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The Need for Thin Description

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Qualitative researchers tout the distinctive character of their work as thickly descriptive of the subject matter. They evaluate published results in the same terms, giving high marks to the richness of the best research. This article unpacks this universal standard and discusses the influence of preinvestigative empirical purview, analytic aims, and available data in addressing the question of why there is a need for thin as well as thick description in the enterprise. Laud Humphreys's book Tearoom Trade, its research project, and unpublished observational notes are used as case material for considering the relative effects of the latter two influences on richness. The purpose is not to devalue thick description but to turn critical attention to the various influences at play in the realization of richness.

Keywords: *data richness; thin description; Tearoom Trade*

Rich data are a leading hallmark of qualitative research. The term *rich* is used to convey a distinctive characteristic, one that is either absent or scarcely evident in other empirical studies. *Rich* is a reference to value as much as a mark of distinction. Whether they apply interview methods, engage in participant observation, use documentary evidence such as diaries or letters, or a combination, qualitative researchers celebrate experientially multiperspectival and highly nuanced data whose features signal richness.

Richness flags experience plished on members' own terms. Although a count of the distribution of particular social types informs us of their prominence across the social landscape, the types come alive in the richly detailed narratives of representative cases. For example, it is in their scenic detail that we come to know the "decent" and "street" families that Elijah Anderson (1999) described in his moving book *Code of the Street*. It is in Annette Lareau's (2003) penetrating study of social class differences in 12 families' domestic lives that we understand how children whose upbringing is "concertedly cultivated" are likely to be more successful than those whose upbringing is "accomplished through their own natural growth." In her account titled

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Divorce Talk, Catherine Kohler Riessman (1990) not only provided the emotional contours of divorce for women but also told us how they “make sense” narratively of what has happened to their lives.

The claimed value of rich data is not new. As early as the 1840s, British social researcher Henry Mayhew (1868) hailed the importance of moving beyond “government population returns” to present the then-unknown lives of London’s “humbler classes.” Knowledge was drawn from “the lips of the people themselves—giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own ‘unvarnished’ language” (Mayhew, 1868, p. xv). In the American context, William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki’s (1974) monumental study of the immigration experience of Poles to Chicago, published in 1918, finds perfection in the experiential details of the series of letters they collected from Polish families in Chicago and in Poland. As Thomas and Znaniecki noted at the end of volume two, “We are safe in saying that personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material” (p. 1832). Decades later, at midcentury, William Foote Whyte (1943) repeated the call for richness, praising the value of intensive participant observation. Referring to statistical information about Cornerville, an Italian slum in Eastern City, Whyte provoked the reader when he compared the thin lives portrayed by the statistics with the results of careful fieldwork: “In this [statistical] view, Cornerville people appear as social work clients, as defendants in criminal cases, or as undifferentiated members of ‘the masses.’ There is one thing wrong with this picture: no human beings are in it” (p. xv). As if to say that human beings come alive with rich data, Whyte presented the intricate social structure of an Italian slum.

Borrowing from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, it is anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) who coined the contrast between thick and thin description, a now popular way of referring to the representational value of richness. Titled “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Geertz’s essay distinguishes his view of the concept of culture. Following a dizzying list of definitions culled from fellow anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn’s (1949) book *Mirror for Man*, Geertz defined the study of culture as the interpretive search for meaning, where culture refers to shared “webs of significance” constructed by adherents. The metaphoric color is infamous: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). It is clear that descriptive richness or thickness derives from taking documentary account of the complex ways the meaning of objects and events is constructed in practice. The resulting data of culture or social life are indeed thick, as their representation necessarily attends both to the fixedness and to the flow of indigenous meaning. Geertz pointed out that “cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete” (p. 29) because adherents continuously enrich meaning in their structuring practices.

Although some researchers showcase the rich documentation of social scenes, if not whole social settings, and others thicken the representational mix by including the detailed analysis of their social construction, richness or thickness in some form or other lead the way. Hardly a book commentary in the review journal *Contemporary Sociology* goes by, for example, without the word *rich* being applied to either laud the presentation or cast aspersion on what could have been done. Back cover book endorsements and publishers' advertisements echo the standard. The significance of rich data and thick description is an evaluative mantra of the trade.

THE QUESTION OF THINNESS

But such judgments show little or no concern for preinvestigative differences in empirical purview among qualitative researchers, which set the boundaries of richness from their varied perspectives from the start. Analytically, little consideration is given to the possibility that a particular research project may call for both thick and thin description. A further consideration is the available data themselves, which may be plentiful or meager on various counts, influencing the possibility of richness in their own right.¹ The question of thinness is eclipsed by the overwhelming acceptance of thick description and rich data as universally applicable.

