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"If Somebody's with Something Every Day They've Gotta Learn Something—Or They're Just Out to Lunch": The Dialectics of Ethnography as a Way of Being

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Review Essay:

Harry F. Wolcott (1999). Ethnography: A Way of Seeing. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 336 pages (English), ISBN 0-7619-9090-9 (hardcover) US $70.00, ISBN 0-7619-9090-7 (paperback) US $26.95

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Abstract: *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* addresses itself to students in anthropology and researchers in other professional fields, intending to help them in understanding what is distinctive about ethnography as a discipline rather than merely being another fieldwork technique. Although I contest the claim to the particular audience—experienced researchers will much more appreciate the different points Harry Wolcott makes—I found this a highly enjoyable book, the textual nature of which I attempted to reflexively capture in this review. Drawing on my own fieldwork in a fish hatchery as an interpretive horizon and on the techniques of ethnographic writing, I articulate a dialectical framework that allows readers to situate a number of contradictions that have become salient during my reading.

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1. Seeing as a Way of Being

It is a hot sunny day during the June of 2001. I had come to my fish hatchery—perhaps the most important one operating here on the Canadian Northwest Coast because of its status as "indicator" hatchery and because of its highly competent staff—to observe the annual event of "marking the coho." Nevertheless, I enjoyed in the traditional ethnographer's "luxury of simply wandering about" (p.205),[1] talking to some of the temporary staff in the process of feeding fish, before approaching a stand on the dam between the two sets of elongated earthen ponds. Under a canvas gazebo that protects them from the scorching sun, three women stand next to a contraption of plastic troughs leading to one of two cubic devices. The one in the center put tiny fish either in one of the two troughs or into a bucket on the ground just below her. The other two take whatever fish float down in the trough, pick them up with a quick grasp, enter their heads into the seemingly perfectly fitting depressions in their devices, then press a button on top of the device, which results in a "puff." They then drop the fish into another trough from where they move into some bucket, which is subsequently emptied into the nearby pond. At first I think the woman in the center is putting equal amounts of fish into the troughs for the women working on either side of her, but this is not the case. I observe her sorting the fish, which are evidently processed differently. But I cannot see on what basis she sorts the fish. Every now and then one of the women to the side does not go through the routine but enters the fish into the trough directed toward her complementary partner on the other side. [1]

During a lull in their chatter, I ask what the difference is between the fish that are put into the trough going to the right, to the left, and into the bucket. I am told that they differed in size and that the two devices, which are projecting little "coded wire tags" into the nose of each fish, are designed to fit fish of certain sizes. I ask the woman in the center to tell me how she distinguishes the fish; she answers, "Just watch!" I ask again, "Please teach me how to classify the fish." And she answers again, "You have to watch!" I begin to watch. After watching them in silence for about half an hour, I begin to hypothesize whether a particular specimen will be put into the left or right trough, or whether it will end up in the central bucket. Initially, I am no better than chance in my assessments. But with time, I become increasingly accurate. When many hours later I finally arrive at classifying more than 90% of the fish correctly, I realize that I, too, cannot articulate the grounds on which I separate the fish. But I know that I have learned to see and make the relevant distinction of this part of the cultural life in the hatchery. [2]

Later, in the air-conditioned administrative building, I sit with Mike, one of the five fish culturists of the hatchery. His tiny office with a window on "the lagoon"—a small, lake-like enlargement of the river into which the creek and hatchery waters shed—is sparsely furnished with a desk and two chairs. There are a few technical

1 Although WOLCOTT recognizes the changing face of ethnography, I read his text as an ode to the classical ways of doing, seeing, and in fact being. My intent was to develop a reflexive text that reproduces the very structural properties of *Ethnography*. I therefore use his format for citing in the notes and only use citations in the text for direct quotations that appear in separate paragraphs.

books and a computer on the desk, a pin board with a photograph featuring angled salmon; a wetsuit, a southwestern, an overcoat, a couple of plastic tote boxes and various pieces of gear clutter the remaining space. Mike talks to me about the most important aspect of being a fish culturist—not schooling, not the computer and the books, but the ability and willingness to look, see, and make distinctions that are crucial to subsequent decision-making. Watching the fish he raises allows him to see their feeding patterns, detect when there is a disease or other problem, modify the food ration if they are still hungry after the allotted food had been distributed or if they stop feeding even before the allotted food ration had been dispensed. All good fish culturists are competent observers, an ability that they have developed over decades of watching fish in the process of hatching, feeding, and raising them. Being a good fish culturist is the outcome of years of being with fish, observing, and learning to see. He bemoans the new generation of temporary workers in the hatchery—the beginning of the trajectory to eventually becoming a permanently employed fish culturist—who do not seem to be interested in learning about fish by watching and therefore producing and reproducing themselves as competent fish culturists.

> "They go out there and they just put a Sony Walkman on. They [fish]'re just meat. That's just a big meathead is all it is. And they [workers]'re throwing feed in. Well I can put an automatic feeder on there and get the same result. I want somebody to tell me something, what they learned today about those fish so maybe I might learn something." (Mike, interview, February 2, 2002) [3]

Mike, like the other fish culturists in this hatchery, stands out by his competence in seeing. Although certain diseases require medication that only the veterinarian can prescribe, Mike already tells her a diagnosis, first on the telephone, then upon her arrival. It turns out that Mike in most instances has seen what the veterinarian confirms using some instrument or laboratory test. But he does not attribute this competence to an innate ability or to a special intelligence. Rather, he suggests that it is an interest in observation rather than an innate ability that distinguishes the expert from a so-so fish culturist and especially from a person who will not and cannot ever become a fish culturist. He insists, "If somebody's with something every day they've gotta learn something—or they're just out to lunch." Taking courses or having a college degree does not assist in becoming a better fish culturist. He tells me the example of a fellow fish culturist, now "one of the head honchos" in another important hatchery, who was never good in his job as a fish culturist.

