



Neopagan Narratives: Knowledge Claims and Other World 'Realities'

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Abstract

The late Charles Tilly argued that good social science required both detailed analyses of the minutiae of everyday life and of the big structures and large social processes. This paper argues that analyses of social scientists' everyday practices, and particularly of their autobiographical narratives, are one way to illuminate the large-scale social processes that are ongoing in the social sciences. The specific focus, ethnography on neopagans, leads to a discussion of four 'big' questions of the type Tilly advocated. The inextricable links between academic textual conventions, the use and abuse of narrative data, and 'access' to the 'realities' and 'knowledges' of believers in other worldly phenomena in other dimensions or times, are explored. There has been a rapid growth in neopaganism in all the industrialised Anglophone countries since the 1960s. Ethnographers, particularly women, have conducted fieldwork in such groups, exploring the cosmologies and practices of neopagans. An analysis of the published accounts of such fieldwork raises questions about ethnography, gender, and particularly how claims to authenticity are made in academic texts. The specific topic - who can speak about neopaganism? - has wider applications when other types of narrative are explored.

Keywords: *Autobiography, Narrative, Ethnography, Neopaganism, Authenticity, Rhetoric, Gender*

Introduction

1.1 Various neopagan religions have grown rapidly in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand over the past 40 years (Hutton, 1999b). One prominent neopagan subculture is witchcraft. These witches practice 'white' magic, using the generic name 'Wicca' for their practice and belief. Working in covens (small groups) rituals are performed to do good either for individuals or for large groups or even to heal the earth itself. This witchcraft has nothing to do with the Satanic beliefs and practices of which those persecuted in the seventeenth century were accused; nor with the 'Satanism' in popular fiction, horror films or sensational newspaper articles (Hutton, 1999a, 1999b). Indeed there is no reliable evidence of any Satanic groups existing. The precise figures on the numbers of neopagan believers, or of initiated practitioners, are not available, but Hutton estimates that in the UK there are probably no more than 20,000 initiates, and a further 100,000 people who believe in some kind of neopaganism, but are not initiated. In the USA there are thought to be at least 200,000 pagans, several thousand in Canada and Australia, and a few hundred in New Zealand. Hutton estimates that witches are the majority of neopagans, and in the UK he believes the 20,000 initiates are made up roughly of 10,000 witches, 6,000 druids and 4,000 working other types of magic.

1.2 Witches are indirectly the focus of this paper^[1] particularly those working in feminist covens. Indirectly because the database for the paper is the autobiographical narratives published by women social scientists who have studied neopaganism in general, and feminist witchcraft in particular. These narratives provide a good exemplar of Tilly's (2009) proposal that detailed research close up against everyday life should be systematically related to big questions. Specifically the narratives of small number of women who have immersed themselves in a minority religion are a vehicle for exploring four big questions about the textual and rhetorical conventions used to report ethnographic research. Firstly, do the 'new' textual conventions reflect a change in ethnographic practice or just a change in rhetoric? Secondly, how is ethnographic authenticity established and maintained? Thirdly, do changing textual conventions, reflect a changed gender balance in social science in the Anglophone world? And, fourthly, questions about the nature of 'reality' in the twenty first century became apparent as the largest question of all, whether there are non-

scientific realities or not? The paper briefly defines the 'confessional' genre of academic social science, explores the 'rhetorical turn' in academic writing, reflects on the nature of narrative, sets out the topic of study, explains Propp's approach to narrative and sets out the three quests found in the narratives analysed. In the final part of the paper, four 'big' questions, of the type explored in Tilly's work, are addressed.

Fieldwork 'Confessions'

2.1 There have been autobiographical writings about the processes of fieldwork for many years. Some of the early ones were fictionalised and published under pseudonyms, such as Laura Bohannon's *Return to Laughter* published using the name Elenore Smith Bowen (1954). In sociology the collection edited by Hammond (1964) was a landmark, and there was a flurry of such volumes in the 1980s, such as Bell and Newby (1977), Bell and Encel (1978), Bell and Roberts (1984), especially in education (e.g. Burgess, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1989, Walford 1987, 1991, 1994, 1998). Among the many more recent collections are de Marrais (1998), Lareau and Shultz (1996), Generett and Jeffries (2003), McLean and Leiberg (2007) and Young and Goulet (1994). These, and the many such texts that have followed, are autobiographical or 'confessional' accounts of research (although that word has the wrong connotations). Until the publication of Clifford and Marcus (1986), the autobiographical genre was normally kept well away from the main academic publications: segregated into appendices or separate volumes, and not appearing at all in the high status journals. These texts are self-deprecating reflections on the difficulties encountered conducting research in a field setting or organisation. The authors were collecting data from respondents other than themselves. That is an important distinction. 'Confessional' texts are *not* autoethnographies. The growth of the autoethnography, in which a person does not do any research on anyone but themselves, is a more recent development in qualitative research, which is highly problematic for reasons spelt out elsewhere (Delamont, 2009).

