On Thick Description and Narrative Inquiry in Music Education

By

Estelle R. Jorgensen

Indiana University Jacobs School of Music

Bloomington, IN USA

February 2008

Presented to “Narrative Soundings”
Arizona State University
February 7-9, 2008

The use of “thick description” is evident in various research traditions in the social sciences. Important in American anthropology in the latter half of the twentieth century, it has been imported somewhat uncritically into educational research. In our time, it is also seen as a means whereby scholars and scholar-practitioners can generate new descriptive knowledge and recover knowledge that has been lost or fallen into obscurity. My present task is to notice the philosophical roots of thick description in the work of Gilbert Ryle and its subsequent use by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. I also note Adam Kuper’s critique of Geertz’s anthropological use of the term. And after rescuing aspects of thick description, I sketch implications for narrative inquiry in music education.

Ryle’s Notion of Thick Description

Gilbert Ryle thinks of the word “thinking” as an “adverbial verb,” that is, it “pyramids.” Each adverb depends or is parasitic on the other before it. As a case in point, Ryle asks us to think of a person breakfasting. In his words,

> “If I am eating my breakfast, you may tell me to hurry over my breakfast. If I obey you, I do so not by breakfasting, since I am doing that already, but by accelerating the rate of my breakfasting. I am then obediently hurrying over my breakfast. If I resent your command but dare not disobey it, then I am with reluctance obeying your command to hurry over my breakfast, I am reluctantly, obediently, hurriedly breakfasting. I am not reluctantly breakfasting; nor necessarily reluctantly hurrying over my breakfast; I am with reluctant obedience hurrying over my breakfast, though I might have cheerfully hurried over it if you had ordered me not to do so.”[1]

Ryle also evokes the word “practising” as with a man practising his golf strokes. The golfer is not actually playing the game while practising, but he is engaged in a sort of “self-training” in order to improve his “approach-shots in matches to come.”[2] In this regard, a thick description of what he is engaged in doing also requires reference to his thought process. For Ryle, there are two things going on: the first condition is “intention-parasitism,” that is, the golfer’s practicing is related to his purpose in making match-shots; the second condition is “circumstance detachment,” that is, in some respect, the golfer’s practice-shots differ from his shots in the midst of a match.[3] These two conditions are practically related and the thick description entails layer upon layer of meaning that surrounds the action, whether it be breakfasting or practising golf.

For Ryle, thick description is a means of interpreting or explicating thoughts rather than actions, and thereby of understanding things philosophically. He gives us the example of Rodin’s sculpture, *le Penseur* (“The Thinker”). Here, Ryle supposes that le Penseur is

> “a composer who is trying to compose a Hungarian Rhapsody, whatever that is. Yesterday he sat at a piano, trying out notes and note-sequences on the keys. The piano notes that ‘thinly’ he produced, ‘thickly’ were cancellings, modifyings, assemblings, reassemblings, rehearsings, etc. for what future trumpeters and violinists will hopefully, be playing. Today, owing to spring-cleaning in his home, he is sitting on a rock on the hillside, half-humming notes and note-sequences, cancelling and modifying them, rehearsing them, etc. Today, unlike yesterday, he uses no instrument.”[4]

As we see by this example, thick description attempts to get beyond superficial description to see the richness of thought and purpose that might lie behind the action. Regarding le Penseur in this

way reveals Ryle's conditions of circumstance-disengagement (in which one is thinking about another activity or rehearsing for a performance) and intention-parasitism (in that one activity depends on other things). And Ryle shows how one might build up layer upon layer of speculation or inference about what might be going on.