> "Smart as a whip, could write papers inside out and backwards, probably could do it in his sleep. But he didn't have the insight. He didn't have enough practical [skill], and he couldn't see anything, you know. Like he couldn't see or observe." (Mike, interview, January 31, 2003) [4]

Being a (good) fish culturist is being a good observer. Fish culture is constituted by its ways of observing and seeing. One becomes a good culturist by participating in fish culture and thereby developing the ways of seeing characteristic of good fish culturists. My own ability to distinguish the fish during

marking developed as I watched and participated in the sorting and marking of fish; my ability to observe fish and see changes in behavior or distribute the appropriate amounts of feed developed as I fed fish. Seeing is central to being a fish culturist; and seeing, as Harry F. WOLCOTT tells us, is central to being an ethnographer. He articulates ethnography as a way of seeing. But fish culture and ethnography, because they constitute ways of being and seeing, are not things that everyone will or want to practice. Following WOLCOTT, I therefore do not "endorse the notion that anyone with good intentions and plenty of time can suddenly begin doing it" (p.220). [5]

Throughout my reading of *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, I thought that maybe it should have been "Ways of Seeing" instead. In this contrast of "a way of seeing" and "ways of seeing" resides an entire problematic, that between the general and the particular, which allows me to understand the book at a different level and articulate some of the central contradictions and tensions in the discipline, its production and reproduction, and in WOLCOTT's exposition. Ethnography as a field, inherently characterized by a group of practitioners, is constituted not by a single way of seeing but in the different concrete realizations that the field makes possible—inherently, ethnography is practically realized in the different concrete ways of seeing of its practitioners. At the same time, *Ethnography* constitutes one ethnographer's way of seeing the field. Other ethnographers will see it differently. The interesting point is that even taken together, the entire group of existing ethnographers does not exhaust the possible ways of seeing ethnography. Every legitimate newcomer concretely realizes another version of what ethnography is, can be, and will be in the future. There is therefore a dialectic tension between the general, the possible ways in which ethnography can be seen, and the particular ways in which its practitioners concretely realize these ways. There exists a similar dialectic tension between the possible ways of enacting ethnography at the collective level and the concrete way it is enacted at the individual level. To me, the book has raised further dialectical tensions and contradictions. But before I get to articulate these, I need to contextualize my reading. [6]

2. Dialectics: Relating the General and the Particular

This time last year (July 2002), I was very ill, taking time out attempting to recover by spending time on the beach. One of the few things I managed to do was to review an interesting book on autobiography as a sociological method.[2] Now, once again, I am sitting on the beach not far from my home reading a book that connects with my life in many ways. I live on the Canadian West Coast, where WOLCOTT had conducted his first major study among the Kwakiutl, a study that he comes back to repeatedly throughout the book. Only a few meters away lies the boundary of a reserve, not part of the Kwakiutl but of the Coast Salish Nation. WOLCOTT uses the metaphor of the ripples on the pond, I study fish culturists who feed fish in ponds and who maintain these ponds, observing the ripples on the pond that allow them to see and understand aspects crucial in raising the fish. Like WOLCOTT, I had not only taught as a high school teacher but also had

2 The review of *Our Lives as Databases* (ROTH, 2002) was also published by this journal.

begun a productive research career while teaching. My *Designing Communities* (ROTH 1998) was an ethnographic study of culture in a fourth- and fifth-grade classroom; my new book, *Toward an Anthropology of Graphing* (ROTH 2003), is squarely concerned with an anthropological approach to study an area traditionally reserved to psychologists and cognitive scientists.[3] But although I have read a good number of ethnographies, although I am fond of individual ethnographers (e.g., Jean LAVE is my great hero), and although a good part of my scholarship pertains to education, I have never read any of WOLCOTT's books—though many years ago I had read and used the *Sneaky Kid* piece in teaching a general introductory course on research design.[4] [7]

Throughout the book, I was struck by the recurrence of issues that I classified as broadly exemplifying the dialectic relation between the general and the particular (e.g., see the page numbers next to the note "dialectic" in Figure 1, an excerpt from my field notebook). Commonly, the general is expressed as the commonalities of a group of entities or individuals. Thus, in inferential (quantitative) research, the mean (median or mode) becomes an expression of what the group is like on some dimension—for example, average income of a household as indicator of quality of life in a country, province, state, or city. Similarly, a correlation between two quantities, such as weight and height collected for a large sample, serves as an expression of the relationship between weight and height in general. However, neither in the first case nor in the second case does any individual (the particular) actually have to show the characteristic or lie on the regression curve (the general). (Some of the worst research on ethnic differences compared head size and intelligence for whites and African Americans.) [8]

In a dialectical materialist perspective, the relationship between the general (universal) and the particular is such that each particular is a concrete realization of the possibilities that exist in the general (universal).[5] The general exists, genetically, prior to the particular, but also in a concrete form, like parents exist before their children, harboring all the possibilities for their offspring. The general and particular are therefore always causally and dialectically related. Both the general and the particular may exist at the same time, just as parents and their children exist at the same time, in all their similarities and differences. Even if they have little in common, as in the case of my brother and me who are very different, physically, emotionally, intellectually, they still have common parents.

3 Both books, Designing Communities (ROTH, 1998) and Toward an Anthropology of Graphing (ROTH, 2003b) use sociocultural, ethnographic, and historical perspectives on "cultural patterns —customary ways of behaving and customary reactions to the behavior of others" (p.256). I pay not only great "attention to *context*" (p.261) but also draw "attention to the critical importance of context" (p.261) for understanding cognition. And yet, throughout my reading, I felt that a lot of the boundary work in this book is designed to keep works like mine out of the field of ethnography in the singular perspective of *this* author.

4 Because of his status as ethnographer in the field of education, he, as my friends Margaret EISENHART or Fred ERICKSON, has been a central representative of the field. One of his texts (WOLCOTT, 1988) was part of a collection of studies exemplifying educational research published by the flagship organization of education, the American Educational Research Association.

5 Evald IL'ENKOV (1982) elaborates the relation between the general (universal) and the particular, the abstract and the concrete, to considerable extent mostly using MARX's *Capital* as a concrete case.

Each child, in all her or his differences, is a concrete realization of the possibilities existing at the parent (general, universal) level. The relationship between the general (universal) and particular is therefore articulated as a genetic one in the sense that each offspring of some parent is a concrete realization of the possibilities that exist in the latter, though no two individuals in the offspring have to look alike. Each new offspring of the parent or filial generation is a concrete realization of the possibilities that exist in the parent generation and the totality of offspring does not exhaust all the possibilities.

