

# THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

By  
Aleksandra Knezevic

Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of Philosophy

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts*

Supervisor: Christophe Heintz

*Budapest, Hungary*

2020

## ABSTRACT

Although participant observation is considered to be the hallmark of cultural anthropology, the epistemic value of this method has not been sufficiently spelled out. One of the most important and influential descriptions of participant observation is given by Clifford Geertz who argues that the epistemic value of participant observation is in interpreting human actions and recovering their meaning, and thus, enabling “thick descriptions”. How does participation contribute to the production of valid interpretation? I argue that doing participant observation involves taking a position from which one can observe the “micro-context” of action. This type of observation and the consequent knowledge acquired enables producing reliable interpretation. However, this production also relies on mind-reading, that is, the psychological capacity to ascribe mental states to others. I argue that first participant observation enables to better “mind-read” the members of the community studied, and second, recruiting mind-reading in participant observation enables the ethnographer to recover the meaning of human actions in terms of their mental causes. Subsequently, I argue that the epistemic value of participant observation is in producing interpretations of human actions that can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena. I conclude that participant observation is compatible with naturalism in the social sciences.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 – WHY NOT NATURALISTIC OBSERVATIONS INSTEAD OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?	3
CHAPTER 2 – HOW MIND-READING BRINGS EPISTEMIC VALUE TO PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION	8
<i>2.1. The epistemic value of the knowledge of the “micro-context”</i>	8
<i>2.2. Answering the possible objections</i>	15
CHAPTER 3 – PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN NATURALIZED CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY	22
<i>3.1. Interpretations as a form of explanation</i>	22
3.1.1. The psychological understanding of meaning	23
3.1.2. The linguistic understanding of meaning	24
<i>3.2. The epidemiological models of explanation</i>	31
<i>3.3. Answering the possible objections</i>	33
3.3.1. The argument from tacit normativity	34
3.3.2. The argument from anti-naturalism	38
CONCLUSION	41
REFERENCES	44

## INTRODUCTION

Participant observation is a method that tries to capture the beliefs and practices of the people being studied as they occur in their natural setting. Bronislaw Malinowski was the first to describe participant observation as an empirical method for studying other cultures. A few decades later, Clifford Geertz published his paper “Thick descriptions: toward an interpretative theory of culture”, in which he conceived participant observation as a method for the hermeneutical analysis. Today, participant observation is largely treated as a qualitative and interpretative method of the humanities and qualitative social science by way of which interpretations of human actions are produced.

I will argue that and explain why participant observation is of epistemic value for doing anthropological research. I will further argue that this method is of epistemic value also for researchers who have a naturalistic research agenda. Arguing that participant observation has epistemic value in naturalism implies that this method is adequate for describing causal relationships that constitute cultural phenomena. In a naturalistic framework, interpretations are understood as ordinary causal explanations, where mental states are identified as causal factors.

My aim is twofold. First, I attempt to contribute to a deeper understanding of what is the epistemic value of participant observation which I believe is not sufficiently explained either by cultural anthropologists or by philosophers of science. The reason is that the cognitive activity of interpreting has not fully been described and assessed: I argue that this cognitive activity strongly relies on the capacity cognitive psychologists call mind-reading. Second, through reflecting on this problem properly we can gain insights into whether participant observation is at odds or not with the methods of natural science. Even though the method involves a characteristic use of mind-reading, I argue that it is not. Therefore, I hope this discussion will be not only instructive as to

how to understand the added epistemic value of participant observation, but will also enable us to see more clearly whether participant observation is of value in the naturalistic research agenda.

The plan of the present discussion is as follows. In Chapter 1 I state my reasons why the question of what is the epistemic value is not trivial. In Chapter 2 I explain the epistemic value of participant observation for studying the normative aspects of culture: by way of participant observation, the ethnographer is able to understand individual actions, cultural practices, proper, desirable, and normal ways of behaving in the community she studies. In Chapter 3 I discuss the nature of cultural phenomena: does culture exist in someone's head? I argue that culture is "in the head" and the epistemic value of participant observation is in recovering mental causes of human actions that are one of the constituents of cultural phenomena. In Conclusion, I briefly summarize the claims I put forward and describe the prospects for future research.

## CHAPTER 1 – WHY NOT NATURALISTIC OBSERVATIONS INSTEAD OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?

Participant observation is a foundational method in anthropological research (Spradley, 1980; Bernard, 2006; DeWalt, 2011) used for discovering characteristics of particular cultures and for capturing the native’s point of view (Risjord, 2006). In order to achieve these goals, a participant-observer or an ethnographer seeks to reach the understanding of why people living in a particular community behave the way they do.

This method includes two components: participation and observation. The “participation” part of participant observation marks the feature of this method in which the ethnographer becomes, more or less, an equal member of the community studied by participating in daily activities of the natives for a sufficiently long period. The “observation” part means that in that period, the ethnographer observes and collects data about behavior of the members of the community and the contexts within which such behavior occurs; what is said, what are the practices, and more controversially, what are the locally shared motives, beliefs, and desires, and other psychological facts. In doing so, the “observation” part of participant observation marks the ethnographer’s ability to step back and to describe what is happening within the community.

The first component – participation – implies that the ethnographer engages in the activities of the people of the community she studies. The second component – observation – implies that while the ethnographer is engaged in participating, she is able to provide detached descriptions of the activities in which she participates. Although there is a tension between the engaged and detached aspect of participant observation, from the beginnings of this method, this discrepancy was recognized as a distinctive epistemic advantage.

For example, Risjord (2006) explains that Malinowski's participation in the daily routines of the people of the community he studied enabled him to collect more accurate data about their point of view (p.399). In a similar vein, Schnegg (2015) explains that Malinowski's "detailed, realistic and objectified descriptions become possible through his subjective relationship with his informants" (p.29). By being among people, living with them and sharing daily routines, Malinowski was able to establish the validity as well as reliability of his claims about other cultures (Schnegg, 2015: 26). Validity refers to the quality, accuracy, and veracity of data that represent reality. Reliability refers to the probability of whether another round of data collection will give the same or at least similar results as previously established ones (Schnegg, 2015: 30).

These authors however do not explain why participation in everyday life increases the validity and reliability of observations conducted in the field. It seems that neither an answer has been given as to why the engaged and detached aspect of this method make participant observation epistemically advantageous nor has this question been fully addressed in the existing literature.

Furthermore, given that there are other methods in social science that aim to explain human behavior, the added epistemic value of participant observation needs to be evaluated. What is it that can be done with participant observation that cannot be done with other methods, in particular, closely related naturalistic observations?

Naturalistic observations are a method especially used by human behavioral ecologists for the purpose of studying human behavior. Naturalistic observations enable human behavioral ecologists to gather data about local ecological facts that include the environment of individuals – with its social components, on the one hand, and behavior, on the other hand, to show how the latter is adapted to the former.

This method includes passive observations of the people in their natural setting that consist in going to the field and rigorously documenting behavior of the community members. Nettle at

all. (2013) explain that “at the heart of HBE is still a commitment to looking at what people do, in the environments in which they live” because “context matters when studying the adaptive consequences of human behavior” (p.1035).

Nettle (2011) argues that the knowledge of the context of behavior is important because it increases the validity and reliability of data that have been gathered by other methods such as questionnaires, surveys or interviews, that inform about behavior regardless of the context in which it has occurred (p.110).

The advantage of these methods is that they gather data by simply asking questions to the community members, to check, with quantitative methods, which answers mark the specific characteristics of the community that is studied. However, since they do not enable gathering precise and relevant information about the context in which the community lives, the answers they provide is usually very difficult to interpret. Therefore, the added epistemic value of naturalistic observations is in enabling social scientists to better understand the context, and thus, to better interpret data gathered by questionnaires, surveys, interviews and similar methods that allow easy data collection.