In another essay, "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' Doing?" Ryle elaborates on his idea of thick description with reference to what may be going on when two boys wink. A wink could be described physically by a simple movement of eye muscles. Beyond this, a parody may be taking place that can be thickly described as "a multi-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by that thinnest description."[5] The parody can involve layer upon layer of understood meaning and the physical act of winking may pyramid into a variety of learned conventional acts and interpretations of what is conveyed by the wink. One focuses on the thoughts surrounding the action and articulates their supposed meanings–the whole of which enables a greater richness in understanding the physical acts. In its philosophical incarnation, rather than focus on actions in the phenomenal world, thick description concerns the symbolic meanings that these actions have. And the point of thick description, at least as Ryle understands it, is to speculate on the nature and meaning of thoughts about actions.

Now, when this term is used by Clifford Geertz, it takes on a different hue. As an ethnographer who studied people and sought to interpret the meanings of what he saw, Geertz was influenced earlier by the writings of Susanne Langer and Nelson Goodman on the role and function of symbols in human thought and action. Later, he also drew on the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Frederick Nietzche, and Jerome Bruner. Among the clearest of his explanations of thick description is his essay, "Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture."[6]

Geertz sees in Ryle's example of winking an image of the "sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which an ethnographer is trying to pick his [or her] way." As he puts it, no anthropological data is directly observed by the ethnographer but "Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating: and worse, explicating explications. Winks upon winks upon winks." And the ethnographer's job is to sort out "the structures of signification" or the symbolic meanings that actions have for their participants.[7]

How does one go about doing this work? For Geertz, like a literary critic, one asks what another's actions mean and looks beyond them to attempt to construct the world as it might be apprehended, sensed, felt, and understood by that other.[8] These constructions must necessarily be "fictions" created by the observer rather than refutable propositions. In Geertz's view, the native has direct or first-order experience. The objective of thick description is to "clarify" or "reduce the puzzlement" about what goes on in the lives of different others.[9] It has morphed, under Geertz's treatment, from a philosophical technique that might help one understand one's own thought and practice to a procedure for attempting to clarify the thoughts and practices of different others.

Employing thick description as a technique for empirical investigation requires further questions: How can one be sure that one's observation is valid? Whose observations and views on them count? Geertz wants to sidestep questions of "verification" of ethnographic findings in favor of less scientifically-charged terms such as "appraisal"–a notion that seems more consonant with the arts rather than the sciences. He suggests testing one's conclusions by checking one's findings with the "natives" because they are closer to first-order experience and

their constructions of reality matter most in coming to understand their beliefs and actions.[10] This position overlooks the problem that the natives may not see what the researcher sees because they are in the midst of actions in terms of taken-for-granted assumptions and points of view that may differ from the researcher's and be invisible to them because they are so commonsensical.[11] Still, Geertz urges the researcher to attend carefully to events in the phenomenal world because they provide important clues to the underlying symbolic systems. And one should not expect that everything will be neat and tidy for, writes Geertz, "there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's delusion or a swindler's story."[12]

Regarding theory, Geertz argues for its subjectivity and challenges the strict division between theory and data, or between science and the humanities. Ethnographers write down, "inscribe," or "translate" ideas that come to or are prompted for them. This writing down and accounting for things, and fixing them in particular "perusable forms" that are "inspectable" are among the central research tasks that seem less complete the more that one pursues them.[13] Although such microscopic studies are laboriously built up from "local truths to general visions," the knowledge generated by thick description is particularistic or microcosmic rather than contributing to universals, generalizations, or scientific laws.[14] Here, theory is approached very cautiously and merely insinuated rather than stated categorically because, in Geertz's view, anthropologists lack the power to state it unequivocally. For him, thick description relates to immediate circumstances and is bound closely to them. "What generality it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions not the sweep of its abstractions." Or, as he puts things, "Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them."[15] For Geertz, the "essential task

of theory building" "is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize with them." As such, theory is not predictive in the scientific sense but serves to generate "interpretations of matters already in hand."[16] In this view, there is no such thing as "moral neutrality" or "God's truth idea." Thinking is an ethical and moral undertaking. One's findings incur obligations to the informants after the research is complete and may complicate rather than simplify one's understandings. And undertaking thick description prompts ethical imperatives towards changing one's lived life and those of others.[17]

