

The aim of this paper is to assess the concept of 'thick description'. In order to do this, I will look at the way in which anthropological study was carried out prior to this relatively new concept. I will then discuss some of the sociologists such as Weber, Ryle and Geertz and their contributions that have influenced this topic. I aim to conclude by showing whether or not 'thick description' is a new method of anthropological study or simply a deeper analysis of action or text drawing on the work of Paul Rainbow. This paper should give the reader a good understanding of the concept and the theorists that have influenced it.

The term 'thick description' was coined by Clifford Geertz (1973) in response to the work of philosopher Gilbert Ryle. It can be briefly defined as, 'Any description of human conduct can be defined as 'thick' in the sense that it depends on the multiple layers of meaning given by human beings to their actions. Every description given an ethnographic account is actually based on descriptions given by other participants, which in turn are dependent on other descriptions. All these descriptions are embedded in different and sometimes incompatible systems of meaning' (The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology. S. Hill, B.S. Turner, N. Abercrombe. 2000).

The definition can be explained using Ryle's example of a wink. A wink can be described as merely a twitch of the eye, this, Geertz would call a thin description. On the other hand, it could be described as a conspiratorial wink or a flirtatious gesture. This later description of the action does not simply

observe and state the action, but takes into account other phenomena such as the different meanings different cultures may attribute to a gesture. This is what Geertz labeled as a 'thick description'. In his book, 'The Interpretation of Cultures' he discusses the need for thick description in discussing cultures and social phenomena. It is important to discuss things 'thickly' or in greater detail otherwise important factors may be left out and the point of an action may be missed. An example of this may be a wedding ring. In one culture, it may mean nothing other than a piece of jewellery, but to our culture it is a symbol of marriage or engagement. A key word here is symbol. In any observation, there are symbols or signs and it is by relating them to one another that we are able to understand the observation better (Saussure). Observation also relies on theories, for example, 'the temperature is twenty eight degrees' relies on the theory of thermometers. Saussure discusses the sign in relation to meaning. He says that the sign has two points, the signifier and the signified. This was the first dominating thought of science, and as social science was a science it should therefore be grounded in systematic observation. This simple observation did not work though as social science cannot be described as physical facts but by meaning attributed to action. So it is these signs that show the difference between observation and meaning. Social life contains a number of signs, natural (black cloud = rain) or social (ring = marriage). The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary though, as a ring may not actually mean that you are married and black clouds may not definitely result in rain. Also, sound to meaning is arbitrary, for example,

letters relating to a sound or sounds relating to the concept of a thing. An example of this may be found in the sentence, 'dog bit man'. A Welsh person may not be able to tell who bit who as they form their sentences differently to the English. It is therefore important to discuss briefly how meaning sticks to a word. Wittgenstein calls this ostensive definition and sites the example of pointing. He says that language is a commentary of life and that commentary is a kind of speech act, word to action.

During the twentieth century, philosophers such as Austin and Searle became very interested in speech acts. Austin named these speech acts locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. He gave the example of saying, 'I do' at a wedding. The speaking part is locutionary, the consenting is illocutionary and your new marital status is the perlocutionary. Weber believed that when we grasp all three levels of speech act we fully understand something (therefore we can give a thick description of it). This is what Geertz discussed in his major work on thick description, 'The Interpretation of Cultures'. In order to fully understand an action, we must immerse ourselves within the culture that the action takes place. He somewhat famously uses the example of the Balinese calendar. It is remarkably different to the calendars that we may be used to in western society, and in fact would not make a lot of sense to us, but it is of fundamental importance to the agricultural life of the Balinese, as it represents the seasonal changes in terms of the best times to farm. Sue Greenwood in, 'Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld' (2000. Oxford, New York) has also

discussed this immersion in to a culture in order to study it effectively. She uses the term 'going native' to describe how she fully participated in many of the pagan traditions and rituals in order to fully understand their culture. It is only then that you can understand the reason behind and the meaning of action.

Later in his book, Geertz gives the example of sheep stealing in Morocco in 1912 to further illustrate this point. Hollis and Luke discussed his example in 'Rationality and Relativism' (1982). Their main concern appears to be that of perspective. They believe that to fully understand an action or a chain of events you must understand the perspective of those involved. They add that this also applies to the anthropologist involved as they may have their own perspective that influences the recording of such events. A relevant example may be when Geertz was in Bali and observed a cock fight. When the police arrived to arrest those involved, he ran away with the locals instead of pleading ignorance and showing his documents as a tourist might be expected to do. He was then accepted by the locals and felt that this gave him an insight into their culture and way of life and enabled him to write more accurately about them. Hollis and Luke's example is also important when interpreting texts. Many authors of anthropological texts are no longer alive and therefore the initial perspective that it was written in may have been lost and we may not be able to place the text in a cultural context.

This was further illustrated by Paul Ricoeur who said that speech has a number of features; it is temporal, self-referential, it expresses a word (relevance may differ from culture to culture) and he says it has an 'other', in that the person who hears it may attribute a different meaning to it. He goes on to discuss this in texts, saying that they tend to fix meaning, more so at locutionary and illocutionary levels. The author's role diminishes and the other becomes anyone who can read.

Criticisms of Geertz' work can be found in Paul Rainbows book, 'Representations are social facts: Modernity and Post modernity in Anthropology (1986). He says that Geertz has not developed a new method of anthropological study, '[he] is just pausing between monographs to muse on texts, narrative, description and interpretation' (p.242). 'Geertz, like other anthropologists is still directing his efforts to reinvent an anthropological science with the help of textual mediations. The core activity is still social description of the other, however modified by new conceptions of discourse, author or text' (242). This appears to me to be exactly what Geertz was trying to do. To analyse texts or actions in more detail, a 'thick description'.

Whether or not he has created a new method of anthropological study does not seem as important as the results of his study. The fact remains that in order to accurately discuss an action you must understand the cultural context that the action takes place in. Prior to the works of Weber, Ryle and Geertz, this did not appear to be the case. Anthropologists like Durheim seemed more interested in

studying the structure of society, families and the distribution of work for example. The work of Marx was similar in his study of class structures. Weber and Dilthey however, drew a new model of 'explanatory understanding and direct understanding', which stated that in order to directly understand an action, you must understand the motives behind it. This study was further drawn upon by the work of Alfred Shutz (1899 – 1959). Shutz looked at Weber's work on meaning and developed his own theories drawing primarily on the example of language. He showed how two words that can be translated as the same thing, have different meanings in different cultures. An example of this might be if an American were to point at a pair of trousers he would call them 'pants', this word has a different meaning to an Englishman who would think he was talking about underwear. The work of Weber, Dilthey and Shutz appears to be much of the inspiration behind Ryle and Geertz' work and the development of the concept of 'thick description'.

The concept of 'thick description' is a relatively new one, although it seems to be fairly well documented. It has been spoken of as if it were a new movement in anthropological study and that Clifford Geertz was its discoverer, I hope that this paper has shown that there were other sociologists that have influenced this area of study such as Weber, Ryle and Saussure to name just a few. It has come under criticism from writers such as the fore mentioned Paul Rainbow, who suggested that it is not a new sociological movement. This however, is not the major issue that I wished to discuss in this paper. My main aim was to

assess the concept itself and not to discuss how ground breaking it is. It should appear clear that it has benefited sociological and anthropological study tremendously, as it is a theory that now seems to be a natural process when studying actions. To have a greater understanding of the culture in which an action takes place or in which a text is written is to have a greater understanding of that action or text.

### Bibliography

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