



# Data Telling Stories and Stories Telling Data: The Role of Fiction in Shaping Ethnographic Truth

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## **Abstract:**

*The following essay explores the use of fiction in ethnographic research. While the concept of fiction as a research methodology is not a new one, most proponents claim that fiction is most useful in the writing of ethnographic data. Despite the gradual acceptance of arts-based methods in ethnography, there still remains a false dichotomy of art and scientific research. This essay contributes to the discussion by arguing that fiction also plays an active role in producing knowledge and truth. To make this argument, the author brings together in conversation scholars of art and literature with social researchers. While multiple examples are illustrated to show how fiction creates knowledge in ethnography, the primary focus will be Clifford Geertz's (2005) "Notes on a Balinese Cockfight." The purpose is to demonstrate how fiction can be a means of knowledge production, so long as it is situated in sound research methods.*

## **Keywords:**

*fiction, literature, ethnography, Clifford Geertz, arts-based research, epistemology*

## **I. Introduction**

Of course, the use of fiction is not new to ethnography. A growing number of outlets, like the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, encourage the publication and dissemination of ethnographic fiction. Mainstream debates, however, still uphold a dichotomy between fiction and research. It seems that, at best, scholars consider fiction acceptable as a "mode of representation" (Sparkes 1995, 159). The problem of truth remained—how could fiction, an invention of the imagination, be a reliable vehicle for truth? Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) help move fiction beyond being relegated to a rhetorical strategy, but their arguments focus more on acts of narrative that are believed to contain some objective knowledge, like oral histories.

I make the case that choosing to write research using techniques of fiction contributes more to the research process than its confinement as a final reporting stage. Rather, fiction is part of the knowledge creation process. We know that how one writes the research shapes the research, so we must also accept that language as a whole is a medium that constructs narratives, whether those narratives be our individual identities, our projections of hidden selves, or our membership in grander cultural narratives. Indeed, stories are the "organizing principle in human existence" (Journet, Boehm & Britt 2011, 4). What we believe to be true is dependent upon the narratives in which we find ourselves the actors. This relationship, between narrative and truth, is cyclical: knowledge is formed through language; language is used to construct narratives; therefore, knowledge is itself a narrative.

In the following sections I will describe features of fictional narratives that are crucial to shaping knowledge, showing how they work on anthropological as well as aesthetic levels. Next, I will discuss how fiction takes part in meaning-making by promoting empathy in the reader. Finally, I will illustrate how Geertz's (2005) classic "Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" exhibit principles of fiction to construct knowledge from his experience.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **Narrative Power**

Narratives serve to organize our experiences, both in their arrangement and in their telling. Committing a narrative act, regardless of whether the narrative is nonfiction or fiction, is an attempt to make sense of existence. Authors in all disciplines at the very least arrange their data into consumable form (e.g., a report, a presentation, an article, a book), and while engaging the reader might not be a primary goal to all of them, it is at least seriously considered. This is explained by Ricoeur (1992) when he said that we “consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them”.

For Jerome Bruner (1986), the question of how individuals construct meaning from experience is the fundamental question “that preoccupies the poet and the storyteller”. In any literary story, the reader seeks meaning from the characters and events in a story, a truth in fiction that can result in some new knowledge. Story facts or factual structures are elements that can be directly identified in fiction. The fact of the story consists of elements of character, plot and setting. These elements shape the reality of life, namely human beings as characters, spaces and places that become the setting and movement from space to space as the plot (Astuti, et al: 2019). A narrative that relays an experience in a meaningful way can become a “virtual” experience for many people who did not “live” it on literal terms. Why should literature be exclusive in its ability to transport people to “virtual” worlds? Since Clifford and Marcus (1986), anthropologists and ethnographers have been experimenting with similar techniques to also move readers into imagining an experience presented in the research.

As a methodological tool, fiction offers unique insights into human experience that might not be accessed otherwise. For instance, besides fiction offering a “safety blanket” for people to share their stories, it also invites participants to author the true meaning of their experiences. In the introduction to “Sp’ange,” Finley and Finley’s (1999) ethnographic narrative of homeless youth, write about their process:

We encourage our participants on introspection about their own psychological development and we invite reflections about their experiences of people and places. Then, as researchers, we retell the stories that we have been told. As collectors of life stories, we intend to present these tales in ways that make the unfamiliar familiar. That is, life history researchers attempt to render texts that will acquaint their readers with the life events of people that they otherwise might not come to know.