The Rhetorical Turn

3.1 Of course Clifford and Marcus did *not* pioneer the academic analysis of ethnographic texts. Brown (1977), Atkinson (1982) and Edmonson (1984) had all worked in the area before them, but their book had a big impact in anthropology, and provoked more controversies – which included a symposium in the journal *Current Anthropology*, two volumes of *riposte* edited by Behar and Gordon (1995) and James, Hockey and Dawson (1997) - than its predecessors. Because of its impact, *Writing Culture* is a convenient landmark from which to date five noticeable developments at the interface of qualitative research and writing:

- 1. A new research area opened up: analysing qualitative academic texts as texts: for example, Atkinson (1996) on Goffman's poetics.
- 2. A new requirement on qualitative researchers to be reflexive about analysis, writing and reading (in addition to the reflexivity that was already required around access, sampling, data collection, field roles etc.), with a consequent opportunity to write about the reflections on those stages. The journals *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Qualitative Research* contain papers on these topics routinely: thirty years ago such papers were not written for publication and there were no journals in which to publish them.
- 3. A wider range of textual forms became legitimate, publishable and even fashionable, such as poems, plays, dialogues, and fictional episodes. These new textual forms were also facilitated by the change from hot metal printing to computer-based typesetting: an author can use four typefaces to produce a 'messy' text and not incur the wrath of the printers or publishers.
- 4. The distinction(s) between the academic writing and the autobiographical or 'confessional' account(s) of the research process(es), and the autoethnographic 'research' project have become blurred.
- 5. The way(s) in which qualitative researchers are able, or are required, to use various textual strategies to establish the authenticity and authority of their accounts have become more explicit. However it is probably more difficult for scholars today to craft accounts that are accepted as authentic and authoritative: especially compared to the 'expert' texts produced by the Dead White Men writing anthropology in the period from 1920s – 1950s.

In parallel to the rise of the 'confessional' text, and the reflexivity around reading and writing that followed Clifford and Marcus (1986) the social sciences have seen a renewed enthusiasm for conducting narrative research.

The Nature of Narrative

4.1 Most social sciences, and most empirical areas, have been enriched by narrative research done in the past twenty years. However there are some distinctly unscholarly, and frankly naïve, writings on narrative around. The boom in illness narratives is one case in point (Atkinson, 1997 and *qv*). Collecting a narrative does not provide a window through which we can see, feel, and hear 'the truth' about any social phenomenon. Narratives are produced by social actors, they are performative, they are speech acts, and they can only be useful to social science if that is recognised. (Of course a narrative can be entertaining or frightening or have a pedagogic purpose or be a great basis for poetry or drama or fiction...but those are not the proper concerns of social science). Along with a naïve belief that a narrative is a transparent, 'neutral', window through which we can see social action, there is also a retreat from analysis in favour of presenting the words of the informant 'untouched' by the social scientist in the name of 'authenticity' or 'democracy'. That is equally an abrogation of the social scientists' duty, to *analyse* data.

4.2 These two basic precepts apply equally to the life histories of miners' wives in the Rhondda, or of Maori elders in New Zealand, or retired chemistry teachers in Chicago, or gravity wave physicists in Italy, as they do to published autobiographical accounts by social scientists about their research projects, whether on liberal arts undergraduates at the University of Kansas, (Geer, 1964) or, in this case, neopagan groups.

Narratives are performances, are accounts, must be analysed, and not just celebrated naively as 'authentic' or 'true' (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). The arguments about the research interview, rehearsed in Atkinson (1997) and Atkinson and Silverman (1997) apply just as strongly to academics' autobiographies, confessional accounts and autoethnographies (Delamont, 2003).

