



A Student's Guide to Reading and Writing in Social Anthropology



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V. An Annotated Paper

To illustrate writing strategies that you can practice in your own essays, we provide here a copiously marked up example of a successful essay that was submitted for a course taught by Smita Lahiri. The assignment was a fairly nebulous one: to “address on or more key respects in which classic practices of ethnography have been critically scrutinized and reoriented since the 1980’s.” James Herron did the annotations.

Silent Voices, Loud Voices:

A Comparison of Ethnographical Treatments of Verbatim Accounts from Informants

[1] When anybody, whether they are a layperson or ethnographer, enters a strange culture and wants to get a feel for it, they have three main ways to go about doing this. One is to simply observe what is going on, one is to join in what is going on, and one is to talk with members of the group about what is going on. Because the actions and interactions of a new group can be difficult to understand, the third way of learning about a culture – talking about it with people who understand it – is especially useful. For this reason, whether it appears in ethnographies or not, conversations with informants are an important part of fieldwork; the voices of these people, the very words they say, constitute a significant portion of the base of observations upon which ethnographies are constructed. Though most, if not all, ethnographies have this in common, there is considerable variability in how these voices are used and presented (or not presented) amongst ethnographic works. This essay will focus on Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and Laura Ring's *Zenana* (2006). It will explore the presence of informant voices in the two texts, and attempt to explain the different priorities of ethnographic construction and effect that are implicit in the choices each ethnographer makes by situating the two works in their historical context within the field of anthropology.

Comment: MOTIVE AND COMPARATIVE FRAME — In the opening passage the writer accomplishes two crucial moves. First, she establishes the *importance* of her topic: ethnographic research, whatever else it might involve, always relies on conversations with informants. So how an ethnographer presents the voices of his or her informants will be an important element in any ethnographic text.

Anthropological essays (and really any academic essay) need to make a case to the reader that the topic, theme, or problem under consideration in the essay is somehow interesting or important. One cannot necessarily expect the reader to glean this importance or interest without some guidance. Constructing 'the motive' of the essay in this way usually takes place within the first few paragraphs.

Second, the writer establishes a common ground or axis of comparison for the two texts she will contrast in the essay, a necessary move for any comparative essay.

Comment: INITIAL PUZZLE OR PROBLEMATIC — Here the writer introduces the *basic problem or puzzle* that will be addressed in the essay, a problem that will be sketched out more fully as the argument unfolds. The puzzle, in this case, is that while all ethnographies rely on the verbal testimonies of informants, they can differ markedly (as they do in the present instance) with respect to the extent such informant 'voices' are present within the ethnographic narrative. The paper will seek to account for such differences in the texts of Mead and Ring.

Comment: THESIS OR META-THESIS — Here we have the primary claim or thesis of the essay, although it's not a specific claim at all but a *meta-thesis*. That is, the writer indicates the *kind* of argument or explanation she will advance (that the differences between the two texts can be accounted for by "situating the two works in their historical context within the field of anthropology"). When can or should a writer use a meta-thesis in place of a thesis? Generally speaking a meta-thesis is used when (1) the actual claim is complex or multidimensional such that it cannot be easily rendered in a few sentences; (2) the specific claim or claims won't really be intelligible until certain background information is in place (theoretical concepts, facts, other information). In such instances the meta-thesis often stands in for a specific claim.

[2] In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the rarity of direct quotes from Mead's informants is striking. Instead, the ethnographer paraphrases the life stories told by the girls she interviews; in lieu of her young female informants' exact words, Mead gives her interpretation of them. In the chapter "Experience of the Average Girl," readers today might expect to find an abundance of quotes from the girls in the village speaking of their experiences. Rather, the chapter is full of Mead's summaries of these experiences: "Tolu...was a little weary after three years of casual adventures and professed herself willing to marry" (151), "[Lotu] reconciled her church membership and her deviation from chastity by the tranquil reflection that she would have married had it been possible, and her sin rested lightly upon her" (154), and many more such sentences. These rephrasings might be an accurate interpretation of the girls' words, but they are not snapshots of what the girls actually said about their experiences.

Comment: FURTHER MOTIVATION — These passages, by highlighting a surprising feature of Mead's text, further establish the interest of the problem to be explored by the paper.

