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WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Methodological, Ontological, and Epistemological Attributes

Tony L. Whitehead, Ph.D., MS.Hyg.
Professor of Anthropology and Director,
The Cultural Systems Analysis Group (CuSAG)
Department of Anthropology
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742

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Contact: twhitehe@anth.umd.edu, or 301-405-1419

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Introduction

In the fall of 1978, as a second year research assistant professor in the Health Education Department (HEED) at the University of North Carolina's (UNC) School of Public Health, I found out that my contract was under review by the department's full professors. I was shocked when Guy Steuart, the department chair, began the review with the comment that the department was considering firing me and hiring a "real anthropologist." I, of course, had no idea what he considered a "real anthropologist." I had spent more than seven years studying and receiving a PhD from one of the nation's leading departments of Anthropology (University of Pittsburgh). Why wasn't that "real" enough? Newly wedded and planning to start a family and buy a home I was, I think understandably, aggravated. I quickly told Dr. Steuart I didn't understand his comment. He responded:

> *"We hired you to bring an anthropological perspective to our community efforts. But you seemed bent on spending your time trying to become a biostatistician. If we wanted a biostatistician, we would have hired a real one; not someone who is trying so hard to become some quasi-statistician."*

Godfrey Hochbaum, another of the professors, then commented that the department wanted and needed an anthropological perspective—experience in ethnographic and qualitative research. He continued:

> *"For more than half a century quantitative methods have dominated the research that informs us regarding what we do. Yet with all of the money that has gone into funding these [quantitative] inquiries into illness and health behavior, they have contributed nothing new in our understanding of the human condition."*

I was shocked to hear this coming from Hochbaum, as he was one of the originators of the Health Belief Model (the HBM), the primary theoretical tool for health education at that time, and one of the discipline's few justifications of itself as science. Moreover, the testing of various constructs found in the HBM led to some of the earliest used of testing such constructs for their psychometric properties, a procedure that would soon become one of the major uses of so-called quantitative methods in public health. What I did not know at the time, but would soon come to learn, was that Hochbaum was one of those social scientists and health professionals who had grown weary of the dominance of such quantitative methods in social and health sciences research. This dominance of these so-called "quantitative approaches (i.e. survey and measurement methods such as psychometrics and econometrics, hypotheses testing, large randomized samples, reliable and valid instrumentation, experimental designs, etc.) was because it had become generally accepted that such methods are the most reliable tools that we have for achieving maximum possible reliability and validity in exploring hypothesized relationship between the factor associated with health behavior. These demonstrations of "scientific rigor" then came to justify both public and private investments of millions of dollars into survey research centers over the past decade within and outside of academic institutions.

On the other hand, social scientists have long known the weakness of such methods in assessing the complexities of the human condition. Sciences advocating strict rules of measurement usually operate in a linear fashion to show causal relationships between select phenomena; but have been long known to be weak in providing insight on the relationships between the contexts and processes of human social life, and the "meaning" that humans attach to social and physical phenomena (Denzin 1970:30-31). I would come to learn that human service policy makers have continued to find over that this huge investment in measurement approaches was having little impact on their abilities to change or influence the negative

health and social outcomes in the lives of the populations that they served. While continuing to recognize the important strengths of quantitative approaches, there is a growing awareness that dominant quantitative methods were telling us little about the complexity of the human circumstances in which ill health and social conditions occur. In 1978, Hochbaum was speaking to what was becoming a growing trend among a number of social and health science researchers and professionals: a recognition that while the so-called quantitative methods had provided little in helping us change risk behaviors related to such chronic adult conditions as heart and other cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancers, and they have been even more limited in helping us address many of the major adolescent health and social problems of the past two decades, particularly in urban areas, such as high rates o homicides and other violence, drug abuse and trafficking, AIDS and STDs, etc.). On the other hand, there has grown a trend towards turning to the so-called qualitative research methods, such as open ended interviewing, *focus and other group interviewing*, analysis of space utilization, text and discourse analysis, and so on, have the strengths to better assess context, process, and socio-cultural meaning (Denzin, op cit) that underlie human behavior, including health risk behavior. Ethnographic research methods were included among these so-called qualitative research methods. But as I discuss in this paper, it is inaccurate to refer to ethnography as simply just another qualitative research method.

Following my meeting with Steuart and Hochbaum in 1978, I would eventually learn that they never had any intention of not renewing my contract at that time. Steuart wanted to shock me into following through with what he thought I was trained to do, and why he had hired me. But was I really trained to use ethnographic or qualitative methods? I had been hired because of Steuart's view that anthropologists were ethnographers, and ethnographers were trained to do fieldwork. Steuart thought that he was getting an expert who would assist in building the field component of HEED's program, and I was immediately assigned to work with this component. However, I was what I would call a classically trained cultural anthropologist. I had passed my preliminary exams in the four subfields—cultural anthropology, linguistics, archaeology and biological anthropology (although without considerable struggle in the last two)—my comprehensive in an ethnographic area (the Caribbean) and a topical area (medical anthropology), and my two language exams (French and Turkish). I had also completed 15 months of extensive fieldwork in Jamaica. But I was never trained to do fieldwork. In graduate school, I took one course in which the professor shared field notes and experiences from the fieldwork that carried out for her own doctoral dissertation. But it was not a required course, and I didn't find myself relying on anything that I had learned in the class when I went to do my own fieldwork. While students in my training program were required to take a course in quantitative methods (such as statistics), I had been allowed a waiver because of the quantitative courses that I had taken in my prior masters degree training in public health. I had found, in fact, that my earlier introductory training in survey research, biostatistics, and epidemiological methods were more helpful to me during my dissertation research in Jamaica than anything that I had learned during my PhD study.

It is not my intention here to critique the department where I did my training. The department was following a standard approach to PhD training programs in anthropology departments throughout the country at that time. In fact, the University of Pittsburgh had what was considered one of the most rigorous training programs in anthropology at that time (early 1970s). My training was grounded in a sort of phenomenological epistemology of classical anthropology that was prevalent in the discipline during those years—an epistemology that still dominates, particularly among senior cultural anthropologists. However, there was little recognition of the value of this type of training within the UNC School of Public Health in which I went to work in January of 1976. I found myself employed in a department in which everyone seemed to have professional orientations that were completely different from my own. My anthropological training had been heavily theoretical, and anything close to being

applied was dismissed as similar to "social work," and definitely not anthropology. HEED, on the other hand, was strongly committed to social action and community organizing. It considered social theory that had no application as questionable, if not useless. The department maintained an interest in qualitative thought and methodology despite the fact that the dominant research paradigm throughout the school of Public Health was quantitative. However, Steuart's ongoing support gave me the courage to develop a qualitative methods course, which I began teaching in 1980 and continued to teach until I left UNC in 1987.

Training in ethnographic and qualitative research methods has grown substantially since the 1970s. The number of books and journal articles that have been committed to these two research orientations has skyrocketed over the last two years, and there are now publishers (e.g, Sage Press and Altamira Press) which have dedicated entire series to these methods. Public and private sponsorship of qualitative and ethnographic research on social and health issues has also greatly increased since the 1970s and early 1980s. There has been a related demand for training in qualitative and ethnographic methods by graduate students across many disciplines, even in departments in which the dominant research orientation and graduate requirements are still quantitative. These departments are also beginning to hire faculty members whose research orientation is predominantly qualitative but who, because of their "minority" research orientation, often find themselves feeling that they have to project a more quantitative orientation. Even given this demand, most colleges and universities offer few courses in qualitative (and ethnographic) methods relative to the number of quantitative courses. Students searching for training in qualitative methods frequently turn to faculty members in the humanities, where qualitative methods have long been the primary research orientation, and to anthropology where qualitative and ethnographic methods predominate.