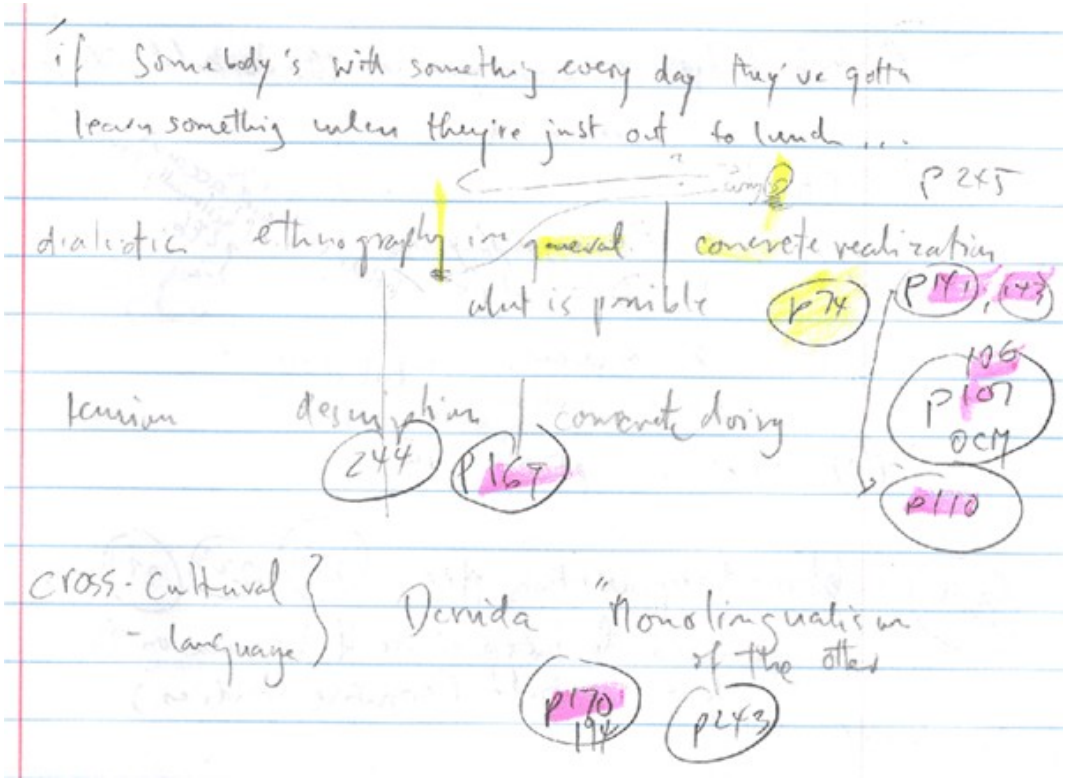
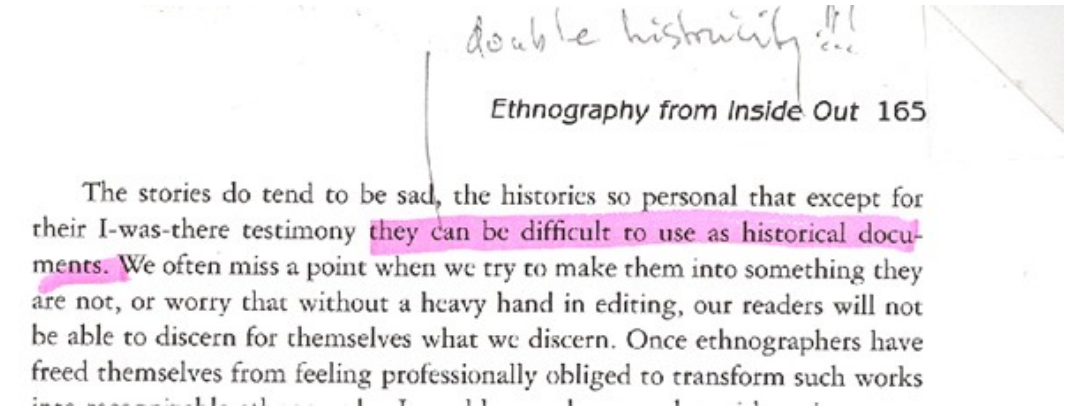


Figure 1. An excerpt from my notebook that illustrates how certain ideas (e.g., the title), concepts (e.g., the relation between the general and particular), and references (e.g., to *Monolingualism of the Other* [DERRIDA, 1998]) initially arose and were subsequently reified as further reading (see increasing page references) seem to stabilize my initial interpretations. The use of notebook, references, highlighter, and vertical and horizontal structuring of text are all forms of cultural patterning, so that my text also contributes to an anthropology of reading scientific (anthropological) texts and reviewing them. [9]

This perspective allows me to understand a range of situations in *Ethnography* that appear to have little interconnection. For example, WOLCOTT uses the metaphor of bread making to discuss the "essential ingredients" of an ethnographic report. For example, he states, "there is no single ingredient common to all the world's breads. And that, of course, underscores the point of the analogy, for neither is there any single essential ingredient common to all the world's ethnographies" (p.245). But all the world's ethnographies are not independent, they have historical antecedents and they have emerged as

concrete realizations of the possibilities of writing ethnography at a particular point in time.


double historicity !!!

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The stories do tend to be sad, the histories so personal that except for their I-was-there testimony they can be difficult to use as historical documents. We often miss a point when we try to make them into something they are not, or worry that without a heavy hand in editing, our readers will not be able to discern for themselves what we discern. Once ethnographers have freed themselves from feeling professionally obliged to transform such works

Figure 2. An illustration of a piece of text, highlighted and annotated as part of engaged reading. Why certain sentences come to be figure against ground and how we conceptualize these as both inaccessible to our consciousness, which has developed in the course of our individual lives, and as an aspect of present culture in a double way. First, there is a dialectical relation between my individual reading and the possible readings at the collective level. There is also a dialectical relation between the history and current nature of my culture and my own concretely lived history (biography) and current nature. [10]

First, there is a dialectic relationship between myself, a fifty-year-old white male who constitutes a concrete realization of the generalized possibilities that make my culture and the way my culture is in part constituted by my practical life. It is through me and my fellow country(wo)men that cultural possibilities are not only concretely realized but also changed and further developed, but without a culture that has developed in historical time, the possibilities for me to realize it and myself would not exist. Who I am in all my particularities, is as much the result of cultural history as it is of personal history (biography). [11]

Second, there is a dialectical relationship between my particular reading of *Ethnography* and the possibilities of reading *Ethnography* that exist at a collective level. In both cases, the collectively existing possibilities are neither exhausted by all particular realizations nor do they exist as the common denominator of all of these ways. This way of viewing the relation between the general and particular opens up ways for viewing cultural change—not only in the groups where we do our research but also in the group that we most identify with ourselves. Each new individual—who constitutes him or herself as a member in our group through his or her writing and is accepted into our group because of his or her writing that we recognize as a variant of possibilities that exist for us collectively—also constitutes change at the collective level bringing with him or her new possibilities. [12]

Further, in each production, an individual ethnographer not only constitutes him- or herself and a concrete realization of the possibilities at the collective level, but

also he or she both produces change and stability in our community. Thus, my way of making salient certain issues in the text (Figure 2) is not only a particular way but also a concrete realization of the generally possible ways. My way of excerpting and keeping a notebook (Figure 1) is not only (or just) a particular way of doing so but also is a concrete realization of the generally possible ways of doing so in my culture. Mike's way of seeing and interacting with the fish is a concrete realization of the possibilities of fish culture (general). As an individual fish culturist he concretely realizes fish culture in a particular way so that by working with him, I can find out something about fish culture in general. On this point, scientists using only quantitative methods and inferential statistics have it got wrong. There are things we can learn about the general by studying individual cases. [13]

