

**Layers of Time: A New Historicist Exploration Through Thick and Thin Perspectives****Joshi Hitesh Babubhai**

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**"T**hick Description" is a term used by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He described the practice of thick description as a way of providing cultural context and meaning to human actions and behaviour, as opposed to "thin description" which is a factual account without any interpretation. A thin description lacks context. It describes something without explaining its cultural significance. A thick description describes not only the action, but its significance.

Thick description includes voices, feelings, actions and meanings (Ponterotto, 2006). The example most commonly used to explain 'Thick description' comes from Ryle. He argued that if someone winks at us without a context, we don't know what it means. We can report on the wink (thin description).

**What is thick and thin description?**

A thin description lacks context. It describes something without explaining its cultural significance. A thick description describes not only the action, but its significance.

**What is the Difference Between Thick Description and Thin Description?**

Thick descriptions provide enough context so that a person outside the culture can make meaning of the behaviour. Thin description by contrast, is stating facts without such meaning or significance.

**What does Geertz thick description offer an anthropologist?**

One of the key terms in Clifford Geertz's anthropological theory is that of "Thick Description". ... According to Geertz an ethnographer must present a thick description which is composed not only of facts but also of commentary, interpretation and interpretations of those comments and interpretations.

**Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description"**

One of the key terms in Clifford Geertz's anthropological theory is that of "Thick Description". Following Ryle, Geertz holds that anthropology's task is that of explaining cultures through thick description which specifies many details, conceptual structures and meanings, and which is opposed to "thin description" which is a factual account without any interpretation. Thin description for Geertz is not only an insufficient account of an aspect of a culture; it is also a misleading one. According to Geertz an ethnographer must present a thick description which is composed not only of facts but also of commentary, interpretation and interpretations of those comments and interpretations. His task is to extract meaning structures that make up a culture, and for this Geertz believes that a factual account will not suffice for these meaning structures are complexly layered one on top and into each other so that each fact might be subjected to inter crossing interpretations which ethnography should study.

In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" Geertz outlines four parameters for an adequate "thick description" and a study of culture:

1. Interpretative study: since anthropology is a semiotic endeavour, cultural analysis should be an interpretative practice which traces the manner in which meaning is ascribed. The raw observational material collected by an ethnographer is not sufficient if we are to achieve a thick description of a culture.
2. The subject of interpretation is the flow of social discourse. Interpretative ethnography according to Geertz should produce the codes required for decoding social events.
3. Interpretation deals with extrovert expressions. Data collection and interpretation are limited to what local informants can tell us. Therefore the thickest of descriptions can only be based on extrovert expressions of culture.

4. Ethnographic description is microscopic. According to Geertz ethnographic findings describe local behaviours and truths as serve as an ethnographical miniature. We always view specific and contextualized happenings, and these make up the thick description.

Clifford Geertz, the cultural anthropologist who influenced the practice of symbolic anthropology, wrote “analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification...and determining their social ground and import.” (Geertz, 1973, p. 9) Geertz was concerned that anthropological research was more interpretive than anthropologists admitted. To paraphrase, they were explicating other’s explications of explications.

What Geertz was saying is that anthropological writing is fiction in the sense that they are made and fashioned but they are not false. Geertz described the practice of thick description as a way of providing cultural context and meaning that people place on actions, words, things, etc. Thick descriptions provide enough context so that a person outside the culture can make meaning of the behaviour. Thin description by contrast, is stating facts without such meaning or significance. Surveys provide thin descriptions at best. We are suggesting that thick descriptions can be useful to people within an organization in order to better understand themselves and the complexity of organizational life. They can then see their own culture in the subtle ways that cannot be exposed by surveys and sound bites alone. Like Geertz, we see our role as exposing the social ground and import of social structures yet we tend to do it in a different way than was available to Geertz. Rather than the researcher being the only one who sniffs out the trail of signification, we engage the people themselves in making sense of their own sense making by indicating the significance of the stories they tell. But this second layer of data (signifiers) alone does not create a thick enough description. It is through sorting the stories by what they mean and seeing groups, patterns and even holes in groups (the things we can do with Sense Maker) that we are able to provide another layer of interpretation and thicken the description of what a culture is doing. We help turn participants in the system to self-anthropologists, sorting out their own signification, social ground, and import. We are