The Texts Analysed

5.1 This paper focuses on women scholars' 'confessional' accounts of their fieldwork among neopagans, part of a growing body of ethnographic work published on neopaganism in the developed world (the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). Researchers of both sexes from anthropology, sociology, history and theology have studied a range of neopagan groups. Men, such as the anthropologist Ezzey (2004) and the historian Hutton (1991, 2003), have been important contributors to the corpus. However, for this paper I have chosen only texts by women: seven autobiographical accounts by eight women who have both conducted ethnographies with modern pagan witchcraft or Wiccan practitioners and published reflections upon their fieldwork. The paper uses an analysis of those texts to illustrate Tilly's point about the big issues that are illuminated by them. The database is the autobiographical accounts published by these women.

5.2 The analytic framework draws on earlier analyses by Atkinson (1996). He produced an analysis of six published autobiographical accounts of ethnographic fieldwork in urban America, including Whyte's (1981) *Street Corner Society* and Leibow's (1967) *Tally's Corner*. The structuralist approach pioneered by Propp to analyse the Russian folktale was used, treating the corpus of ethnographers' autobiographical accounts as a genre of narrative, that were, for analytic purposes, parallel to folktales. The typical story concerns a journey (a quest) for the Hero to find or retrieve a desired object (the grail, the princess, the treasure, the bluebird of happiness) being held by The Enemy (Smaug, The Wicked Witch of the West). The Hero has, in many stories, been born with a head start (the seventh child of the seventh child). The Hero faces setbacks, meets, and is betrayed, by a false friend, encounters and is helped by a true friend who often provides a magical object (seven league boots, a cloak of invisibility, Excalibur) that facilitates success. Eventually the Hero overcomes the enemy (Sauron, Smaug the Dragon, The Snow Queen, The Wicked Witch of the West) obtains or retrieves the desired object, and lives happily ever after.

5.3 I performed a parallel analysis to Atkinson's of the stories which eight women tell.^[2] The eight texts analysed in this paper were selected to cover the Anglophone world, and to include established academics who had provided an autobiographical account for an academic (rather than a neopagan practitioner) audience. There are other autobiographical accounts of research involvement with neopagans (e.g. Orion, 1995) by women, and some overviews of the research (Pike, 1996; Carpenter, 1996). The eight academic women were treated as the Heroes in this analysis, because the structural role of Hero is not gendered. These women are the Heroes of their autobiographical narratives, just as Gerda is the Hero of the Snow Queen, or Lyra the Hero of *His Dark Materials*. This structuralist analysis of the neopagan texts starts from the recognition that all the authors are recounting three journeys, three parallel quests. They recount one quest in the mundane everyday world to conduct fieldwork in a productive setting; a second parallel quest in the university world to balance engaged, empathetic immersion in the field setting and the retention of a necessary critical academic distance; and a third quest in the neopagan, nonmundane field setting to have supernatural or numinous experiences (i.e. to enter the otherworld). For analytic purposes these are separated in this paper, and first quest is the main focus.

Among the Neopagans

6.1 One of the seven texts is summarised before the results of the analysis of the whole data set are explored. The least well-known, only because it is written by a New Zealander, is Rountree (2004), who studied feminist witchcraft in Auckland. She enrolled for a PhD in 1990, and began to do research on contemporary New Zealand witchcraft. She deals 'only with feminist witches and women involved in Goddess spirituality' because "when I went looking for witches to study for my doctoral research" the first ones she "came across" were feminist witches (pix). Rountree was a founder member of a coven that survived for over a decade, got a PhD, obtained a permanent academic job, and published a monograph. The book contains a reflexive narrative about her research which deals with all three quests: the quest for the PhD and the job, the quest to balance immersion in the field site and obtain critical academic distance, and the third quest to have 'other-worldly' experiences. The first of these contains all of Propp's stock elements: the hero, the sought after object, the setback, the enemy, the false friend, the true helper.

