

Engaging Communities: Writing Ethnographic Research - Supplemental Modules

Module 5: Representation and Authorship as a Theoretical Lens in the Field

Exploring Representation and Authorship

“Who is the ethnographic researcher and why does it matter?” You should be confident at this point that *you* are the researcher and that this matters because as the researcher and writer, your mindset and worldview will affect how you see, respond to and interpret human behavior in your site. Examining your research through the lenses of representation and authority extends the self-reflexive stance you considered in Module 4: “Identity and Reflexivity Lens in the Field.” This additional reflexivity not only acknowledges that your perspective affects your understanding and interpretation of your site, but that you should make moves to investigate this perspective. **You need to ask *why* you think and feel the way you do about certain actions and then express your analysis of your own reaction in writing.** In doing so, you call attention to the partiality of the truths you are working to tell, to the relativity of the reality you have worked to observe.

In this module, you move a step further down this road of consciousness and self-reflexivity by asking the question: So what does all this have to do with writing? Clearly, becoming a conscious and self-reflexive ethnographic researcher affects the way you collect and record your fieldnotes. And this is relevant to your project because you will only be able to write about what it is you saw and recorded. However, as you work toward your final essay, the culmination of your work, you must be aware that when you write this cultural translation, your ethnographic essay, you will be not be writing **TRUTH**. Instead you will be conveying a *partial truth*, a representation of the reality of your site as observed by you. How you choose to write your final essay—how you choose to re-present your data—becomes a most pressing question.

Directly related to the concept of representation is the idea of authorship. If you are working translate your observations into written research, then what **authority** as a writer are you calling on in order to do so? What are you qualified to say? Do you have enough of a pattern identified to make the assertion you want to make? What are the implications of this assertion and what are your ethical responsibilities in attempting to deal with those assertions? That is, where do you locate your **authority**? Is it in your expertise as someone who knows your culture from the inside, or do you think your expertise is located in your position outside the culture, as a researcher? Or maybe your ability to write about this stems from the negotiation of these two subject positions? These are the kinds of questions you’ll want to ask yourself as you write your representation of your cultural site. You’ll want to consider your **authority** in order to write an ethical representation of your project.

What is representation?

In their textbook, *Studying Culture: A Practical Introduction*, Judy Giles and Tim Middleton explain that there are three basic definitions associated with the term representation:

1. To stand for, or symbolize: a simple example would be that the stars and stripes--the flag of the United States--represents what we like to call America.
2. To act on behalf of others as a spokesperson, or even an actual voting representative: examples here can easily be drawn from politics, or the advertising industry.
3. To re-present; to present again. Examples of a re-presentation of an event might be a photograph. Actually, any re-telling, and re-construction of events, images, actions or behaviors is a re-presentation of reality.

It is the last of these definitions for represent – calling on the prefix—re, meaning again, to do over—that guides the discussion here. In ethnographic terms, a representation of culture, a translation, is in all actuality a re-presentation. It is another, subsequent presentation of what has happened, of what does or did exist.

Take a cultural example: museums. Among other things, it is the job of the museum to re-present objects, artifacts, materials, art, and information in a way that multiple people have access to it. An art museum re-presents certain pieces by hanging them on huge, white or colored walls, in larger open rooms. This means of displaying the art creates a much different sensation than if the painting were hanging, on say, your grandmother's bedroom wall. Ignoring for a moment the probable fact that your grandmother would never be able to afford a piece of art that would be in a museum, ask yourself this: how would the understanding of the painting differ in the two places? The museum, given its status in the community, and maybe even the world, would “write onto” the painting a specific meaning, perhaps something such as: this piece is worthy of being hung in a museum. You would then “read” the piece differently than you probably would were it on your grandmother's bedroom wall: pretty, nice, cool, stupid, etc. In this way, you need to consider that it isn't always the text that is read, but the way in which it is situated in the world.