Kuper's critique

Adam Kuper's critique of Geertz's views is couched within the wider problem of Geertz's views on culture.[18] Kuper has a more complex and inclusive view of culture than does Geertz, and in this respect, his views accord with those of Seyla Benhabib who likewise problematizes the word culture, although differently to Kuper.[19] Sidestepping these differences, what is at issue, here, is Kuper's critique of the notion of thick description. For Kuper, Geertz turns away from sociological and scientific stances towards his philosophical roots; his "hermeneutic" view of culture requires that observers "filter" or interpret their observations of what people do through the "interpretations" that people "make of their actions." This leaves the ethnographer "explicating explications." By the time that the original actions that prompt the analysis reach the reader, they are already second- or third-hand. Kuper believes that although interpretations may be important, people also act directly in ways that can be directly observed. He is not satisfied with Geertz's assertion that the best that the observer can hope for in these circumstances is a dialogue with informants, the capacity for "ego effacement and fellow

feeling," and a sense of "communion" with those who are observed.

Kuper is also critical of Geertz's hermeneutic approach to culture which relies on an argument by analogy that culture is like a text that can be read by a literate person. Aside from the problem that every analogy ultimately has limits and breaks down, Kuper also cites Geertz's well-known analysis of the Balinese cockfight as a possible misreading of events. In Kuper's view, Geertz believes that the "dangerous emotions" he has read into the event are really there and that he has "penetrated the hidden depths of the Balinese psyche." [20] Instead, thinks Kuper, Geertz may be superimposing his own beliefs and values on these different others and imagining that every society has its "own forms of violence", and the cockfight is theirs.

Also, in constructing a story that looks like a text, Kuper notes that Geertz does not attend to "the way in which the text is made up," the problem of whether some versions are better than others, and the basis on which the claims of each version are to be adjudicated. How is one to assess the degree to which Balinese cockfights are like plays of Macbeth, or the 'hidden, subversive aspirations and values of Balinese men" as manifested in their cockfights?[21] Geertz gives us no way to verify the truth-claims of these versions. As Kuper sees things, "the implication seems to be that behind the texts constructed by informants there is a deeper text that can be read only by the cosmopolitan scientist, who is equipped with other, culturally foreign expertise."[22] The layers upon layers of texts are added to by the ethnographer who is reading a "fragmentary and fleeting text over the shoulder of her informants but she is also fabricating a text of her own. At the end of the day, one is left with no way to judge anything much except an author's "dissimulations and the critic's skill in unmasking them."[23]

For Kuper, reading society as text and basing the analysis on figurative constructions

ultimately transforms ethnography into poetry. The ethnographer's task becomes one of finding fruitful metaphors to "shape a new text." One way to see these metaphors is in terms of their fecundity in generating more extended accounts that intersect with other accounts, thereby "widening their implications and deepening their hold." If one accepts the metaphor of a text, then, as Kuper puts it, one metaphor illumines another and "the best ones generate new metaphors, by a chaste but fruitful process that somehow is its own justification. The poetics of culture becomes a kind of poetry in itself. And the ethnographer discovers that he [she] has been writing poetry all along."[24] And in Kuper's view, this reality seems more like art or philosophy than science.

Critique of the critique

Kuper's characterization of Geertz's views is almost a caricature or an argument *reductio ad absurdum.* His critique of Geertz's excessively interpretivist stance is a case in point. Regarding the possibility of first-hand knowledge that is unfiltered, and the researcher's ability to penetrate what is really going on, Geertz would not say, as Kuper suggests, that researchers cannot know events firsthand. His point, rather, is to attempt to describe what goes on in their heads as they analyze and interpret the meaning of what they have observed. The selective perception of social events is also well documented in the psychological and sociological literatures; to a point, one finds what one wants or expects to find. Nor would Geertz say that an observer does not or cannot acquire knowledge of different others commensurate with their own knowledge. Rather, Geertz would argue, even if this were possible, things are not that simple. There is still a construction to be put on things by the ethnographer. And for Geertz, there is no

all-knowing ethnographer, as Kuper suggests, just a person trying to make sense of things and very much aware of the limitations of her or his stance.