6.2 Summarising Rountree's chapter using Propp's categories produces the following elements. Her quest was "to gain sufficient material to write a doctoral dissertation and ultimately a meal ticket" (71). Unlike the Hero in a Russian folktale, Rountree does not describe herself as 'special' in any way. This Hero does not have any special characteristics (such as being the seventh son of the seventh son) that provide advantages in the quest: rather, she celebrates the extent to which she shared the demographic characteristics of her informants: she is qualified for her quest by her sameness. Like the other ethnographers in the data set Rountree explicitly states that she "shared the same culture, class and educational background as many of my research participants" (77). Later she also mentions that she, like all her key informants, is *Pakeha* (European New Zealander). The Scholar faces a setback (the first coven she joined folded before it had ever got established); overcomes it (another coven starts and lasts 13 years). There are two sets of human enemies: firstly tele-evangelists and other believers in Satanism (who label all neopagan practitioners as Satanists) and secondly academics who reject feminist research, research on neopaganism, and/or ethnography 'at home'; especially those academics on appointment and tenure committees. Rountree's false friend is a TV producer who wants to lure her onto a programme confronting a tele-evangelist who was campaigning against feminism, witchcraft and Satanists. She refused. Had she accepted, Rountree believes, this would have damaged her career, the neopagan movement, and feminism. Her true helpers were two women running adult education workshops on neopaganism through which Rountree met her key informants. The quest was successful: Rountree got her

PhD and a University post.

6.3 A detailed content analysis (not presented here) of the other six texts reveals that they contain the same structural elements as Rountree's story: that is, they too fit Propp's formal structural model. All six, like Rountree's, use the 'quest' story as their narrative structure. In all texts the Heroes describe their research on neopaganism as a quest for a sought after object. In four of the cases that object is a PhD, in the other four a tenured academic post achieved via a good publication record. All eight women stress that their qualifying characteristic to undertake the quest was their similarity to their informants. That is they shared race, sex, educational qualifications, class and political beliefs (*e.g.* about the environment) with their informants.

6.4 All eight Heroes report one or more setbacks. Rountree, Luhmann and Maliocco had problems accessing a stable neopagan group to study. Greenwood, Griffin and Salomonsen report exhaustion as a major setback. Hume and Greenwood each had a bad experience at a particular ritual. Foltz discovered that a key informant had lied to her. Salomonsen was caught covertly tape recording a ceremony (taping was strictly forbidden) which angered her core informants and *could* have resulted in her expulsion from the coven. In all eight narratives the Heroes recount how the use of ethnographic reflexivity, and the development of their research skills, coupled with the explicit recognition that good fieldworkers are drawn into the rhetoric, and internalise the belief systems, of their informants, saved their quests. That is, their most powerful magical 'object' was competent fieldwork skill. *De facto*, all eight women invoke their reflexive fieldwork skills as their equivalent of seven league boots or a cloak of invisibility.

6.5 It is a feature of these particular narratives, about fieldwork on groups practicing magic, that many physical objects which the informants believe to be *literally* magic appear in the quest story: such as tarot cards, wands, and knives. However as befits accounts which are designed to demonstrate how accomplished, as researchers, the tellers are, the tacit, invisible skills of ethnography are the most powerful of all the magical objects. Good fieldwork skills produce data, the thesis, and the tenured post, in these accounts, and are therefore the *really* powerful magical objects. This is a small paradox. The women authors stress the vital importance of prosaic practical skills from their mundane world in their studies of magic, rather than invoking any nonrational, magical, powers or objects.

6.6 All eight authors offer their reader one or more humans in the narrative role of The Enemy. Like Rountree, Hume, Foltz and Griffin cast the sensation-seeking mass media people who are too ignorant to distinguish between real neopagans and imagined 'Satanists' as enemy both to them and to the witches. Four of the narratives also cast academics on tenure and appointment committees in the role of potential enemies because they are the gatekeepers to careers and may reject neopaganism as a 'respectable' research topic. For all the women but Luhmann, anyone who is hostile to feminism as a social movement or an intellectual standpoint is also an 'enemy'.