My reading is not merely a reading, but is a reading that has occurred in a particular historical context. This historical context has a dual nature (see the hand-written note in Figure 2). My personal history (biography) is dialectically related to the history of my culture. It is a concrete realization of the possibilities in culture. I did not merely develop in culture but, qua member of group, contributed to the development of culture. Personal history (biography) and cultural history are intertwined and dialectically related. At any one point in time, therefore, my reading emerges from the double historical relation of the text constitutive of and understandable through current culture and of my biography, itself dialectically related to the historical context. Throughout this review essay, readers should keep in mind that my reading is not *the* way of reading the book but *a* way; but it is also not *just* a way of reading the book. This review essay has to be read as a concrete realization of the possible ways in which the book can be read and in which it can be understood. The review essay, in all its particularity, tells us something about the possible ways of reading the book and therefore about our (academic) culture—right down to the process of marking up the texts I review (Figure 2, top center) and marking those pages with particularly salient issues (Figure 2, top right) and my use of a notebook (Figure 1) for organizing my emergent reading and understanding of the book. This article therefore also constitutes material evidence for an anthropology of reading books and writing review essays. [14]

A third historical element emerges from the way in which we read—it is a process in time and through time even if we do not begin on page one to proceed to the last page. Thus, this review, its major elements and concepts emerged from taking notes about issues that became salient to me, situations that emerged in association with the text (e.g., my study o the hatchery, which, if WOLCOTT does not classify it as ethnography, is at least ethnographically informed), my current preoccupation with dialectical theories, and my knowledge of DERRIDA's writing. Although I did not know what I would write, the usefulness of a dialectical perspective emerged in the transaction with the text. In this point, I disagree with WOLCOTT—who avows that he does not read because in ethnography, you can only be a reader or writer, and he is a writer. If we do not draw on existing sophisticated social theories, then we draw on the social theories inherent in the language given to us by our forefathers—the worst case scenario, for then we are

stuck in common sense ways of understanding the world and become trapped in ideology. But of course, the importance of a dialectical perspective could only arise because I had studied, used, and written about dialectical theories. [15]

Sitting on the beach, wondering whether what I am doing can be called, according to WOLCOTT, "doing ethnography," I wobble from moments of "No" to moments of "Yes." I not only use ethnographic techniques but also view my work through a cultural lens. Much of my recent work has been framed in terms of cultural historical activity theory, which has the notion of "culture" in its name. At the same time, there are some key differences, one of which is my allegiance to certain theoretical ways of framing that appear to be absent in the way I read WOLCOTT describing ethnography. Thus, I reference my theoretical background to cultural sociology and cultural-historical activity theory, both of which are essentially based in dialectical conceptions, agency–structure and subject–object, respectively.[6] I wonder whether the absence or adherence to such a theoretical frame is particular to WOLCOTT or a characteristic of ethnographer's culture. I did recently read and review a study of culture among Berlin's Turkish Hip-Hop youth[7] in which a strong theoretical perspective was brought to the study, but this study, too, may be one of those that WOLCOTT might attribute to a different discipline such as cultural studies, sociology, or urban anthropology. [16]

3. A Way of Seeing A Way of Seeing

In the following, I begin with a review of the structure and content of the book and then proceed to discuss several issues that became salient in my own reading of it. These issues include (a) the dialectic of the general and the particular in *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, (b) the framing of the ethnographic subject and object, (c) the inside/outside dichotomy and boundary work maintaining it, (d) the telling of an ethnographic story, and (e) the enculturation of ethnographers. [17]

3.1 Structure and content

The book addresses itself to "those unfamiliar with ethnography or familiar (through prior reading) but not yet experienced in it" (p.335). Its main intent is to articulate not just a way of doing research, which the author views as mere ethnographic technique, but as a way of looking, seeing, writing, and living a professional life. *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* is divided into four parts. Part One ("Introduction") contains two chapters, the first ("Ethnography in the Good Old Days") constituting something of a traditional introduction with an overview of the parts and chapters, and the second ("Where in the World Do You Think You Are Going?") discussing the relationship between place and research question.

6 William SEWELL (1992), a representative of cultural sociology, provided a comprehensive account of the field and how it distinguishes itself from other conceptualizations in sociology. Alexei LEONT'EV (1978) is the father of activity theory as it is being used today in such fields as education, instructional technology, and social studies of science.

7 Culture, the identifying characteristic that WOLCOTT uses to distinguish ethnography from ethnographic technique is a central aspect of my review (ROTH, 2003) of *"Sicher in Kreuzberg" Constructing Diasporas: Turkish Hip-Hop Youth in Berlin* (KAYA, 2001) and *Cultural Psychology: Theory and Method* (RATNER, 2002).

The title both summarizes the chapter content and plays on a double entendre of the question, "Where do you think you are going?" in terms of a literal understanding of "where?," meaning a place, and a metaphorical "where?," meaning "where are you heading with this?," "What are your plans?," and "What are you going to do?" Because ethnographic work intends to develop understanding of sociocultural patterns enacted by people-in-setting, place is co-constitutive of what can be seen. [18]

The two-chapter Part Two ("A Way of Looking and a Way of Seeing") develops the distinction between ethnography as qualitative method and ethnography as a way of seeing and understanding the world. Accordingly, Chapter 3 ("Ethnography as a Way of Looking") is devoted to fieldwork issues. It includes discussions of (a) the notion of "participant observation" and its variants; (b) descriptions of different research strategies in terms of *experiencing*, *enquiring*, and *examining*; (c) the distinction between observation and participant observation as an instantiation of experiencing; (d) the role of interviews, as a form of enquiring; (e) archival strategies embodied in examining; and (f) the overall appeal of ethnography as an approach to research. In Chapter 4 ("Ethnography as a Way of Seeing"), WOLCOTT goes "beyond method" in the attempt to articulate the difference between ethnography as a research strategy and ethnography as a way of seeing and being. This chapter is therefore pivotal, because it frames all the following chapters and the boundary work of distinguishing the field from all those other activities that only use its methods.[8] The author elaborates on the nature of an ethnographic question, which distinguishes the field from other fields, and the role of a cultural focus. He articulates typically ethnographic concerns as holistic or contextual, cross-cultural and comparative, and as idiosyncratic. The central ethnographic concerns are expressed in terms of cultural orientation, know-how, and beliefs; but the author also acknowledges the problematic nature of the culture concept, proposes other terms that one can employ (e.g., "conventions, customs, folkways, life ways, life styles, mores, practices, traditions" [p.99]) without ever doing justice to the ongoing debate in regard to the concept.[9] [19]

Part Three ("Representing and Presenting Human Social Life") is devoted to the different ways and forms in which ethnography is, has been ("descriptive accounts of non-literate people" [p.17]), and possibly will be written—which is always in terms of what ethnographers know. In Chapter 5, WOLCOTT uses the metaphor of building a house—he relates his own attempts at this endeavor—to articulate how to write an ethnography using existing classifications such as the *Notes and Queries* or the *Outline of Cultural Materials* as a starting point for

8 The notion of "boundary work" is current in science studies, especially among those concerned with the work of scientists to distinguish (and often elevate) themselves and science from other activities. Such boundary work was especially salient during the court cases concerned with distinguishing evolution and creation theories or with distinguishing science and science studies (e.g., GIERYN, 1996).