Our aim is to unpack and shed light on the operational meaning of richness or thickness, similar to the operational unpacking of other shibboleths such as freedom and validity. In the public sphere, everyone would seem to be for freedom, and the standard is endlessly applied in evaluating the political texture of social forms. Yet the operational meaning of freedom seems to vary with the political perspective in tow. In research circles, validity is accepted as the key to truthfulness. But one researcher's demonstration of validity can be at considerable odds with another's, as attested for instance by the endless battles between qualitative and quantitative designations of truth.

It should be clear that we are not questioning the value of richness when thick description is warranted. Nor are we just indicating that research and writing never tell the whole story because these activities inevitably involve choices—include this, exclude that. Instead, our goal is to distinguish influences that would warrant thin description for some purpose and thick for others. Our point will be that the apparent richness, thickness, or thinness of qualitative inquiry is not simply a matter of good or bad research habits but also has bearings in preinvestigative *empirical purviews*, developing *analytic aims*, and *available data*.

Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein's (1997) book *The New Language of Qualitative Method* provides a framework for discussing the influence of empirical purviews. We briefly consider two purviews as preinvestigative warrants for thick or thin description. We then take up the question of

whether there might be good analytic reasons for why the richness of description would significantly vary within a qualitative research project despite the available data. For that we turn to Laud Humphreys's (1970) book *Tearoom Trade* as a case in point. The book is an adaptation of his late 1960s dissertation project (Humphreys, 1968), which was a study of male homosexual encounters in public places. Part of the incentive for considering the case stems from the recent acquisition by the authors of unpublished research material central to Humphreys's project, close examination of which sheds interesting light on the relationship between analytic aims and available data.

EMPIRICAL PURVIEW AND THINNESS

The standard of richness and the goal of thick description belie differences in the empirical purview qualitative researchers bring to their craft. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) considered how differences in empirical purview compel variations in thick and thin description. Their discussion is not exhaustive of the orientations to data that inspire qualitative researchers; rather, it is suggestive of how differences in thickness and thinness relate to preinvestigative empirical preferences. They argued that the research vocabularies or "idioms" that qualitative researchers apply in their work foreground distinct senses of richness separate from their analytic aims and the available data.

Comparing two of the idioms is sufficient to make the point.² The first idiom considered is "naturalism," featured as the oldest of the empirical purviews qualitative researchers take in their work and the idiom that informed Humphreys's research. In this idiom, the language of "here" and "there" marks the space of fieldwork and designates the richness of data. Whyte's (1943) methodological imperative has been a prominent voice leading the way—go and seek intimate understanding of those whose daily lives are in question. The imperative calls for keeping those lives in view rather than figuring their social contours at a distance. Whyte put it this way in the context of studying Cornerville: "The only way to gain such [intimate] knowledge [of local life] is to live in Cornerville and participate in the activities of its people" (pp. xv-xvi). Aspiring urban and street ethnographers are urged to gather rich data *in place*, found in the often hidden reaches of the city, an admonition Humphreys took very seriously. Elliot Liebow (1967) carried forth the idiom in his observational study of African American street life in Washington, D.C., titled *Tally's Corner*, after its protagonist's home base. And decades later, Anderson (1976, 1990, 1999) followed through in his own engaging studies of African American, inner-city neighborhoods in Chicago and Philadelphia. Richness is located in the detailed "thereness" of the facts, represented in the scenic presence of empirical material.

But rich as these naturalistic studies are, they are thin on the processes by which the complex realities of social life are managed and sustained. The

work of “doing” gang, bravado, and social status in Cornerville, for example, is not evident, as it understandingly could not have been given the times and the empirical purview in place. We now know that this work might have been documented and represented through protagonist Doc’s and others’ communicative practices (see Heritage, 1984; Silverman, 1998). Extracts of talk are otherwise only thinly represented in Whyte’s (1943) text; they merely serve as apt illustrations of the kinds of conversation (see, e.g., pp. 160-162) that Whyte overheard, affirming the social organization he descriptively features in his own hand.

In hindsight, we might argue that Whyte (1943) needed this kind of thinness to make visible what the “fashionable High Street inhabitant” (p. xv) does not see—the solid moral organization of an allegedly disorganized slum. There is a political message too, whose empirical grounding would be shortchanged by featuring the thick details of communication practice. Taken up by Liebow (1967) and Anderson (1976, 1990, 1999)—and Humphreys himself—naturalistic verve rides on the same relative thickness and thinness, appropriate to their respective authors’ documentary aims.

It is naturalism’s thinness—the interactional accomplishment of social worlds—that is thickened in the second idiom of qualitative inquiry Gubrium and Holstein (1997) considered. In ethnomethodological field studies (see Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), the richness of scenic plenitude recedes and becomes relatively sparse as talk and social interaction are foregrounded. It is not that the scenes of social interaction are not important. They are often described and in detail, but as a way of calling attention to the situational or institutional linkages of talk and interaction, the latter of which are richly represented.³ What Gubrium and Holstein called the “whats” of social life—the setting, specific roles, social organization, shared stocks of knowledge—are temporarily bracketed to highlight what they referred to as the “hows” of doing the everyday reality under consideration. Applying the latter to Whyte’s (1943) Cornerville society, the communicative details of street life would be enriched, emphasizing, for example, *how* Doc, his gang, and the College Boys of Cornerville produced, managed, and sustained an accountable sense of the structure of their relationships and community. The work of doing Cornerville would be foregrounded, thickly described in as much of its everyday procedural glory as would warrant the practical production and reproduction of life in that social context.