The Women's Second Quest

7.1 The eight women had a second quest, to produce an account, suitably crafted for an academic audience, of a critically reflexive period of fieldwork. This is a quest that all qualitative researchers face today. It is normal in the academic autobiography to represent oneself critically, as rather socially incompetent in the research setting, and to tell some stories of funny or frightening incidents (Atkinson, 1996). There are rhetorical conventions for recounting this quest, of course. The author has to display sufficient reflexivity about her fieldwork to demonstrate that she is a reflexive researcher, and demonstrate that the reflexivity itself means the reader can regard the account of the field sites as authentic. In the last twenty five years or so authenticity has become something performatively produced for the reader by the autobiographical account, rather than by the dispassionate, impersonal, *ex cathedra* pronouncements that characterised anthropology, and sociological ethnography, from the 1920s until the 1980s. For example, when Pitt Rivers (1954: 189-201) wrote about two folk healers, or wise women, in an Andalusian village he adopted an entirely aloof style. He asks his readers, who are addressed as if they could not, themselves, have any 'unscientific' ideas, rhetorically, how beliefs in wise women, bonesetters, sorcery and poltergeists "can persist" in "a modern European culture" (p199), and argues that "the villagers' beliefs show no consistency" (p199). If he ever consulted the wise women himself, or felt himself the victim of sorcery, he hides that completely from the reader. His contrastive scientific rationality is the only discourse about the superstitions of the peasants in Grazalema, and in his autobiographical writing about the fieldwork he is silent about the supernatural beliefs and practices. There is no 'second quest' in such writing: the anthropologist's scientific rational Enlightenment self is untouched.

7.2 The changing *mores* of ethnographic writing between Pitt Rivers (1954), Favret-Saada (1980) who wrote a notorious account of her own entanglement in the witchcraft beliefs of French peasants, and Luhmann (1989), are such that all the eight accounts analysed here are entirely different from that of Pitt Rivers. Most of the authors are 'believers' in the existence of the otherworlds that their neopagan friends invoke and visit. Those who claim not to believe themselves treat their informants' beliefs seriously and with respect. Hence, they have to establish themselves as interpreters of an alien worldview for their readers, but still create accounts which will be understood as authentic and as sufficiently academic (*i.e.* the product of proper, reflexive fieldwork). All eight women write at length about a "continual internal mind battle" (Hume p8) and describe the dangers of "interpretive drift" (p9), a useful phrase proposed by Luhmann. Greenwood (2000: 19) explicitly addresses this issue, drawing on Tedlock (1991) and Rabinow (1991). Greenwood stresses Tedlock's core point: that ethnographic work attempts to reveal both self and other as "vulnerable experiencing subjects" and thus reduces the traditional academic gulf between them, and thus the researcher becomes bicultural.

The Women's Third Quest

8.1 The third quest is common only to those scholars who have chosen to study an esoteric *and secret*

belief system. By secret I mean a belief system that has elements only revealed to those who have been through one or more initiations during which secret matters are revealed. Neopagan witchcraft is one such belief system, and those researchers who have been initiated are enabled to access other worlds and experience encounter with other non earthly powers. They also encounter a dilemma as academics and initiates: once initiated it is a requirement not to reveal the secrets known only to initiates. The authenticity of the research would be enhanced by revealing secret things, yet were these to be revealed, the researcher would expose herself as a dishonest and unreliable person and would also have betrayed their informants, and possibly even endangered them. This is a dilemma for scholars of many esoteric beliefs or secret settings and practices, not just for women who have focussed on neopaganism.

8.2 A parallel example can be found in the writings by ethnographers of three African-origin religions in the Americas, *Candomble*, *Santeria* and *Voodoo*. (Atkinson and Delamont, 2008) Ethnographers of those three religions, all persecuted and highly secret, have, if the autobiographical accounts published over the past eighty years are analysed, to compare the rhetorical style and content over time, *either* changed their ethnographic practice *or* changed what they choose to tell their readers regarding their own religious initiation. The ethnographies published in the past 25 years report that the scholar chose to be initiated into the African origin religion. The motive(s) are usually reported as *either* a genuine conversion *or* a deep affection for a key informant who desired it *or* a consultation with an oracle which declared that the gods and goddesses had ordered it *or* a discovery that initiation was the only way to gain access to the more secret aspects of the beliefs and practices of the religion *or* some combination of those motivations. Recent scholars, such as Brown (1991), describe their fieldwork in a style similar to the ethnographers of neopaganism. Authors from the 1920s to the 1970s do not report being initiated themselves, and, indeed, describe the religion in a detached, distant way, as the practice of 'othered' (generally black) people. Whatever the motivation described, the result is, of course, to reinforce for contemporary readers the claims the *contemporary* authors make to authentic knowledge about the religions.

8.3 The ethnographers of neopaganism differ in their accounts of the third quest. Three explicitly state they did not embark on it. Foltz and Griffin (1996) were not initiated into the feminist coven they studied, and they write reflexively about what they could, and could not, experience because neither asked for initiation. Griffin (2004) subsequently formed an all-female drumming group who played for Goddess rituals, and got access to other neopagan groups, but did not get initiated into any of those either. Luhrmann (1989) explicitly states that although she has been initiated into several neopagan groups, she is not a believer. In a famous passage she wrote.