9 In my view, Ayan KAYA (2001) does a very nice job of dealing with the culture concept as part of his study of Turkish hip-hop youth in Berlin, and proposes "diaspora" and "cultural bricolage" as alternatives (e.g., ROTH, 2003a; §5, §75).

articulating one's looking, organizing one's seeing and subsequent writing.[10] He also suggests using introductory texts as informal field guides, because their structures (headings) generally cover every category of understanding the ways of a people. (Over the past several weeks, I have suggested both as resources to Leanna BOYER, who has been working with me in the hatchery for two years now, who is beginning her interdisciplinary masters that includes an ethnographic study of an environmental group, and who was wondering what she could look for as there was so much happening during her first days in the field.) In Chapter 5, the reader encounters the different perspectives from which one can write ethnography, for example, according to the well-known emic-etic or insider-outsider distinctions. The ethnographer may want to tell a people's story or help people tell their story. Most recently, the idea of native ethnography has increasingly taken hold. Whether the anthropologist goes native or the native goes anthropologist, the question of how much one needs to be inside to understand and how much one needs to be outside to be able to engage in distancing reflection will always remain. Chapter 7 is devoted to more recent ways of writing ethnography—it is not surprising and indicative of WOLCOTT's stance that he chose as epigraph, "Ethnographies are getting weirder, both for disjunctures between subject and object and for blurrings of subject and object" (p.169). [20]

In the four-chapter Part Four, WOLCOTT develops "The Bigger Picture." With a slight disdain always showing through, the author describes in Chapter 8 ("Hurried Ethnography for Harried Ethnographers") various methods that others have developed for doing ethnography in the quick way. Speaking to an issue that became increasingly salient to my reading—I was thinking that it does not really matter whether WOLCOTT thinks that what I do is or is not ethnography as long as I can answer the questions that are dear to my heart—the author provides in Chapter 9 his response to the question, "Does it matter whether or not it's ethnography?" He even applauds researchers of my type "who borrow ethnographic techniques in the conduct of their inquiries" (p.219). But, and this is part of the both implicit and explicit agenda of this book, he wants us to use discretion in labeling something as ethnography because it does matter, at least under some circumstances. Although he wants to assure us that ethnographers do not form a tight and elitist club, much of the book does a lot of boundary work that will include only a small number of people who use ethnographic methods among the (true?) ethnographers. Chapter 10 ("Ethnography as a Piece of Cake") is playing on a popular expression, but really using bread rather than cake making—in a curious reproduction of a popular social practice of employing various forms of cooking as analogy or metaphor for other salient issues in

10 The *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* had been published repeatedly since 1874 by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (1951), and, by 1951, had been released in their sixth edition. The *Outline of Cultural Materials* (MURDOCK, 1971), which contains codes of all major topics one may require in conducting an ethnographic study, were developed in conjunction with a major project at Harvard University designed to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons, *Human Relation Area Files* (HRAF). The electronic version of HRAF and the OCM codes can be accessed through at URL http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/e/ehrafe/ (Accessed July 22, 2003).

research—as a metaphor for doing ethnography.[11] The final Chapter 11 ("Living the Ethnographic Life") deals with such issues as the future of ethnography and ethnography as a professional career, occupation, and preoccupation. Although WOLCOTT acknowledges that ethnographers engage in behaviors in which "all humans engage all the time" (p.281), and although we all learn through this, as Mike, the fish culturist, expressed in his characteristic way, "If somebody's with something every day they've gotta learn something—or they're just out to lunch," WOLCOTT concludes that the formal labels "ethnography" and "ethnographer" ought to be "reserved for those who pursue such endeavors intentionally as a facet of a professional career" and for whom ethnography is "a preferred way of seeing" (p.281). [21]

3.2 On the relation of the general and the particular in *Ethnography*

There are many places in the book that I marked with the label, "dialectic of general and particular," and that appear in WOLCOTT's account as somewhat mystified situations. I felt that had he done some prior reading on the dialectic of the general and the particular, he would have had the theoretical tools (rather than his American common sense) to understand what was going on. In the absence of a model for the relation of the general (universal) and particular, WOLCOTT struggles, for example, with the potential contributions that anthropological life history can make to ethnographic research (pp.159-167). In a dialectical approach to culture, the individual life history is always intertwined with cultural history. The possibilities of acting that exist for an individual are always concrete realizations of acting within the group. Every life story therefore tells us about history, unless we retreat into an idealist conception of history. We do not need to call something "'life histories' [just] to keep historians happy" (p.161) but we need a better conceptualization of the relationship between individual life history and collective history. [22]

In my ethnographic study of the fish hatchery, I consider it in all its individual characteristics as one way of hatching fish within the Salmon Enhancement Program (SEP) of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). The way it operates, the relationships between management and personnel, its interactions with research scientists, the way in which policies are enacted, and so forth all are concrete realizations of the possibilities that exist for operating a hatchery. Our interviews showed how other hatcheries are different in some aspects and similar in others; fish culturists actually learn by getting together and talking about what they do, and by becoming aware of their own practices. Neither do I take this hatchery to be an expression of what hatcheries are "in general" nor do I take this hatchery to be an idiosyncratic case that does not tell us ways of hatching. To more appropriately understand this hatchery, we study the history of SEP within DFO, and the emergence of this hatchery from the policies enacted over time both in the regional offices and in hatchery

11 In my teaching, I have frequently used cooking as a metaphor and context for thinking about knowing and learning; I even made a video that shows me cooking to allow students to analyze embodied forms of knowing. Alan SCHOENFELD (1998), for example, used making pasta as a metaphor for making mathematics.

management. We therefore understand Mike, his practices, his way of seeing, his identity and identification with the organization as dialectically related to the history of SEP more broadly and that of the hatchery more specifically. [23]

3.3 On framing the ethnographic subject and object

Harry WOLCOTT's view of ethnography, its objects and subjects (researcher, informant) is, I felt, a thoroughly American one, not only individual but heavily slanted to the individualistic. It is not a cross-cultural view but one heavily steeped in an American way of looking at the world. For example, the relationship between researcher and researched is set up in a dualistic way, in which the co-participants in the ethnographic enterprise not only face one another but use one another for their own purposes, which, however, can never be tracked. Thus, WOLCOTT polarizes researcher and informants "It is easy to find ourselves 'using' our informants even when we try desperately not to do so" and "It is perhaps more unsettling to realize how informants use us" (p.145). [24]