Like naturalistic observations, participant observation is also used as a method for understanding the context of behavior. As DeWalt (2011) writes, participant observation “provides context for sampling, open-ended interviewing, construction of interview guides and questionnaires, and other more structured and more quantitative methods of data collection” (p.3). However, the difference between participant observation and naturalistic observations is that the ethnographer participates in the lives of the community members while the human behavioral ecologist only observes<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> I do not however assert that the ethnographer cannot take on the role of a complete nonparticipant observer. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1994) point out, in order to pin down the definition of participant



In addition to observing people and their behaviors, the ethnographer participates in their everyday life for several months, often more than a year. In order to participate in everyday life, the ethnographer also must learn the language of the community studied. In contrast, since the human behavioral ecologist gathers her knowledge of the context of behavior only by observing, she does not have to learn the language nor to spend that much time in the field.

The questions arise: why do cultural anthropologists use participant observation when they can make use of apparently less costly, in terms of time and effort, naturalistic observations by means of which the same kind of data can be gathered, that is, data about the context of behavior? Should ethnographers give up participant observation for more efficient methods?

The goal of this thesis is to provide an answer to the question of what is the epistemic value of participant observation. It must be that this method, and in particular, its participation component absent in naturalistic observations, has some added epistemic value because otherwise this method would have been replaced by other less costly methods.

In addition, this thesis questions whether participant observation has epistemic value for a naturalistic research agenda. I ask this question because participant observation is often presented as a method for interpretation that is fitted only for the humanities and the qualitative social

---

observation, the distinction between participant and nonparticipant observations (an example of which are naturalistic observations) drawn on the assumption that the former are carried out only when the researcher takes an engaged participant role in the scene studied is misleading because it implies that the ethnographer cannot take on the role of a complete nonparticipant observer (p.248). However, nonparticipant observations play a role in participant observation.

This is why Hammersley and Atkinson propose the fourfold typology as a more accurate description of what the ethnographer does in the field. The ethnographer can be: complete observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, complete participant (p.248). By contrast, the human behavioral ecologist exclusively takes on the role of a complete nonparticipant observer.

The question is: what is the added epistemic value of participation? It must be that participation enables the ethnographer to gather data other researchers, who exclusively observe and never participate, cannot gather. It must be that the engagement in the daily life of the community members enables the ethnographer, who, in one point, can take on the role of a complete nonparticipant observer, to be observant of the facts other researchers are oblivious to. If otherwise, why bother participating and doing participant observation?

sciences, and at odds with the methods of the natural sciences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994: 249). More precisely, participant observation is understood as a source of interpretations and interpretations are seen as incompatible with causal explanations. If this was the case, then participant observation could not contribute to naturalistic research projects in the study of culture.

In an attempt to answer the first question, in Chapter 2, I will argue that due to the ethnographer's engagement in daily life, the specific epistemic value of participant observation is in enabling well-informed mind-reading that leads to valid and reliable interpretations of human actions.

Additionally, in Chapter 3, I will argue that the general epistemic value of participant observation is in providing interpretations of human actions that are compatible with naturalism in the study of culture because they can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena.

## **CHAPTER 2 – HOW MIND-READING BRINGS EPISTEMIC VALUE TO PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

In this chapter, I argue that the specific epistemic value of participant observation is in improving mind-reading, which in turns leads to reliable interpretations of human actions. In particular, I argue that participant observation enables well-informed mind-reading because the “participation” part of participant observation enables gathering information about the “micro-context” of action that is of high relevance for recovering the mental states at the origin of actions observed. The chapter has two sections. In the first section, I specify my claim: I explain the epistemic value of the knowledge about the micro-context for understanding human action. In the second section, I answer the possible objections and I explain what is the epistemic value of the “participation” part of participant observation.

### ***2.1. The epistemic value of the knowledge of the “micro-context”***

I argue that the epistemic value of participant observation is in enabling the collection of data that allows well-informed mind-reading. I further argue that well-informed mind-reading in turns provides valid and reliable interpretations of human actions that are one of the factors that constitute cultural phenomena.

Mind-reading is a cognitive capacity successfully used in day-to-day interactions whose biologically evolved function is in enabling one to attribute mental states to others to make sense of their behavior. Since mind-reading evolved exactly for the purpose of making sense of others’ behavior, this capacity enables one to provide valid and reliable interpretations and predictions of human actions.

I use the term “mind-reading” to refer to the cognitive process through which people attribute percepts, beliefs, intentions, desires, and emotions to others, without specifying how mind-reading is done, how it develops or what is its evolutionary origin. However, in the remainder

of this thesis, I will consider empathy as an example of the mind-reading capacity. Therefore, hereafter I will use the term “mind-reading” in the most general sense to refer to the ethnographer’s ability to attribute mental states to others.

First question: *what kind of data can be gathered by participant observation that cannot be gathered by other methods?*

By participating, being present, and being engaged in daily activities of the members of the community she studies, the ethnographer puts herself in a privileged position to acquire knowledge about their situation, point of view and what it is like to live their lives. For instance, the ethnographer acquires knowledge of what it is like to take part in the Balinese cockfights; what it is like to be accused by an oracle for using Azande witchcraft on another villager; what it is like to be an adolescent girl living in the island of Ta'u in the Samoan Islands; or, what it is like to be a parent and a child in the matrilineal society of the Trobriands in which the biological parentage is ignored.

The ethnographer is in a privileged position to grasp the other’s point of view because by being engaged and participating in the daily routines of the native people, and living their lives the ethnographer is in a position to know better what are the local constraints, challenges, expectations, misconceptions, and other available information about the locally shared motives, beliefs and desires present in the community that constitute the “micro-context” of specific human actions.

I use the term “micro-context” rather than “context” because the term “context” can refer to aspects of action that are accessible without participant observation. For instance, data about the history of the community, the geographical location, modes of production, and the natality rate all constitute the context of action, if they are relevant to explaining the action at stake. However, what participant observation adds is knowledge about what a member of the community is living at time *t*, in her very specific and local environment.

The elements of the “micro-context” include *mental* elements that involve the locally shared beliefs, desires, ideas, expectations, motivations, and *observable* elements of the very local natural and social environment of an action. For instance, at the time the action took place, the observable elements of the “micro-context” specify, for example, whether it was raining, or whether the air was dry. Or, whether the action took place in the forest or in the streets. If the action took place in the forest, the “micro-context” includes information about whether there were any dangerous animals in the area nearby. Or, if the action took place in the streets, it specifies whether there were people interacting, and if there were any, what is their connection with the person performing the action (are they the person’s family members or her enemies).

Therefore, participant observation enables the ethnographer to collect data about the “micro-context” of specific human actions, so she can better understand the other’s point of view (that is, the beliefs and feelings one holds about the situation in which one finds herself) which enables the ethnographer to provide valid and reliable interpretations of others’ actions. Furthermore, the production of such interpretations, as I will show in Chapter 3, is an essential step towards explaining cultural phenomena.

Second question: *why and how does the knowledge of the “micro-context” of human actions allow valid and reliable interpretations of these actions?*

The knowledge of the “micro-context” of action allows the ethnographer to provide valid and reliable interpretations of human actions because it enables her to recover mental states at the origin of the actions observed.

When the ethnographer arrives in a new culture, she knows little about the mental elements of the “micro-context”, so what she finds especially useful for interpreting others’ actions are the observable elements of the environment. For example, on the first day of her fieldwork, in order to explain whether the person is winking because she has something in her eye or because she has

some underlying intentions, the ethnographer starts to look at the environmental cues: she looks whether there is the presence of wind and dust or whether there are potential addressees of the wink, and if there are, how are they reacting to the wink.

If there is no apparent cause of winking as a way to clean the dust out of one's eye, but there are however people reacting to the wink, the ethnographer concludes that the behavior of the winker is most probably intentional. What are the winker's intentions? Does the winker want to secretly signal his addressees, or he nevertheless wants to be caught to create a whimsy situation and make others laugh? The ethnographer notices that people are smiling and that the situation is playful. She concludes that the winker's intention was to create laughter.

The ethnographer asks new questions. Why did the winker want to make others laugh? The ethnographer starts forming hypotheses about the mental elements of the "micro-context" of action. She assumes that the locally shared conviction is that the desirable way of behaving considers openness and tendency to make jokes, and for this reason, people who are open and bring laughter are liked by other community members. This kind of insight into the mental elements that constitute the "micro-context" of action enables the ethnographer to understand better the winker's action, but also other actions she will encounter during her fieldwork.