"I am no witch, no wizard, though I have been initiated as if I were ... I never have and I do not now 'believe' in magic" (p18)

8.4 That passage has been much criticised by other ethnographers of neopaganism. Salomonsen (2002) by contrast argues that:

"in Witches' rituals, covens and classes, there is no outside when an observer can literally put herself.....you are either in or you are not there at all" (p17)

She was initiated into Reclaiming Witchcraft (the largest and best known feminist tradition) but, because she was initiated for *research* purposes, Salomonsen disbars herself from initiating anyone else. She presents her own initiation narrative but excludes the secret parts of it (p25).

8.5 The other women share Salomonsen's intellectual position or have adopted a more thoroughgoing 'insider' status. Greenwood (2000), for example, has been initiated into both high magic (Garnerian) and feminist witchcraft. Magliocco (2004), similarly an initiate of a high magic and a feminist coven, describes an otherworldly experience (a visit to the Summerland, the Isle of Apples that she had, and therefore 'owns', which is hers alone to publicise or keep secret), during the major Halloween festival of Reclaiming Witchcraft in San Francisco. Several hundred witches 'travel' every year to the Summerland to 'visit' their Blessed Dead: those heroines, family, friends, lovers, mentors who are no longer alive in this world. On her otherworldly visit, where she encountered *her* blessed dead, Magliocco's grandfather and thesis advisor's husband, met and cherished her. She does not disclose anything about either of her initiations, nor any secrets she was subsequently able to share with her informants.

8.6 The examination of how eight women present themselves and their fieldwork on neopaganism, while confirming that such autobiographical accounts of ethnography can be analysed in a rigorous way, could also be criticised for paying attention to such a minority, marginal, or even insignificant topic. However, in the next section of the paper the way(s) in which detailed attention to a small question can lead to the exploration of big issues become clear.

Four Big Questions

9.1 Charles Tilly (1984: 14) set out his belief that good social science must be built on "concrete and historical analyses of the big structures and large processes that shape our era". Among his concrete examples was the contrast between sweeping generalisations about social disorder, especially among recent migrants, in Third World cities, and the evidence from actual studies in specific neighbourhoods that the generalisations were wrong (pp 54-55). In his last book, Tilly (2009) argued that the analysis of the *minutiae* of everyday life, as described by Goffman, for example, should be used to address the recurrent concerns of sociology, such as the varieties of reason that can be offered. Tilly divided these into four types:

	Popular	Specialised
Formulae	Conventions	Codes
Cause-effect accounts	Stories	Technical

9.2 Tilly (2009: 19) explains that all four types of reason do 'relational' work. He explored the four varieties of reason and addressed sociological concerns such as how judges determine if undue influence has been brought to bear on will-makers, how nurses in accident and emergency triage patients, how medical malpractice cases proliferated in the USA, how the Warren Commission reached its verdict, and how the enquiry into 9/11 gathered and evaluated evidence.

9.3 In the same spirit, but focusing on changes in social science itself, there are four questions, each 'big' enough to satisfy Tilly (2009), which can be illuminated from the analysis of eight quest narratives. In ascending order of potential 'bigness' of the question, they are:

- 1. Do the changed textual and rhetorical conventions for writing ethnography reflect real changes in ethnographic practice?
- 2. How is ethnographic authenticity established and maintained?
- 3. Do changing textual conventions reflect changes in the gender composition of 'western' academia?
- 4. Are there non scientific realities, or only delusional belief systems?