Kuper is inclined to dichotomize facts and interpretations of them. His example of the mystery of Captain Cook's murder in late eighteenth-century Hawaii is a case in point. He is convinced that one interpretation can be objectively truer than another. For him, if one could find all the relevant data, the mystery of what happened to Captain Cook could be solved and the truth ascertained. Still, the destruction of Hawaiian documents on which such a determination might be made suggests that data is never complete because some data are deliberately suppressed, ignored, or destroyed. Also, Kuper fails to address the matter of multiple valid although different interpretations and the problem of which data and whose data these are. In Geertz's defense, not only is objectivity difficult to achieve in the social world but requiring a particular narrative to be objectively true would also necessitate that all the actors in the story are omniscient and omnipotent, and obviously, this is not the case.

On the other hand, Kuper's concerns about the validation and evaluation of texts and truth claims of metaphors, analogies, and the like, have merit. Failing to recognize the possibility of fictionalizing lived situations and creating spurious accounts that become self-propagating narratives or reducing scholarship that wants to know if or that such-and-such is the case to poetic discourse that wants to know how it has this meaning is to do a disservice to the distinctions that may be made between the arts and the sciences. Ducking responsibilities to know the world in a wide way and failing to be interested in generalities while absorbed by particularities seems irresponsible and takes too narrow a view, especially when social consequences follow from knowledge of these particulars. And failing to see the limits of

analogies and metaphors, and uncritically equating a text with the reality that it supposedly represents is to think simplistically and fail to see the complexities of both texts and lived lives.

Analyzing thick descriptions suggests possible differences of views on the “thickness” or “thinness” of a particular description and various interpretations of the meanings of events. For example, Steven Feld’s first analysis of mythmaking and music among the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea needed revision after it was criticized by the Kaluli who interpreted things differently. Likewise, there may be multiple viewpoints on the meaning of events in the Balinese cockfight described by Geertz. These differences arise from the fact that what observers find or think about what they find depends on their perspectives within or without a social system. The ambiguity of the notion of “thick description” and its role as an “ideal type” (or theoretical type viewed comparatively with its opposite) opens the prospect of multiple interpretations that are judged comparatively. Thick descriptions are justified in terms of the perspectives of the observer, and not so much in terms of arbitrary views of what is “correct” or “incorrect.” Kuper is searching for refutable propositions, that is, assertions that can be demonstrated to be incorrect. By contrast, Geertz raises the problem of multiple perspectives and the difficulties of interpreting and adjudicating them, and the multiple constructions of “worlds” or the various “lenses” through which observers see their worlds. These ambiguities are a necessary fact of social life. On the one hand, Geertz’s presumption that those whose culture this is, the “natives” as he calls them, are the only ones to arbitrate a “correct” interpretation of events, is arguably racist and ethnocentric. Suggesting that only those who are born within a particular culture can have the “correct” view–shades of John Blacking’s argument that the only ones to make Venda music correctly are those who are born Venda–ignores the fact that immigrants regularly

negotiate new cultures and become absorbed into them.[25] On the other hand, in Geertz's defense, the relationships between observers and observed, researcher and informant are sometimes ambiguous, vexed, and even ethically problematic. And there seem to be no easy answers to these challenges practically speaking.