The ethnographer interprets the winker's behavior as follows: since the winker believes that if he makes jokes, others will not welcome him with judgment and strange looks, but quite the contrary, the winker winks with an intention to amuse others. He does so because he desires to be liked by people and because he believes that the most efficient way to make people like him is if he makes them laugh.

In an attempt to recover beliefs, the winker holds, to interpret his actions, the ethnographer spontaneously recruits her cognitive ability for mind-reading. She attributes certain beliefs to the winker, so she can make sense of his behavior. Since mind-reading evolved exactly for the purpose

of making sense of others' behavior, this capacity enables the ethnographer to provide accurate interpretations of human action in terms of the underlying mental states, if she holds correct assumptions about the "micro-context" of action. The "micro-context" of action allows more accurate mind-reading because it provides the ethnographer with certain expectations about the content of other minds. In this sense, the knowledge of the "micro-context" of action is of high relevance because it informs the ethnographer's mind-reading capacities.

What if the ethnographer holds the wrong assumptions about the mental elements of the "micro-context" of action? What if she wrongly assumes that the locally shared conviction is that a desirable way of behaving includes openness and humor? In this case, the ethnographer's mistakenly held assumptions that constitute the mental elements of the "micro-context" of action will misinform the ethnographer's mind-reading capacities and disable her to provide accurate interpretations of actions.

After spending some time among the people of the community she studies, the ethnographer is able to say whether she formed the correct or mistaken assumptions about the mental elements of the "micro-context" of action at her first day of fieldwork because, during her stay, she will either notice or not notice that the recurrent patterns of behavior include openness and making jokes.

If she does notice that recurrent patterns of behavior include openness and making jokes, she confirms and maybe enriches her initial assumptions: in this community, the desirable behavior includes openness, humor, and the ability to spontaneously initiate interactions and conversations. Thus, she concludes that her interpretation of the winker's action was accurate.

If the ethnographer does not notice that most people of this community start conversations easily, and in doing so, are laid back, open, and able to make others laugh, she realizes that her initial interpretation of winker's action based on the assumption of what are the desirable ways of

behaving in this community is wrong. She concludes that due to the lack of information about the mental elements of the “micro-context” of action, she misinterpreted the winker’s action, and she provides another interpretation of the wink.

She is able to do so because while she was spending time with the community members (among which was the winker), she was collecting newer information about the “micro-context” of actions. This made her realize that the winker was trying to make others laugh because he is a witty person and people were smiling at him not only because they found the joke funny but out of politeness which is a highly valued trait in this society. Considering that she collected enough information about the “micro-context” of action to state with certainty what the wink meant, the ethnographer finally concludes that her initial assumptions that the locally shared conviction in this community is that the desirable way of behavior include openness and humor was mistaken, and thus, she forms new, more accurate assumptions about the beliefs, ideas, and misconceptions present in this community.

Thus, by participating in everyday life and observing specific human actions for a sufficiently long time, the ethnographer is able to form more accurate assumptions about the mental elements that constitute the “micro-context” of actions because she notices that some beliefs and patterns of behavior are recurrent. This empowers her capacities to “mind-read”, and empowered mind-reading enables her to interpret with greater accuracy and precision the actions of the community members she encounters next.

Finally, the knowledge of the “micro-context” of action, enables the ethnographer to distinguish between actions that recur, preserve over time, and are shared by most members of the community studied (like the winker’s wink in the first case), and those that are specific to a particular situation (like the winker’s wink in the second case). After she abstracts actions and practices shared by most members, she forms hypotheses about whether these recurrent actions



and practices together with the beliefs, desires, and motives underlying them, constitute cultural phenomena.

Therefore, the production of interpretations of human actions should be conceived as a threefold process that includes the following steps:

1. By being present in the same context of action as the members of the community, the ethnographer knows and uses her knowledge of the “micro-context” of actions for interpreting specific action. This act of interpretation is tantamount to mind-reading. The “micro-context” of action includes observable elements of the environment in which any specific action takes place but also the locally shared beliefs, desires, and motives that determine what is considered to be “normal” or “usual” behavior within the community.
2. By participating in daily life for a sufficiently long period, the ethnographer is able to note that some beliefs and patterns of actions are recurrent and shared by most members of the community. She enriches her repertoire of possible means-goal relationships and thus empowers and makes more accurate her mind-reading capacity. She is consequently better able to interpret the actions of the members of the community studied.
3. From such interpretations, the ethnographer is able to identify what is idiosyncratic and to abstract what is shared by many. She can thus make hypotheses about cultural phenomena.

In other words, the production of interpretations of specific human actions, or type 1 knowledge (single situated action), enables the ethnographer to gather more valid and reliable type 2 knowledge (recurrent ideas and practices), which in turn enables her to exercise type 1 inferences better. Finally, the ethnographer’s ability to produce reliable type 2 knowledge, enables her to provide type 3 knowledge (hypotheses about cultural phenomena) which is the final product of participant observation. Therefore, the process of providing valid and reliable interpretations of human actions is a virtuous circle where precision and validity is best achieved as one participates

in daily life.

## **2.2. Answering the possible objections**

First objection: *the knowledge about what it is like to be a tribe member, a pub owner, or a village nurse can be acquired only by observing for a sufficiently long period with a very good telescope that enables one to observe every minute detail, from different spatial, and time perspectives if necessary.*

I agree that in principle this is the case. The knowledge about the other's point of view that is provided by insights into the "micro-context" of human actions can be acquired only by observing. However, I argue that in practice detailed observations cannot be made without being present and following people because there is no such a telescope that will enable one to observe every minute detail from a large distance.

Although I take this answer to provide a sufficient reason for arguing that the ethnographer's engaged perspective is of distinctive epistemic value for social science, since it allows gathering data about minute details that cannot be gathered otherwise, I would like to push my answer a bit further. Namely, I think that the closeness and intimacy of the ethnographer and her informants achieved by the ethnographer's participation in everyday rituals enable the ethnographer to get "the feeling for the people"; to grasp their "inner nature". This aspect of the "participation" part of participant observation is nicely captured in Geertz's ethnography of the Balinese culture.

In his paper "Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight", Geertz's aim was to describe the Balinese culture by looking at how Balinese people behave during cockfights they illegally organized. Geertz begins his paper by explaining that the way Balinese treated him upon his arrival did not deviate from the usual way they treated all foreign people: as if they do not exist. However, after he participated as an audience in a cockfight that was eventually dispersed by police shooting,

the attitude of Balinese towards him changed drastically. Geertz (1972) writes:

“In the midst of the third match, with hundreds of people, including, still transparent, myself and my wife, [...], a truck full of policemen armed with machine guns roared up. Amid great screeching cries of “pulisi! pulisi!” from the crowd, the policemen jumped out, and, springing into the center of the ring, began to swing their guns around like gangsters in a motion picture, though not going so far as actually to fire them. [...] People raced down the road, disappeared head first over walls, scrambled under platforms, folded themselves behind wicker screens, scuttled up coconut trees. [...]

On the established anthropological principle, When in Rome, my wife and I decided, only slightly less instantaneously than everyone else, that the thing to do was run too. We ran down the main village street, northward, away from where we were living. [...]

The next morning the village was a completely different world for us. Not only were we no longer invisible, we were suddenly the center of all attention, the object of a great outpouring of warmth, interest, and, most especially, amusement. Everyone in the village knew we had fled like everyone else. [...] But above all, everyone was extremely pleased and even more surprised that we had not simply “pulled out our papers” (they knew about those too) and asserted our Distinguished Visitor status, but had instead demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our covillagers. (What we had actually demonstrated was our cowardice, but there is fellowship in that too.) [...]

It was the turning point so far as our relationship to the community was concerned, and we were quite literally "in." The whole village opened up to us, probably more than it ever would have otherwise [...], and certainly very much faster. Getting caught, or almost caught, in a vice raid is perhaps not a very generalizable recipe for achieving that mysterious necessity of anthropological field work, rapport, but for me it worked very well. It led to a sudden and unusually complete acceptance into a society extremely difficult for outsiders to penetrate. It gave me the kind of immediate, inside view grasp of an aspect of "peasant mentality" that anthropologists not fortunate enough to flee headlong with their subjects from armed authorities normally do not get. And, perhaps most important of all, for the other things might have come in other ways, it put me very quickly on to a combination emotional explosion, status war, and philosophical drama of central significance to the society whose inner nature I desired to understand.” (p.3–4)

This example nicely shows that although Geertz was in a position to observe people from a very close distance (maybe even from a sufficiently close distance for gathering minute details), only after he was accepted as a fellow villager, he was able to grasp “inner nature” of the Balinese community and “mentality” of the Balinese people.