[3] Though there are perhaps a dozen instances in which Mead backs up a statement about Samoan culture with the words of a specific Samoan native, most of these quotes come from men – not the girls who are the focus of her study and the book. If Mead were male, we might attribute this gender imbalance in the direct quotations she chooses to use to the difficulty or awkwardness inherent in inter-gender conversations between the ethnographer and his subjects. However, Mead states that she chose to focus on female adolescents for the reason that she "could hope for greater intimacy in working with girls rather than with boys". A more likely explanation for

Comment: PARAGRAPH 2: OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT PRESENTED WITH LITTLE INTERPRETATION — This may seem like a rather uneventful paragraph, but in fact it accomplishes something basic and important. By presenting a straightforward description of Mead's rendering of informant testimony along with a few well-chosen quotes that illustrate this rendering, the writer grounds her initial characterization of Mead's ethnography in specific textual evidence. Notice how the writer does not yet try to *interpret* or make sense of Mead's text at this point. Such interpretive restraint is important as well, since the reader needs to have an *independent sense* of what the writer will analyze before the writer begins her analysis. This *separation of description and interpretation* (however formal) gives the reader a better capacity to arrive at his or her own reading of the evidence, a reading which may or may not align with that of the writer.

the lack of quotations from the girls whose lives form the support for Mead's argument about adolescence is that, consciously or unconsciously, the ethnographer has decided to withhold them from her finished product despite having been privy to many quotable narratives from the girls in her study group.

[4] Mead does include many exact phrases that are used often to describe the lives of adolescent girls in the villages – examples are *tautala laititi* (“presuming above one’s age) and *Laititi a’u* (I am but young), both of which phrases appear many times throughout the text. The care Mead takes to include the Samoan words as well as the English in these instances suggests that she has done enough research to include specific, concrete pieces of verbal evidence to augment her more general descriptions in culture, and also that she deems linguistic accuracy important to the value of her ethnography. However, these words are seldom directly attributed to any specific member of the village. Instead, Mead attributes them to Samoans in general: “a Samoan would say ‘X’”, or “they say ‘X.’” Reluctance to link individuals to their words is also apparent in the first appendix, where Mead presents “literal translations from dictated texts” of adolescent girls’ descriptions of their household members -- the only prominent inclusion of words spoken these girls. It is not a paraphrasing, but it is not at all personal. The names of the girls who give the description are omitted, making it impossible to place the descriptions within the context of any one girl’s personality and life story. The adolescent girls are treated a sort of

homogenously mixed soup of informants for this portion of the appendix – the descriptions could come from any or all of them. Though the work identifies many of the girls in the group by name and tells each girl’s story connected with her name, the lack of a voice attributed to any of them means that these “characters” are not very well developed.

[5] One of the most dramatic ways in which Ring’s *Zenana* differs from *Coming of Age in Samoa* is its high content of direct quotations from Ring’s neighbors and informants. In chronicling the experiences of women in her apartment building, Ring often translates her informants’ stories of past events and their emotional divulgements and provides them, verbatim, within the text. Aliya’s recounting of an experience with an Eve-teaser (111) and Ruhi’s confession of ambivalence toward her father-in-law (84) are included as blocks with different spacing and font from Ring’s discussion of the lives of the women in her building. Here, in contrast with Mead’s treatment of her subjects’ words as implicit within her own ethnographic description, the blocked transcriptions of Ring’s neighbors’ narratives are made to stand out from Ring’s commentary. Indeed, verbatim quotations have such central importance to Ring’s style of ethnography that they inform the general structure of the book. Zubaida’s choice of the word “tension” (61) prompts an entire chapter titled “Tension” that discusses both the choice of Kerachi women to use the English word and the many ways in which the concept of tension applies to their social and political lives. Ring seems so concerned with providing readers with exactly how her informants verbally described

Comment: PARAGRAPHS 3 & 4: MORE FINE GRAINED OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT COUPLED WITH INTERPRETATIVE CLARIFICATIONS
— In these paragraphs the writer continues to refine the initial observations presented in paragraph 2 that Mead’s text is mainly bereft of direct quotation from specific informants. In particular, in these passages the writer works to show that apparent instances of direct quotation are in fact generic — not linked to any particular individual — and therefore consonant with the writer’s basic characterization of Mead’s text. As with paragraph 2, in paragraphs 3 and 4 the writer abstains from offering a broad explanation of such patterns, limiting herself primarily to observation.

their lives that she includes Urdu words in parentheses next to English words when there seems to be a chance that something will be lost in translation. She also sometimes provides the Urdu when this linguistic problem doesn't seem to exist; for example, *rishtedar* does not have much special connotation other than its translation, "relatives" (17). Though this hyperfrequent inclusion of Urdu words might partially reflect an attempt to prove a strong grasp on the language of Ring's subjects, it could also be another example of the importance Ring places on capturing the exact way in which subjects verbally represent their own lives.