A holistic theory of activity as a system provides me with a different way of organizing the world around me and myself. Thus, when I observe a classroom, scientific laboratory, or hatchery, I understand what is going on as a system, including the human subjects, the objects/motives of their activity, the tools that they use as part of work, the community that relative to which the object/motive get its sense, the reigning forms of division of labor, and the rules that appear to be in place.[12] Each pair of entities that I select for study is always mediated by other entities when observed from the perspective of an action. This entire system and each of its entities undergo continuous change, each action not only producing some change in the system toward the accomplishment of the motive but also producing a change in the person who executes it. There is therefore a double historicity at work in the sense that for any individual action to be understood requires studying the historical unfolding of the activity system as a whole and the historical changes in the human subjects (biographies). Rather than expecting coherence, I expect contradictions—which express themselves to individuals in the form of resistance—in any individual entity, the mediated relations in which it is involved, and between associated and neighboring activity systems. [25]

Using this perspective, I can articulate an ethnographer's work in multiple activity systems.[13] Thus, the ethnographer, especially the "fly-on-the-wall" ethnographer (p.50), makes some activity system his or her object of study. More realistically, the ethnographer as participant-observer becomes part of the activity system and therefore affects the system, even if he or she only introduces some reflective component. When the ethnographer interviews an informant, the two engage in a new form of activity, interviewing about life (e.g., "birth, infancy, puberty, old age," or "recruit, initiate, member, chief" [p.52]), that is, takes the original activity as its topic. There is a new object, different tools, a different community, a different

12 This characterization of activity systems is due to Yrjö ENGESTRÖM (1987).

13 In ROTH and BREUER (2003), we use multiple (layers of) activity systems to theorize research and writing, subject and reflexivity, and subject and object of qualitative research.

form of division of labor, and different rules at play, and therefore a completely different activity system. The interview is then theorized as coproduced, and thereby accounts for the "nodding enthusiastically, redirecting the conversation, or responding to the repeated question, 'is this what you want'" (p.145) that appear to provide WOLCOTT some problems. Further, WOLCOTT would be even more reflective if he was facing my request to graduate students that they show that what is being said in interviews has a bearing on or reflects the original activity that it is said to be an account of. That is, the relationship between what informants say they do and what they actually do needs to be an empirical matter rather than taken for granted, because they are produced in different activity systems, and therefore in different contexts giving rise to different subjectivities, objects, tools, division of labor, rules, and community. If context is as important to WOLCOTT as the text states (e.g., 78-81, 180-181, 261-262), then the difference between context in observation and context in interview needs to be explicit and theorized. That is, I do agree with WOLCOTT that the "distinction between participant observation and interviewing" (p.44) needs to be maintained, but for theoretical reasons rather than simply making fieldworkers mindful of how to use these techniques. [26]

Another important aspect of ethnographic research is the level of involvement required of the researcher to get to appreciate the "insider" perspective, that is, how much participation in the culture is necessary to give the ethnographer an appreciation of the inside story? Let me return to the hatchery for a moment. Although I apparently learned to classify the fish at the marking stand by watching for a period of time, I do not believe I could have learned what it means to feed fish by watching someone feeding fish. The very movements required getting the food spread across the surface of the pond, and the different reactions of the fish in response to my actions, would not have become apparent from my observation of fish feeding alone. What it means to gut a female to get its eggs or to bend a male and stroke its belly until the spawn squirts so that another person can capture it in a clean container without getting into contact with a possibly disease-infested intermediary, one learns by doing it. What it means and what one learns while flipping rocks, whose temperatures exceeded our up to 65 °C-scaled thermometers in the search for lizards, one can only know by actually doing it—consistent with a dictum of MAO Ze Dong that one can know a practice only through its enaction.[14] Watching a practice, involving the theoretical gaze, can, at best, give us symbolic not practical mastery—even the theoretical statements of the expert misses the very essence of expertise.[15] However, there is a dialectic at

14 The many differences between symbolic and practical mastery has been discussed in detail from quite different philosophical (DREYFUS & DREYFUS, 1986) sociological (BOURDIEU, 1980), and political (MAO, 1967) perspectives. There is insufficient space to develop a theoretical account why this might be so. But, to put it briefly, each action bears a dual relation to the social, public and unconscious, private. The relation between unconscious operations and actions is one of reference; the relation between action and activity is one of sense. The relation between reference and sense is meaning. Thus, to truly understand a practice, that is, to arrive at a meaning relation, one needs to be able to produce the actions that constitute it and make sense of it. Again, I take it to be the task of the researcher to provide an empirical account of the relation between talk about praxis and praxis as it unfolds in real time.

15 BOURDIEU (1980) wrote extensively on the difference between practical understanding and the theoretical gaze, e.g., watching and analyzing a soccer game and playing it.

work. The theoretical gaze is required for practical mastery to develop; but the theoretical gaze is always preceded, enveloped, and concluded by understanding that comes with some level of practical mastery.[16] [27]

3.4 Inside/outside, inside out, outside in: On boundary work

Throughout the book, WOLCOTT takes great pains to separate inside from outside, defining who and what is inside ethnography and who and what is outside. That is, he conducts a lot of boundary work—his editor had told him, WOLCOTT confesses, that his "case on behalf of ethnographic purity was limited to 'about 30 ethnographers, worldwide'" (p.241). Throughout the book, and even before I got to read this confession, I had this very impression of WOLCOTT building a boundary around something like "true ethnography," to which he counts himself, and from which he wanted to exclude many other endeavors that use ethnography only as a technique. [28]

Consistent with the approach of establishing polarities, such as insider/outsider, WOLCOTT suggests that "we are all more or less insiders in some settings, and more or less outsiders (even when enacting the role of participant observer) in others" (p.171). First, I find other notions developed by social scientists—including those of multiple marginality, diaspora, and cultural bricolage—much more congenial because, in my reading, they express dialectical tensions that unite formerly distinct and polar opposites into one analytic unit, including Self/Other, Insider/Outsider, or newcomer/old timer. The important thing is to think of these units not as composed of parts, but to begin with the unit, and then allow it to dialectically unfold, studying contradictions on the inside, and using the different components (opposites) as heuristics. [29]

Such an approach comes with many advantages that we are always inside and outside, always Self and Other, and newcomer and old timer. This approach is exemplified in the following double law about language:

1. *We only ever speak one language*.
2. *We never speak only one language*. (DERRIDA, 1998, p.7, italics in the original) [30]

In his elaboration of the fundamental issues concerning language and culture, Jacques DERRIDA also articulates issues of purity, in his case, linguistic purity of French, which resists translations. "In a sense," DERRIDA writes, "nothing is untranslatable; but *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible" (pp.56-57). This dialectic is continuously at work throughout our lives and is preferable to the building of polar dichotomies. Therefore, however much the ethnographer tries, whether the research is being conducted in a foreign culture and language or in her or his own, he or she is always facing and in fact existing in this double law, attempting the impossible, translating something that is untranslatable, that is, cultural and linguistic