Therefore, I believe that besides the fact that the “participation” part of participant observation allows the collection of observations that cannot be collected otherwise, the epistemic value of participation is in allowing the ethnographer to get “the feeling for the people” whose culture she is studying; to understand them the way they understand each other. I tend to believe that the closeness and intimacy the ethnographer builds with her informants enables her to go beyond what can be understood only by observing.

Second objection: *contrary to the example provided above, there are cases in which people change their behavior when they know they are being observed, followed, and questioned for the purpose of the study. This is known as the problem of reactivity. If people change their behavior, conducted observations will provide invalid data. In other words, the ethnographer will form the wrong assumptions about the other’s point of view. In return, the knowledge about the “micro-context” of action acquired in the field will be misleading, mind-reading will be ill-informed, and this will disable the ethnographer to produce reliable interpretations of human actions.*

As Bernard (2006) explains, participant observation reduces the problem of reactivity or the problem of people changing their behavior when they know that they are being studied because “[p]resence builds trust. Trust lowers reactivity. Lower reactivity means higher validity of data” (p.354).

The previous example nicely illustrates this aspect of participant observation as well. Namely, after Geertz consented to be chased by the police the same way Balinese were chased, he earned Balinese’s trust. After he earned Balinese trust, they accepted him as their fellow villager, and he ceased to be perceived as a stranger who came to their community to study them. Thus, this example indeed shows that by participating the ethnographer gains trust of the community members, which lowers reactivity of the people studied, or in the above example, absolute non-reactivity that, in a similar manner, disables gathering valid and reliable data.

Similarly, DeWalt (2011) explains that exactly because of this feature of participant observation, this method is, in some cases, “the only viable approach to research”. She continues explaining that the researchers who worked in “deviant subculture” with groups such as drug dealers, bank robbers or gangs often argued that “long-term participation in the setting was the only possible way to gain enough of the trust of participants to carry out research” because the use of more formal methods might have “put off” informants increasing their reactivity (p.12).

Therefore, since there is no magic telescope that enables the ethnographer to observe minute details from a great distance, I argue that the epistemic value of participant observation, and in particular, the “participant” part of participant observation, is in enabling the ethnographer to collect meticulous data about the behaviors of the community members as they occur in their natural setting. The participation component enables the ethnographer to collect minute details because due to her engagement in the everyday life of the community she studies, she is considered by the community members as a part of the natural context; she is no longer an external observer that distorts and disrupts normal routine and creates the problem of reactivity.

Finally, living with others enables the ethnographer to improve her mind-reading capacities because once the ethnographer has herself lived the situation, she is in a better position to understand the actions of others (the danger of attending the cockfights and the excitement that goes with it).

Thus, the epistemic value of the “participation” part of participant observation is in lowering the reactivity of the people studied, so the ethnographer can collect valid and reliable data about minute details that constitute the mental and environmental elements of the “micro-context” of action. This in turn enables the ethnographer to provide accurate interpretations of human actions by recruiting her mind-reading capacities.

Third objection: *reliance on mind-reading capacity is warranted but has its limit. In*

*particular, it means relying on naive psychological assumptions that might not be correct.*

In the explanation of human action that rests on the capacity for mind-reading, one is working within the conceptual framework of naive psychology. Naive psychology is a psychological theory of human behavior represented in our brains that includes the platitudes about the mind people are inclined to endorse in their commonsensical reasoning about the mental states at the origin of the behavior observed. (Ravenscroft, 2019). In other words, by means of mind-reading, naive psychology provides commonsensical explanations and predictions of human behavior in terms of mental states that underlie behavior.

I argue that mind-reading is the ethnographer's scientific tool in the same way a telescope is the astronomer's tool. Further, I claim that the limits of the astronomer's observations are the limits of a telescope in the same way the limits of participant observation are the limits of her capacity for mind-reading. However, I hold that the limits of the astronomer's observations are not the limits of the theories according to which workings of a telescope are adjusted (for example, the law of reflection). Thus, I argue that the limits of participant observation are not the limits of naive psychology.

The limits of the astronomer's observations are not the limits of the law of reflection because the law of reflection and other theories embodied in the workings of a telescope can be improved, enriched, or even replaced by more accurate theories. Thus, I argue that the limits of participant observation are not the limits of naive psychological assumptions embodied in mind-reading because these assumptions can be improved, enriched, or even replaced. Here, cognitive anthropology (that is, the study of human cognition in cultural and cross-cultural context) helps because it allows questioning these naive psychological assumptions in an attempt to improve them or even replace them by hypotheses coming from cognitive science.

In this chapter, I have argued that the epistemic value of participant observation is in

enabling the threefold process by means of which the ethnographer produces interpretations of human actions. The threefold process has three steps: 1. production of interpretations of specific actions by recruiting mind-reading that is enabled by the knowledge of the details of the natural and social environment of action; 2. identification of recurrent ideas and practices that form the cultural context (which itself form elements of the “micro-context”, to which an inexperienced ethnographer is blind); 3. making hypotheses about cultural phenomena.

The ethnographer is in a position to produce valid and reliable interpretations by means of the threefold process because she participates in the culture she studies; thus, participation is essential for reliable mind-reading. However, participation has its own limits. The “pure” participation in which the ethnographer “goes native” and “becomes the phenomena” describes the case in which the ethnographer loses the identity of an investigator and adopts the identity of a full participant in the culture. If the ethnographer goes native, she loses her scientific perspective and analytic interest, which ends with the ethnographer’s inability to present and publish her material as a scientific work (DeWalt, 2011: 22).

Therefore, the final step the ethnographer has to take in order to construct theories about cultural phenomena is to become detached from the object of her study, so she can justify her perspective of a scientist. Only if the ethnographer is able to step back, and to provide detached hypotheses about cultural phenomena, the engaged and detached aspect of participant observation can and should be recognized as a distinctive epistemic advantage of this method.

In short, I have argued that the specific epistemic value of participant observation is improving mind-reading that leads to good interpretations of human actions.

This answers the question raised in Chapter 1 namely, why do we need participant observation when we have naturalistic observations? Since the participation component enables the collection of data about the mental and observable elements of the “micro-context” of action,

this method (by recruiting mind-reading) allows specifying mental states at the origin of actions observed.

By contrast, for the purpose of their study, human behavioral ecologists use naturalistic observations to provide quantitative measurements of the macro aspects of the context of action without specifying its microelements. Therefore, since I presume that reliable mind-reading is empowered by the knowledge of the “micro-context”, naturalistic observations do not enable accurate recovering of mental states at the origin of behaviors and actions observe.

In conclusion, compared to naturalistic observations, by providing the researcher with the insight into the mental and observable elements of the “micro-context” of action which is an essential input for accurate mind-reading, I argue that the added epistemic value of participant observation for social science is in explaining human actions in terms of their underlying mental states.

In the next section, I will argue that the general epistemic value of participant observation is in providing interpretations of human actions that can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena.



## CHAPTER 3 – PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN NATURALIZED CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

In this chapter, I argue that the general epistemic value of participant observation is in producing interpretations of human actions that can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena. As a consequence, I argue that participant observation is of epistemic value for naturalized cultural anthropology. I begin this chapter by specifying the epistemic value of interpretations in hermeneutics. On the basis of these insights I propose what is the proper form of interpretations in cultural anthropology and how these interpretations can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena. I continue by introducing what I think are the proper models of causal explanations in cultural anthropology that amounts to describing *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains*. I end this chapter by arguing against Zahle (2016) and Stueber (2012).

### **3.1. Interpretations as a form of explanation**

I argue that the epistemic value of participant observation is in producing interpretations of human actions, in which actions are explained in terms of the mental states that are causing them. As a consequence, I argue that these interpretations are not opposed to ordinary causal explanations, and as such, can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena.