One of the positive aspects of the quantitative-qualitative debate over methods in the social sciences over the last 30 years has been the growing acceptance of qualitative methods in social science research, research funding, and research training programs. One of the downsides of this debate for ethnography, however, has been the creation of a quantitative-qualitative methods dichotomy, wherein ethnography is considered as simply another qualitative research method. Thus one of the primary purposes of this paper is to argue that while **the predominant methods paradigm** of ethnography **is qualitative**, ethnography is **more** than simply a qualitative research method. One of the reasons that this distinction becomes relevant is with regards to research funding. With the growing acceptance of qualitative research, in health and human service research funding, there has been an increasing call for research projects to include both quantitative and qualitative components as a means of overcoming the shortcomings of both. At the same time, however, the quantitative components in these "multi-method" approaches are still the dominant components, with the qualitative components being frequently allocated less time and money to achieve the outcomes that would be most beneficial to project outcomes. As such, the qualitative methods used are most often chosen based on what is perceived to be least costly and time consuming. This particular view has often led the adoption of a single qualitative research method, and one that is cheap and can be quickly completed, so that the project can move on to doing the "real science." Unfortunately, in health and human research, focus group interviews are frequently chosen as that quick and cheap method. Thus any ethnographer working in such an environment often find themselves having to abandon any interest in doing ethnography, and adopt focus group, or some other quick and cheap method that is considered qualitative. For anthropologists, this abandonment of ethnography is also sometimes facilitated by the inability to articulate what is ethnography is, and why should it be used. It then becomes easier to carry out focus groups, and accept it as a suitable substitute for another so-called qualitative method, ethnography. Thus another purpose of the present paper is to

define what ethnography is. The remainder of this paper will discuss what I call the **strengths** or **attributes of ethnography**, as the following:

(1) Ethnography includes *both qualitative and quantitative methods*, *and both classical and non-classical ethnographic approaches*.

(2) Ethnography is more than simply *methods*, but has *ontological* and *epistemological* properties.

(3) Ethnography is a *holistic* approach to the study of *cultural systems*.

(4) Ethnography is the study of the *socio-cultural contexts*, *processes*, and *meanings* within cultural systems.

(5) Ethnography is the study of cultural systems from both *emic* and *etic* perspectives.

(6) Ethnography is greatly dependent on *fieldwork*.

(7) Ethnography is a process of *discovery*, making *inferences*, and *continuing inquiries* in an attempt to achieve *emic validity*.

(8) Ethnography is an *iterative* process of *learning episodes*.

(9) Ethnography is an *open-ended emergent learning process*, and not a *rigid investigator controlled experiment*.

(10) Ethnography is a *highly flexible* and *creative*[1] process.

(11) Ethnography is an *interpretive*, *reflexive*, and *constructivist* process.

(12) Ethnography requires the daily and continuous recording of *fieldnotes*.

(13) Ethnography may be carried out by individual investigators, or by teams of investigators.

(14) Ethnography presents the world of its *host population*[2] in human contexts of *thickly described case studies*.

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[1] A caveat here is that this list of ethnographic attributes should not be considered to be exhaustive. Other ethnographers may see other attributes that are not listed here, and maybe even disagree with these. The remainder of this paper, however, will consist of brief discussions of each of these fourteen attributes.

[2] In writing this essay, I have adopted the phrase of "host populations" or "ethnographic hosts" to refer to the members of the cultural system being studied by the ethnographer. I prefer the word hosts rather than the traditional ethnographic term of "informant" because in my work in inner city communities I found the word informant to be quite awkward because of the use of the same word to refer to police snitches, who are greatly disliked. The word host also fits the epistemological orientations being discussed in the present paper of moving away from any connotation of the researcher being the dominant actor in the researcher-researched dyad. As such, I prefer the word hosts over the psychological research use of study subjects, or the sociologists use of respondents or study populations, because these terms can also imply a higher status in the researcher researched relationship for the researcher. I selected the word hosts also, to further confirm the role of fieldwork in the ethnographic process, where in the ethnographer is living in the world of his or her hosts.

Ethnography Includes both Qualitative and Quantitative Methods, and both Classical and Non-Classical Ethnographic Methods

A primary reason as to why one should not categorize ethnography as simply another qualitative research method is that while the dominant methodological orientation of ethnography has traditionally been qualitative, there are some ethnographers who have always tended towards quantitative methods in their work. But perhaps, more importantly, while most ethnographers maintain a predominantly qualitative focus in their research, some complement that focus with quantitative methods, where use of the latter is appropriate.

The ethnographer should employ any and all means necessary and prudent to create the most holistic understanding of the cultural system or group being studied, including qualitative, quantitative, classical, and non-classical ethnographic methods. We will soon discuss the holistic attribute of ethnography, wherein individuals or groups are studied within the holistic contexts of families, households, networks, communities, societies, and individual and group history. Such holistic or contextual analysis requires a multi-method approach, whether such methods are quantitative or qualitative. Also, whereas qualitative data may provide rich contextual information regarding the individual providing such information, quantitative data must then be collected in order to strengthen both the internal validity (whether the ethnographer's interpretation of the data is what it means to those providing it) and the external validity (representativeness or generalizability) of the data.

Classical ethnographic methods are those that ethnographers have traditionally used, such as carrying out fieldwork and living in the living communities of their hosts, observing activities of interest, recording fieldnotes and observations, participating in activities during observations (participant observation), and carrying out various forms of ethnographic interviewing. Other methods that anthropologists have traditionally used include the physical mapping of the study setting, conducting household censuses and genealogies, assessing network ties, and using photography and other audio/visual methods.

Ethnographers have also added many non-classical methods to their tool kits. The study of ethnosemantics is a good example of a non-classical method. For example, ethnography is grounded in the study of cultural domains, or the meaning that social, physical, and metaphysical phenomena have for the members of a cultural group. The initial key to understanding these domains was in the structure and use of language. Thus ethnosemantics evolved as a technique for exploring cultural domains (Casagrande and Hale 1967; Gatewood 1984; Henley 1969; Lounsbury 1964; Romney and D'Andrade 1964; Spradley 1979; Wallace & Atkins 1960). New techniques of structured interviewing evolved in the continued study of cultural domains, including free listing, pile sorting, and paired and triadic comparisons (Bernard, Borgatti 1999; Borster 1994; Borster & Johnson 1989; Burton & Nerlove 1976; Chavez et al 1995; Weller and Romney 1988). Because such ethnosemantic explorations are carried out in a structured interview format, they are not what are generally thought of as qualitative research methods. At the same time, because they are exploratory, rather than hypothesis testing, and are usually not administered to randomized samples, they can not be categorized as quantitative in the more traditional sense of the word.

Another non-classical methods that some ethnographers have added to their research tool kits include such computer assisted technologies as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to facilitate traditional

ethnographic approaches of mapping their host communities (e.g., see Aldenderfer and Maschner 1996; Cromley 1999; Oliver-Velez, et al. 2001; Bennardo 2002; Matthews, Detwiler and Burton (in press). Other non-classical approaches that have been adopted by many applied ethnographers, but which were not at first acceptable to those anthropologists who defined ethnography in classical terms, are Focus Group Interviews (Agar and MacDonald 1995) and Rapid Ethnographic Assessments or Appraisals (Rist 1980; Whitehead and Brown 1986; Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987; Beebe 1995; Harris, Jerome, and Fawcett 1998; Beebe , 2001). In summary, because of the orientation towards understanding context and meaning from the perspectives of their hosts, ethnographers not only use a range of methods, but they must they be open to the use of all methods of understanding the human conditions, and not be prison to the artificial boundaries that can be created by the use of such labels as quantitative versus qualitative (Reichardt and Cook 1979), or classical versus non-classical ethnographic methods.