Geertz recognizes the limits of "reading" social events as "texts" and the possibilities of creating "fictions" that are not only constructions or translations of events but potentially false or misleading, and lacking the means of being tested. Nevertheless, Kuper forwards the value of testing these constructions and translations against the views of participants, and making the sorts of distinctions that relate to, are informed by, or inform social theories or hypotheses about how things might work. In thinking about this problem of the nature of the social theories that researchers are after, Paul Farnsworth notices that the sorts of "laws" that govern social relationships are of a different sort than scientific laws that govern the natural world. I find this point persuasive because while one may wish to make sense of the social world just as one seeks to understand the natural world, the particular ways in which one does this differ because of differences in the phenomena under study.[26] Geertz's grasp of these differences and the specific nature of the propositions and theories that generate or emerge from empirical investigations of society and culture and the role of thick description as a means of making sense of observed social and cultural phenomena alert social researchers to the importance of putting their theoretical constructions to the test and developing ways to evaluate the "worth" of observations and analyses. Failing to do this critical work by taking ideological positions that eschew objectivity and embracing subjectivity as the sole means and ends of narrative inquiry can miss the larger picture of also attempting to figure out ways of testing these theories. Nor does it

suffice to tell narratives uncritically. Rather, it is also important which particular theories, hypotheses, and lenses inform and make sense of these narratives, and how the constructions that are "created" are assessed for their validity as justifiable ways of seeing the world. And matters of the validity and reliability of observations are also important in ensuring that these narratives are faithful to the events under examination, robust in articulating the deeper meanings of these events, careful in their critical examination and reflection about things seen and unseen, and alert to the complexities of these issues.

Kuper's critique prompts us to the dark side of "thick description" and the possibilities of its lacking sufficient robustness, clarity, and defensiveness as a means and end of social and cultural research. He notices how self-perpetuating, subjective, and uncritical analyses may create fictions, art rather than science, and fail to advance materially our knowledge of the ways in which human beings interact socially. The figurative basis for this technique has limits, and there are dangers in thinking exclusively in terms of analogies and metaphors: these may prompt imaginative thought, but they cannot suffice. These difficulties notwithstanding, thick descriptions also enable important insights into society and culture. Breaking down the either/or dichotomies between facts and interpretations, and seeing both to be, to some extent, objective, subjective, and analogical requires a broad and holistic research attitude. Thick description is imaginative in its reliance on intuition, feeling, perception, and reason.[27] It is learned through practical experience. Assumptions can be tested and claims cautiously stated and open to revision over time. Rather than thinking of discrete, first-order, second-order and third-order experiences, immediately experienced or observed at a distance, thick description softens these boundaries and melds these distinctions that are regarded as fuzzy at the edges. In understanding

the importance of particularities, thick description also generates informed guesses, hunches, or hypotheses that might guide the search for generalizations. As such, it moves from subjectively known to objectively known understandings as ideas are tested within the wider community of scholars. It blurs the distinctions between the researcher and the researched, the observer and the participant, while also seeking to understand reasons for the various ways in which they each think and act. In so doing, it dignifies the ways in which those who are observed make sense of their world. It acknowledges the power of symbolic thinking whereby humans make meaning in their lived lives and the fallibility and the incompleteness of understanding. And although it constitutes an important way of investigating social events, there are limits to its use and value as an investigative tool.

Implications

Where does this leave the research of the social and cultural events that make up the greater part of music education as it is practiced around the world? First, while the importance of subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and the relativity of knowledge may be acknowledged, objectivity is also important because people act regularly in everyday life as if there is a commonsensical and objectively or collectively known reality. This is not Objectivity (upper-case O) in the hard and positivistic sense of absolute knowledge of reality. Rather, it is objectivity (lower-case O) in the soft sense of knowledge that continues to be tested and verified, where multiple perspectives are combined to establish shared understandings that continue to be subject to revision but are useful for the present and taken as more-or-less trustworthy. Rather than leave things entirely at the whim of subjectivity, there is a move to test and establish understanding toward something