The power of narrative lies in its interpretative opportunities. This is true even reflectively. To know ourselves is to know a story. Ricoeur (1992) writes that “self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation”. The knowledge we carry of who we are is always situated in the signs and symbols of other stories being told around us. The study of culture, then, opens up the ethnographer to these stories, allowing a deeper analysis into how those cultural stories have shaped our being in them. And yet, ethnography has long wrestled with the historical grasp of positivist science, which would claim some objective truth lies hidden and merely needs to be discovered with the right quantitative tools.

Traditionally, meaning is conceived as something that is straightforward or objective. However, when we think of meaning through the framework offered by scholars like Joan

Scott (2001), who suggest “what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (Scott 797), we understand meaning to be much more complex. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer the image of a rhizome, which has “no beginning or end” and is “always in the middle, between things, interbeing, and intermezzo” (27). Ironically, the opening up of meaning and the invitation for fiction can aid in the resistance of the seemingly singular sourced narratives Deleuze and Guattari critiqued. Accepting a rhizomatic image of knowledge and truth allows researchers to investigate the multiple experiences that shape and are shaped by social constructions of meaning. Generally speaking, within this theoretical framework, fiction would offer a way to both emotionally and intellectually experience the lives of others.

### **III. Discussion**

#### **3.1 Fiction: Truth via Empathy**

It may not be possible to conceive of knowledge outside of narrative. The raw matter of experience at some point, in order to be shared, must be arranged and deliver a particular way. Vladimir Propp (1968) offer us the terms: *fabula* (the chronological order of events as they occurred) and *syuzhet* (the storyteller’s arrangement of the *fabula* in the telling). Consider the hypothetical situation in which two people observe a car accident (*fabula*). One person reports: “The black car came out of nowhere and slammed into the red car.” The other testifies: “Both cars collided when the red car crossed the intersection.” Both witnesses have arranged the *fabula* into narratives (*syuzhet*). The first report implicates the black car is at fault by syntax alone. The black car, as the sentence’s subject, slams into the red car, which, by virtue of its placement as the sentence’s direct object, is framed as the victim. In the second testimony, the sentence implies shared guilt between both cars, but does shift the attention to the red car, which has become the acting subject. As is apparent with this very simple example, grammatical features inherent in the *syuzhet* alone can communicate particular meanings, which suggest that “nonfiction” as a pure, unadulterated form of storytelling that is an exact transmission of the facts is not possible. Always at play is some level of invention (the etymological root of the word “fiction” is “*fingere*,” which translates to “invention”). The questions become: at what level of language does fiction occur? Does a narrative act of fiction emerge when a certain amount of words are combined to have a particular effect, or do traces of fiction come into play at the micro level of grammar? Assuming, just for the moment, the possibility of the extreme, that all language is a narrative act, then even attempts to avoid narrative is itself a narrative.

For instance, when researchers follow the scientific realism of eliminating bias and removing the influence of the author, their writing inevitably carries with it the experience of distance. Any reader becomes consequently neutralized in the reading. What this type of research produces is a narrative of indifferent observation, where knowledge is “deduced from general laws and initial conditions” (Journet, Boehm & Britt 2011, 12). This is contrasted from the narratives produced by ethnographic fiction, where, as a researcher, “you put yourself in [the way of culture] and it bodies forth and enmeshes you” (Geertz 1996, 44). This kind of knowledge is personalized. It focuses on the researcher as an author of experience who is also a character in the narrative of knowledge. Behar (1996) describes this process by saying anthropology is about loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something.

Fiction accomplishes empathic reflection in two ways. First, it allows access to the intimate thoughts of characters, which, at the risk of sounding solipsistic, cannot be accessed without taking that imaginative leap. Throughout the social sciences is the growing awareness that traditional instruments, like self-report surveys, include a troubling amount of uncertainty. And the question isn't just one of method, but also theory, as one would have to assume that such an instrument will "capture" the experience as it naturally occurred (Lester 2014). Fiction invites this uncertainty, which can have the opposite effect of inviting honesty. Second, fiction purposefully leaves structural gaps that allow readers to interpret the experience being communicated, allowing them to actively connect with the characters and the world in which they live.

What researchers do is tell the stories of experience that are unique to a specific moment in time. In so doing, the writing must be organized as a narrative that creates a "close-in contact with far-out lives" (Geertz 1988, 6). Just as the reader of scientific realist research experiences the distance of indifferent observation, readers of ethnography must, by virtue of empathy, become a character in the narrative. Leavy (2013) describes fiction as "the process of imaginatively putting ourselves in the shoes of others [so] that we are able to develop compassion and empathy" (28). Once readers feel an emotional connection with the characters in a story, they don't have to have ever met them. Imaginatively, they are able to put themselves in their place. In Behar's (1996) words, "it is themselves [readers] must be able to see in the observer who is serving as their guide" (16). And when readers see themselves in the ethnographic work, they are transported to Bruner's (1986) "virtual world."