Think about your research. You are currently going into your site, and jotting down what you see happen. At the moment you jot anything down, you have created a re-presentation of an instance. This re-presentation becomes more fully developed through the process of expanding your fieldnotes. The representation takes the form of a narrative--a story. Then, when you go to write your final essay, you may use a certain section of your fieldnotes as an example of some sort. You will then re-present your own fieldnotes on another level. At this point you are at least three representations away from the actual instance you experienced.

So, what does that do to fieldwork? What does this “removal from the moment” mean when we think about and try to produce ethnographic writing? Is there any truth left? It is because of this removal from the actual moment that James Clifford explains ethnography as the presentation of “partial truths.” You can only talk about what you see

(that's why it is important to collect a great deal of fieldnotes). You can only interpret these observations with respect to what you know (that is why it is important to conduct secondary research). And you can only represent your ideas as interesting depending upon how well you write (this is why you engage in writing expanded fieldnotes throughout the course.)

Re-presentation of anything allows for the exploration of creativity, but the idea of representation is can be scary and threatening. Who represents whom and how that representation is situated is of utmost concern. This is because the notion of removal from the actual makes it seem as though there never was any fact; there was no truth. What is to prevent someone from making something up? Well, nothing, really. In fact, there was a popular film in 1998 called *Krippendorf's Tribe*, starring Richard Dreyfus and Jenna Elfman that explores this very idea. The film is about an anthropology professor who is supposed to have used grant monies in order to conduct research on a lost tribe. Having never completed the research, he resorts to faking a documentary of this lost tribe by using his family members as tribe members. He and his sons create a fictional film using the tropes of ethnographic film. That is, they use what we understand as re-presentations of truth in order to mask the fiction they create.

This film makes clear that there are definite ethical dilemmas in representing ethnographic data. These are dilemmas you need to take into consideration as you write your research. The notion of **re-presentation**, then, not only invites you to think about how you might want to present your work, but also pushes you to consider the ethical issues involved in such representations. As you prepare to write the longer, more involved essay, you need to start asking questions such as:

- How, in your work, can you be fair to your informants?
- What would it mean to be fair to them?
- How can you represent your point and be fair *as well as* interesting?
- Are you emphasizing oddities of the site, or what seems to be a part of the norm?
- Have you gotten permission from the informants to use given names, or are you just going to use pseudonyms?
- Are there moments when someone asked you *not* to record or write about what you said?
- How will it be possible to honor that request?
- How might you honorably use dialect or slang to express the tone, style and feel of the culture?
- Are you going to let your informants read your final essay?
- Are you going to give your informants the opportunity to suggest revisions for your work?
- What would it mean to give some other informants credit for helping “write” your ethnographic essay? Is this really feasible?

While there are definite ethical considerations as one works in the field, ethics do not disappear at the point you begin writing. Rather, they become that much more important as your essay will be the more public representation of your work. The real focus then becomes power to re-present. Who has it? What does it mean to have it? How might it be

expressed? This is where you move from the question of representation to that of authorship and authority.

What is authorship/authority and how does it affect representation?

Authority is often understood as something that has to do with power—having authority over something or someone else. Here, you should also consider authority in relationship with a source of student power: writing or **authorship**. Your authorship is the result of your ability to author a piece of ethnographic writing. By this point, it should be clear that you do have something to say about your research; you just need to take ownership of what you *want* to say and make conscious decisions with respect to *how* you say it.

You need to make choices. And these choices not only include *what* you will say but *how* you'll **re-present** those ideas on the page. *Krippendorf's Tribe*, again, provides some insight into the nature of the relationship between representation and authority. When Dr. Krippendorf fakes evidence of a lost tribe, he does so with anthropological authority in mind. He knows what his academic field accepts as “truth,” and this truth often takes the form of ethnographic film. As the representation, the ethnographic film derives its authority from the idea that “seeing is believing.” This lost tribe must exist if Krippendorf can show it to us, and so he re-creates a lost village and then records data that is understood as ethnographically relevant: a coming of age ritual.