To exemplify the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods while conducting classical ethnography, I offer my dissertation research in Jamaica during the calendar year of 1974, and the summer of 1975. My research, focused on the role of employment and economic status on male family role (husband-fathers) performance in a Jamaican sugar town (Whitehead 1976). Some relevant statistical and secondary data were analyzed prior to arriving in the field setting, and continued throughout the 15 month data collection period. Shortly after arriving in the field, I designed a survey instrument and carried out a household survey of a randomized sampling of the entire study community **(quantitative)**. Participant observation (**qualitative)** methods were carried out during the entire fieldwork period, as time was spent in various settings in which males spent their times (in the homes, in work settings, in rum shops, church, etc.). Participant-observation fieldnotes revealed that my hosts frequently used words such as *big, little, good, wicked, strong, weak, respectable,* and reputation, when discussing male attributes, and in some cases, female attributes. So ethnographic interviews were carried out on a subsample to explore the meanings implied in this language when used as gender attributes. These interviews were carried out in a survey format to convenience samples of 180 males between the ages of 18 and 55 of both low and high income males to get some idea of how broadly these attributes were represented, as well as some other items, in the community. During three months of the summer of 1975, I returned to administer a questionnaire similar to the last one to a sample of females in the host community (Whitehead 1978). During the summer of 1983, I again returned to again explore such characteristics in a more informal and semi-structured interviewing. (Whitehead 1984,1986, 1992).

As we shall soon see in the discussions below, ethnographers often find themselves in host settings where the investigator control desired in quantitative or *positivist* research is largely impossible. Thus, insisting on maintaining a single, predetermined method of inquiry would prevent the collection of meaningful information. As such ethnographers are open to a variety of methods, including methods that are more quantitative or positivist in their epistemologies. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) have suggested, following Levi-Strauss (), the effective ethnographer should be a "bricoleur", a "jack of all trades", one who uses whatever tools and techniques are at hand in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question. According to this definition, ethnography should not be made a slave to any single method, whatever that method might be.

Ethnography is more than Simply Methods, but has Ontological and Epistemological Properties

In the preceding paragraph, the reader might notice the introduction of the word positivist or positivism. This is being done deliberately to suggest that in differentiating research orientations we need to move beyond simply a discussion of methods, as in the quantitative-qualitative differentiation, as there are other attributes involved in different research approaches. Two key attributes of difference, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994) are also ontological and epistemological orientations. They suggest that scholars with different research orientations may also differ not only in terms of methods, but also in terms of perspectives on *the nature of what is being studied* (ontology), and how to best understand this object of study (epistemology). Researchers may differ in their ontological orientations in terms of whether they adopt the idea that what is being studied exists as some *exact* phenomenon (i.e., the idea of an exact objectivity), the more positivist orientation, or the nature of the phenomenon will *vary* based on a range of factors, including social, economic, political, situational, or experiential/personal. Researchers may also differ epistemologically in their beliefs that the best way to accurately understand human settings is through the positivist investigative approach that emphasizes a separation between investigator and subject, or an acceptance that what is understood of that setting is the product of an intersubjective process between investigator and subject. (More on positivism will be discussed in later sections of this essay).

My point here is that understanding ontological and epistemological orientations are relevant to understanding differences in research approaches, it is also important to understand that these different philosophical orientations will frequently dictate the selection of methods to be used in social research, and how those methods will be carried out. Thus differentiating researchers in terms of their ontological and epistemological orientations may be more useful than trying to differentiate them based on methods because researchers of different research philosophies may use either quantitative and qualitative methods, or both. The primary argument in the present paper is that ethnography differs from what is called qualitative research because while ethnography may share many of the ontological, epistemological, and methods orientations of qualitative methodologists, it may also share some with so-called quantitative researchers, and have certain orientations that are not found in either. The remainder of the ethnographic attributes that are discussed in this paper reflect the ontological and epistemological properties of ethnography, as well as additional references to methods.

Ethnography is a "Holistic" Approach to the Study of Cultural Systems and Introduction to the Cultural Systems Paradigm (CSP)

Ethnographers are fond of saying that ethnography is always defined by theories of culture. But rarely do they inform you as to what those theories of culture are. In fact, throughout the history of cultural and social anthropology, there have been debates as to what the nature of culture truly is. The fact that some refer to themselves as social anthropologists while others refer to themselves as cultural anthropologists reflects one of the earliest problems with this concept. More than fifty years ago, Kroeber and Kluchon (1952) produced a book that compiled definitions of the concept of culture and came up with more than 250 conceptualizations. It is a complex concept, but in my opinion, a very important one, even though difficult to grasp. It is for these reasons that in this section, I will give significant attention to it, and how it evolved to become my primary ontological framework for research and applied anthropological practice.

The lack of a standard anthropological definition of culture contributed to my predicament early on at UNC. Surrounded by colleagues who expected a frequently used anthropological concept to be measurable or operational in applied settings, I had difficulty articulating a definition of culture. Over years of experience I began to synthesize many definitions of culture to formulate a culture concept of my own, but also one that draws on a variety of other conceptualizations. Similar to the present discussion defining ethnography in terms of its attributes, culture too can be defined in terms of its attributes of culture, among which I include the following:

(1) **Culture is a "holistic" flexible and non-constant system** with continuities between its interrelated components, which include shared *ideational systems* (knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and other mental predispositions), and *preferred behaviors* and *structural (social) relationships.*

(2) **Culture provides rules and routines that facilitate order, regularity, familiarity, and predictability** in what is otherwise a disorganized world of people, things, ideas, and behaviors.

(3) **Culture provides "meaning"** in the interpretation of people's behavior, things in the physical and metaphysical world, events, occurrences, and so on, so that people can construct and communicate their realities.

(4) **Culture is the primary source of a people's knowledge about the world**. In the context of ethnography, culture provides no inherent hierarchy of knowledge, instead it applies local conceptions of the definition of knowledge (See Berger 1967:15);

(5) **Culture is a shared phenomenon**. Members of a cultural group often share knowledge and meaning systems, or "a common sense of reality," (Berger: 1967:23), which is referred to as intersubjectivity.

(6) **Culture contributes to human communication** and ***miscommunication***. The meanings and interpretations provided by a cultural system not only facilitate communication between those who share various aspects of such systems, but they may also give rise to miscommunications and misunderstandings between members who are from different systems.

(7) **Culture implies values,** or the preferred practices, social relationships, or ideas and sentiments of a human community.

(8) **Cultural patterns may be *ideal* as well as *rea*l.** People's statements as to what their realities are may contradict what their behavioral patterns and products imply.

(9) **Culture may be *tacit* as well as *explicit*.** Explicit culture is cultural knowledge that people can easily talk about in a direct fashion. Tacit culture is knowledge that motivates particular ideational or behavioral patterns, but about which people may not be able to directly speak. (Spradley 1979: 8-9). The concept of "personal space" (the distance of comfort in the context of personal interactions) is an example of tacit culture.

(10) **Cultural patterns are *horizontally*** (within generations) **and *vertically*** (intergenerationally) **reproduced.** However, there is also continuous change taking place within cultural systems. Thus in planned change programs, such concepts as "core" and "peripheral" cultural patterns are helpful, as core patterns can be assumed to be more resistant to change. But even within core cultural patterns there is continual stress for change, as well as subpatterns that emerge, disappear, and reemerge.

(11) **The expression of cultural patterns is *highly influenced—but not determined by—environment.*** Both physical and social environmental factors influence cultural expression. Environmental influences of a physical nature might take years or even generations to express themselves; while social environmental features may influence cultural expressions immediately and continually because of cultural mechanisms of social feedback.