exploring ways in which we can make the description even thicker. One idea my colleague Joan Goppelt came up with is to create stories from the stories. We are beginning to write semi-fictional accounts of actions and interactions that describe the patterns emerging from the data. The stories are “fictional” because no exact series of events described in these stories would have actually happened. But they are “semi-“because they are in a sense true. They mirror cultural patterns and should be seen as plausible and probable events to those in the culture. These stories will be more than merely changing the names to protect the innocent but less than pure creative fantasy. Fiction writers (those that write for our entertainment) create plausible and often improbable stories. They are out of the ordinary, which makes them interesting. We’re looking at recreating the “ordinary drama” of everyday existence in an organization – not to entertain but to explain, expose, and enrich.

There are examples of fictional accounts that describe organizational patterns such as Lencioni’s Five Dysfunctions of a Team, but these are accounts abstracted from multiple teams, organizations and cultures. Lencioni wants a story that is applicable to many (and to create a best-seller). We want to create something that only makes sense in a certain cultural context and so shows not just the typical but also the unusual. By starting and ending with the stories told within a cultural setting, we are attempting to, as Geertz put it, expose “their normalness without reducing their particularity” (p. 14). Has anyone else tried this approach in organizations and if so, what was your experience?

### **Introduction To "Thick Description"**

As an anthropologist, Geertz was first and foremost interested in ethnography. However, he was frustrated by what he saw as the many surface-level readings of culture that some anthropologists were producing (Geertz 1973/2013). Why was this an issue? Simply put, Geertz recognized that culture is a knotty and often mysterious thing, made up of layers upon layers of intertwined symbols and signs. (“[It’s] turtles all the way down,” he once noted, quoting ancient Hindu belief; 1973, p. 29). This means that culture is not an easy thing to define, and it is even harder to describe. To aid anthropologists in the task of defining their cultural object of study,

Geertz introduced the concept of thick description into the parlance of the discipline; this term can be described as "the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context" (Hollaway RWJF, n.d., para. 3).

To make better sense of what thick description entails, Geertz explained it with a simple example: Consider ... two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way ... Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking. That's all there is to it: a speck of behaviour, a fleck of culture, and—voilà!—a gesture. That, however, is just the beginning. Suppose, he continues, there is a third boy, who, "to give malicious amusement to his cronies", parodies the first boy's wink, as amateurish, clumsy, obvious, and so on. He, of course, does this in the same way the second boy winked and the first twitched: by contracting his right eyelids. Only this boy is neither winking nor twitching, he is parodying someone else's, as he takes it, laughable, attempt at winking. Here, too, a socially established code exists ... The point is that between what Ryle calls the "thin description" of what the rehearse (parodist, winker, twitcher . . .) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the

zero-form twitches, which, as a cultural category, are as much non-winks as winks are non-twitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids. (1973, pp. 6-7). In this short but impactful passage, Geertz provides us with a perfect example of a behaviour that can only be explicated by thick description. The three boys—the winker, the twitcher, and the parodist—are all doing the same physical action (as Geertz's says "rapidly contracting [their] right eyelids"), but given the socio-cultural context that each boy finds himself in, the exact same behaviour can mean vastly different things. Geertz argues that it is this detailed context—this *je ne sais quoi*—that the ethnographer must dig into and discover if one wants to adequately explain behaviour and by extension culture. In summation, Geertz is quoted as saying "culture is context" (Geertz quoted in Shankman et al., 1984, p. 262), and this utterance helps understand what exactly he was getting at when he discusses thick description.