The claim that interpretations of human actions are a form of explanation in which actions are explained in terms of their mental causes goes against the key assumptions in hermeneutics. In hermeneutics, that is, the methodology of interpretation, interpretations are understood as a form of explanation in which an action is explained by appealing to its meaning rather than to its causes. Consequently, hermeneutic philosophers understood interpretations as opposed to causal explanations.

What makes interpretations methodologically different from causal explanations? In hermeneutics, the act of interpretation, also known as understanding, is twofold: it includes the

psychological act of empathetic understanding and the non-psychological act of linguistic understanding (Stueber, 2012).

### **3.1.1. The psychological understanding of meaning**

The psychological act of empathetic understanding or empathy is the act in which one takes “a first-person-like perspective on another that involves emotional, embodied, or experiential aspect” (Hollan and Throop, 2008: 391). In hermeneutics, empathetic understanding was considered to be the key method for uncovering meaning of human actions, and as such, the key method of research in the human sciences (Robbins and Rumsey, 2008: 416). Empathetic understanding provides interpretations of human actions by uncovering their meaning in terms of the mental states that underlie them.

As Stueber (2012) informs, hermeneutic philosophers such as Droysen or Dilthey argued that the objects of study in the natural and human sciences are substantially different. While the inanimate natural world is driven by causes, human action is filled with meaning (p.17). Since the natural world is driven by rules of nature, natural science should uncover causal relationships in its explanations of natural phenomena. However, since human actions are intelligible, human science should uncover meaning these actions.

Therefore, considering their different goals, that is, to interpret human action by ascribing meaning to it and to explain natural phenomena by uncovering causal regularities that govern them, Droysen (1977) and Dilthey (1961) argued that the natural and human sciences must use different forms of explanations. For this reason, they argued that interpretation is opposed to causal explanation. On the basis of this assumption, they defended anti-naturalism in the human sciences.

Anti-naturalism is a view according to which the methodology of natural science cannot be applied in human science, and vice versa. Here, I understand the term “methodology” in the broadest sense referring to a) forms of explanations and b) research procedures. In this sense, I

presume that for anti-naturalists, it is sufficient to show that either a) or b) applied in natural science cannot be applied in human science, and vice versa, to argue in favor of anti-naturalism. (In subsection 3.3.2., I will argue against Stueber who holds that since empathy is the unique method of the human sciences, the disunity of b) provides support for anti-naturalism. I will claim that despite the disunity of b), a) forms of explanations utilized in natural science can be applied in human science, and this is a sufficient reason to dismiss the disunity of b) as an argument for anti-naturalism.)

As Robbins and Rumsey (2008) explain, from the beginnings of hermeneutics, the tension between two streams of thinking was present. According to one stream to which Droysen and Dilthey belong, research in human science involves understanding of what other people think. For those who accepted this assumption, empathetic understanding was a key research method because it enables one to take the cognitive and emotional perspective of another. However, according to the second, research in human science consists of recovering the meaning of the products of human actions especially written texts, without making any references to the author's mental states (p.416).

The main proponent of hermeneutics in cultural anthropology was Clifford Geertz. Considering the divide of hermeneutical ideas, Geertz was among those who sided with the latter option (Robbins and Rumsey, 2008: 416). In the following, I explain how and why his theorizing departed from the claims of the former, and what consequences this departure had for cultural anthropology. I begin by specifying the act of interpretation as a linguistic activity.

### **3.1.2. The linguistic understanding of meaning**

The act of linguistic understanding of meaning is an interpretative activity that is guided by the hermeneutical circle (Stueber, 2012: 19). The hermeneutical circle is a linguistic maneuver used as means for translating and uncovering the meaning of written texts that are considered to

be the products of meaningful human actions. Utilizing the hermeneutical circle, meaning of texts is uncovered by shifting the understanding between the two interpretative undertakings: from the interpretation of parts of the text (words, sentences) to the interpretation of the whole (a paragraph), and vice versa.

Following hermeneutical principles, Geertz (1973) argued that uncovering the meaning of cultural practices is equivalent to deciphering the text (p. 314). This means that cultural practices are likened to pieces of texts, and thus, the understanding of cultural practices is like trying to read and to understand a manuscript. As foreign and obscure texts were deciphered by shifting the understanding from the meaning of the parts to the meaning of the whole and vice versa, it seems that for Geertz cultural practices can also be understood in the same way, by utilizing the interpretative activity guided by the hermeneutical circle, which implies shifting the understanding from the meaning of human actions (parts) to the meaning of the cultural practices (the whole), and vice versa (see Geertz, 1973).

One of the most salient assumptions of Geertz's theorizing about culture is that culture is a web of meanings, and meaning is public (p.314). Consequently, Geertz claimed that culture is public: "it does not exist in someone's head" (p.314). I specify two consequences Geertz derived from his claims about the meaning of culture.

First, Geertz argued that the epistemic value of participant observation is in producing thick descriptions, that is, interpretations of human actions – and cultural phenomena these actions embody – that are likened to pieces of text whose meaning has to be uncovered for them to be explained. Since meaning is public, Geertz argued that the meaning of human actions can be uncovered by looking at whether specific actions are in accordance with socially established public code (p.321) Thus, for Geertz, the epistemic value of participant observation is in producing thick descriptions in which the meaning of cultural practices and other cultural phenomena is recovered

without making any references to the psychological aspects of one's actions in which these phenomena are embodied.

Second, since meaning is outside the heads of people, the ethnographer's empathetic abilities are not the foundation upon which she builds her understanding of a particular culture. Thus, Geertz concluded: the ethnographer does not need to recruit empathy for uncovering meaning of human actions and practices because the psychological aspects of actions and practices uncovered by means of empathy do not provide meaning. For this reason, Geertz neglected the importance of empathetic understanding for recovering meaning, and due to his influence, empathy was not recognized as a research method in cultural anthropology (Hollan and Throop, 2008: 388).

Contrary to Geertz's assumptions about the nature of meaning, the cognitive revolution showed that meaning is "in the head", so the search for the meaning of human actions should include the search for the psychological aspects of these actions because actions like words get their meaning from the mental states that underlie them.

Geertz endorsed the assumptions about the nature of meaning from the work of Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who were two of the main proponents of logical behaviorism, which is a philosophical theory concerned with the meaning of terms that refer to mental states – mental terms.

According to Ryle (1949), there is nothing more to mental states than behavior; beliefs, desires, intentions, and all other mental states are behavior and behavioral disposition. This implies that every statement about mental states can be translated into a statement about behavior without loss of meaning. In a similar vein, Wittgenstein (1953) claimed that meaning of mental terms should be uncovered by referring to what is public, and as such, intersubjectively accessible

(behavior and environmental cues, or in Geertz's terms, public code) rather than to what is private and accessible to only one person (mental states).

The overall conclusion of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning (relevant for what is being discussed here) is that the meaning of mental terms is outside people's heads because only if meanings are intersubjectively accessible, the possibility of communication can be explained. If otherwise: if words got their meaning from the private mental content, accessible only to the holder of that content, communication would be impossible because others with whom that person communicates would have no insight into the meanings of the spoken words.

Therefore, as Chomsky (2000) explains, in externalist theories of meaning, to which Wittgenstein's theory belongs, meaning is externally determined by the two kinds of factors: features of the real world and, in Geertz's terms, public code that prescribes norms of communities (p.148).

Noam Chomsky however reached opposite conclusions concerning the nature of meaning. His research was in the field of linguistics where he investigated language acquisition. What he found perplexing is how it is possible that with the limited input of words and sentences coming from "outside" due to children's interactions with, and reinforcements from the environment, children are able to produce, and with remarkable ease, an unlimited output of new and original sentences. Chomsky concluded that there must be certain innate structures common to all languages that justify the richness of output comparing it to the poverty of stimuli or input. He called these inborn structures language acquisition devices or universal grammar.

Chomsky's conclusions about language acquisition were generalized and applied to the existing discussions in philosophy, one of them being about the nature of meaning. For example, contrary to Ryle's assumptions that there is nothing more to mind than behavior, Chomsky's showed that there is something in the mind and that the content of the mind is another factor that

determines behavior because it seems that behavior and human actions such as speech surpass the limitations imposed by the outside factors.

