of significance render thick description a more or less complete explanation of what anthropologists should

do—that is, endeavor to identify and represent the cultural contexts in which behaviors and the meanings behind them are embedded in order to figure out what people are *really* up to. Cultural anthropologists today recognize Geertz's articulation of thick description as a seminal moment in debates over the discipline's position as closer to either the social sciences or the humanities. Geertz's work also helped usher in the next generation of ethnographers who championed more literary approaches to ethnographic writing and analysis. The remainder of this entry expands on the notion of thick description through (a) a brief overview of its initial articulation by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, (b) a discussion of the debates and criticisms surrounding Geertz's application of thick description, and (c) an elaboration on its significance and legacy.

Gilbert Ryle and Thick Description

Although Geertz introduced thick description as an important concept in anthropology, he in fact borrowed both the term and the best known example for explaining it from the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Through a series of thought exercises, Ryle juxtaposed the idea of a “thin description”—that is, a surface-level explanation of a directly observable act—with a “thick description,” which additionally presents the intentions of social actors as well as the reasons for and meanings behind their behavior. The most famous of these exercises considers the thinly described contracting of an eyelid as either an involuntary twitch or an intentional wink. Ryle demonstrates that a contracting eyelid only becomes recognizable and understood as a wink with an awareness of the cultural context and circumstance—both the social codes through which a wink takes on meaning and the various situations that might prompt its use. Methodologically, this distinction highlights the importance of ethnographic embeddedness. In other words, simply being present to observe and record an act will not suffice—any video camera can document a contracting eyelid; the researcher must be familiar enough with the social environment to (at least attempt to) understand the meanings that actors attribute to their actions.

Criticisms of Thick Description

Criticisms of thick description primarily come from two camps. Anthropologists committed to more

objective social scientific principles see Geertz as attempting to thrust social inquiry into an interpretive quagmire. For example, positivists such as Paul Shankman and materialists like Marvin Harris view thick description's lack of systematic analytical rigor as a form of anything-goes relativism and regard Geertz's thickly descriptive writing as excessively wordy ivory tower musings that don't say much of anything and make little to no effort to address the pressing issues facing contemporary society. On the other hand, researchers predisposed to an interpretive approach, including postmodernists like Vincent Crapanzano and Graham Watson, cite a number of ambiguities and/or contradictions in Geertz's explanation of thick description and how to go about doing it. One common source of confusion concerns the relationship between describing and explaining. Although scholars frequently reference "thick description" to mean the former, as an approach to cultural analysis it is incomplete without the latter. Explaining the circumstances, intentions, and meanings behind a wink may seem straightforward enough. However, for more elaborate cross-cultural situations—including most of the concrete examples of thick-description-at-work offered by Geertz—sorting out the layers of significance underlying different actors' actions and motivations involves a considerable imaginative leap. While Geertz appears comfortable in moving from descriptive accounts of cultural contexts to diagnostic understandings of the frames of interpretation that guide social actors' behaviors, critics such as Crapanzano argue that his explanations are often too neat to account for the inherent contradictions and tensions of lived reality and, furthermore, lack sufficient evidence for how he reaches his interpretive conclusions. To this end, Crapanzano characterizes Geertz's writing as deliberately illusive and perpetually inconclusive. Another ambiguity surrounds the difference between describing/explaining particular situations and generating knowledge about either the broader society or social life on the whole. Geertz clearly promotes thick description as an effort toward cultural theory building rather than a means of studying particular places. Yet, as such, he advocates for the intrinsically unfinished nature of cultural analysis, arguing that the aim of (interpretive) anthropology is to progressively refine what are inevitably unresolvable on-the-ground debates regarding the nature of social life.

Thick description, which came of age during a particularly acrimonious moment in anthropology, was unquestionably introduced in response to the scientific models that dominated the discipline during the 1950s and 1960s. It in turn influenced a generation of social researchers—within anthropology and beyond—suspicious of hard (social science) facts and dedicated to more literary approaches to ethnographic representations. This postmodern turn in anthropology, which reached its apex in the mid-to late 1990s, moved from a Geertzian understanding of social life as a text to be read and interpreted by researchers to the position that ethnographers not only describe/explain but, in fact, construct culture through the process of writing about it—advocating for a cultural anthropology that is very much akin to literary scholarship. Such attention to issues of writing and representation marked a monumental shift that, in chorus with important critiques coming from feminist and native anthropology, transformed the discipline during the final decades of the 20th century. As such, many contemporary anthropologists view Geertz's articulation of thick description as a turning point in repositioning anthropology closer to the humanities.

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See also Geertz, Clifford; Hermeneutics; Humanistic Anthropology; Postmodernism; Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology

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TORRES STRAITS EXPEDITION

The 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits was an important turning point in the development of British anthropology,