#### **Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture:**

In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture", Geertz has addressed the theme of culture and has refuted the previously developed anthropological perspectives seeing culture as the synthesis of traditions, values, and techniques. The author has focused on the concept of 'sick description' arguing that the semiotic nature of culture has its implications to political and anthropologic studies. The following paper will critically summarize the class reading under consideration. The key ideas expressed by the author draw the readers' attention to the nature of human culture. Geertz supports Weber's point of view that a human being can be seen as an animal dangled in the entanglement of meaning and significance invented on one's own. He states that these webs are cultures created by the man. Therefore, he argues that cultural studies should involve an interpretative search of meaning rather than experimental research (Geertz 3). The concept of "thick description" that Geertz often uses in the given reading can be described as a methodological imperative that is being shaped under the influence of semiotic developments in culture. Geertz has distinguished the notions of "thick description" from the notion of "thin description" by stating that it

relates to the work of ethnographer who interprets the factual account of a culture that has occurred. "Thin description" is thus the exact cultural phenomenon that has taken place. Reasoning with the help of "thick description" and "thin description" concepts, Geertz has come up with the conclusion that the very task of ethnography is producing "thick description" or providing translation to the actual cultural events. For Geertz, culture is the phenomenon that becomes revealed in the actions of a particular person. Culture, according to Geertz, is specific and public. These characteristics mean that culture belongs to particular groups of people and it is the collective property of all individuals in this group. It is also an assembly of socially established concepts of meaning that people are using in their communication. Geertz argues that culture can also be also seen in the collection of texts. Written manuscripts are thus the physical demonstration of culture. Therefore, an ethnographer may study culture in the same way that a researcher is working with a case study. One thus needs to incorporate the knowledge of the localization of the studied group and the exact details of the event that took place. Culture is a complex phenomenon that occurs in the process of communication with contextual meaning. Culture exists in the network of present social relations. Consequently, social structure and culture are the two dimensions of the same phenomena.

**Expanding on the Author's Essential Points:**

The author's contribution to ethnographic studies can be hardly underestimated. Geertz addressed this area of scholarly studies from a fresh perspective and identified the wide scope of questions that need to be answered to improve the validity of findings made by ethnographers. His vision of culture and the work that an ethnographer is doing can be compared with the tasks done by a literary critique that reads, evaluates, and analyses a text. For such specialists, many aspects need to come to attention in order to make sure that the results of their work are solid. These aspects include being fluent in the language of studies, having a background in studies, being methodological, and avoid bias. In parallel with a critique, an ethnographer should be fluent in the local language, have a background with the studied culture, be methodological and avoid bias. The points that

Geertz made in this chapter has addressed the very nature and fundament of anthropological studies. He originated a new debate on the topics related to the nature of culture, the difference between culture and social structure, how culture should be perceived, and how the relations between the observed and observer can be regulated. Geertz has made an important contribution into understanding the post-modern world. He has helped anthropologists change their traditional approach to conducting studies in the natural environment of the studied society. Instead, today's cultures began to be addressed from the perspective of other cultures. For instance, U.S. or European anthropologists can study a representative of a certain culture invited to their terrain rather than immersing themselves into the cultural environment of the native country of this individual. This approach has improved the understanding of the notion of globalization through the process of international culture assimilation because the technological progress has left almost no individual or culture that has not experienced influence from other cultures and societies.

**The Author's Argument's Strong and Weak Points:**

Speaking about the strong points of Geertz's argument, it should be noted that the author is using a strong theoretic background to build on and prove the appropriateness of the conclusions made. He does not stop there and makes helpful illustrations to help the audience understand the difference between the notions of "thick description" and "thin description" in practice. For instance, he is using the example of the parodist, whose professional activity can be seen as "thick description", whereas the phenomenon that one trying to demonstrate is "thin description" according to Geertz. Another strong illustration that the author is providing to the readers to help them ponder into the complexity of the world of ethnography is comparing the work of an ethnographer with the work of a translator whose task is to interpret a manuscript written in a foreign language and with multiple incoherencies, ellipses, and transient examples. As for the weak points in the argument, Geertz keeps on focusing on the idea that the cultural knowledge is intrinsically of an interpretive character, which seems ambiguous because it is not clear how one can make sure that

interpretation is done in a valid way. Next, if it is a highly interpretive matter and multiple different interpretations exist by different persons, then how one can know which interpretation is trustworthy, and which one is unjustified or even completely mistaken. Besides, how can one avoid the dangers of being biased or prejudice? These are the questions that appear to have no distinct answer in the reading under consideration.