Empirical purviews have technical consequences. Take the matter of writing ethnographic fieldnotes, for example. Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (1995) provided a useful guide to the practice. Their specification of activities such as “making jottings,” “writing up fieldnotes,” “in-process analytic writing,” “coding,” “memoing,” and “ethnographic documentation,” among other facets of fieldnote taking, systematizes what had been an undistinguished documentation process. Yet as useful as this is, it is motivated by a naturalist purview, whose written results produce a particular

form of empirical richness. Applying their guidelines results in notes that supply rich scenic details, the kind of thick description associated with Whyte's (1943) and Anderson's (1976, 1990, 1999) ethnographies, for instance. To borrow Geertz's (1973, p. 5) colorful terms, such fieldnotes are relatively thin on the "spinning" and richer on the "webs of significance," that is, the culture in which the human affairs in question are suspended. In contrast, ethnomethodologically motivated fieldnotes would thickly record in writing the interactively accountable details of talk and social interaction, whose systematic spinning produces and sustains the webbing apparently in view.⁴

THICK AND THIN IN *TEAROOM TRADE*

The thinness and thickness of empirical description in qualitative research also have analytic bearings specific to particular research projects as well as in relation to available data. We have recently come across material that Laud Humphreys collected for his study of homosexual encounters, much of which did not appear in his 1970 *Tearoom Trade* or in his 1968 dissertation. On request, the ONE Institute & Archives of Los Angeles provided us with copies of Humphreys's "systematic observation sheets." Humphreys used these to track the frequency and organization of men's homosexual activity in the city park restrooms ("tearooms") he observed. Our discussion of this material is supplemented by a deconstructive reading of *Tearoom Trade* and the related dissertation and is tangentially informed by interviews undertaken for a recently published intellectual biography (Galliher, Brekhus, & Keys 2004). From this corpus of material, we reconstruct the analytic history of Humphreys's project, which sheds light on his developing need for thick and thin description. The evidence suggests that the project and especially the final theme dealing with the compartmentalization of deviant identity were not analytically focal at the start. The analysis took shape with the passage of time, as did the resulting justification for thin and thick description.

The Initial Motivation for Thin Description

Humphreys's dissertation project had a different theme at the beginning than what eventually appeared sketchily in the completed dissertation and more full-blown in the second half of *Tearoom Trade*. Neither their similar titles nor their identical subtitles, which is *Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, offer a clue to the difference. For that, we turn to a close reading of the published text, where the initial motivation for thin description is intimated early on by Humphreys and by Lee Rainwater, who was Humphreys's dissertation advisor in the Sociology Department at Washington University in St. Louis.

Initially, the project was a scientized, naturalistic attempt to assess the presence and distribution of impersonal sex in the public restrooms of a city park. This was driven by a long-standing sociological thesis about the social anonymity of the modern metropolis. Especially pertinent was the widely accepted view that such typically private activities as sexual encounters could unfold with little notice in the nooks and crannies of city life. Even deviant encounters such as homosexual "one-night stands" could proceed without moral commitment. Highly unacceptable acts occurred on a daily basis in the adequately concealed public settings of the urban landscape. They were engaged with little or no harm being done to anyone, neither to the participants nor to the mostly unknowing public.

At the start, the dissertation project was more about the city and its moral climate than about the specific deviant acts and personalities in question. The aim was to obtain a portrayal of the extent to which the city is a diverse moral world, one different from morally homogenized environments such as small towns and the countryside. Documentation of the extent of impersonal sex in the public space of one of the nation's largest cities would add to this thesis, especially as it applied to the public policy question of what is or is not socially problematic. As Rainwater (1970) noted in his foreword to the book,

In the tradition of studies of city life that continues into the present from such beginnings as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, Laud Humphreys contributes to our understanding of the city as a place where people with special tastes, needs, interests, and problems work out a niche in which they express themselves among like-minded and supportive people. (p. vii)

The "creative use of [public] privacy" (Rainwater, 1970, p. viii) in urban areas needed to be objectively assessed, not taken for granted. According to Rainwater (1970), this was a contribution of Mayhew's (1868) well-documented survey of the London poor. Humphreys's project could make a similar contribution by systematically taking account of the extent of the tearoom trade in an American city, adding to the evidence in support of the thesis. To be stressed were the anonymity and moral thinness—the social inconsequentiality—of tearoom activities, peeled as they were from this special feature of the larger social environment in which they were embedded. The impersonal character of tearoom engagements would parallel the equally impersonal face of other deviant (and nondeviant) urban encounters to convey the unique texture of the city. The city was distinctive; it was not held together by sameness as by the everyday workability of anonymous indifference.