Furthermore, Chomsky provided reasons for arguing against Wittgenstein's semantic externalism, according to which mental terms get their meanings from outside factors. Chomsky showed that since there is something in the mind, mental states rather than the features of the real world or public code are the objects of reference of mental terms.

Thus, besides public things, mental states can also be one of the constituents of meaning. This implies that since human actions are likened to pieces of text, and pieces of text partially get their meaning from the mental content, human actions partially get their meaning from the mental content as well. Therefore, contrary to what Geertz thought, the cognitive revolution showed that meaning, and culture as a web of meanings, is "in the head". As a consequence, it provided convincing reasons to abandon Geertz's assumptions about the epistemic value of participant observation and his attitudes towards the role of empathy in interpretation.

First, since the cognitive revolution showed the relevance of the mental content for recovering the meaning of human actions, participant observation must provide interpretations of human actions that appeal to mental states that underlie these actions because they provide meaning to them. However, such interpretations are not thick descriptions because thick descriptions recover meaning without making any references to what is inside someone's head.

Second, since participant observation should aim to uncover meaning of human actions in terms of underlying mental states, the ethnographer's ability for empathy is of epistemic value for this method because by means of empathy the ethnographer can attribute beliefs, motives, desires, and feelings to others. Thus, contrary to Geertz who neglected the importance of empathy in anthropological research, the cognitive revolution showed that hermeneutical philosophers such

as Droysen or Dilthey rightly emphasized the epistemic relevance of empathetic understanding for the human sciences.

Hermeneutic philosopher however argued that the meaning of human actions is provided by specifying underlying mental states that should be understood as reasons for actions, and not causes of actions. In addition, they argued that causes and reasons are different types of things because causal explanations that appeal to causes are opposed to interpretations that appeal to reasons. However, I argue that in interpretations produced by well-informed, and thus, reliable mind-reading capacities, an action is explained in terms of the underlying mental states that are the action's causes.

Donald Davidson (1963) famously argued for the common-sense position that interpretations are a type of ordinary causal explanations. He begins his argument by claiming that if someone does something for a reason, one can be characterized as having certain pro attitudes (desires, wantings, urges, moral views, aesthetic principles, public and private goals, social conventions) towards the action of a certain kind, and believing (knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering) that the action of a certain kind is worth performing because by performing that action one's pro attitudes will be satisfied (p.685).

Davidson argues that giving the *primary reason* why someone did something is a matter of naming either the pro attitude or the related belief or both (p.685). For example, every day when she returns from school, Anna puts the rest of her school lunch money in her piggy bank. Why? Because she wants to buy a trampoline and because she believes that if she leaves aside a certain amount of money every day, she will eventually collect enough money to buy it.

Furthermore, Davidson argues that the primary reason for an action is the action's cause (p.686). He explains that the main reasons why it was argued differently, namely that causes and



reasons are different types of things is because the explanation of an action in terms of its reasons, that is, interpretation differs from a causal explanation.

Davidson defines interpretation as a new description of an action that explains the action by providing reasons that place the action in a wider social, economic, linguistic context (p.692). For example, “‘James went to church with the intention of pleasing his mother’ yields a new, and fuller, description of the action described in ‘James went to church’” (p.690). Davidson explains that two conclusions are drawn from this claim that do not follow.

He argues that if we assume that a) giving reasons explains the action by providing a redescription of the action in terms of the wider context in which the action takes place and b) causes and effects are separate events, it does not follow from a) and b) that reasons are not causes. Davidson provides two reasons for his claim. First, he argues that events are often redescribed in terms of their causes in the same way actions are redescribed in terms of their reasons (p.691).

Second, as Davidson explains, a person can have a reason for an action, and perform that action, and yet the reasons she holds for performing the action are not the reasons why she did it (p.691). For example, although I have a reason to turn on the light (because I want to), it is not definite that this reason is the reason why I turned on the light; it might be that I turned on the light from a different reason (because I tripped and fell on the switch).

Therefore, just as causes are separate from effects, reasons are separate from actions. This is why the claim that “I want to turn on the light” can be used to give a reason why the claim “I turned on the light” is true. (p.688). Thus, reasons do not merely redescribe an action; they explain why it happened (the action happened *because* of the agent’s pro attitudes towards the action and his belief that if he performs the action, his pro attitudes will be satisfied).

Finally, Davidson argues that interpretations are not opposed to causal explanations because first reasons are separate from actions in the same way causes are separate from effects, and second, events can be redescribed in terms of their causes in the same way actions are redescribed in terms of their reasons. Further, he argues that the way how an action can be explained is by placing the action in the context of its cause, and thus, redescribing it in terms of its causes that are the action's primary reasons.

Therefore, primary reasons are mental causes of actions. So, in order to explain why an action happened, we need to know the primary reasons of a person who performed the action. In other words, we have to recover mental causes of her action, which we are able to do because we are endowed with the ability to "mind-read".

Since interpretations are not opposed to causal explanations, and reasons are not different from causes, I argue that interpretations, in which actions are explained in terms of their mental causes (by relying on informed mind-reading), can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena. As a consequence, I argue that the epistemic value of participant observation, in such a naturalistic framework of cultural anthropology, is in providing such interpretations. The question I answer next is: what is the form of explanation in which cultural phenomena are causally explained?

### **3.2. The epidemiological models of explanation**

Epidemiological models of explanation seek to uncover causal mechanisms that determine cultural phenomena. Sperber (1985) defines cultural phenomena as *long-lasting and widely distributed cultural representations* (p.74). Such representations are a complex of causally connected representations of two different kinds: *mental representations* and *public productions*.

Mental representations are "biological states or events in individuals' bodies" such as memories, beliefs, or intentions and public productions are "any kind of objects in the

environment that humans can produce and perceive’: bodily movements, utterances, written symbols, works of art, tools, etc.” (Heintz, 2007: 246).

In other words, mental representations exist inside people's heads, whereas public productions exist in the environment, and as such are accessible to more than one user. Mental representations and public productions are tokens of material things. For instance, mental representation can be an internal psychological state whereas an example of a public production is a written sign that says “Smoking forbidden”.

In what way cultural phenomena ought to be understood as long-lasting and widely distributed cultural representations? For example, a myth is a cultural representation that is, according to Sperber (1996) usually presented in its canonical version as an abstraction of its different versions that exist in a culture (p.27). However, in epidemiological models of explanation, a myth is defined as a long-lasting, widely distributed cultural representation understood as a causal chain linking various mental and public versions of the myth (Sperber, 1996: 27). Causal chains that represent cultural representations are called *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains* that are formed from *Social Cognitive Causal Chains* that serve as an extension of *Cognitive Causal Chains* (Heintz, 2007: 246).

*Cognitive Causal Chain* is a chain where each causal connection stands for a semantic relationship between two mental objects that have propositional properties. A myth that I am reconstructing in my head is a *Cognitive Causal Chain*, which consists of many mental representations connected together forming a story stored in my memory.

If I am uncertain about the content of the myth, I seek help from my sister. In an attempt to reconstruct the myth together, my and my sister’s memory of the story are connected into an acoustic narrative, in which my mental representations form a causal relationship with her mental representations, producing a new causal chain, that is, *Social Cognitive Causal Chain*, which apart

from our mental representations of the myth can include public productions of it in the video, audio, written, or any other intersubjectively observable form that exists in the environment.

Finally, *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains* are *Social Cognitive Causal Chains* that stabilize cultural items. This means that mental representations and public productions that form *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains* have been widely distributed across the population and transmitted from one generation to another, which made them persevere over time. Cultural phenomena that are understood as cultural representations defined in terms of causal chains, in which causes and effects are instances of material things, represents a new form of naturalism in cultural anthropology.

The epistemic value of participant observation for such a naturalistic conception of cultural phenomena, and culture in general, is in allowing zooming on some events of *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains*. In particular, it allows describing cognitive or psychological aspects of these chains because since it allows reliable mind-reading, it allows recovering mental representations that are one of the tokens of *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains*.

Assuming that causal explanations are of epistemic value and that naturalism can give causal explanations, I argue that interpretations of human action that appeal to meaning of actions in terms of their mental causes can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena. Since participant observation allows specifying mental constituents (by relying on informed mind-reading) of cultural phenomena, I argue that participant observation is of value for naturalism and naturalized cultural anthropology.