**Clifford Geertz - Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture:**

In his important essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” anthropologist Clifford Geertz aims to provide social science with an understanding and appreciation of “thick description.” While Geertz applies thick description in the direction of anthropological study (specifically his own ‘interpretive anthropology’), his theory that asserts the essentially semiotic nature of culture has implications for the social sciences in general and, in our case, political science (and comparative political science) in particular. “Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is... There are a number of ways of escaping this—turning culture into folklore and collecting it, turning it into traits and counting it, turning it into institutions and classifying it, turning it into structures and toying with it. But they are escapes. The fact is that to commit oneself to a semiotic concept of culture and an interpretive approach to the study of it is to commit oneself to a view of ethnographic assertion as... ‘Essentially contestable.’ Anthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of the consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other.”

**The Idea Of “Culture”**

*From Clyde Kluckhohn’s Mirror of Man, Geertz lists the following potential meanings of “culture”:*

- "The total way of life of a people"
- "The social legacy the individual acquires from his group"
- "A way of thinking, feeling, and believing"
- "An abstraction from behaviour"

- “A theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave”
- "A storehouse of pooled learning"
- "A set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems"
- "Learned behaviour"
- “A mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour”
- “A set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men”
- "A precipitate of history"
- A behavioural map, sieve, or matrix

Essentially, there is no standard and it will eventually be “necessary to choose.” Geertz himself argues for a “semiotic” concept of culture: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical.”

We must proceed interpreting a culture’s web of symbols by

1. Isolating its elements.
2. Specifying the internal relationships among those elements

3. characterize the whole system in some general way—according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based. We must, however, be careful that such hermetical approaches might actually distance us from cultural analysis’s proper object, “the informal logic of actual life... Whatever, or wherever, symbol systems ‘in their own terms’ may be, we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns.” Therefore, coherence cannot be a test for a cultural interpretation’s validity. While cultural systems must have a certain degree of coherence in order to be cultural systems, coherence is a loaded measurement as well as a limited one. “Tightness” of a culture, or at least its

interpretation, makes for neither a valid or invalid interpretation. Rather, the ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse, turning a passing event into an account. Guessing at meanings is a given in the interpretations behind the inscriptions. “Tightness” is irrelevant for the most part. In Geertz’s understanding, ethnography is by definition “thick description”—“an elaborate venture *in*.” Using the action of “winking,” Geertz examines how—in order to distinguish the winking from a social gesture, a twitch, etc.)—we must move beyond the action to both the particular social understanding of the “winking” as a gesture, the *mens rea* (or state of mind) of the winker, his/her audience, and how they construe the meaning of the winking action itself. “Thin description” is the winking. “Thick” is the meaning behind it and its symbolic import in society or between communicators. Ethnographic description includes the following:

1. Its interpretive
2. What it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse
3. The interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms.

He compares the method of the “interpretive anthropologist” (who accepts a semiotic view of culture) with the method of the literary critique analysing a text: “Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification—what Ryle called established codes—and determining their social ground or import... Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript.” Additionally we should treat human behaviour as “symbolic action—action, which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask is what their *import* is.” (9-10) (my emphasis) Approaching culture as either subjective/objective, modern/traditional or designated by and supposed social dichotomy is dangerous and misleading. We should, rather, view human behaviour as “symbolic action.” Culture is public because “meaning is,” and systems of meanings are what produce culture, they are the

collective property of a particular people. When “we,” either as researchers or simply as human beings, do not understand the beliefs or actions of persons from a foreign culture, we are acknowledging our “lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs.” we cannot discover the culture’s import or understand its systems of meaning when, as Wittgenstein noted, “We cannot find our feet with them.” Therefore, when faced with “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit,” the ethnographer must attempt to grasp and interpret them, striving to understand how and why behaviour is shaped in such and such a way (as opposed to another). Thick description is, thus, much more than mere data collection although this is an inherent part of anthropological work as well.