Humphreys's initial empirical questions were how much fellatio transpired in the restrooms and what were its behavioral characteristics. Nothing short of a careful accounting in situ of the daily frequency of these sexual encounters would do. The published result was to be a relatively thin description of the fellating activity of strangers in a metropolitan area.

This converged on what Humphreys called “systematic observation sheets.” Data entries centered on the number and behavioral patterning of the sexual encounters. An example of these sheets is reprinted in *Tearoom Trade* (see Humphreys, 1970, p. 35). A range of data are recorded: the date and day of the week, the weather, the number and type of people in the parks, the estimated volume of gay activity, the place, the tearoom participants (observer, principal [sexual] aggressor, principal passive participant, other participants, law enforcement personnel), the time an encounter began and ended, a diagram of moves within an encounter, and a narrative description of the action. As we discuss shortly, although there is considerable evidence in the narrative descriptions that the observed sexual activities were thicker than presented in the dissertation and the book, Humphreys’s focus on the frequency and behavioral character of “anonymous” encounters—befitting the analytic aim in place—eventually reduced its descriptive richness. As we show, analysis worked hand in hand with methodology to produce the thin sociability of the impersonal.

The first four-and-a-half chapters of *Tearoom Trade* describe the project’s initial results. The various tearoom roles are presented in anonymous detail. For example, in chapter 3, titled “Rules and Roles,” fellating participants are distinguished into “insertee” and “inserter,” and the relative stability of their respective activities discussed. Related questions are raised. Do persons with particular social characteristics, such as being young and attractive, always serve as inserters? Does race matter in who serves as an insertee or inserter?

Chapter 4, “Patterns of Collective Action,” outlines the natural history of the sexual encounters, which are viewed in behavioral terms and divided into phases—approaching, positioning, signaling, maneuvering, contracting, foreplay, the payoff, and clearing the field. These are portrayed as conversationally silent engagements, allegedly between strangers, that begin with the participants’ entering the restrooms and standing in front of the urinals, either urinating or feigning urination (approaching and positioning). This is followed by a silent conversation of gestures leading to unspoken agreements (signaling, maneuvering, and contracting) to move to the toilet stalls for foreplay and fellatio and, rarely, additional sexual activity such as anal intercourse. The payoff is orgasm, which when completed leads to “wiping” and a quick departure from the premises. Anonymity and moral inconsequentiality stand out and flag the ostensible impersonality of city life.

The tearoom scene is represented as an unaccountable world, one that because of its thin moral veneer, effectively accomplishes what it does. Rainwater (1970) affirmed the social consequences this way:

Activity in the tearooms is organized to make what is highly stigmatized seem matter of fact and taken for granted. So long as there is no conversation and little gestural communication, the participants can mask the varying interpretations each privately makes of what is going on. One suspects that if the participants

talked freely about what they were doing they would not find it easy to maintain the gathering as a positive sum game. (p. x)

By and large, absent from the first half of *Tearoom Trade* are the thoughts, feelings, and identities of the participants. As anonymous inserters and insertees, they approach, signal, and maneuver one another in silent sexual dances. We are offered a detailed picture of the mechanics and role dynamics of the tearoom interaction and have little sense of the participants beyond their behaviorized representation.

The Available Data

Humphreys's observation sheets tell us more about the tearoom encounters than conveyed in the published material. At first blush, the sheets suggest that available data about the encounters are considerably richer than offered in the first part of the book, where the broader thesis about the remarkable anonymity and moral inconsequentiality of city life is supported by thin description. Humphreys does not take up a potentially thick description of the tearoom encounters to challenge the urban anonymity theme in place.

What recommended treating the otherwise rich observational material on sexual activity as irrelevant to his immediate concerns? Was this a matter of ignoring the available data or was there analytic justification for keeping the mostly silent encounters in view and ignoring the narrative activity that surrounded them? A close reading of the book suggests that the way both Rainwater and Humphreys defined and Humphreys subsequently discerned the encounters set them up as thin from the start. The initial urban anonymity theme of the project designated the observational boundaries of the encounters, casting anything other than their silent, behaviorized dynamics as something other than the data in view. The narrative evidence on the observation sheets was treated as *ancillary* to the otherwise thin evidence under consideration. This evidence was not to be taken as part of the data on the tearoom encounters but rather, treated as separate commentaries by participants *about* the otherwise thin encounters. The diagrammed and mostly silent tearoom actions were viewed as evidence of urban impersonality, not the surrounding, often intertwined participant commentaries. Urban anonymity, in other words, was operationally defined as diagrammed movements, which in turn supported the anonymity theme. There was good analytic reason for thin description.

Looking through Humphreys's systematic observation sheets, we have identified elements that could have produced thicker description in the first part of the book on tearoom activities had there been a more inclusive understanding of the social interaction in place. It is ironic that in the methods section of the book, Humphreys (1970) referred to the systematic observation

sheets rather than his interviews and conversations as his "richest source of data" (p. 37).