In the case of this research, the authority of the film is supported by Dr. Krippendorf's stature as a well-respected anthropologist, his credibility or *ethos*. He is able to fool his audience because they accept what they see. And they accept what they see not only because of his authority, but because of the authority of the representation. They know what to expect from an ethnographic film and when they get what they expect, then they can let themselves believe what they see. The real problem here is that Dr. Krippendorf makes use of his authorial voice, his *ethos*, in order to falsify findings. He makes conscious choices regarding what he wants to say and how he needs to say it in order to trick people into believing that a tribe he made up really exists. He then uses his authority in the field to support his assertion. That is, what he published before, his past writings, stand as the support and authority regarding what it is he proposes to say.

While there is a great discussion to have here with respect to ethics and your responsibility in making sure our representations are not consciously faked, the assumption is that you will not be faking data and making up informants. The fact is, as evidenced by the film, it is pretty labor-intensive to produce faked data. In other words, just as much work goes into faking what you have as would go into producing actual fieldnotes. The problem arises when you put off writing fieldnotes, when you have nothing to show after weeks of research. This is really Krippendorf's problem. Don't let this happen to you.

What you do want to do, however, is work to allow your own authority and the credibility of the research you have conducted to guide your project. You can use what you do know to represent reality as truthfully as possible. In doing so, you will engage in the ethical

and responsible treatment of your culture. Consider what you do know, how much you have already written, how much you have learned this semester. Instead of concentrating on what you haven't ever done, (written an ethnographic essay) concentrate on what you have accomplished. This is the location of authority.

Rhetorical Considerations for Writing about Representation and Authority

Writing about representation and authority is a bit tricky for many students. This is because to add this focus into your expanded fieldnotes, you really aren't going to begin with recording descriptions of what you observe, to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. Rather, you will make observations about your own subject-position. Your observations stem from a position of self-reflexivity. Your writing becomes a bit more theoretical here as you are asked to consider whether you have authority or credibility, how you might represent that authority/credibility/ethos, and how you'll claim that authority in your final essay.

Here are some guidelines and questions for your consideration of representation and authority in your research:

1. Think about all the different sets of fieldnotes you have written. Begin by considering that, in a way, each set is yet another **representation** of the same thing: your research site. In one set you focused on place and space, in another on ritual and symbol, in another on identity and reflexivity, and in even others descriptions of behaviors, activities, expressions, etc. at your site. Reflect on which set of notes was the easiest for you to write, the hardest? Why do you think this was? How do you feel about the job you have done representing what you saw, did, thought and felt? Where and how do you think you could continue to improve if you were going to continue working on this research for weeks, months or (bite our tongues) even years?
2. What have you had to actively balance and think about as you made choices to **re-present the people** at your research site and what you have come to know about the culture there. What worries you about what you are writing? Is there any aspect of describing this "culture" and creating a representation that troubles you? What do you feel most confident about? How do you feel you can create credibility in your work as **author** with authority?
3. How you might position yourself without taking over the personalities and lives of your informants? An ethnography is the ethnographer's telling of other people's stories. You are translating what they do, think, and say from a real time situation to words on a page. Do you want to include excerpts from your fieldnotes, or rewrite conversations as dialogue? Do you want to create a voice for certain folks, or always be the researcher re-telling the story? You may not know the answer to questions like these, but you need to consider them because the difference in choice will create a difference in perception.
4. Consider how it is you might want to **re-present your work**. Do you want there to be humor? Do you want it to be serious? How would you achieve such mood in an essay? Of what help might certain visuals such as diagrams, drawings or photographs be? How do visual elements affect the representation?

5. How willing are you to extend authority and authorship to those you write about. If you were to share your drafts, with whom would you share them? What are your anxieties about this process? What are your expectations?