### **3.3. Answering the possible objections**

Two of the most serious objections to the claims I have put forward in the previous chapters can be found in Zahle (2016) and Stueber (2012). Zahle's argument attacks the main claim of Chapter 2, that is, the specific epistemic value of participant observation is in improving mind-

reading that leads to good interpretations. Stueber's argument attacks the main claim of Chapter 3, that is, since the general epistemic value of participant observation is in providing interpretations of human actions that can be integrated into causal explanations of cultural phenomena, participant observation is of epistemic value in a naturalistic framework of cultural anthropology. I start with Zahle's argument.

### **3.3.1. The argument from tacit normativity**

In her paper, Zahle (2016) claims that the epistemic value of participant observation is in enabling the acquisition of knowledge about social norms. Social norms such as you should shake hands when greeting, you should start eating only if everyone has joined the table, or you should give preference to elders, pregnant ladies, and children, describe the appropriate and inappropriate ways of acting in a community. She explains that the important feature of these norms is that they are tacit, which means that individuals are often unable to state the circumstances under which certain behavior is appropriate or inappropriate, and exactly because of this feature of social norms participant observation is useful when it comes to their study (p.4).

Zahle argues against the view according to which the claim A: "when studying social norms by way of participant observation, the ethnographer makes indispensable use of a distinctively social scientific method, that is, empathy" provides an argument for anti-naturalism. She argues that empathy is not recruited in participant observation when studying social norms, and thus, the claim A should be rejected as an argument for anti-naturalism<sup>2</sup>.

Zahle claims that the ethnographer learns about social norms by observing expressions of approval and disapproval of certain actions because those expressions are suggestive of social norms that exist in a society (p.4). To support her claim, she gives an example of Ben and Amy,

---

<sup>2</sup> Zahle states that even though in the existing literature empathy is presented as a method distinct for the human sciences, for the purpose of her argument, she presents those points as applied to the social sciences, and thus, she finds the distinction between human and social science irrelevant for the claim she is making. Similarly, in the rest of this essay, I use the terms "human science" and "social science" interchangeably.

in which Ben's hitting of Amy is seen as an expression of his disapproval of Amy's previous actions.

In order to learn about social norms, Zahle argues, the ethnographer does not have to look for the reasons of why Ben disapproved of Amy's actions; the ethnographer has to pay attention to Ben's bodily movements and the situations in which his and Amy's actions took place while drawing on her knowledge of the relevant conventions for expressing approval and disapproval that exist in Ben's and Amy's society (p.10).

Furthermore, Zahle explains that even in the cases in which the ethnographer is not familiar with the conventions for expressing approval and disapproval or where an individual expresses approval or disapproval in ways that are not conventional, the ethnographer does not need to grasp individual's reasons in order to find out about social norms. In these cases, all that the ethnographer has to do is to rely on other observations she gathered while doing participant observation because those observations will inform her how to better understand whether the events, she is observing, are instances of appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving that are suggestive of social norms (p.11).

Finally, she concludes that since the ethnographer does not need to grasp the individuals' reasons for finding out about social norms, she does not make indispensable use of empathy when studying norms by way of participant observation (p.11). Therefore, she argues that the claim A that presupposes that the disunity of research procedures is an argument for anti-naturalism should be rejected as an argument for anti-naturalism because there is no disunity of research procedures – methods deployed in participant observation for studying social norms are used in natural science as well (p.11).

Bloch (1990) explains that it was argued that culture is inseparable from language, and that all cultural knowledge is language-like. Consequently, it was argued that culture is thought and

transmitted verbally (p.184). However, since many social norms, as Zahle rightly states, are tacit, which means that individuals cannot express them in language although they act upon them, some aspects of culture however are not thought and transmitted through language.

In the study of culture, for this reason, interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and all other methods that rely on verbal answers are proven to be at best insufficient, but often highly problematic and distorted (Fiske, 1996). In contrast, participant observation gains new epistemic value because, according to Fiske (1996), since the ethnographer participates in the culture she studies, she is in a privileged position to learn the culture the way her informants do: by participating, observing and imitating.

Therefore, Zahle rightly asserts that considering the tacit aspects of culture, participant observation is a method particularly useful in the study of social norms. Further, since norms are tacit, non-verbal behavior such as expressing approval and disapproval is indeed valuable for learning about norms because tacit aspects of a culture are embodied in behavior, and as such, they are thought and transmitted, as Fiske explains, not by means of a language but by participating, observing and imitating.

For example, a man who has moved to another culture goes to a local tavern. To fit in, he looks at how other people behave. In particular, he looks whether they are loud and aggressive and drink a lot, or are they are quiet and restrained in their conversations. He looks at how they behave because the man himself implicitly knows that these types of behavior suggest what are the social norms in this community. In other words, behavior in a tavern is suggestive of what this community considers to be a desirable way of behavior in a tavern and life. So, the man participates in a tavern nightlife, observes how people behave, what actions they approve or disapprove (for instance, they disapprove bringing women in taverns) and imitates their behavior. In this way, he learns about social norms.

Zahle argues that in order to learn about the norms that exist in a community, the ethnographer, like the newcomer, needs to observe the expressions of approval and disapproval because, as she rightly acknowledges, these actions are suggestive of social norms. However, I find the ethnographer and the newcomer different in the following way:

In order to learn how to behave in accordance with social norms, the man in a tavern does not need to reflect upon these norms. In other words, he does not need to make the content of norms explicit. He learns about the norms implicitly by looking at the people's expressions of approval and disapproval. For example, to know that he should not bring his wife in a tavern, the man does not need to make explicit the belief tavern people hold that a tavern is no place for a woman; it is sufficient for him to see how they disapproved when another man brought his wife last night.

Unlike the newcomer, the ethnographer tries to make the content of social norms explicit. She wants to make explicit what these norms impose as appropriate and inappropriate rather than to just act upon them. In order to do so, it is not sufficient for her to observe the expressions of approval and disapproval, she must interpret these actions.

For example, in order to specify that social norms in this community impose that women should not go to taverns, she observes the expressions of tavern men's disapproval when a woman shows up, and then, to make explicit the social norm that guides tavern men's expressions of disapproval, she must interpret these expressions, and to do so, she must ascribe the belief to them that a tavern is a no place for a woman; thus, she must mind-read. In this way, the ethnographer finds out social norms by looking at how these norms, as mental representations, guide behavior.

Therefore, since Zahle does not recognize the relevance of uncovering the mental states underlying the actions and that are shaped by social norms, and thus, are suggestive of them, I



argue that she fails to show in which way participant observation is used for learning about the tacit normativity.

Participant observation enables the ethnographer to acquire the knowledge about the tacit normativity because, due to her privileged position in the community she studies, the ethnographer can collect the knowledge about the “micro-context” of action which, by recruiting informed mind-reading, enables her to zoom on and uncover the cognitive aspects of social norms. Thus, this method enables the ethnographer to find out social norms by understanding the role they have, as mental representations, in guiding actions.

As a consequence, I do not reject the claim A: I argue that empathy, as an example of a mind-reading process, is indispensably used when studying social norms by way of participant observation. However, I do not consider this claim to be an argument that favors anti-naturalism. On the contrary, I argue that participant observation has epistemic value for naturalized cultural anthropology. I present my reasons next.

### **3.3.2. The argument from anti-naturalism**

In his paper, Stueber (2012) argues that empathy is a distinctively social scientific method because its “epistemically central role [is] solely in understanding rational agency in the human sciences” (p.29). On the basis of this assumption and the distinction between explanation and interpretation, he constructs his argument for anti-naturalism.

He begins by providing an overview of the anti-naturalistic argument put forward by hermeneutical philosophers who argued that considering the nature of natural and social phenomena, causal explanations are utilized in natural science and interpretations are utilized in human science. Further, they held that causal explanations and interpretations are distinct types of explanations, and thus, they concluded that the methodology of human science cannot be applied in natural science, and vice versa.

Stueber argues that the difference between causal explanation and interpretation does not suffice as an argument for anti-naturalism because considering the holistic nature of our knowledge about the natural world, interpretations, as a form of explanation, are present in the natural sciences as well (p.22).