(12) **Culture is a *historical production.*** The emergence and continuity of cultural systems are not only products of vertical and horizontal reproduction. Significant events and processes can also give rise to the production and reproduction of specific cultural patterns.

(13) **Culture is *functional.*** It is not popular in popular scholarly discourses of postmodernism and cultural criticism to refer back to the functionalist perspectives of earlier scholars like Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown, and Parsons. But through many years of experience as an applied anthropologist working with health and human service professionals, I have found notions of culture's role in meeting an array of human needs to be very fruitful. While I share critical reviews of the misuse of the concept of culture by past anthropologists, I have found that holistic approaches to the functional qualities of cultural systems are invaluable in developing strategies which combat simplistic programs that can do more to harm than to help.

Discerning for myself the attributes of the culture concept has helped me immensely in articulating it to others. Another necessary challenge that I have faced is in attempting to operationalize the culture concept, or parts of it, in order to use it in an ethnographic and interpretive fashion. In other words, gaining a clearer conception of culture provided a degree of standardization to the fundamental theoretical concept that underlies the ethnographic inquiries carried out by anthropologists. This step was most necessary—for the nearly 35 years that I have worked as a health ethnographer, I have been called on to provide ethnographic expertise to dozens of projects which cut across a range of health and social fields. Moreover, the research unit that I found in the fall of 1989, the Cultural Systems Analysis Group (CuSAG—http://www.cusag.umd.edu), survived for some time, like so many applied anthropologists, primarily on short-term research contracts[3]. For entities whose existence is dependent on the successful

[3] For nine years, CuSAG survived through primarily my solitary efforts to secure contracts. However, because ethnography had not yet entered the mainstream minds of those funding health contracts as worthy of long term contracts and research grants that were offered to more popular health research following the more popular positivist approaches, the contracts that CuSAG received were short term (usually a year or less), I found it impossible to maintain this type of productivity in a small anthropology department, and meet my responsibilities as a full time faculty member. Moreover, after suffering a range of chronic health conditions between 1996 and 2003 (diabetes, cancer, and hypertension), in 1998, I called a moratorium on pursuing contracts for CuSAG. Having achieved some control over my health problems, this past year I have started the revival of CuSAG, but not as a contract pursuing

securing of such contracts, not having some degree of standardization in both methodologies and their underlying theoretical concepts means constantly 'reinventing the wheel for each new project. This is physically and mentally trying. My attempts to avoid this trying situation led to the development of the Cultural Systems Paradigm (CSP), a framework for research which is grounded in the dimensions of culture discussed above.

Figure I is a schematic illustration of the CSP's construct categories and subcategories. An assumption of this schema is that the range of human activities can be grouped into one or more of 9 descriptive categories:

(1) **The individual human organism** and its biological status, psychological makeup, personality and idiosyncratic tendencies (including agency), "intelligence," skill levels, etc.

(2) **The social systems** or units of social relationships which individuals interact within, are influenced by, and have an influence on (residential units, extra-residential networks and dyads, and community or societal organizations and agencies).

(3) Individual and shared (with others in select social systems) **behavioral patterns.**

(4) The significant **"idea" systems** (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values, and symbolisms or "units of meaning") held by individuals and social systems.

(5) **Expressive Culture** as represented in such forms as language, music, art, etc.

(6) Technologies and human made material objects, or **material culture**.

(7) The **physical environments** in which humans interact.

(8) **Needs** that humans must meet in order to achieve the level of physical functioning necessary to the survival of the individual and group.

(9) The human group's **shared history** of significant events and processes.

While the CSP has become my primary conceptual framework for both the analysis of social and cultural systems, the schema offered in Figure 1 is often critiqued when I have included it in presentations at anthropology and other social science conferences, As such, I feel that I need to demonstrate to readers that it is more than that by providing some background on how the CSP evolved as part of my ontological and epistemological orientation as an ethnographer and an applied anthropologist. .

While the CSP was first published in the early 1980s (Whitehead 1984), its origin probably started with my training in public health in the late 1960s. At that time, the systemic approaches of Parsons and others (e.g. Parsons and Bales ; Billingsley 1968) had not yet been abandoned as stagnant functionalism, as they often are in today's more popular theoretical approaches in the social sciences, in particular post

entity as in the past, but simply as an online entity, offering information and assistance to those who might think CuSAG has the skills that they want.

modernism, post structuralism, and critical perspectives. During my graduate school days in the late 1960s and early 1970s, systems theory continued to be heavily taught by social scientists at Pittsburgh while I was there, and I was attracted to the approach for personal reasons. Moreover, my early personal history of growing up black in rural segregated southern poverty contributed to my lifelong interest in the application of my training to issues of poverty and inequities in access to health and social resources. The system's framework of the individual as a member of multiple social systems significantly contributed to my continued focus on structural factors that contributed to poverty and related problems. The introduction to systems theory that I received in public health, attracted me to to the conception of "holism" in anthropology, and to the structuralist and structural-functionalist theories of Radcliffe-Brown () and Malinowski (). Moreover, as a "culturally deprived[4] " African American who grew up share cropping in the South, functionalism provided me with a balance in contrast to the "blaming the victim" models which dominated the thinking on social problems at that time. In fact I have never found too great a distinction between early functionalist theory in anthropology, and the present popular notions of personal agency which is omnipresent in the currently popular critical approaches to understanding the human condition. But what was so important to my development as an applied anthropologist was that this early introduction to systems theory helped me to understand the possible sources for the complexity of any social issue that other theoretical models did not address.

The CSP began to emerge as a formal theoretical and research paradigm during and after the ethnographic fieldwork which I conducted for my Ph.D. dissertation in Jamaica in 1974-75. Existing theoretical models explaining West Indian family and reproductive behaviors weren't being explained by dominant theories at the time on the split personalities (Kerr 1963) and normative dualism (Smith 1966) of West Indian people. My field experience taught me that the sources of persistent poverty and related conditions, as well as their impact on family structure and function, were much more complex than such models suggested. These models were similar to the blaming the victim models found in literature on black families in the United States, as discussed in the preceding paragraph, and failed to give adequate attention to the broader more structural sources of these conditions.

By the time I arrived in the field in 1974, my training in anthropology had led to a more Marxist orientation, somewhat[5] replacing Parsonian structuralism as the theoretical framework to help me understand what I saw and experienced. However, the fieldwork experience moved me away from a Marxist model because from what I could see, Marxism seemed to view everything in terms of broader structural sources. Although a focus on the agency of poor people is usually associated with Marxist thinking, it did not provide me with an adequate framework for understanding the complexity of the *ideational* systems of my ethnographic host. I have published elsewhere the complexity of how males among my ethnographic host viewed themselves in themselves in terms of their relationship to other social systems in which they lived, their families, communities, the larger Jamaican society and Caribbean, and in the relationship of Jamaica and Jamaicans to the powerful cosmopolitan countries of England, Canada, and the United States (Whitehead 1978, 1984, 1986, 1992).

The Jamaican experience was valuable in terms of my experiencing how people integrated ecological factors, social systems, and ideational constructs into a systemic whole, i.e., the cultural systems paradigm. However, it was not until my arrival at UNC that the CSP became a formal theoretical and research model. The systemic orientations of Parsons and others became useful again when I was asked to teach a course on the family, primarily because of the family health orientation of my public health

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training, and the kinship focus of my anthropology training. I found that my early attraction to systems theory overlapped with the fact that systemic (e.g. Billingsley 1968) and development [6]approaches (e.g., see Allen 1978) were then and continue to be popular theoretical approaches to the study of the family.