Two kinds of interactionally rich data are evident on the observation sheets—actual conversations and ethnographic traces of community life extending beyond the sexual encounters. These data usually appear in the last section of the observation sheets titled "Description of the Action." The following instructions (emphasis in the original) are indicated on the sheets after this title. Humphreys is clearly attentive to the degree and character of sociability between the participants of the tearoom's sexual encounters, as well as possible intrusions by outsiders, especially teenage hustlers who might cause trouble or otherwise harm the participants:

[note: when possible, indicate: delays in autos, etc., before entering tearoom . . . manner of approaches . . . types of sexual roles taken . . . nature of interruptions and reaction to them . . . ANYTHING WHICH MAY BE SPOKEN . . . any masturbation going on . . . actions of lookout(s) . . . REACTION TO TEENAGERS AND ANY PARTICIPATION BY THEM . . . reactions to observer . . . length of time of sexual acts . . . spitting, washing of hands, wiping, etc.]

The conversational material is made up of reconstructed exchanges between participants, snippets of which are either jotted down by Humphreys while in the field or reconstructed in their entirety soon after the day's observations are completed. Most of these are short, composed of a sentence or two of talk either within the tearooms or in the immediate environs. Serving as a watchqueen in the restrooms, Humphreys is very close to the action and can overhear even whispered exchanges, which he dutifully records. Participants in the sexual encounters often linger about the premises following sexual activity, either at the nearby drinking fountains or park bridges. This provides opportunities for additional conversation, especially between regulars.

The conversational material is telling. It suggests that the socially thin silence that Rainwater (1970) described in his foreword as a necessary feature of impersonal sex in public places and as characteristic of urban anonymity is surrounded by talk and interaction. Our sense of these conversations is that they are not a distinguishing feature of the sexual encounters as such, most of which are guided by a highly animated exchange of gestures, including eye movements, turns of the head, nods, manipulations of the penis, and bodily stances. In that sense, Rainwater was correct; the gestured exchanges themselves are mostly silent. Associated conversation is largely made up of *comments about* the sexual activities and the associated guiding gestures, data construed as separate from the encounters themselves. It is in this sense that conversation is taken to be ancillary to the otherwise thin empirical material in view, which of course serves to support the leading theme.

Within the tearooms, conversation is composed mostly of brief remarks that comment in some way on the sexual activities and gestures. For example,

the observation sheet for July 2, 1967, notes that C, an approximately 25-year-old male with a dark complexion and wearing dark green trousers and a light green shirt, asked Y, an insertee who has just finished an encounter, "Did he [X, the inserter] get satisfied?" Humphreys noted that Y responded, "Yes, I took care of him." Humphreys added that C laughed and said, "O.K." Similar brief commentaries on the action suggest that there are elements of style and fulfillment surrounding impersonal sex, which participants have in place, express concern about, and that periodically result in audible reflections on the success or failure of engagements. Even penis size, knowledge of which enters into judgments of style and success, are occasional points of shared desire and personal knowledge. The observation sheet for July 8, 1967, indicates that a large penis can be a source of envy. There also is evidence that there is shared knowledge of the penis size of regular participants, something hardly anonymous in the circumstances. As Humphreys described the ritual penis manipulation of participant Y in the encounter in question, we are privy to Humphreys's own access to this shared knowledge:

Y begins to manipulate his penis and gets erection. [I was envious as to size. I had spotted Y last Sunday and was told by "Dave" that he "has an 18 inch cock." After observation, I doubt this. It is probably 9" or 10" however.]

Tearoom silence may be broken by talk and interaction if the proceedings are not going smoothly or there is risk of intrusion. But again, this is treated as talk *about* anonymous sex, not as part of the activity itself, which is portrayed as thin. On one occasion, when the fellatio apparently is not as pleasurable as it might have been, an inserter is overheard commenting that the insertee is sucking too hard, which is followed by a brief audible apology by the insertee. Silence also is broken when there is suspicion that outsiders, especially children or teenagers, or the police, might intrude on the action. There are several entries in the observation notes in which Humphreys himself, as watchqueen, breaks the silence to point out that it is safe or unsafe to proceed. On one occasion, participant A, who is closely observing the action between the particular encounter of X and Y, seemingly acknowledges Humphreys's help as watchqueen and invites Humphreys to safely indulge himself in the action while A serves as watchqueen. Humphreys noted,

A moves toward me. Y moves to basin to wash hands and departs. A says, *sotto voce*, "Go ahead—I'll watch." I replied: "No, thanks. I've got to get home." And left.

The sheets show that there also are occasional audible references within the tearooms to the communal, not anonymous, environment surrounding encounters. Humphreys recorded many signs of recognition and social regularity. For example, in the notes for August 14, 1967, in taking his daily role as watchqueen, Humphreys recorded that he recognized X as a friend from previous encounters and said "hi" to him. A few days later, following an apology

to an inserter and insertee for possibly interrupting them ("I said, 'Hope I didn't interrupt you. Go ahead and I'll lookout for you'"), the observation notes for August 16 indicate that Humphreys overheard Y say to X as Y left the tearoom, "See you tomorrow."