[6] It is rare that Ring presents any claim without supporting it with a direct quote attached to a specific person. This strategy runs nearly opposite to Mead's pervasive tendency to attribute the few included exact informant quotes to the population of the village (or of Samoa) in general, rather than to an individual. The result is that specific, named neighbors and their voices appear throughout Ring's ethnography as evidence whenever Ring makes a new point. Readers learn to recognize these voices; the characters that populate the society being studied are well-developed. This emphasizes the differences in their experiences and personalities; thus, even though these women inhabit the same physical space and, to an extent, the same social world, the ethnography frames their lives in a quite individualized way.

[7] These contrasting choices regarding the inclusion of verbatim quotes from informants lead to a different effect from each of the two works. While it offers evidence for this interpretation in the form of statements about

Comment: PARAGRAPH 5: OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT PRESENTED WITH LITTLE INTERPRETATION — This paragraph follows precisely the same pattern as paragraph 2, first offering a general observation about Ring's text (that it contains a great deal of verbatim quotations from informants) and then substantiating this observation with textual evidence and detailed observation. The argumentative function is likewise similar to that of paragraphs 2-4; to establish the evidential basis for the broader contrast and interpretation the writer will introduce later in the essay.

Comment: SIGNPOSTING A SHIFT IN ANALYTICAL FOCUS — Notice how the writer clearly signals a shift in analytical focus from the way informant voices are represented textually (paragraphs 2-6) to a consideration of the "effects" of such presentation in paragraph 7. This sort of signposting helps readers better track the stages through which the argument unfolds.

Comment: INITIAL COMPARATIVE MOVE — Here the essay begins explicitly to sketch out an initial, rough sense of the contrast between the two ethnographies with respect to how they represent of informant 'voices.' But note that the contrast is still basically descriptive here, although the level of abstraction has moved up a notch or two and the writer begins to hint at an overall characterization of the differences between the two texts.

Samoan culture that have presumably been gleaned from the notes the ethnographer took in the field, *Coming of Age in Samoa* does not provide detailed descriptions of individual observations or (more importantly to the focus of this paper) of particular conversations with familiar informants. Instead of presenting concrete snapshots of Samoan life in the form of anecdotes and verbatim quotations along with its claims, Mead's work offers readers a trained ethnographer's interpretation of a foreign culture. On the other hand, Ring makes readers privy to exactly which information from her fieldwork suggested the claims about culture that she makes in *Zenana*. The liberal quoting of informants in the work contributes to an ethnographic style that emphasizes that the ethnographer's presentation of life in her Kerachi apartment building is based on specific experiences; these are presented to readers as anecdotes complete with dialogue and as verbatim transcriptions of certain conversations in which a particular informant whose personality is known to the reader said something specific. Mead acts as a medium for Samoan culture, using her training and talents as an ethnographer to translate what her informants tell her into summaries and impressions of the lives of adolescent girls in Samoa for the readers back at home; in contrast, Ring gives her ethnographer's sense of the culture she studies, but also brings readers directly into the world of the ethnography by reproducing the observations and introducing the informants that lead her to her claims in concrete detail.

Comment: A FIRST APPROXIMATION OF THE CONTRAST, RENDERED CONCRETELY — These passages contain a first approximation of the basic contrast that the writer will develop in the remainder of the essay — Mead's "trained ethnographer's interpretation" versus Ring's "presentation of her life based on specific experiences." The writer will develop this basic contrast more abstractly and generally at the end of the paragraph. Here it appears in a form that's clearly derived directly from the observations adduced in paragraphs 2-6.

This *gradual, inductive building* from specific textual observations to more general observations to an interpretative contrast is one of the things that makes the essay persuasive.

Comment: THE BASIC CONTRAST IN MORE GENERAL FORM — Here the basic contrast is again stated in yet more general and synoptic form. All of the evidence presented in paragraphs 2-7 leads up to this contrast.

