



## Absence of Audience's Consciousness in Ethnography On the Writing of Ethnography from an Audience Angle Based on Communication

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### Abstract

Contemporary studies on ethnography chiefly focus on the formation of ethnography, the relationship between researchers and research objects, the role orientation of researchers and research objects. Especially, the post-modern reflections on ethnography urge anthropologists to recognize ethnography again. Seldom do studies on ethnography focus on the audience. However, the audience of ethnography has important effects on the communication of ethnography. An in-depth study on audience of ethnography can provide with better guidance for researchers in writing ethnography and it will impact the studies on the communication of ethnography to a great degree.

**Keywords:** Ethnography audience, Communication mode of ethnography, Role switch

The basic meaning of "ethnography" is the narration of other nations' social and cultural phenomena (James Clifford, 2006). Today, ethnography mainly has two meanings: one means the texts written by anthropologists, narrating other nations' social and cultural phenomena; the other means the study methods used by anthropologists in writing ethnography. The formation of ethnography is an interactive process between researchers, mainly anthropologists, and research objects. The primitive mode for ethnography's formation is as follow. Researchers study the research objects and write the original texts of ethnography. Primitive studies on ethnography are restrained to this aspect. In 80s in 20th century, anthropology faces a noticeable controversy about "writing culture". Two representative works are *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. The two works center on the rhetoric, narration politics and tactics in writing ethnography, advancing reflections and challenges to traditional ethnography (Jianbo Huang, 2004).

However, all former studies are restrained to the formation of ethnography in general. Seldom do studies on the relationship between anthropologists and research objects mention the audience of ethnography. Few studies focus on the readers of ethnography (Yanrong Chang & Qi Cai, 2005). Here the audience of ethnography includes readers of ethnography and people who know contents of ethnography by other communication means.

The audience of ethnography has important effects on ethnography's communication and influences. Studies on audience of ethnography can help ethnography writers understand the influences of ethnography and the present and supposed effects of ethnography on social communication.

### 1. The ethnography's audience communication process

In studying ethnography, researchers usually regard the communication process of ethnography as a simple linear mode. In their opinions, once contents of ethnography have experienced a communication process, the audience would accept all the contents completely. The audience is only a negative receiver in the whole communication process. They just accept all viewpoints advanced by anthropologists in ethnography. Then, a linear ethnography communication mode includes these parts: researchers, research objects, texts of ethnography, and audience of ethnography. In this linear communication mode, the communication process stops at the audience of ethnography.

This linear ethnography communication process has clear defects: (1) it has the roles, relations, and effects of researchers, research objects, texts of ethnography, and audience of ethnography fixed. One part is either a positive disseminator or a negative receiver. No role transfer happens. However, in practical daily life, the audience of ethnography is usually not a negative receiver who may affect the researchers and research objects, and even the

formation of ethnography texts. (2) This linear communication mode does not include the feedback factors or rings and can not reflect the interactive nature of human communication that is common in ethnography's audience communication.

Realizing the limitations of linear communication mode, we know that the audience communication process of ethnography is a recycle process that includes not only researchers, research objects, texts of ethnography, and audience of ethnography, but also two processes in which the audience understands the ethnography and give information feedback respectively. The two processes are very important in the ethnography's audience communication. First of all, the process of audience understanding ethnography is not a negative receiving process, but a process in which the audience re-understands the ethnography based on their acquired knowledge and culture. During the process, the audience of ethnography is active and positive, who re-understands and re-creates the texts of ethnography. Secondly, the information feedback process can greatly help anthropologists understand their studies, master the relationship with research objects, and perfect their ethnography writing.

## 2. The characteristics of ethnography audience

### 2.1 *The roles of ethnography researchers and that of ethnography audience are interchangeable*

There is a well-known example, namely the studies of Redfield and Lewis, in anthropology studies. Many anthropologists usually use it to illustrate that the cultural explanation for wild materials can not realize the transcendent objectivity. Redfield and Lewis have respectively studied a same village in Mexico in 1926 and 1941 and drawn completely different conclusions. At the very beginning, Lewis merely intended to look at changes of the village, holding the sincere faith in for Redfield's studies. However, the materials collected by Lewis are different from that of Redfield in nature. Therefore, we have to suppose that the culture has been changed thoroughly or one of them has been wrong. What Redfield has described is a village with religious values. Coordination and cooperation are the norms of the village. In contrast, according to Lewis' description, the village is disintegrated because of hostile emotions, jealousy, and competition. Self-interests even overwhelm connections of relatives. The completely different observations and explanations can not be attributed to social changes simply. Many anthropologists start studies on this example and conclude that: because Redfield is a Protestant coming from the Midwest, and Lewis from New York, their writings reflect their background. Redfield's anthropology emphasizes on Webber's theories, thinking that kindred, village, and saint values are the core of the traditional society. He has found out all these elements in this village. Lewis is from the Graduate School of Columbia University, where people are interested in studying personalities, giving prominence to social conflicts and economic struggle. Lewis has found out that either. Apparently, Redfield and Lewis' ethnographies have been respectively influenced deeply by their personalities, sub-cultures, political views, and theoretical schools. It does not mean one of them is absolutely wrong. Their reports are both exact, but concern different fields. Materials collected by Redfield are about self-consciousness. His descriptions are always general, simple, and ideal. In contrast, Lewis has probed into the nature of phenomena, releasing every "truth" in social life. Redfield has studied the culture by taking it as a signal and meaning system, while Lewis by real social relationships (Bingxiang Zhu, 2004).