The CSP did not fully emerge until the late 1970s and early 1980s as a paradigm for the study of cultural systems, and as a framework for designing and implementing comprehensive ethnographic research and analysis. It was at UNC, where I struggled with the anxieties and conflicts of being in an alien disciplinary land, that the CSP emerged in response to two important factors: (1) a lack of adequate models for interpreting the complex data generated by ethnographic approaches in a manner appropriate for applied settings (Pelto et al, 1980); and (2) the frequency with which ethnographic inquiry yielded narrative answers from informants which expressed a range of concerns outside of the research questions but which appeared to be of extreme importance to those being studied. These dilemmas gave rise to three underlying ethnographic principles which are built into the CSP.

The first ethnographic principle of the CSP is what I refer to as *The Principle of Universal Human Cultural Categories.* This principle holds that *t*here are certain categories of phenomena which are universally relevant to human communities, though these communities differ in terms of how these phenomena are expressed *(culture*). This assumption is in contrast to the epistemology that drives most positivist and ethnographic research paradigms. It suggests that *we look for ways that humans and their cultures are similar* before we began to look for how they vary. Thinking in this way led me to consider the development of broad universal cultural categories for designing community ethnographies, and for managing and analyzing the plethora of data that this research often yields. Thus, the basis for the nine general categories of the CSP discussed above, and the subcategories found in each as provided in Figure 2. However, very important to this particular orientation is that while the CSP suggests *broad universal cultural categories,* it must be noted that *human* communities and their individual members *vary in terms of how those components are expressed*. The job of ethnographer, then, is to *decipher the specific cultural and individual expressions within these data categories.*

The second ethnographic principle of the CSP is what I call the *Principle of Paradigmatic Flexibility,* which states that because of the differences in behavioral and ideational expressions across human groups and individuals, *conceptual frameworks that inform the study of cultural systems must be flexible.* As a consequence of variations in expression, while the categories of the CSP provide a framework for initiating ethnographic study and storing ethnographic data, the boundaries of these categories are not rigid. Data that are stored in one CSP category at one point in the ethnographic process may be moved to or shared with another category as the ethnographer continues to learn about his or her host culture. The categories of the CSP are not necessarily permanent. Indeed the CSP's categories and subcategories have changed a great deal since the paradigm was first conceptualized—a process of evolving conceptualization that will continue as conceptions of human cultural and individual variations also evolve.

The third ethnographic principle of the CSP is what I call the *Principle of the Interrelationship between Socio-cultural Contexts, Processes, and Meaning Systems.* This principle holds that in order to understand why certain behaviors emerge and persist, including health risk and resiliency behaviors, we must understand the socio-cultural contexts in which these behaviors occur, the socio-cultural processes of behavioral contexts, and the socio-cultural meanings that these contexts and processes have for those who practice them. More specifically, the CSP allows us to holistically study:

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(1) *the socio-cultural contexts* of the **social systems** (households and families, formal and informal networks, organizations, groups, dyads, institutions and relationships of the wider community, society, inter-societal linkages), of which individuals are members, of the **physical environments** occupied by individuals and their significant social systems, and of **significant individual and shared historical patterns**;

(2) *the socio-cultural processes* included in the **interactions of individuals with and within their significant social systems,** with and within the physical environments that individuals and their significant social systems occupy, and in individual and shared histories and patterns of individual and group human needs fulfillment; and

(3) *the socio-cultural meanings* that individuals and their significant social systems apply to social systemic relationships, the physical environments they occupy, individual and shared historical patterns, and patterns of basic human need fulfillment[7].

While the concept of culture is usually thought of as being applicable to the analysis of societies, ethnic or national groups, or local communities, I have used the CSP, and the theories of culture that underlie the paradigm, most frequently in the analysis of illness populations (e.g, persons suffering from HIV/AIDS), organizations, organizational subunits, institutions, academic disciplines and professional groups, or other social human group as cultural systems. The use of the CSP in analyzing these various social units as cultural systems is made possible when these systems have the following:

(1) preferred social relationships or structures;

(2) preferred (or normative) idea systems and behavior patterns;

(3) valued and other objects that have been produced by the group;

(4) exist within certain physical and social environments;

(5) a shared sense of needs that the group attempts to meet; and

(6) shared historical events and processes that group members either explicitly know, or are tacitly influenced by.

Discussions of the use of the CSP in applied ethnographic research can be found in existing publications on food research which were carried out in North Carolina in the late 1970s and 1980s (Whitehead 1984, 1992). Developing the CSP in this context was crucial to my being able to design and effectively carry out a later rapid team ethnography project in Cameroon (Whitehead and Brown 1986). The CSP has also been used to inform the design and implementation of most of the urban health related projects in which I have been involved since establishing CuSAG (See http://www.cusag.umd.edu/programs).

[7] There are three categories of human needs outlined in the CSP, not only the basic or biological/organic needs as outlined by Maslov, but also social needs such as education, and expressive needs such as the need for having an orderly view of the physical, social, and metaphysical worlds. The three categories of human needs are discussed in more detail in the CEHC Working paper, "The Cultural Systems Paradigm."

Ethnography is the Study of the Socio-cultural Contexts, Processes, and Meanings in Cultural Systems

To explore this particular attribute of ethnography, we return to the third ethnographic principle of the CSP discussed above, the interrelationship between socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meanings that are found in cultural systems. The idea for this principle as it applies to ethnography emerged from the realization early in my career that the traditionally dominant quantitative or positivist approaches to research and intervention programs in public health were rarely grounded in the social, historical, or environmental *contexts* of the lives of the people being studied or targeted. The *socio-cultural processes* that take place within these populations—and that may affect their realities and behaviors—are inadequately addressed by such approaches (See Buchanan 1998). The complexity of human meanings applied to contexts and processes are often ignored, or are bounded in narrowly defined (for the sake of measurement and demonstrations of causality) constructs of investigator defined attitudinal scales. Token lip service is sometimes given to discussions of meaning systems by bringing in qualitative researchers or anthropologists. But these consultations have usually been undertaken in order to confirm or complement already existing non-contextual or "blame the victim" models by categorizing these so-called beliefs and values as peculiar to the population being studied. Otherwise, discussions of beliefs, values, and other domains of meaning among the population being studied are ignored in the majority of health research.

The ethnographer is interested in the socio-cultural contexts and processes in which people live their lives, as well as the meaning systems which motivate them. Within an ethnographic paradigm, the actors and their corresponding actions, behaviors, and beliefs are examined within the cultural and societal context in which they take place. In so doing, as Agar (1996) suggested in the update of his classic *The Professional Stranger*, an ethnographer must go "beyond a focus on local communities [but should]..should situate them within the larger political economy, as people are part of states and of a turbulent world (p.11). Such social context brings multiple systems of meanings, some more dominant than others in affecting the lives of people at the local level. As discussed by Clifford:

> "Ethnography is actually situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, tilling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration and is itself part of these processes." (1986:2)

Boyle (1994) has suggested that *a "central tenet of ethnography is that people's behavior can only be understood in context."* At the same time, however, emphasis in ethnography is placed not on separate behavioral acts, as is often the case in positivist approaches, but on how behavioral processes are linked. The process of pursuing a holistic view of group often includes environmental and historical considerations which help the ethnographer gain a better understanding of the context in which an individual or group operates.