*Mistaken views of “culture” as a concept:*

- “To imagine that culture is a self-contained ‘super organic’ reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is to say, to reify it.”—
- Reductionist tendencies
- We must be wary of defining what a particular tribe “really” thinks and setting this in stone. Additionally, we must be aware that simply applying formal models to subjective realities; refined ethnographic algorithms make the reality no less subjective. “The cognitivist fallacy—that culture consists of ‘mental phenomena which can be analysed by formal methods similar to those of mathematics and logic’—is as destructive of an effective use of the concept as are the behaviourist and idealist fallacies to which it is a misdrawn correction.” (12)
- mistaking the thick description for thin or vice versa.
- taking anthropological interpretations as first order interpretations—when they are at best second and third order interpretations (first order refers to interpretations by a community member living within the particular community in question)
- Careful not to fall into problematic models; for instance the “Jonesville-is-the-USA microcosmic model” or the “Easter Island-is-a-testing-case natural experiment model.”

As a semiotic concept, “culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours,

institutions, or processes can causally be attributed; it is a context, something within which [interworked systems of construable signs] can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described.” We must ever be attempting to uncover “the degree to which [an action’s] meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. Understanding a people’s culture exposes their *normalness* without reducing their *particularity*.” In sum, Geertz wants us to appreciate that social actions are larger than themselves, they speak to larger issues, and vice versa, because “they are made to.” “It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers.” We seek to converse with subjects in foreign cultures, gain access to their conceptual world; this is the goal of the semiotic approach to culture. Cultural theory is not its own master. At the end of the day, we must appreciate that the generality thick description “contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions. The essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them.” Cultural theory is not predictive; at best, it anticipates. Finally, “Our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects’ acts, the ‘said’ of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in those terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinates of human behaviour. In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself—that is, about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed.”

#### **Clifford Geertz: Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture – Review And Analysis:**

*Culture* is the centre of Clifford Geertz's discussion in "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture". Following Max Webber, Geertz views people as being entangled in webs of meaning that are of their own making. Geertz refutes previous anthropological perspectives

which viewed culture as a vast array of values, techniques, tradition and so for the in favour of a more narrow definition of the term "culture". In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" Geertz views culture in semiotic terms, a sort of public act in which people express themselves using various signs and symbols which have pre-ascribed cultural meaning. Culture for Geertz is far from an abstract psychological construct. On the contrary, culture for Geertz is embodied in the person who acts out of and in a certain context, and culture is revealed in this person's actions and his interpretation of their meaning. Culture is in this sense concrete and public, and not something which exists in people's individual minds. Following his perception of culture Geertz holds that the ethnographer's task is in fact the same of someone who belongs to a certain culture – to have a deep and rooted understanding of in the semiotics – symbols and meanings – of the culture. This is the basis for Geertz's notion of "thick description". Thick description is defined for Geertz as a methodological imperative which takes into account the structure and nature of a culture's semiotic formations. Geertz distinguished "thick description" from "thin description" which is a factual account of a culture that does not include hermeneutic interpretation which is required by the thick description. In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" Geertz uses the example of a wink which can be seen as just a contraction of the eyelids or as sign which bears cultural as well as contextual meanings. As an anthropologist, Geertz was first and foremost interested in ethnography. However, he was frustrated by what he saw as many surface-level readings of culture that some anthropologists were producing. Why was this issue? Simply put, Geertz recognizes that culture is a knotty and often mysterious thing, made up of layers upon layers of intertwined symbols and signs. This means that culture is not an easy thing to define, and it is even harder to describe. To aid anthropologists in the task of defining their cultural object of study, Geertz introduced the concept of Thick Description into the parlance of discipline; this term can be described as a detailed account of field experiences in which researchers make explicit patterns of cultural and