9.4 At the initial glance, the first three questions may not appear to meet Tilly's (2009) criteria for big questions. However my argument is that, when thoughtfully explored, serious matters underlie them. The first two questions are inextricably linked. Ethnographic 'authenticity' is established and maintained by rhetorical conventions, and these shift over time. However it is naive and irresponsible to assume that these changed rhetorical conventions reflect real shifts in research practice, far less that fieldwork today is 'better' because 'confessional' accounts exist. To make that assumption would be as wrongheaded as the narratives produced by social scientists about global social change that Tilly (1984) criticised so cogently. However, the first two questions are not so much about rhetorical conventions, but about the veracity of published ethnographies. The potential consequences of the periodic disputes about social science research can be serious. People who question the work of revered social scientists receive bomb threats; book contracts are cancelled; grants refused; tenure offers are revoked, and whole disciplines threatened. Frequently, *de facto*, attacks on social science are actually disputes about rhetorical style and textual conventions. The attack by Tierney (1999) on Chagnon (1997) appeared to be focused on Chagnon's rhetorical *style*. Tierney objected forcefully to Chagnon's characterisation of the Yanomamo an Amazonian tribe as 'fierce': arguing both that they were not fierce at all, and that Chagnon's 'label' aggrandised Chagnon, sold thousands of copies of his book, and endangered the survival of the Yanomamo themselves. ^[3] In reality, Tierney was attacking the veracity of every statement, every photograph, and every moment of film, Chagnon had produced about the Yanomamo. Tierney went so far as to claim that Chagnon had been as damaging to the tribe as the illegal gold miners and loggers destroying the rainforest. In one polemical book, Tierney moved swiftly from issues of rhetoric, to attacks on the veracity of the whole research report, to a rejection of the ethnographer as a scholar, and finally to a claim that an inauthentic *text* can be genocidal in its consequences. More broadly, the authenticity of all ethnographic research was a second theme in Tierney's attack on Chagnon. More dispassionate readers have suggested that Tierney vastly overestimated the power of anthropological discourse, and was unable to disentangle changes in ethnographic practice from rhetorical conventions, and therefore impugned a whole discipline because he read Chagnon's confessional texts naively. The publicity that Tierney attracted was as damaging to anthropology as the arguments of Derek Freeman (1983), about the (poor) quality of Margaret Mead's study in Samoa, which had shaken intellectual America in the 1980s. In both cases the American Anthropological Association decided that the credibility of *the discipline* was, potentially, under threat, from these well-publicised attacks and devoted time and attention to investigating the issues.

9.5 The third question, about the gender composition of academia in western culture, is certainly a big issue, which I have addressed elsewhere (Delamont, 2003). Tilly says very little about gender as a big issue, but the autobiographical narratives of the eight women have it as a central concern. They all reflect on the risk a young woman scholar takes if she studies women, especially feminist women, from a feminist standpoint, and on the limitations of conventional textual practices. All eight reflect that if a woman wishes to secure a PhD, tenure, and be free from attacks on her work in the media or by powerful men in the university, a topic that is not woman-centred, and a perspective that is not feminist, would be wiser choices than doing feminist research on women neopagans. Here again a very small group are a useful way to move into exploration of big issues. As the proportion of women in the social sciences and humanities has changed in the Anglophone world, increasing in number, but not necessarily succeeding in refashioning their subjects, so too have rhetorical conventions been made more explicit and their boundaries extended.

9.6 Tedlock (1991) locates the changes in textual conventions alongside the changing nature of the anthropological profession, especially the increased percentage of women. However the best known scholars who argued that social science needed to pay serious attention to the rhetorical conventions of their texts ignored women authors altogether. Clifford and Marcus (1986) notoriously decided that no female

work was worth reanalysis and no woman anthropologist was capable of engaging in the analysis of anthropological rhetoric. Behar and Gordon (1995) compiled their collection of papers, called *Women Writing Culture*, in explicit opposition to the sexism of Clifford and Marcus (1986). When Denzin and Lincoln decided to compartmentalise ethnographic work into 'moments' - initially five (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), then seven (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000,) then nine (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) - they were able to do so only by ignoring the rhetorical conventions used by pioneering women anthropologists such as Ruth Landes (1947), and Nora Zeale Hurston (1935), who produced very uncanonical texts, decades before Clifford and Marcus. Wolf's (1992) riposte was one of the most eloquent refutations of the idea that reflexive, or polyvocal or experimental texts were *new*.

9.7 The Denzin and Lincoln grand narrative, which confuses changing textual fashion and conventions with 'real' changes in ethnographic practice, is a Pernicious Postulate exactly like the eight principles attacked by Tilly (1984). This big question is explored in Delamont (2003) and there is no space to develop it fully here. The changing gender balance of academia is, in the humanities and social sciences, related to the rise of postmodernist theories and the consequent challenges to the Enlightenment Project: issues big enough for anyone!