Ethnography then approaches the interrelationships between socio-cultural contexts, processes and meaning systems as they contribute to the complexities of human realities. Most often this is accomplished in ways that cannot be adequately addressed by positivist approaches alone. This became very apparent to me while carrying out research on food and culture in North Carolina during the late 1970s. In order to be awarded a grant to pursue this research, I had to commit to following a quantitative approach which was informed by positivist epistemologies. But even after utilizing validated, structured research instruments, and interviewing more than 200 study participants regarding their food practices,

there were questions about response validity because of, among other things, the varied meanings attached to much of the terminology we used in our research (e.g. "eating between meals." [8]). Even after selecting instruments which had supposedly validated for rural black populations, and then attempting to confirm their validity for our specific population by administering a pretest to a subsample of residents of our study county, we continued to experience serious problems, not only with varying meanings of words[9], but also with language structure, as well as the still seemingly alien quality of the instrument[10], and with interviewer-interviewee psychodynamics. These psychodynamics often resulted in study participants finding a safe place within our coded answers to respond, regardless of the question that was being asked. A subsequent grant allowed us to drop the traditional epidemiological model we had been following in favor of a more ethnographic approach[11]. Abandoning a more positivist approach allowed us to achieve the major findings of the study, primarily that conceptions of food extended well beyond simply eating and nutrition and were influenced by a variety of complex socio-cultural factors. We have found similar interrelationships in studies of violence (Whitehead, et al 1994), risk factors for AIDS in inner city communities (Whitehead, 1997), drug trafficking and the present incarceration epidemic among black men (Whitehead, 2000), and in the risk behaviors of adolescent African American females.

Ethnography is the Study of Cultural Systems from Both "Emic" and "Etic" Perspectives

The primary aim of ethnography is to understand the socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meanings of a cultural system from the perspective of the members of that system. To achieve this understanding, the ethnographer should maintain both an "emic" and an "etic" approach to studying any given cultural system. An emic approach attempts to understand components of a cultural system from the perspective of the group being studied. The etic approach, on the other hand, analyzes a cultural system with research paradigms brought by the researcher from outside of that system (Pelto and Pelto 1978).

The emic perspective is critical to the ethnographer's primary goal of learning the world of his or her host community from the perspectives of its members. As Malinowski pointed out more than 80 years ago, the goal of ethnography is *"to grasp the native's point of view…to realize his vision of the world"* (1922:25). Moreover, as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1997:198), the various hypotheses, theories, and interpretive frameworks brought by outside investigators *"may have little or no meaning within the emic view of studied individuals, groups, societies, or cultures."* At the same time, complementing the emic with an etic viewpoint is important for understanding all aspects of a human group. Because the attributes of culture include dichotomies such as the ideal versus the real and the tacit versus the explicit, the ethnographer must maintain some sense of an external, "objective" framework. This provides what I call 'emic validity'—understanding from the perspectives of ethnographic hosts through rigorous and iterative observations, interviewing, and other modes of ethnographic inquiry. In the end, the ethnographer must keep in mind that the product of ethnographic work is a descriptive reconstruction of

[8] We had found in our pretests that the use of the word snacking was open to broad variations in meaning, so we adopted the phrase of eating between meals. However, as we later found in our ethnographic study, much of the data we had in response to the question of eating between meals was also invalid because for some of our participants, a meal was something that you sit down to a table and eat. Thus some people viewed themselves as only having one meal per day, but was eating between meals all of the time.

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the hosts' own construction of their worlds. This reconstruction can be best achieved by balancing the emic understanding with what is learned through an etic perspective.

Ethnography is Greatly Dependent on Fieldwork

Spradley (1980:3) stated that "*ethnographic fieldwork is the hallmark of cultural anthropology."* Agar (1980) has argued that the very name for *"doing ethnography"* is fieldwork. My use of the word ethnographic hosts rather than the traditional informant used traditionally in ethnography implies the role of fieldwork in ethnography, wherein the ethnographer live among those upon whom he or she is researching, and they are his or her host. A primary reason for fieldwork is to achieve the emic validity that ethnography promises. Being in the field and coming to a thorough understanding of the daily lives of the group under study is one of the key components of any ethnographic enterprise. Fieldwork allows the researcher to observe and examine all aspects of a cultural system, especially those that could not be addressed through laboratory or survey research alone. Spending long periods of time in the field is considered the crucial aspect of the classical ethnographer's ability to comprehensively describe components of a cultural system as accurately and with as little bias as possible. Epistemologically, the classical ethnographer believes that the only way to gain a native's view of his or her own world is to spend time in that world, according to Spradley (ibid), *"participating in activities, asking questions, eating strange foods, learning a new language, watching ceremonies, taking fieldnotes, washing clothes, writing letters home, tracing out genealogies, observing play, interviewing informants, and hundreds of other things."*

Indeed, one of the primary methods used in ethnography is participant observation, which implies that the ethnographer not only observes activities in the field setting, but also participates in them wherever possible. Long-term participant observation, as advocated in classical ethnography, is the means for an ethnographer to discern what is real versus what is ideal, what is explicit from what is tacit, and what is emically valid. Participant observation by definition takes place within the social settings that are familiar and significant to the ethnographer's hosts—those social settings that provide the socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meaning systems of their world.

Ethnography is a Process of *Discovery* and Continuing Inquiries in an Attempt to Achieve Emic Validity

Among the ontological orientations in which ethnography is grounded is the view that humans, as the primary object of study, construct *multiple realities* that are complex, multifaceted, differently expressed in specific situations, and continually undergoing change. Epistemologically, to grasp an understanding of such realities, the classic ethnographic enterprise does not begin with predetermined hypotheses to be proved or disproved as objective social fact, but begins with open-ended exploratory attempts to learn as much as possible about those realities. In the end, this process enables the ethnographer to describe these realities and the connections between them with as much emic validity as possible. A large part of gaining as much information as possible is through the collection of secondary and existing information (statistical, scholarly and popular publications, etc.) on the ethnographic host and their social and physical environments. Because of the exploratory orientation of ethnography, this secondary information is not assessed so much to generate hypotheses to be proved or disproved in the ethnographic setting (although this is an option), as it is to contribute baseline knowledge about the research setting, and to generate questions worthy of ethnographic exploration. The ethnographic enterprise is as much about discovering the right questions to ask (process) as it is about finding the answers to those questions (product). Ethnography entails continual observations, asking questions,

making inferences, and continuing these processes until those questions have been answered with the greatest emic validity possible.

The ethnographer is not always immediately aware of new discoveries while in the field. I discuss not discovering the important concept of "balance" among the Jamaican male hosts until I had been in the field setting for eight months, until I recognize through reviews of my fieldwork that the work was repeatedly used in conversations by males regarding males. Once discovering it, I then began focusing on it and found that it was an important concept in explaining the puzzle that I had had for some time regarding how males could seem to value behaviors that seemed to be opposite from my perspective. For example, for some males having children was an indicator of a man's strength, the more children by a number of women, the stronger the man. At the same time however, a man who had so many children that it could "mesh up" (destroy) his relationship with his primary mate was seen as weakness. (See Whitehead 1986; 1992).

I discussed my struggles with the construct of balance in Jamaica within Agar's (1982) application of Gadamer's (1975) concepts of *breakdown*, *resolution*, and *coherence*. For the ethnographer, according to Agar (1982:783), breakdown occurs when there is a "disjunction between worlds"—the ethnographer's world and the host culture's world. That is, the ethnographer does not have a framework for making sense of what he or she is observing, as his or her assumption of coherence has been violated. Resolution is the (ethnographic) process of achieving coherence. In fact, Agar implies that while an ethnographer might have been in the field for some while, the ethnographic process begins in earnest when breakdowns occur because the need for finding coherence prompts the development of focused questions and a search for answers--the process of resolution. The process of breakdown-resolution-process also accentuates the importance of being in the field, as such processes will occur more frequently in those environments in which ethnographic hosts spend most of their time.