He states however that the distinction between interpretations and causal explanations can be used as an argument for anti-naturalism if we do not fail to notice that there are two types of interpretations: interpretations produced by the psychological act of empathetic understanding and interpretations produced by the non-psychological act of linguistic understanding, and that the former (empathy) rather than the latter (linguistic understanding) is a research method used only for explaining the human, and therefore, it does not exist in sciences that deal with the natural (p.18).

Therefore, Stueber holds that the human sciences can be methodologically distinguished from the natural sciences, only if the distinction between two types of research procedures and interpretations they produce is been rightly acknowledged.

Even if we grant that empathy is not used as a research method in the natural sciences (which is not an obvious claim given that there are cases in natural science that prove otherwise<sup>3</sup>), I argue that the apparent disunity of research procedures does not provide a sufficient reason for arguing in favor of anti-naturalism because although empathy is recruited when trying to explain human actions, and not when trying to explain the position of planets, it does not follow that the explanations this method provides can be utilized solely in social science. In other words, I claim

---

<sup>3</sup> Barbara McClintock was a geneticist famous for her discovery of the ability of genes to change positions on chromosomes. McClintock claims that her discovery is a result of a special thought process she herself calls "integration" (Barker and Kitcher, 2014: 112). Barker and Kitcher (2014) write: "McClintock seems to have been able to achieve results others could have not, by means she could not always articulate. [...] She was able to track genetic interaction in this context by means of an intense and fine-grained familiarity with her plants and her expectational skill with the microscope: In interviews late in life she spoke compellingly about the importance of having "feeling for the organism"; of knowing "the whole story" of each plant, from pollination to maturity" (p.111).

that although the natural and human sciences utilize distinct research procedures, they do not necessarily utilize distinct types of explanations.

I argue that since by recruiting well-informed mind-reading, one is able to produce interpretations of human action in terms of their mental causes, interpretations produced in that way are not opposed to ordinary causal explanations. Thus, despite the disunity of research procedures, causal explanation can be applied in the human sciences, and cultural anthropology. As a consequence, participant observation, as a method that makes indispensable use of mind-reading capacities to produce interpretations of human actions by uncovering their mental causes, is compatible with naturalism in the study of culture.

## CONCLUSION

I argued that the specific epistemic value of participant observation is in enabling the ethnographer to acquire information about the “micro-context” of human action which allows well-informed mind-reading. Further, I argued that the knowledge of the “micro-context” informs the ethnographer’s mind-reading capacities because it provides her with certain expectations about the content of other minds. As a consequence, I claimed that well-informed mind-reading provides valid and reliable interpretations of human actions.

Furthermore, I claimed that the general epistemic value of participant observation is in producing interpretations of human actions in which the meaning of actions is given in terms of their mental causes. I showed that in the mainstream discussions this claim was rejected: it was argued that interpretations explain human actions by appealing to their meaning in terms of mental states that are reasons for rather than causes of actions. However, I presented arguments why interpretations ought to be understood as ordinary causal explanations, and consequently, why reasons for action ought to be seen as identical to causes of action.

Moreover, I introduced the epidemiological models of explanation that amounts to describing *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chains* which represent cultural phenomena as a causal chain of mental representations and public productions. As a consequence, I argued that naturalism in the study of culture is a research program that can strongly benefit from participant observation, which identifies which type of mental states participate to the *Cultural Cognitive Causal Chain*.

I presented Zahle’s argument that the epistemic value of participant observation is in providing explanations of social norms. I stated that although Zahle rightly recognizes that participant observation is epistemically valuable in the study of social norms, she fails to show why this method in particular is of value when explaining the tacit normativity.

Moreover, I argued against Stueber who defends anti-naturalism on the basis of the claim that empathy is a distinctively social scientific method. I claimed that although Stueber rightly recognizes the epistemic value of the mind-reading capacities (in particular, empathy) in the human sciences, he fails to see that having distinct research procedures is not a sufficient reason for arguing against naturalism in the human and social sciences.

In this thesis, I have dealt only with the aspects of participant observation that have added epistemic value in cultural anthropology. However, what remains to be explained is what are the limits of this method.

In Chapter 2 I used the comparison between interviews, questionnaires, naturalistic observations, and participant observation to indicate that compared with these methods, participant observation has some added epistemic value. However, this comparison could also lead one to observe all the good things these methods have that participant observation has not. For example, these methods allow for quantitative, rigorous hypothesis testing, for which participant observation might not be well designed.

Also, if one accepts the arguments put forward in this thesis, the aspect of participant observation that needs to be analyzed and evaluated in detail is how ethnographies should be written. Considering that I emphasized the high relevance of the knowledge of the “micro-context” for the study of cultural practices, I am inclined to argue that field notes and ethnographies should realistically and in rich details describe mental and observable elements of the “micro context” and with respect to these elements to provide interpretations of human actions. What I think is the advantage of this was of taking field notes and presenting data about the context of action is that it allows the reader to form her own hypotheses about how the documented actions ought to be interpreted – this can be a way of how the reader can test the ethnographer’s hypotheses about why

people living in a particular culture behave the way they do. In other words, my hypotheses could be furthered by empirical work, leading to a cognitive anthropology of anthropology.

## REFERENCES

- Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (1994). Ethnography and participant observation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. (pp. 248-261). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barker, G. & Kitcher, P. (2014). *Philosophy of science: a new introduction*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Bernard, R.H. (2006). *Research methods in anthropology*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Bloch, M. (1990). Language, anthropology, and cognitive science. *Man* (N.S.) 26: 183–198.
- Chomsky, N. (2000). *New horizons in the study of language and mind*. UK: Cambridge University Press
- DeWalt, M. K., & DeWalt, R. B. (2011). *Participant observation: a guide for fieldworkers*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Dilthey, W. (1961). *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 15). Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Droysen, J. G. (1977). *Historik*. Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog.
- Fiske, A. P. (1996). Learning a culture the way informants do: observing, imitating, and participating. Unpublished manuscript.
- Geertz, C. (1972). Deep play: notes on Balinese cockfights. *Daedalus* 101(1): 1–37.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick descriptions: toward an interpretative theory of culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (pp. 3–30). New York: Basic Books.
- Heintz, C. (2007). Institutions as mechanisms of cultural evolution: Prospects of the epidemiological approach. *Biological Theory* 2(3): 244–249.
- Hollan, D., & Throop, C. J. (2008). Whatever happened to empathy? *Ethos* 36(4): 385–401.
- Nettle, D. (2011). Behavior of parents and children in two contrasting urban neighborhoods: an observational study. *J Ethol* 30: 109–116.
- Nettle at all. (2013). Human behavioral ecology: current research and future prospects. *Behavioral Ecology* 24(5): 1031–1040.
- Ravenscroft, I. (2019). Folk psychology as a theory. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/folkpsych-theory/>.
- Risjord, M. (2006). Ethnography and culture. In S. Turner and M. Risjord (Eds.), *Handbook of philosophy of anthropology and sociology* (pp. 399–428). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

- Robbins, J., & Rumsey, A. (2008). Introduction: cultural and linguistic anthropology and the opacity of other minds. *Anthropological Quarterly* 81(2): 407–420.
- Ryle, G. (1949). *The concept of mind*. London: Hutchinson.
- Schnegg, M. (2015). Epistemology: the nature and validation of anthropological knowledge. In H. R. Bernard and C. Gravlee (Eds.), *Handbook of methods in cultural anthropology* (pp. 21–53). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Sperber, D. (1996). How to be a true materialist in anthropology. In *Explaining culture: A naturalistic approach* (pp. 9–31). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sperber, D. (1985). Anthropology and psychology: towards an epidemiology of representations. *Man* 20 (1): 73–89.
- Spradley, P. J. (1980). *Participant observation*. US: Waveland Press.
- Stueber, R. K. (2012). Understanding versus explanation? How to think about the distinction between the human and the natural sciences. *Inquiry* 55(1): 17–32.
- Zahle, J. (2016). Methodological anti-naturalism, norms, and participant observation. In M. Risjord (Ed.), *Normativity and Naturalism in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (pp. 1–19). London: Routledge Publisher.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. (G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.