social relationships and put them in context. To make better sense of what Thick Description entails, Geertz explains it with a simple example: consider. Two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is involuntary twitch; in the other, conspiratorial signal to friend. Two movements are, as movements, identical; from I-am-a-camera, phenomenalist observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however in photographable, between twitch and wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had first take for second knows. Winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in quite a precise and special way. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking. That's all there is to it: speck of behaviour, fleck of culture, and voila! Gesture. That, however, is just the beginning. Suppose, he continue, there is a third boy, who, to give malicious amusement to his cronies, parodies first boys wink, as amateurish, clumsy, obvious, and so on. He, of course, does this in the same way second boy winks and first twitch: by contracting his right eyelids. Only this boy is neither winking nor twitching, he is parodying someone else's, as he takes it, laughable, attempt at winking. Here, too, socially established code exists. The point is that between what Ryle calls a thin description of what the rehearse is doing and the thick description of what he is doing lies the object of ethnography: stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produce, perceive, and interpret, and without which they would not in fact exist, no matter what anyone do or didn't do with his eyelids. In this short but impactful passage, Geertz provides us with a perfect example of behaviour that can only be explicate y Thick Description. Three boys' winker, twitchier, and parodist are all doing the same physical action, but given the socio-cultural context that each boy finds himself in, exact same behaviour can mean vastly different things. Thick description is a way of writing that includes not only describing and observation (usually of human behaviour) but also the context in which that behaviour occurs. The term 'thick description' was

made famous by anthropologist Clifford Geertz who wrote in this style as a way of capturing his brand of ethnography in the 1970s. Since then, 'thick description' has gradually taken hold in the social sciences, and today, it has become the way of writing qualitatively.

Geertz borrowed the term from philosopher Gilbert Ryle and added meaning to it. In "*Thick description*": *Towards and interpretive theory of culture* (1973) Geertz stated: "From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, 'thick description'" (Geertz, 1973:6; Ponterotto, 2006: 539). Geertz believed that the reader of anthropological writing needed to interpret the credibility of the author's interpretation and he/she could only do this if the observations and context were fully described.

### How Can We Describe Thickly?

'Thick description' goes beyond surface appearances to include the context, detail, emotion, and webs of social relationships. It presents the significance of an observation, event or behaviour. Thick description includes voices, feelings, actions and meanings (Ponterotto, 2006). The example most commonly used to explain 'Thick description' comes from Ryle. He argued that if someone winks at us without a context, we don't know what it means. We can report on the wink (thin description). But if we provide a context we will know if the person is attracted to us, or that s/he is trying to communicate secretly, or that s/he has something in his/her eye. As the context changes, the meaning of the wink changes. 'Thick description' explains the context of practices and discourses in a society. WHAT GOES INTO 'THICK DESCRIPTION'? Denzin (1989) outlines the features of 'thick description'. For each observation, event or behaviour, 'thick description' captures the following details:

- Biographical (who?)
- Historical (what led to this?)



- Situational (context)
- Relational (what’s happening?)
- Interactional (what are the meanings and relationships?)

‘Thick description’ allows the reader to ‘see’ the lives of respondents because of the way the text is written.

**Another Way of Describing Thickly**

Bloom’s taxonomy is another way of describing thickly in qualitative writing. Provide information which gives the reader *knowledge*, and then explain so that the reader can *comprehend*. Give examples so that the reader can see how this information has been *applied*. Then pull it all apart to *analyse* it for the reader, put it back together with interpretation, insight and new knowledge through *synthesis*. Finally, step back and *evaluate* your interpretation. In short: describe, explain, give examples, interpret, make sense of your interpretation and then explain to the reader why this is (or isn’t) a worthy interpretation.

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