Ethnography is an Iterative Process of *Learning Episodes*

The process of continual inquiries discussed in the preceding section are organized and carried out in a *discursive* or *iterative* format. The ethnographer enters a research setting with an orientation towards discovering new knowledge through multiple learning (ethnographic data collection) episodes. Each subsequent learning episode builds on questions that emerged during preceding episodes. As such, each subsequent data collection method or instrument is designed and implemented in order to complement and enhance the data already collected. That is this iterative approach allows an ethnographer's ongoing experience in the field to inform decisions on subsequent methods and approaches. As stated earlier, this process involves multiple techniques and methods for data gathering or learning, as methods are selected for their utility in revealing what is to be learned.

Ethnography is an *Open- Ended Emergent Learning* Process, and Not a *Rigid Investigator-Controlled Experiment*

Spradley (1979) has commented that ethnography is not so much about studying people as *learning from them*. Ethnography is the process of learning about ethnographic hosts' worlds or cultural systems, as their socialization into or experience with these systems has rendered them as experts on various aspects of their worlds. Thus to be effective at his or her craft, the ethnographer learns to become comfortable with appearing unknowledgeable or ignorant of the world about which he or she is learning. This learning process is an ongoing one throughout the fieldwork enterprise, until the ethnographer feels that

he or she has an understanding of that world from the perspectives of his or her hosts. As such, many ethnographers have traditionally rejected or been quite uncomfortable with the emphasis placed on investigator control that is the cornerstone of quantitative or positivist approaches to social research. The positivist emphasis on investigator control is often characterized by the development of a research design and hypotheses to be tested, as well as the development of data collection instruments and analysis prior to the researcher spending any significant time in the cultural system to be studied. The positivist researcher must build into his research design methods for controlling variables that might possibly influence the outcome of tests to validate hypothesized relationship(s) between study variables. It is not only this predetermined structure that is problematic for ethnographers; but also the rigidity that is inherent in the implementation of these designs. In positivist or quantitative orientations, not only are one's research questions, hypotheses, and methods predetermined before significant time is spent in the social setting to be studied, but once such designs are established, they usually can not be altered, regardless of what is later learned from the study setting. Why ethnographers may learn such rigid positivist approaches, and use them to answer specific research questions, or in specific research settings, the ethnographic attribute of discovery oriented dictate that ethnographers must also remain open to new discoveries as they emerge during the fieldwork process. That is, the ethnographer must not allow existing knowledge (including scientific, theoretical, and methodological orientations) from preventing the absorption of new knowledge gained during the fieldwork process; or as Geertz (1973) puts it the ethnographer must allow components of the cultural system to be revealed through the fieldwork process.

I have numerous examples from different fieldwork settings to support the point of being open to discoveries in the field, and how these discoveries can lead to a more valid understanding of the social setting and issues being studied. However, I only have space in this paper for one, which I take from the classic ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out in Jamaica in 1974-75 on male family role performance. As a PhD candidate, I was quite knowledgeable regarding the plethora of literature on Jamaican and West Indian family structure, and one of its most important domains, male-female conjugal relationships. However, I had not come across the phrase "wicked woman" in that literature, but which turned out to be one that I would come to hear often during the course of my fieldwork. The frequency with which I heard the phrase, and its relationship to the important domain of male-female relationship meant that I needed to understand what the phrase meant for those who used it. Thus after 8 months of classical ethnography, I developed an instrument to explore the meaning among convenience samples of 80 men, and 40 females, and came to find that the behavior of the wicked woman of significance to constructs of masculinity was not the prostitute or the female conjurer, but the woman who would leave her partner after he had worked hard to provide for her[12].

Ethnography is a Highly Flexible and Creative Process

Another reason that ethnographers, in particular those of substantial ethnographic experience, find the rigid methodological orientation of positivism difficult, if not impossible, to follow is because of their experience of finding themselves in so many research settings over which they are not able to have the investigative control that is so highly valued in more positivist research orientations. Most often the ethnographer works in a situation in which his or her host population has greater immediate control of the research setting than the ethnographer[13]. Thus the success of the ethnographer's research enterprise is

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[13] Exceptions would be ethnographies carried out among institutionalized or some other captive population, such as hospital or prison inmates, classrooms of students, etc.

more dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of his or her host than is usually the case for those who persist in following a more positivist research paradigm. In some instances, it is not only the research process upon which the ethnographer is dependent on his host population, but he or she may find early in the ethnographic process that his or her mental and physical functioning or comfort is dependent on his or her host. Because of such circumstances, the ethnographer often finds him or herself having to "go with the flow" of the socio-cultural contexts and processes of these research settings. Thus ethnographers have to be highly flexible in their approach to understanding the human condition. Moreover the open-ended, emergent and iterative attributes of ethnography described earlier mean that the ethnographer must constantly be *creative* during the ethnographic process. Once in the field setting, ethnographers sometimes find that either the methodological or theoretical orientations that they had planned to follow were not possible, or actually had no relevance for the population or the issue they had initially planned to study. Or once in the field, situations and circumstances change constantly. Gaining access to participants, being able to document fieldnotes in a timely manner, having to use multiple methods, managing a team of people, all require creativity and resourcefulness. In ethnography, there is a great deal of uncertainty. An attitude of flexibility and creativity can greatly ease the process that enables research success.

Ethnography is an *Interpretive*, *Reflexive*, and *Constructivist* Process

In addition to what I have been referring to here as emic validity (understanding the meanings of studied phenomena from the host perspective), Altheide and Johnson (1994) discusses the concept of "interpretive validity." Their terminology is based on the perspective that all research findings are interpretations made by the researcher of what he or she has observed in the research setting. As such it is long been accepted among positivist researchers that biased interpretations are possible, and thus they have long attempted to overcome such biases through statistical and methodological treatments. Since positivist approaches have dominated the social science research scene, the findings from ethnographers and qualitative researchers have long been dismissed as not having validity because they don't religiously follow such rigid methodological regimens. As such, as Altheide and Johnson point out, *reflexivity* is the best prescription for enhancing interpretive validity. They define reflexivity as the recognition "that the scientific observe is part and parcel of the research setting, context and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent" (Altheide and Johnson 1994:486). As such the interpretation or representation (research findings) bias that an ethnographer might have may be based not only his or her own cultural, personal theoretical or methodological paradigms brought to the research settings, but also to the dynamics of the research process—his or her interactions with the host community.[14] As such, another definition of ethnographic reflexivity is that it's not only an ongoing process of not only what is being observed or studied, but also a continuing examination and reexamination of the basis for one's interpretations, and the potential biases in representation.

Another attribute of contemporary ethnography is the understanding that a portion of the "realities" that are represented in an ethnographer's findings are constructions created not only by the observations of the ethnographer but also because of input from the host. A constructivist viewpoint implies that for the

[14] It should be noted however, that while what is considered as a reflexive perspective is widely accepted in contemporary ethnography, it was not always the case. While there has long been some tradition of reflexivity in ethnography (for example in the Boasian school of anthropology and the Chicago School of Sociology), the orientation became a core epistemological attribute of ethnography with the rise of postmodern and poststructural thinking in the social sciences and humanities during the 1970s, which coincided with the publication of Malinowski's diary (which indicated that some of his representations of his Melanesian hosts might have been influence by his own thoughts and interactions with his host community.

ethnographer, reality does not exist as a neutral objective phenomena that can be accurately revealed, let alone accurately measured. Rather, "realities" are jointly constructed at given points in time by the ethnographer in conjunction with the people being studied. That is, another ethnographer studying the same topic in the same ethnographic setting may come out with different findings because of the differences in the ethnographers, the fieldwork dynamics, and some differences in the host population.