16 Paul RICŒUR (1991) articulated and worked out this dialectic relation between (practical) understanding and explaining (structural analysis).

experience. There is therefore an "absence of a stable model of identification for an *ego*—in all its dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and so on—[which] gives rise to impulses that are always *on the brink* of collapse." (DERRIDA, 1998, p.60, italics in the original) [31]

WOLCOTT does not account for this problematic, and always emphasizes the differentiation of inside and outside with which one can identify, which one can ferret out. Ethnography, from the outside in and from the inside out, emic/etic distinctions, insiders and outsiders (Chapter 6, pp.131-168) then become problems, but problems that are not theoretically reflected in terms of the dialectic that I unfolded here. It is a polar approach, always attempting to oppose the one with the other. From this perspective, then, all description is emic and no description is ever emic. WOLCOTT almost comes close to the dialectic in writing, "every view is a way of seeing, not *the* way" (p.137), but stops short in recognizing that every view is also a concrete realization of the possible ways of viewing and that neither triangulation nor summation can ever exhaust all possible ways of viewing (and writing). [32]

I do not have to describe the social behavior of others in order to have to confront this "incompossible" (DERRIDA, 1998, p.7) law. At the very moment I articulate my ideas about fish hatching, even my deepest private feelings, I use a language that is both mine and not mine: it is not mine because it has existed before I ever entered this world and is a cultural-historical achievement. At the very moment that I use a reflexive pronoun "I," I have to make use of a sign that is "not-I." The very existence of a sign that can stand for something else presupposes the splitting and identity of Self and Other[17], for a sign is something other than that which it stands for. And yet, because the sign can stand for something other, it also is taken to be identical with the other. At the same time, because of the dialectical relation of individual and collective, because I am a concrete realization of biological and cultural possibilities at a collective level, this language is also mine. Without me and all other individuals like me, there could not be a collective with a distinctive culture. It is a cultural tool that has a history, which began long before I set foot on this planet. [33]

Instead of following others who understand the complexities and contradictions of (cross-) cultural issues through a dialectical lens, WOLCOTT does a lot of dualistic boundary work. He does so throughout the book, but all boundary work is in the same tenor: "I do urge, however, that we restrict the term 'ethnography' to research carried out in the ethnographic tradition and in more or less traditional ways" (p.207), "it matters whether or not it's ethnography, and is clearly labeled as such (preferably in the title or subtitle)" (p.223), or "one of the purposes of my writing here is to urge that the label be applied with care, even a bit more awe, to studies both 'seen' and interpreted in a cultural context" (p.227). [34]

17 In my view the most sophisticated philosophical discussion of the Self-Other dialectic was developed by the French (reflexive, hermeneutic phenomenological) philosopher Paul RICŒUR (1990/1992).

3.5 On telling a story

In his advice to aspiring and future ethnographers, WOLCOTT articulates a lot about writing one's story, mediated perhaps by drawing on existing models of what topics to include. He writes little about the relationship between author and audience, both historically constituted in time. He writes mostly about the relationship between author and text and very little about the relationship between text and reader. But the role and sense of any particular ethnographic text can only be understood in its relation to the historically existing possibilities of writing ethnographic text. A critical reflection on the mediated relation between author and reader, in addition to the dialectic of language that mediates between the two, could have revealed a lot about the nature of ethnography that makes it distinct from other pursuits.[18] [35]

WOLCOTT appears to bemoan the ever-widening "extent of variation in the ways ethnography is applied, adapted, and reported seems to know no limits" (p.169), confounding in WOLCOTT's own view his efforts of "teasing out ethnography's critical attributes" (p.169). It appears that he longs for the old days, when ethnographies were distinct, not "getting weirder" as one of the epigraphs to Chapter 7 states. My response to the question, "Does it matter whether or not it's ethnography?" (Chapter 9, pp.219-240) differs from WOLCOTT's. I value a compelling and interesting story, whether or not WOLCOTT calls it an ethnography and whether or not ethnography is in the title of the book or article. Thus, there was a time when I had read all of Carlos CASTANEDA's books, never worrying about whether this was a true story or whether it was fiction—I always keep in mind that fact and fiction etymologically have related senses as doing (Lat. *facere*) and fashioning (Lat. *fingere*). WOLCOTT clearly places CASTANEDA outside his ethnographic circle, outside *his* way of individuals who practice a (particular) way of seeing, even though the latter's *A Separate Reality* is centrally about seeing, a different way of seeing, induced "by squinting, focusing and unfocusing and rapid sideways scanning" (DOUGLAS in WOLCOTT, p.189). [36]

I see the cultural production of ethnographic stories somewhat different, from a dialectical materialist perspective. Initially, there were the celebrated ethnographies of the discipline's founders, Bronislaw MALINOWSKI, Franz BOAS, or A.R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN. These were the original forms of writing, the parent generation. Each subsequent ethnographic study, in its own unique way, was a concrete realization of the possibilities of writing ethnography that existed at the collective level. But with each new ethnographic report, the possibilities changed, by both opening up new ways of writing and closing off old ones. Today nobody would be able to publish another *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (MALINOWSKI, 1922), nor would anybody in his or her right mind attempt to do so. MALINOWSKI's paternalism and his gendered style are politically incorrect and passé, and his writing "really does sound ugly now" (p.90). [37]

18 For example, *Limited Inc* (DERRIDA, 1988) provides, in my view, an excellent elaboration of this issue.

How much detail is enough? Facing the eternal ethnographic concern with description of context, WOLCOTT repeatedly addresses the difficult nature of the answer. A provisional answer is, "as much as is needed to produce a coherent and compelling account." I always aspire to orient my inquiry to those aspects of the setting ("context") that appear salient in the actions (talk, perception, manipulations) of the participants in the setting. All the other possible detail is irrelevant to understanding cognition if they form part of the background against which everything salient to the participants becomes figure. Still, a lot of judgment is necessary and even "old foxes" in ethnographic description may add too much, even Harry WOLCOTT. For example, I was wondering what was gained by letting the reader know, by mentioning that he shares house, site, and lifestyle with his partner "Norman" (p.107), and therefore that he is homosexual? What do we gain from this snippet of detail in the personal life of the author? By the end of the book, it had done little in explaining the overall project—perhaps except one thing, it became part of a piece in the puzzle about the case of the *Sneaky Kid*, a trilogy on schooling and education which WOLCOTT had built on one and the same informant with whom, as I found out on the Internet, he has had a homosexual relationship and who, as obliquely referenced in this book (pp.92, 102, 162, 287), had attempted to kill him. [38]