[8] What is the explanation for the difference in the use of the words of informants in these two ethnographies? One might argue that each ethnographer judges whether to use dialogue based on how its inclusion will support her specific argument. According to this explanation, Mead chooses to exclude portrayals of her speaking informants so as to avoid emphasizing their individual personalities, which might weaken her claim that Samoan culture is homogeneous (206) and thus causes less adolescent conflict; Ring includes these portrayals precisely because they highlight the diverse personas of the women in the apartment building who create peace despite their differences. However, Mead does admit that despite the apparent homogeneity of life among her informants, “in temperament in character they varied enormously” (139); this suggests that Mead’s reluctance to use direct quotations is not a mere factor of her specific argument. Instead, it seems to indicate that certain restrictive conventions surrounded the use of informant voices in Mead’s day, while Ring’s work seems wholly free from these conventions and even to oppose them.

[9] Some of the early preference toward generalized, paraphrased renderings of information over verbatim quotes may have to do with the old distinction between ethnologists and ethnographers. Collecting direct quotes and other observations was the duty of ethnographers, whose work was not as appreciated as that of the ethnologists who would then take this data and extract claims from it, bringing scientific validity to the study through the anthropological authority that stemmed from their training. The concern of

Comment: EVERYTHING BEFORE PARAGRAPH 8: DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROBLEM — The entire essay prior to paragraph 8 may be viewed as the careful development of the analytical question posed in the first sentence of paragraph 8: the (to this point) unexplained difference between Mead’s and Ring’s representation of informant ‘voices.’

Note the painstaking and deliberate way in which the writer develops the problem over several paragraphs; this is typical of anthropological writing, in which analytical problems do not simply present themselves but must be developed in dialogue with empirical and theoretical sources.

Comment: RESTATEMENT OF THE ANALYTICAL PROBLEM OR QUESTION — By restating the basic analytical problem here the writer (1) reminds the reader what the problem is (best to assume a fairly inattentive reader) and (2) clearly marks a shift from the largely observational first stage of the argument to the largely explanatory second stage of the argument.

Comment: INTRODUCTION OF AN OBVIOUS COUNTERARGUMENT — By introducing a counterargument here, the writer (1) anticipates a salient objection or alternative to her own explanation of the contrast and (2) introduces tension into her argument by showing that her position is potentially contentious.

Comment: COUNTER TO THE COUNTERARGUMENT — This passage makes quick work of the counterargument — one expects rather too quick work. If a counterargument is worth introducing, it should probably not be possible to dispense with it so easily.

Comment: FORSHADOWING THE TYPE OF EXPLANATION TO BE PROPOSED — By singling out ‘restrictive conventions’ here, the writer foreshadows the *kind* of explanation she will be offering for the differences between Mead and Ring. This is helpful, since it allows the reader to focus his or her attention on the different *conventions* of ethnographic writing and research under which Mead and Ring labored.

Comment: HEDGING — Hedging of this sort is appropriate when making speculative claims, as the writer does here.

ethnologists was to let readers know what constituted life for a given community, not for just a few people – an ethnographer would be capable of doing the latter through simple interview. Though Mead’s mentor, Franz Boas, was one of the first anthropologists to bring these two branches of anthropological work together, it is notable that in the excerpt we read from his work *A Year Among the Eskimo* the voices of his individual informants are never directly quoted during their interactions with him; only folklore like the story of Sedna (50) or of Quadjaqdjuq (53), which are attributable to the Eskimo culture as a whole and thus allow Boas to present a statement in quotation form that represent the whole group, not just individual parts of it.

The premium placed on gleaning and providing representation of a community as a whole might have still influenced Mead in the late 1920’s; this, combined with her self-acknowledged worry that her sample size was too small to make generalizations about Samoan culture, might have made her fear that including direct quotes from her informants would make her first ethnography seem inexpert and second-rate.