These snippets of talk within the tearoom and related ethnographic notes offer evidence that what might otherwise be figured as impersonal sex with no conversation is larded with brief episodes of talk and sociability. Possible restroom intrusions by nonparticipants continually punctuate the action conversationally, as are appreciations of, and minor complaints about, particulars of the engagements. What is thinly coded as impersonal is continually mediated by communicated commentaries on desire and security. The combination provides the unacknowledged, thickly social organization of the thinness otherwise analytically focal, empirically assembled, and textually conveyed.

Lengthier conversations take place outside the tearooms, especially at surrounding water fountains and bridges, and in the more distant parking lots. Two of these conversations are testaments to additional rich material. The first of the lengthy conversations referenced on the observation sheets was recorded on July 15, 1967. Following the usual diagram of tearoom action, the following note appears at the bottom of the front page: "(see other side for account of subsequent conversation with Y"). Earlier, Y had been portrayed as a 55-year-old man with white hair, glasses in the pocket of his blue shirt, as being portly, and having a mustache. On the back page, Humphreys described the conversation that transpired that day at the nearby bridge, portions of which are extracted below:

When O [Humphreys] left tearoom, I saw Y standing on the bridge, leaning against the railing. I walked over to him and remarked about the beautiful weather. We then engaged in a conversation which extended over the next hour—with three interruptions for observation in the tearoom. Mostly, we discussed sex, the men who entered and left the tearoom, and a handsome young man who sat on the bridge railing about 15 ft. east of us.

Although I cannot remember enough of the conversation to recount it all, I shall note the points I consider important. Y is married, a physician, and a very pleasant person. He considers himself bi-sexual and happily married. Says that his wife just can't satisfy him. There is nothing at all effeminate about this man or "campy" in the style of his conversation. He thinks about 80% of the men who come to this tearoom are married. He is interested in men who can give him "a good blow job." "Experience is more important with me than looks," he says. [Y describes himself otherwise as only heterosexually active.] He thinks "a good blow job is better than banging pussy." He tries to come to this tearoom "nearly every evening about 5:30 for a quick job on the way home." He thinks this makes him a better husband. He knows most of the "regulars" who drop in around that time, which "makes the action move faster—no wasted time." He claims that the guys who blow him rave over "what a nice piece of meat" he has. [Y and O then speculate about the penis size of various other men.]

The observation sheets suggest that Humphreys is acquainted with Y, the physician, as well as other frequenters of the tearooms he observed. It is clear that the social environment immediately surrounding the encounters provides a rich source of contextual knowledge for both Humphreys and the participants he studied. The "rules and roles" Humphreys described in chapter 3 of his book are gleaned as much from these conversational sources as they are from systematic observation of the thinly described encounters. Yet, again, in the context of the analytic needs in place, these are understandably of marginal interest.

Later the same summer, on the second page of the observations dated August 16, 1967, Humphreys actually reconstructed a conversation he had at a park bridge with another Y, whom he had just observed being fellated in the nearby tearoom. Note the relative thinness and thickness of this data entry. The first part, which is thin, describes the encounter, which suggests that Y is a regular. This is followed by a relatively thick conversation that contains information on sexual preferences and biographical background. The reference to "chickens" is a comment on the particular risks of pursuing adolescent sexual partners. Although not evident in the following extracted conversation, this also calls attention to a tearoom siege by a group of teenaged hustlers during the study that became the topic of considerable talk and interaction among sexual participants, this time both within the tearooms and in related conversations on the surrounding premises. The siege, which temporarily transformed individualized and anonymous sex into the collective "we" of the participants under siege and the "they" of the hustlers, is a clear moment in local time and space when anonymity becomes richly evident social solidarity:

Y (who was B in observation #149) now moved over into second stall, unzipped and began masturbating. In about a minute, X (A in observation #149) began fellating him. I moved to door, right window, door again, and back to window. In less than 10 minutes, they were finished. As Y moved over into stall #1 where the [toilet] paper was, A entered. Y zipped up without wiping. A went to second urinal. Y departed and I followed him out. We walked down to the bridge together and stood there talking for about 15 minutes. A couple of the teenage kids from encounter #138 walked by on the bridge and looked us over. I watched them as they walked away. Y said: "Do you go for chicken?"

O - "It depends on the circumstances."

Y - "I like them more mature. Chickens are too dangerous."

O - "If you ask me, anything's dangerous in these tearooms."

Y - "Yeah, I prefer it in bed. That's what's nice about Miami, where I live.

There, a bunch of us know each other and go to our houses. There's always something going there . . ."

O - "Well, I can't do that here. I'm married."

Y - "Me, too. I've got 4 kids too. D'you have any?"

O - "Two little ones."