more verifiable and sustainable. Habits, mores, attitudes, beliefs, and practices are forged within the context of certain commonly accepted assumptions about how things should be thought about and done. Judgments are made and public policies are constructed on the basis that certain agreed-upon tenets do govern collective and individual existence. Notwithstanding disagreements about these assumptions and the varying "assumptive frames of reference," or particular and existentially developed perspectives on lived life, there are public realities and shared understandings about self, other, and whatever lies beyond.[28] Perspectives on these realities may be multi-modal, but some analyses are regarded as better than others as means of grasping the integrity, complexity, and bases for these particular realities as they are known by practitioners and observers. These distinctions may blur practically speaking, but to negate any role for objectivity would be to deny a characteristic feature of social and cultural interaction between human beings. And while these realities may be contested, sometimes bitterly, protagonists of particular views are also cognizant of opposing, disjunct, or similar positions, and ideas and practices are regularly debated in public spaces.

If objectivity is to have a role in the research enterprise, the thick descriptions generated by researchers need to be put to the test. A variety of ways present including logical tests of coherence, correspondence with evidence, and consistency of the observations with themselves that are applied to qualitative traditions closest to philosophy. I think, for example, of Alfred Pike's classic phenomenological study of musical experience, and of Douglas Bartholomew's phenomenological analysis of music teaching.[29] Among other mechanisms, "triangulation" invokes a navigational metaphor of lining up lights or stars at the entrance to a harbor as a compass to guide one's travel; it requires that each point when combined with others locates a

position with greater certitude than one taken alone.[30] In counterpoint to triangulation, "crystallization" suggests the metaphor of distilling or expressing the sense of a thing, doubtless changing its actual composition in the doing, but nevertheless, creating something that is of worth. We think, for example, of John Dewey's metaphor of expressing grapes into wine.[31] An educational case in point is Theresa Hurley's description of international-mindedness in an international school in Cairo, Egypt.[32] Various techniques such as member-checking allow researchers to consult informants about what the researcher has made of the information they have provided and its meaning for them, Continuing to investigate a phenomenon until the researcher begins to hear the same things again and again provides yet another strategy for testing the validity and reliability of researcher observations. In carefully doing these sorts of things, the researcher hopes to attain a measure of objectivity so that one's findings "ring true" for oneself, participants generally, some participants individually, those outside a social system but in a position to know about it, and other researchers. And, this search for public knowledge is, to some degree, objective, and akin to the procedure that René Descartes outlined as a basis for what became known as the scientific method.[33]

It is impossible to avoid some interpretation of data within the phenomenal world. Thick description reminds one of the importance not only of describing things richly but of understanding the difference between researchers' descriptions of events and what those who are being observed think about what they do. Since an observer's position in relation to the things being studied reveals as much as hides what is visible, observations and descriptions need to be as clear as possible about the positionality of the observer and the context in which observations are made. Such observations are contingent in terms of the observer's and subject's fallibility

and incomplete knowledge. Still, observers and informants can describe what they see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and grasp psychologically, socially, musically, historically, and theologically. They can frankly admit the biases, shortsightedness, limitations, and delimitations that constrain their knowledge of particular events. Seeing truthfully requires meticulous and extensive study over prolonged periods of time if one is to do justice to the complexities and multi-layered meanings that may lurk beneath a cursory or superficial appearance of things. Since actions are multi-faceted, it is easy to mistake or misinterpret what is going on. Some things may be readily visible but observers and even informants are not necessarily privy to or aware of all of the beliefs and practices that help to explain this situation. Informants may seek to mislead others, lie, or otherwise put constructions on things that show themselves in the best light. Also, they may be unwilling to share with researchers the privileged knowledge open only to initiates in their social group. Sometimes, deceptions may only be unmasked over a prolonged period of observation, if at all. These possibilities suggest the need for contingency and openness to reinterpreting findings later. Still, the clearer researchers are in describing their position and the context of their observations, the more readily others can test and advance knowledge about their findings and it is likely that social and cultural attributions and explanations may need revision, extension, elaboration, or refutation over time. Public knowledge is advanced through observing carefully, acknowledging the complexity of the phenomena under study, and attempting to come to a richer understanding of these phenomena. Beyond narrative inquiry, scientists such as physicists, astronomers, or biologists, also face a similar possibility of deceptions in the state of the things that they study, and they, too, may be unable to grasp fully a context that turns out to be much larger, more complex, or even simpler than they had imagined. And irrespective of the

research undertaken, the necessity for proceeding carefully is patent.