[10] Nowadays, virtually all anthropologists do their own fieldwork, and the distinction between ethnology and ethnography has vanished, taking with it the implications of an imbalance between the skill required to do fieldwork and that required to make conclusions from it. Indeed, Ring, a modern-day ethnographer, seems to take pride in liberally publishing the informant quotations gleaned during her fieldwork; her ability to gain the confidence of her informants boosts her professional authority in some ways,

Comment: CORROBORATING EVIDENCE — Introducing corroborating evidence here — that the same pattern of not quoting individual informants is evident in Boas’s work — is crucial to rendering the basic explanation more persuasive. If Mead’s practice is explained by ‘restrictive conventions,’ such conventions would have applied to Mead’s contemporaries as well, such as Boas.

because the ability to do comprehensive and subtle fieldwork is now considered valuable. In writing *Zenana*, Ring was probably also less concerned than Mead about conveying a sense of cultural omniscience through providing a generalized picture of culture in her apartment building that would include each of her informants – thus, she is comfortable with the development of unique, diverse characters that comes along with allowing the voices of particular informants to return throughout her work. This is allowed to happen because the mission of ethnographies has largely shifted away from the creation of an accurate, full, generalized portrait of life in a community toward giving one or several perspectives on the culture being studied and focusing on what that perspective can bring to the intellectual discourse. This change may have been precipitated by intellectuals’ realization that, since culture in America and other home countries was increasingly and significantly multicultural even within a given place, cultures elsewhere were probably much more complicated than earlier anthropology had given them credit for when making its claims on them.

[11] This argument can be taken a bit further to conclude the exploration of the differences between Mead’s and Ring’s use of informant voices. One might reasonably assume that with anthropologists’ realization that their ability to verify their generalizing statements regarding culture was limited came a revisit of the legitimacy of anthropological authority. Mead’s work seems to rest strongly on two assumptions common in early 20th century ethnographies; that as an outsider, she is better qualified than the natives she

Comment: APPROPRIATE HEDGING

— More appropriate hedging here. Since the writer is speculating about Ring’s ‘concerns’ as a writer, it’s appropriate to signal the speculative nature of such remarks.

Comment: REFERENCE

— A reference for these broad characterizations of shifts in ethnographic practice would be apt here.

Comment: PARAGRAPH 11 (CONCLUSION): BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARGUMENT

— Until this point the paper sought to explain the differences between the two texts by appealing to the different conventions that governed ethnographic writing in Mead’s and Ring’s time. Now, however, the writer aims at something much more ambitious: to claim (again, speculatively) that the shifts in ethnographic practice from Mead to Ring are in fact diagnostic of a broad transformation in our understanding of ethnographic knowledge and in particular to the nature of ethnographic authority.

In conclusions a writer is typically granted greater license to work out the broader implications of his or her argument; this writer makes effective use of such latitude here.

studies to offer a reading audience of outsiders a perspective on Samoan culture, and that as a trained (if somewhat green) anthropologist she is better qualified than her readers to interpret the words of her informants. Both of these beliefs preclude the necessity of including verbatim quotes from informants, and so almost none are to be found in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. By the time Ring began work on *Zenana*, both of these beliefs had been challenged and dethroned to some extent. The self-consciousness that arose in the field of anthropology around the 70's and 80's due to the reductionist, generalizing, and even racist tendencies of early anthropology persists; ethnographers no longer feel sure that their training qualifies them to accurately portray foreign cultures, which can lead to the inclusion of large blocks of verbatim transcripts of informant's words. Many ethnographers, perhaps including Ring, are so reluctant to paraphrase these words and potentially lose some of the privileged authority now given to those who actually live within a culture that they include many words in the language of their informants in case there are extra layers of meaning inaccessible to English. The ethnographer's authorship and creation of an interpretation of a studied culture seems to have become less important than accurately capturing some perspectives of a culture with the understanding that other perspectives will exist – this priority lends itself to the inclusion of the voice of individuals. Providing these voices also lets readers in on the raw yields of fieldwork to a greater extent than they are in ethnographies like Mead's, where only the end results of the fieldwork are presented. This invites readers to disagree with the ethnographer's conclusions about the studied community, and in this way diminishes unquestioned anthropological authority by holding ethnographers more accountable. However, if selected well to fit an accurate claim, verbatim quotations from informants have potential to make the ethnographer's conclusions much stronger arguments than those that are backed only by the ethnographer's interpretive paraphrasing of informant's verbal information, since today's readers are reluctant to trust the accuracy of these interpretations based on professional authority alone. In sum, the different choices made by Mead and Ring in dealing with the voices of their informants are significant examples of the conventions surrounding the construction of ethnographic authority in each of their times.