Y - "Of course, that doesn't make a difference. I could tell you some great stories about times I've taken a guy and his wife, too. A guy picked me up at the airport one day last winter, took me to a really swank home, showed me a bunch of fuck movies. Then we all went to bed. He went down on his wife and got her ready. Then I screwed her while she sucked him off. We went on all night that way."

O - "I don't think my wife would go for that."

Y - "You'd be surprised how many of them do, though. Mine doesn't either, but lots of husbands and wives get married just to work out such deals. Man, it's really great when you can get something like that going."

O - "I'll bet."

Y - "Of course, Florida is pretty great. They had some old temporary buildings for a while down at _____ University; and I've seen 6 guys going at once in gang bangs down there. The library is really hopping there, too."

O - "It sounds terrific. Gosh is it that late (looking at watch). I've got to get home for dinner. Hope I'll see you later."

Y - "I've got to get home, too. Oh, I'll be hanging out here for a week or so yet before we head back."

Data for a thick description of tearoom encounters are indeed available, but they are trumped, so to speak, by the study's informing theme. As long as the coding of the encounters is limited to the gestural and sheer sexual activities in question, the encounters are indeed relatively thin empirically and a resulting innocuous part of the urban scene. At the same time, but analytically uninteresting, their thin designs are shadowed by thickly social mediations.

New Motivation for Thin Description

It is well into the research project that Rainwater suggests to Humphreys that he record the license plate numbers of participants' automobiles, which someone in the motor vehicle department can trace for home addresses, and which Humphreys then can use to solicit anonymous interviews. Although the ethical and legal dimensions of this procedure certainly warrant consideration and indeed were extensively debated after the book was published (see retrospective commentary in the second edition of *Tearoom Trade*), the thickly descriptive results, which are presented in the second half of the book, begin to relate to a different approach to the empirical material. In the process, as a situated identity argument replaces the original urban anonymity theme, the thin tearoom encounters take on a different relevance.

The second half of *Tearoom Trade* centers on the interview material that Humphreys collected in participants' homes, the contents of which now contrast mightily in richness with the tearoom's thinly represented sexual

encounters. The second half of the book relates to a different theme about the situated and therefore limited culpability of sexual deviance. Focusing on the interview material, Humphreys emphasizes elements of personal biography and motives for behavior, which are only marginally apparent in earlier chapters.

The second half of the book is replete with descriptions of participants' marriages, family life, and neighborhood relations. The inner thoughts, feelings, and opinions of participants are center stage, which stand in considerable contrast with the focal thinness of the tearoom material presented earlier. Participants are not the silent and anonymous cardboard figures depicted diagrammatically on the systematic observation sheets and described in the early chapters as impersonal (urban) participants moving through the paces of brief sexual encounters. Instead, they emerge as full-blown, morally self-conscious subjects, otherwise known to be managing the realizations of their identity. As Wayne Brekhus (2003) featured in his book on the uses of sexual anonymity by suburban gay men, the argument in *Tearoom Trade* now takes up the social placements of the sexual self. The suburb and the city provide different scenarios for self-presentation, where the complex and thickly described actors in one location contrast with the single-sided participants of impersonal sex in the other location.

The title of chapter 6, "The People Next Door," is instructive. It suggests that those under consideration will be as fully characterized as neighbors. The tenor of fleeting anonymity is absent. "People next door" do not just come and go but instead, stay a while, get friendly, and under the best of circumstances, become neighborly—known to us in greater measure than the city's breezy encounters. The "people next door" convey community, a lifestyle, and personal characteristics shared in common, even as, unbeknownst to the neighborhood, the people next door may be the impersonal participants of anonymous sex in the secret public venues of city life.

The contrast contributes to the book's emergent theme, that deviant activity and its identities can be compartmentalized within the opportunity structures of urban environments, rendering it, by and large, harmless in the greater scheme of things. The chapter's epigraph makes the point very well; it is a statement from the anonymous wife of a homosexual quoted from *Good Housekeeping* magazine: "It was hard for me to grasp that men respected in their profession and devoted to their families could also be involved in furtive, 'queer' behavior. That happened in flashy novels, not to the people next door" (Humphreys, 1970, p. 104). The situated character of sexual identity is difficult for this wife to fathom.

The contrast between the focal thin description of tearoom participants and the thick description of the participants' personalities, families, and neighborhoods outside of the tearoom gives the new theme empirical punch. It is precisely by foregrounding issues of motive, personal biography, participants' social ties, and the broader context of their lives, now presented in con-

trast with the behaviorized features and thin roles of the tearoom, that urban deviance stands out as morally unremarkable. The thinness of tearoom participants' conduct as compared with their otherwise highly variegated lives ensconced at considerable distance from the park setting, makes their deviant status, not their urban anonymity, a "fact" blown way out of proportion. Humphreys (1970) felt justified in offering the following public policy recommendation:

In order to alleviate the damaging side effects of covert homosexual activity in tearooms, ease up on it. Every means by which these men are helped to think better of themselves and to relate to others in the homosexual subculture will lessen any threat they may constitute for the society at large. (p. 166)

Thinness in the representation of tearoom activity remains throughout the book, but this is informed by a different analytic aim in the first part than in the second part of the book. Tearoom activity is continuously construed as thin as one analytic aim replaces the other. In the end, thinness has served two analytic masters, obviating the plenitude of the available data.