3.6 Coming to see: Becoming an ethnographer

WOLCOTT (p.82) recognizes a need for the aspiring ethnographer to look and see differently, to experience a conversion of gaze, which, according to him, requires a catalytic experience that at least in the tradition of ethnography came through fieldwork in a distant and different culture. Going to a (geographically) very different place, being in very different circumstances, is nearly a precondition for this conversion of gaze, which is not as easily gained by doing "backyard ethnography"—which WOLCOTT had done literally in his own backyard while interviewing (and whatever else is on record that he did with) Brad, the protagonist of his "Sneaky Kid" trilogy. Going abroad to be able to come home seems a requirement of a field that has as a core tenet of its ideology the individual and individualistic ethnographer. "How come," I wondered, "that a discipline so concerned with culture and social practices as their pillars reproduces itself by making its aspiring practitioners go out on their own?" Social practices and individual actions stand in a dialectical relation, the latter being concrete realizations of the former. In many other communities, social practices are acquired by engaging with others in them.[19] Does an (ethnographic) way of seeing have to be developed on one's own? [39]

My own response to this question is a resounding "No." In my own research, I tend to have graduate students accompany me into the field, conduct ethnographic fieldwork together, debrief with them, and interview informants having them present.[20] My graduate students Leanna BOYER, Stuart LEE, and Yew Jin LEE, all

19 Jean LAVE and Etienne WENGER (1991) have, if not originated, at least popularized the notion of communities of practice, which reproduce themselves by accepting new members who, along a trajectory of legitimate peripheral participation develop their identities and practices, who themselves bring about change of the community and its practices.

accompanied me to the hatchery, coparticipating in debriefing sessions after the workers had gone home, preparing our meals in the "stand-by" house that the hatchery management made available to us. We also debriefed while strolling through the site, or along the river that provides habitat to the fish once released. In the course of time, the graduate students took an increasingly central role in the data collection. Whereas Leanna, having recently graduated with a B.A. double major in biology and anthropology, simply watched and listened during the first several interviews, she became increasingly involved in the practice until she interviewed entirely on her own. In fact, we found that some informants would talk more and at greater ease with her than with me, while others would talk more readily and with greater ease and frankness to me. Later, we analyzed some data together, which allowed them to experience this aspect of the endeavor in the context of a group. Then, we collaborated on an ethnographic report—about the flow of knowledge and things, about the relation of people in and outside the hatchery, about the ways they structure their social worlds—that we design for a leading journal in the field of social studies of science. In this way, they increasingly participated in what they come to identify as their community or practice. [40]

I have taken many of my cues from Pierre BOURDIEU, who holds that being a researcher "presupposes a definite mode of perception, a set of principles of vision and di-vision" (1992, p.222) and he suggests that

> "there is no way to acquire it other than to make people see it in practical operation or to observe how this *scientific habitus* (we might as well call it by its name) 'reacts' in the face of practical choices—a type of sampling, a questionnaire, a coding dilemma, etc.—without necessarily explicating them in the form of formal precepts." (p.222) [41]

Already in the beginning of the book, I was struck that WOLCOTT had taken the same perceptual metaphor as BOURDIEU for understanding a scientific discipline and its practices but that he failed to draw similar conclusions as the latter, who has been centrally concerned with theorizing social and cultural practices. [42]

There are tensions arising from the ideology of the lone ethnography, and, as in the similarly enacted ideology of the lone ecologist, which have their repercussions on the "doctoring of uncertainty" during dissertation work.[21] This is not to deny that there are tensions in the apprenticeship, enculturation, or legitimate peripheral participation model, too.[22] But taking a dialectical

20 My former graduate student G. Michael BOWEN and I (ROTH & BOWEN, 2001) had conducted an ethnographic research project among ecologists, to whom we offered our services as field helpers, following the idea of apprenticeship as field method in ethnographic research (COY, 1989).

21 DELAMONT and ATKINSON (2001) provided a report on the discursive construction of doctoral work in *Doctoring Uncertainty: Mastering Craft Knowledge*. In *The Doctoral Experience* DELAMONT, ATKINSON and PARRY (2000) provide more data including the enculturation of anthropologists and other sciences with fieldwork components.

22 Stuart LEE and I wrote about our struggles to both enact legitimate peripheral participation, the model of cultural reproduction that we had negotiated for our collaboration on his Ph.D., and the production of studies that not only bore his name but also produced him as a unique member of

perspective, the inherent tensions in cultural production and reproduction become immediately evident and therefore, because they become topic of reflection, avoid FREUDian repression into our unconsciousness. In fact, the perceptual metaphor in *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* then allows us to understand how a different gaze becomes both evident in collective activity and how aspiring members to the community both adjust their gaze to align themselves with others and bring new forms of gazing to the field. By aligning my gaze with that of the hatchery workers and fish culturist, I was both producing and reproducing their practice and in this, gained a better understanding of what it means to be (look, see like) a fish culturist. That is, with every new doctoral student, the field of ethnography is both produced and reproduced, somewhat changed and somewhat the same. It is this process which gives ethnography both its recognizable history and allows its survival into the future, though always changing, always transforming itself. I therefore maintain that the plural "Ways" might have been better in the title, for there is never only one way of seeing, and all the ways of seeing do not exhaust all the possible ways in which ethnographers have seen, see, and will see. [43]

4. Coda: A Way of Seeing or Ways of Seeing?

The title of WOLCOTT's book *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* can be read as *Ethnography, Harry F. Wolcott's Way of Seeing It*. His way is a concrete realization of the ways of seeing ethnography that are possible within the discipline. Seldom do we know the ways that are not possible, for usually the knowledge of failures to get articles or books published remains restricted to the authors and editors. *Ethnography* is a way of seeing a field, not *the only* (legitimate) way, nor *the* (authoritative) way. Ethnography is not merely a method, an ethnographic technique. [44]

"A way of seeing" is an interesting metaphor for articulating an entire field, its mode of being. I doubt that the book is ideal for introducing neophytes to this mode of being. I know from experience that many of my students in qualitative and interpretive research courses would find too little "how to" advice, and therefore would criticize me for having selected this book—I therefore would not select it as core reading for my students. But I do highly recommend it to those who have already had fieldwork experience, or to those who have embarked on field research and need to select only a small number of key books to fit their limited baggage space. Those of us who are ethnographers or have used ethnographic techniques but do not belong to the "exclusive club" (p.220) of "thirty ethnographers, world wide" (p.241) will also enjoy it for understanding where Harry F. WOLCOTT, one of those thirty on the inside, draws the boundary around the field. [45]

At this point, I am looking forward to reading and reviewing my next book by Harry WOLCOTT (2002), his *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath*, apparently his

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the research community (LEE & ROTH, 2000, 2003).

account of having been involved in a (homo-) sexual relationship with his key informant, a school dropout, who had subsequently attempted to murder him. [46]

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