### **3.2 Revisiting Bali's Cockfights**

One of the more interesting essays to exemplify is Geertz's (2005) "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." Of course, "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is not ethnographic fiction, which makes it all the more interesting. The essay was first published in 1973, around the time that ethnography experienced an emergence of new writing styles (Richardson 1990). Geertz made no attempt at writing fiction. As a result, this piece, a landmark essay in introducing ethnography to more versatile forms of writing, shows that even when ethnographers intend to use writing as an objective window into another world, fiction emerges.

In the opening scene, Geertz (2005) characterizes him and his wife as "intruders," who were invisible and ostracized by the people he intended to know (56). This isn't just Geertz's description, either. He shows the reader, in effect placing her at the center of his experience, through vivid scenes:

If we ventured to approach someone (something one is powerfully inhibited from doing in such an atmosphere), he moved, negligently but definitely, away. If, seated or leaning against a wall, we had him trapped, he said nothing at all, or mumbled what for the Balinese is the ultimate nonword—"yes".

The reader sees what Geertz sees, moves through the village as Geertz moves. His use of the collective "we," while ostensibly referring to him and his wife, is inclusive of the reader as well, so the reader feels the sense of some secret being kept hidden.

The scene dramatically turns when a vice raid sends Geertz and his wife running along with the peasants and gamblers attending the cockfight. In that moment, the reader experiences the flight that bonds the "intruder" with the people who previously ignored him. He became accepted, and the reader, too, feels acceptance, having learned something about the extraordinary conditions that could lead to rapport. Geertz (2005) admits his story isn't

“generalizable” for achieving such a relationship, but that isn’t the purpose of narratives. As shown above, experiences are small glimpses of truth that take place in a particular moment of time and are ultimately irrevocable (Behar 1996; Geertz 1996). Thus, the reconstruction of experiential glimpses provides insight into the rhizomatic possibilities of knowledge, not knowledge reduced to general laws. The reader feels what Geertz does, so then, as Behar said, he sees himself in the observer. By surviving such an immediate conflict with high stakes—nearly getting arrested—Geertz establishes empathy with the reader, leading to the reader feeling as though she has been accepted by the Balinese.

One might contend that such a scene is not necessary to an ethnography on cockfights, and from an objective stance they might have grounds for that contention. What Geertz accomplishes doesn’t directly communicate his “findings.” Rather, they transport the reader into the world Geertz experienced so that the reader can share in the interpretative process of narrative. By dramatically structuring the essay, Geertz employs fiction to place the reader in the world. We are not just being told a story through diegesis; Geertz’s research takes on a mimetic quality so that we feel as though we are also observing. As an effect, we co-construct the truth of Balinese cockfights, that they are constituted by “status gambling” that functions on a “sociomoral hierarchy” (73). Take the following passage for example, in which Geertz (2005) describes the setting of typical cockfights:

There are, around the edges of the cockfight area, a large number of mindless, sheer-chance type gambling games (roulette, dice throw, coin-spin, pea-under-the-shell) operated by concessionaires. Only women, children, adolescents, and various other sorts of people who do not (or not yet) fight cocks—the extremely poor, the socially despised, the personally idiosyncratic—play at these games, at, of course, penny ante levels. Cockfighting men would be ashamed to go anywhere near them.

The conclusions Geertz draws are likely to be shared by the reader, mostly because the reader has come to understand the world as driven by the desire for social mobility and status. One might even question how they would interact with the “sorts of people who do not fight cocks.” Such questioning, while not explicit in “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” encourages Deleuzian critiques of the singular cultural narrative. Even if readers have never found themselves in a culture of animal cruelty and gambling addiction, they might use the essay to interrogate the roles they themselves assume in harmful cultural narratives analogous to that in Bali. None of this would be possible had Geertz simply reported his trademark rich descriptions. Necessary to the effect of Geertz’s (2005) essay is the organization of his research into a plot that builds empathy in the reader.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Stories build connections between audiences and authors, researchers and interlocutors, always with the goal Ricoeur (1991) had in mind: “To say that you think as I do, that, like me, you experience pleasure and pain, is to be able to imagine what I would think and experience if I were in your place” (180). Once there is greater acceptance of fiction in ethnography, we can move past the debate of what qualifies as a meaningful text and explore ways of using narrative to create moments of connections between readers, interlocutors, and researchers. Almost ten years ago did Behar (2007) announce that “until the time comes when we pursue the art of ethnography without fear, ethnography will remain a second-fiddle genre, a poor stepchild of memoir and fiction, an academically safe form of writing” (154). What needs to be considered is how we are telling stories as researchers, what we expect of our readers, and the role writing plays in the knowledge we invariably shape.

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