CONCLUSION

The hallmark of naturalistic work is the presentation of richly scenic data, not exclusively the frequency, distribution, and patterned relationships evident in research material. *Tearoom Trade* presents Humphreys as a naturalist and takes the reader into the setting in which the action unfolds. His is a "survey" in Mayhew's (1868) sense of the term, in which a social landscape is entered into and personally observed for complex patterns of living and distinctive social worlds. But the idiom and related empirical purview are tempered by developing research themes. Contrary to expectation for naturalistic inquiry especially, thick description is not simply given but wends its way representationally in relation to analytic needs.

The case material suggests that there is no direct relationship between rich data and thick description. Although thick description is typically applauded in juxtaposition to thin description, this is a disembodied appreciation. Internal to the qualitative research enterprise is an unacknowledged contrast stemming from the variable thickness and thinness within. Qualitative researchers of various persuasions marginalize some forms of richness to make a case for other forms and if perhaps unwittingly, in the process they make good on a related need for thin description. The poignancy of qualitative inquiry's distinctive thick description derives as much from such internal contrasts as it does from its status as a special kind of inquiry.

Qualitative researchers always know more about the lives, events, and settings they study than appears in their notes and texts. In some measure, this applies to all forms of scientific inquiry, but the distinctive in situ character of

qualitative inquiry—where participation itself serves as the inquiring instrument—results in extensive undocumented knowledge, not just unused information. If the participant-observer presents information in the form of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, archival material, and available documents, data also are stored in the memory of having “been there,” of having been part of the action under consideration. Thinness and thickness are also an intrinsic feature of this difference, something which we have not explored here but which needs further consideration in relation to empirical purview, analytic aims, and published data. In this case, both thinness and thickness come with the territory because the researcher himself or herself was “there” and part of the social world in view, but variably attentive to it.

All research can be faulted for failure to take up empirical material, a common enough type of criticism. Study after study is justified on the grounds that existing research ignores, slights, or otherwise misrepresents particular matters of empirical interest, a textual practice that has as much rhetorical cache as it leads to new “findings,” including richer data. The form of empirical thinness we have considered here extends beyond that, stemming from preinvestigative empirical preferences as well as from the analytic needs of a study that provide working horizons of their own for data relevance. This is as much a part of qualitative research as it is integral to research as a whole, and is a basis of the continuing need for both thin and thick description within qualitative inquiry.

Rich data are not qualitative inquiry’s only persuasive strength. Without casting aspersions on richness, it is important to acknowledge that this form of inquiry also draws credibility from the nuanced analyses it puts into place. This serves to equally persuade and works against universal criteria for good qualitative research. As we have noted, the richness of description depends as much on empirical purview and analytic need, as it is a feature of the available data. This should be taken into account in judging the quality of qualitative studies. Simply put, some qualitative studies are thin on certain fronts because, for good preinvestigative, analytic, and empirical reasons, they need to be. Some qualitative studies are thick where others are rightfully thin. Acknowledging such differences broadens the scope of what is laudable in the enterprise.

NOTES

1. Catherine Bateson’s (1984) account of her mother Margaret Mead’s travels in the South Pacific looking for richly variegated cultures in which to do fieldwork is telling in this regard. Some societies, Mead concluded, are thin on symbolic traditions, making them less rich contexts for studying culture than others. This knowledge influenced Mead’s selection of cultures in which to conduct her research.

2. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) considered four idioms in their book. A third idiom, which the authors labeled “emotionalism,” is thick on what adherents take to be the

affective bearings or “wellsprings” of social life and understandably thin on its constructive and/or categorical details. A fourth idiom of qualitative inquiry, labeled “postmodernism,” recognizes the epistemological play in representational practices and takes up thinness and thickness as rhetorical strategies, which can altogether eclipse naturalistic and ethnomethodological richness, the two idioms used in this article for illustration.

3. Ethnomethodological studies vary in the extent that the situational or especially the institutional groundings of talk and social interaction are highlighted (see Heritage, 1984). For example, the conversation analytic stream of this idiom, called studies of “institutional talk” or “talk-at-work,” provides fairly detailed descriptions of communicative environments because of the theoretically prompted need to trace the institutional mediations of patterns of talk and interaction. This is more thinly inscribed in the empirical material corralled by conversation analytic work limited to sequential analysis, where interest centers on the formal structures or machinery of talk.

4. The two halves of D. Lawrence Wieder’s (1974) seminal ethnography of a halfway house provide a reflexive comparison of the procedural differences between, and empirical consequences of, these idioms in a single study.

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