Other implications of thick description follow for the theory and practice of music education. Ultimately, the work of music teachers is practical and social, tinged with affect and ethical responsibility. Music education research potentially impacts public policy decisions concerning how people should and do come to a knowledge of music. Discontinuities between theory and practice are also evident.[34] The symbolic character of human thought and practice, the use of languages of various sorts, and the behaviors predicated upon or contributing to these understandings all complicate efforts to understand richly and truly the state-of-affairs under study, and analyze, describe, and communicate these phenomena in ways that can be grasped clearly by the various constituencies and stakeholders of music education. Thick description has its roots firmly in philosophy, and its use makes all research somewhat philosophical. Actions are imbued with meaning and beliefs that have practical and ethical consequences. Since ideas impact sensory perception, there are ever-present dangers of misconstruing what is observed, claiming too much or too little of research findings, and finding what one expects to find because one expects to find it. Hence, the importance of allowing a situation to "speak" so that one hears and is open to receiving and undergoing it rather than just actively engaging with it. Among the philosophers to recognize this principle, Edmund Husserl advocated a method for doing philosophy that required one to remain in a state of openness and receptivity and maintain a certain naivety and childlike wonder, so that ideas might come to one rather than be constructed continuously.[35] And John Dewey pointed to the active and passive aspects of experience, the doing and undergoing essential if one is to deeply, broadly, and richly engage with subject matter.[36]

Rather than just thinking of thick description hierarchically, in which one excavates "down" through the substrata of ideas and practices, one may also see it as a multifaceted enterprise. A particular situation has a history, a theology, a particular organizational structure, ethical and legal codes, and ways of interpreting interpersonal interactions. This situation makes particular demands on people within specific times and spaces that can be examined physiologically, psychologically, institutionally, societally, anthropologically, philosophically, musically, and in other ways. A thick description needs to take into account these various facets. The richer the description, the more likely that one can uncover a nuanced view of ideas and practices. In thickly describing music education, it would be helpful to discover models that allow rich and detailed descriptions and interpretations of the broad array of phenomena that count as music education. And this is true not only for narrative inquiry but over the entire array of music education research traditions.

What, then, are the criteria of exemplary thick descriptions in music education? From the foregoing discussion it is clear that they need to be relevant to the situations being studied, systematic of their principal elements, faithful to the observations and data gathered, meticulous and detailed narratives, inclusive of all the aspects that are unearthed even those that seem to be "outliers" to the general population or sample, analyzed in the context of and reflective of what the data seem to suggest, checked with participants, reported dispassionately yet compassionately, clearly articulated with respect to the researchers' perspectives, assumptions, and situatedness, described richly, analyzed rigorously, documented meticulously, and written unpretentiously in language that is clear to an intelligent reader who is likely to have an interest in the findings. Of course, the same might be said of all research in music education.

Nor can one overlook the matter of the ethical valency of the research enterprise in music education and the quality of imaginative thought that is shot through with felt life. Thick description challenges the archetypal divisions between the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor parts of thought-action. It suggests that research ought to have consequences for the betterment of thought and practice in the future. It challenges the community of researchers to consider its continuing obligations to participants and informants who make possible its research findings. It reminds one of the importance of studying phenomena that are crucial to the work of music teachers and students and disseminating one's work to people who could be impacted by one's findings. Narrative inquiry may be particularly accessible to music teachers, and it demonstrates ways to do scholarship that are significant and relevant to the thought and practice of music education and show how scholars can contribute toward creating a more civil and cultured society. And these special obligations to the field of music education are likewise applicable to scholars across the gamut of research traditions in the field.