Ethnography Requires the Daily and Continuous Recording of Fieldnotes

Ethnographers are continuously recording as fieldnotes, what they are observing and learned in the field setting. The open-ended, emergent, discovery-oriented iterative, and reflexive attributes of the ethnographic enterprise make the collection of daily fieldnotes necessary simply as a means of recording what is being observed and experienced by the ethnographer. As the ethnographer learns about the culture in which he or she is working, similar to a student taking notes in a classroom, he or she must record data and observations while they are still fresh in the mind. The rich details which make fieldnotes valuable require that an ethnographer make these notes each and every day in the field. With each day that passes following a fieldwork experience, the recollection of it inevitably loses the clarity and significance upon which analysis is bases. Most ethnographers maintain their daily field notes in field journals. Because of the emergent nature of ethnography, the value of maintaining field notes becomes apparent during later reviews of the journal as the ethnographer begins to pick up on cultural patterns. These patterns often reveal a social or cultural significance of which the ethnographic hosts themselves may not even have been consciously aware. Daily fieldnotes also facilitate the iterative and interpretive processes of ethnography, as the repeated collection and recording of data helps the ethnographer achieve an emically valid product in which findings are repeated often and in detail. Taking fieldnotes also facilitates the ethnographic attributes of reflexivity and constructivism, in that the ethnographer not only records his or her observations of the ethnographic setting, but also his or her reactions to what is observed or experienced.

Ethnography May be Carried out by Individual Investigators, or by Teams of Investigators

For many researchers, this aspect of ethnography may appear to be obvious. However, many ethnographers (and many of those who hire ethnographers) think of ethnography as an individual endeavor. Indeed, most classical ethnographic reports have been those of lone ethnographers. Interpretivist, reflexive, and constructivist epistemologies have supported this classical approach to ethnography. Undoubtedly, an individual researcher who has spent a long period of time in the field is capable of providing careful and well thought out analyses in the course of ethnographic analysis and writing. I am a strong advocate of an ethnographer's training including this kind of classical ethnographic experience. I believe that such an experience is crucial to developing important epistemological orientations of ethnography. At the same time, however, I am also a strong advocate of most ethnography being a team effort because of the distinct advantages of division of labor and increased manpower, particularly in applied settings.

I admit that I have always been a little uneasy about my ability to be true to the concept of holistic study of communities when I have worked alone; and I am a little suspicious of colleagues who say they can provide such comprehension. Taking a holistic approach to the ethnographic study of human communities requires an overwhelming amount of work—more work than a single ethnographer can reasonably accomplish, no matter how long-term the research. Moreover, in most of the communities in

which I have worked there have been constraints on my ability to reach certain segments of the population because of barriers regarding sex, age, ethnicity, race, class, or nationality. As such, the primary advantages of the team ethnography approach is a division of labor and, in the case of a phenotypically and socio-culturally diverse team, the ability to use different members of the research team to gain entrée into different population segments of the host community.

At the same time, in applied research, the holistic perspective that an anthropologist can bring applied efforts (e.g. planned interventions to address community health problems) is crucial because without such holistic perspectives interventions informed by such research can be misdirected because of its lack of emic validity. At the same time, if research based on a holistic perspective is going to be recommended, it should have the research skills involved to achieve that perspective. Often times the single ethnographer does not have the range of research skills necessary to adequately address the complexities inherent in a holistic approach to the study of a cultural system.

Beyond methods, a team approach also allows the ethnography to capitalize on the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of any individual team member. For example, some researchers are more skilled at interacting with community residents, for instance, while others are not as comfortable or interested in those interactions. Others may be proficient in the literature and document analysis related components of the ethnography, or more skilled at using the internet to tap into other electronic sources of information. In other words, the various strengths of team members can be brought to bear in order to exploit the full range of data sources available, ultimately producing as holistic and comprehensive a picture of the community residents as is possible.

From the reflexive recognition that different researchers may bring different interpretive frameworks to a study setting, assurances of achieving emic validity are enhanced with discussions between team members following ethnographic data collection episodes—regarding what had been observed during the day, why and how were certain settings or activities selected for observation, and whether there were variations in the interpretations of what was observed. Such reflexive and interpretivist perspectives also dictate the presence of both *cultural outsiders* and *cultural insiders* on the research team. Technically trained researchers (including ethnographers) are usually cultural outsiders, in that they usually study cultural systems outside of the ones of which they are members. They often bring technical research skills to the team that are not present among the communities and populations that they study. They may bring a certain degree or type of objectivity to the research process because of a less likelihood of emotional attachment to certain features of the culture under study. Moreover, being of a different culture, the cultural outsider may make observations that stimulate new and culturally significant ethnographic questions (referred to by Agar as a period of "breakdown" in the ethnographic process); whereas the cultural insider's enculturaltion and familiarity with the same phenomena may have made it so routine that such questions may not even be considered.

On the other hand cultural insiders (members of the cultural system being studied) will know of sources of cultural meaning that could be very important to the study, but maybe completely unknown to the outsider. Moreover, cultural insiders can be very important to issues of entre into a study community, and the development of rapport and trust. I have found our research among drug traffickers, street prostitutes, HIV positive persons, urban adolescents at risk for a variety of ills, the world of children, and even African chiefs and Queen Mothers greatly facilitated by having members of these cultures and subcultures present on the team. Frequently, as cultural outsiders, we have found insiders to be very important too as first contact cultural informants as we wrestle with exploring continually new breakdowns during the ethnographic process. And finally, I have found the team approach also found that—are some of the most intellectually

stimulating experiences of an ethnographic enterprise. Finally, I have found the team discussions held at the end of each ethnographic data collection episodes—mentioned at the beginning of the preceding paragraph—to be some of the most intellectually stimulating activities in the research process, indeed more stimulating than those individual attempts to find meaning and relevance in the ethnographic data assessed through individual ethnographic efforts.

Ethnography Presents the World of their Hosts Within a Human Context of "Thickly" Described Case Studies.

In contrast to positivist and quantitative research approaches such as the surveys, which often collect data from large samples in an effort to achieve external validity and representativeness, rich descriptive case studies can provide valuable, in-depth data even when the number of cases is small. In other words, whereas the survey provides data that is *broad* (in terms of external reliability or representativeness), good ethnography, through rich, holistic case studies, can provide data that are *deep*, rich, or what Geertz (1973) refers to as "thick." The richness or thickness of ethnographic data comes from placing individuals within their various socio-cultural contexts, and exploring how socio-cultural processes and meaning systems are expressed within these contexts. In good ethnography, hosts are not reduced to simple numerical values, but are depicted through the gamut of human experience, including rich contextual, process, and ideational constructions. While ethnographers rarely use the real names of their hosts for reasons of confidentiality and protection, they often provide pseudonyms. This naming process tends to "humanize" individual hosts for the reader of ethnographic texts, and organizing that individuals contextual data around him or her continues this process. I have had experience graduate students in both anthropology and public health collect very rich and relevant data on very small and non-probabilistic samples, but which had the potential of yielding new insights about a health or social problems that had theretofore been unexplored. But when it came to the analysis and presentation of this data, the domination of positivism in their training has been so strong, that the rich contextual data are then omitted, and they attempt quantitative analyses with data from samples too small and non-representative for the statistical analyses that they are attempting. I have seen such students then have problems with getting their products approved by their thesis committees, or if the committee approves their thesis, their work is never further used by anyone as the work is methodologically unsound, irrelevant, and considered to be poor work on the part of professionals. Until researchers learn that there are alternatives to this domination of positivist perspectives, and can be trained to pursue how to develop the rigor necessary to carry out these alternatives to studying the human condition, then our advances in the human sciences will continue to be limited, as Godfrey Hochbaum suggested to me many years ago.

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Figure 1: The Cultural Systems Paradigm