In this example, we notice that at the very beginning Lewis is the audience of Redfield's ethnography. He read Redfield's ethnography and believed in it faithfully. With this attitude, he intended to find out changes of the village, what made him begin his studies and draw different conclusions. Before he went to that village in Mexico, he was still an audience in ethnography communication. In this process, Redfield is the researcher, and the village in Mexico the research object. As Lewis started his studies on the village, his role has been changed from an audience of ethnography to a researcher.

From the example above, we can draw a conclusion: the roles of ethnography researchers and that of ethnography audience are interchangeable. The audience of ethnography is not only a receiver but may become a researcher. The interchange of roles has important impacts on studies of ethnography. In studies, people should not only investigate researchers but also try to understand the audience who may become researchers later.

### 2.2 *The motive of ethnography audience in the re-decoding process*

Ethnography's communication process includes two important procedures: coding and decoding. The coding means a process that changes information into message according to certain rules of signs and signals. To compile meanings of information by rules is the coding process. That is the first part of coding. The second part is the communication channel in which the compiled codes are transformed into sequence of signals, such as sound signals, electric signals, and light signals, for the sake of communication. For example, an article, namely the original message, is derived from information source. If the article is sent by telegraph, it must be coded into signals of telegraph codes firstly and then pass the communication channel (Qingguang Guo, 1999). In ethnography's communication process, the coding process mainly refers to the writing process of ethnography by anthropologists, namely researchers.

The decoding is to turn signals into messages, such as letters and languages. It is an information-transforming process reverse to the coding process. That is the first step. The second step, decoding is a process making messages revert to information (Qingguang Guo, 1999). In ethnography's communication, the decoding process means the audience's

self-understanding to the ethnography and the re-construction of image described in it.

The information coded by researchers is supposed to be received by the audience of ethnography. However, the information is not the same with that received by the audience of ethnography by decoding. Sometimes they are similar, and sometimes sharp different. Ethnography audience's decoding process is under the influences of many factors, among which the most important is the self knowledge structure of ethnography audience. For example, one with anthropology knowledge background and the one without may have completely different understandings to the same ethnography text. The influencing factors cover many aspects. Thereof, the important factor is chiefly: the richness degree of relevant information resources grasped by audience of ethnography. For example, an audience of ethnography may obtain more information resources related with certain ethnography from other aspects, such as films, pictures, or other ethnographies written by other anthropologists about the same place. The richer the ethnography audience obtains information resources, the more exact the audience's decoding process, the more positive and active the audience's understanding to ethnography.

### 3. Meanings of studies on ethnography audience to ethnography writing

Studies on ethnography audience can provide with guidance for researchers in writing ethnography in a sense. Post-modern anthropologists have already realized that it is impossible for ethnography writing to be pure objective and fair. The writing of ethnography will inevitably be affected by a series of factors, such as politics. During the Iraq War, America sends a group of anthropologists to Iraq and asks them to make on-the-spot investigations and researches on conditions in Iraq. In this circumstance, the ethnography will absolutely be endowed with political factors. Post-modern anthropologists have already dealt with this problem. In the reflection on the "politics" factor in anthropology, anthropologists not only realize their "political" statuses and stations as researchers, but also acknowledge that the so-called "objective" descriptions to foreign culture are influenced by the times, personal viewpoints and inclinations. They recognize the falsehood of scientism's "objectivity and neutrality" in anthropology studies.

Therefore, to impose the "complete neutrality" standpoint of ethnography audience to ethnography researchers is unfair and impractical. It is impossible for the cultural explanation of wild materials to be transcendent objectivity. As researchers describe foreign cultures, the times and personal viewpoints and inclinations, and even the "politics" factor, will inevitably affect the description.

Since these factors are inevitable, researchers should not try to conceal them but deal with them with right attitudes. In writing ethnography, researchers should tell the audience about the influencing "political factors" and "cultural factors" according to the facts. The audience will make judgment by themselves. Researchers should never regard the audience as a group of "bookworms" who merely receive knowledge positively.

### 4. Conclusion

To study the writing of ethnography from an audience angle is to study the ethnography from another angle by integrating the "audience"-related concepts in communication with relevant knowledge of anthropology. This paper analyzes the communication mode of ethnography, the main characteristics of ethnography audience, and the effects on ethnography writing. To study ethnography writing from an audience angle can help researchers form an overall consciousness, escape from worries about the objectivity of ethnography texts, and understand the ethnography's communication process clearly.

However, this paper merely concerns some concepts about this problem. The author does not make deep analysis on specific problems. Besides, in this paper the author just studies ethnography from the audience angle but not study the audience from the researcher angle. For this point, somebody suggests to apply the "The Third-Person Effect" theory to analysis and explanation. For ethnography researchers, the audience is "the third person". This "third-person" thinking mode is also meaningful for studies on ethnography writing.

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