In sum, thick description needs to be seen across the entire spectrum of music education research. In summarizing the intellectual roots of thick description, its anthropological use by Geertz and critique by Kuper, and assessing its detractions and potential contributions, it is evident that qualitative and quantitative approaches to music education research have much in common. While it may be important to distinguish these differing traditions, much can be gained by thinking of narrative inquiry as akin to other branches of scholarship in music education. Description and explanation have differing specific contributions to make to music education research and practice. Still, all scholarship needs to evidence critical thinking, generosity of spirit, and intellectual rigor. It is important not to lose sight of one's ethical obligations as

researchers to improve the theory and practice of music education towards greater humanity, civility, and a love of what is good, true, and beautiful.[37] And in so doing, those engaged in narrative inquiry or interested in its work can point the way towards more humane scholarship and practice in music education.

Notes

---

1. Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers* Vol. II: *Collected Essays. 1929-1968* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 473-474. Hereafter cited as Ryle, *CP.*
2. Ryle, *CP*, 474.
3. Ryle, *CP*, 475.
4. Ryle, *CP*, 477.
5. Ryle, *CP*, 482.
6. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures.* Hereafter cited as IC.
7. Geertz, *IC*, 9, 10.
8. Geertz, *IC*, 9.
9. Geertz, *IC*, 16.
10. Geertz, *IC*, 14, 16.
11. *Local Knowledge*, 58. Hereafter cited as *LK*
12. Geertz, *IC*, 18.
13. Geertz, *LK*, 44, chap. W; *IC*, 19, 20, 30.
14. Geertz, *IC 22; LC, passim.*
15. Geertz, *IC*, 24.
16. Geertz, *IC, 25, 27.*
17. Geertz, *AL,* 21, 41, 82, 144, 256, 260 and chap. 11, entitled, "The World in Pieces"; *LK*, 41, 44, 54.
18. Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
19. Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), especially chap. 1.
20. Kuper, 106-109.
21. Kuper, 112
22. Kuper, 112.
23. Kuper, 113.
24. Kuper, 114.
25. John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).
26. Paul Randolph Farnsworth, *Musical Taste: Its Measurement and Cultural Nature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1950).
27. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), passim, writes on the power of imagination and the construction of worlds beyond the phenomenal.
28. Edward A. Tiryakian, "Existential Phenomenology and the Sociological Tracition," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 674-688, and his "Sociology and Existential Phenomenology," in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, vol. 1, ed., Maurice Natanson (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 187-222.
29. Alfred Pike, *A Phenomenological Analysis of Musical Experience and Other Essays* (New York: St. John's University Press, 1970); Douglas Bartholomew, "Sounds Before Symbols: What Does Phenomenology Have to Say?" *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3 (1) (Spring

1995): 3-9. Also see the special issue of the *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3 (1) (Spring 1995) on phenomenology and music education.
30. On triangulation, see, for example, Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion, *Research Methods in Education*, 4th ed. (London, UK and New York NY: Routledge, 1994), 233-51; John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Research and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 202.
31. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* ([1934]; repr., New York NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), 64.
32. Theresa Hurley, "International-mindedness in an International School in Cairo, Egypt," Doctoral diss., Walden University, 2006.
33. For an online English translation, see Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* at Project Gutenberg, trans., unknown, http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext93/dcart10.txt, accessed November 12, 2007.
34. See Joseph J. Schwab, "The Practical: Arts of Eclectic," *School Review* 79 (1971): 493-542; Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), chap. 16.
35. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans., W. R. Boyce Gibson ([1931]; repr., London, UK: Collier-McMillan, 1962).
36. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* ([1934]; repr., New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), especially chap. 3.
37. For a defense of these values, see Estelle R. Jorgensen, *The Art of Teaching Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), chap. 2, forthcoming.