9.8 The fourth question is the most far reaching, and answering it is far beyond the scope of the paper. However, both the narratives about fieldwork analysed by Atkinson and Delamont (2008), and those discussed here, raise legitimate questions about 'western' scientific rationality. It may seem a long way from a young scholar doing a life history interview with a poor Haitian woman in New York (Brown, 1991), or a struggling graduate student experiencing her first goddess ritual (Pike, 2004), to the theoretical arguments about the origins of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment Project and the claims that in a post industrial world these can, and must, be seen as social constructions by elite white European men, whose hegemonic era is over. However, every autobiographical narrative by every ethnographer of African-origin religions in the Americas, and those of ethnographers of neopaganism, displays that big question embedded in their accounts. Reading the autobiographical narratives of the eight women raises the question: how is it that so many highly educated, articulate people are absolutely convinced that there are other realities which can be accessed by ritual practices? Answering that question is certainly a task for sociology parallel to those raised by Tilly (1984).

Conclusions

10.1 Using the eight women's accounts, I have shown that the reflexive autobiographical text *is* a type of narrative, and that it should be analysed, not just enjoyed, or celebrated, or read naively. The analysis shows that these accounts share formal structural properties, being constructed as a three layered quest narratives: first a typical quest for good ethnographic data, second a quest to find ways to write a scholarly, rational, technical account of studying an unscholarly, irrational, anti-technical phenomenon (magic) and third a quest to enter one or more 'other' worlds via initiation and 'otherworldly' experiences. The writing about the third quest, in particular, blurs the boundary between the long established, even traditional, autobiographical narrative about social research and a newer genre of research and writing, the autoethnography.

10.2 How, then do these issues relate to 'bigger' analytic themes, and how do they speak to some of Charles Tilly's concerns? I have used the 'confessional' accounts to make the following general point: getting 'close to' social phenomena is a far from straightforward matter, and it is not an unmixed blessing. There is a recurrent (possibly essential) tension between the close knowledge of the ethnographer and the close knowledge of the convert or initiate. The latter is undeniably 'close' to her subject matter. She may have access to aspects of everyday life that are otherwise inaccessible. But the analytic purchase of the ethnographer may be blunted by the familiarity of the convert. Modes of knowing, modes of writing and modes of being in the world are unusually implicative. Consequently, the juxtaposition of 'big' questions and detailed or close-up inquiry is never straightforward.

10.3 Narratives of neopaganism may seem to be an especially, even perversely, esoteric lens through which to view this topic. Yet it serves as a perfectly apt microcosm for much that is going on in contemporary social research. As Atkinson argues in his contribution to this special issue, there is a widespread reductionism in contemporary social research. It is a tendency to elide the social and the personal, and to collapse the conduct of everyday life into a confessional mode of "lived experience". Authors like Charles Tilly and Erving Goffman are potential correctives to such a tendency. Each in his own way demonstrates that everyday life and the minutiae of its conduct must be just as subject to disciplined scrutiny as the 'big' issues of social organisation.

10.4 Consequently, we cannot afford to take issues of membership, experience, or narrative as if they are unproblematic in themselves. The biographical narrative, the conversion experience, or the admission to an esoteric social world cannot be treated as unexamined resources for sociological or narrative research. While we may collectively resist the old reductionism of structural sociology (where the 'big' questions remain ungrounded), we should not substitute a new form of reductionism based on appeals to "experience" alone.

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Notes

¹ There are two broad types of modern neopagan witchcraft, Garnerian and Feminist. Garnerians, so called

for Gerald Garner who lived in the New Forest in England in the 1930s, and founded a successful brand of neopaganism which is mixed, ferociously heterosexual and homophobic. Feminist Wiccans emphasise goddess worship, and do not believe that a male 'priest' and a female priestess are both needed to harness the power of the otherworld as Garnerians do. Some feminist covens admit men, others do not. Feminist witches are not homophobic, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual people are welcome in their covens.

² The texts selected for this particular analysis are:

- Luhrmann (1989) *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* – American studying England
- Greenwood (2000) *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld* – British woman studying England
- Magliocco (2004) *Witching Culture* – American studying America
- Rountree (2004) *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess* – New Zealander studying New Zealand
- Hume (1998) *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia* – Australian studying Australia
- Salomonsen (2002) *Enchanted Feminism* – Norwegian Studying America
- Foltz and Griffin (1996) Essay by 2 Americans studying America

³ The AAA enquiry into Chagnon is available on the AAA website.

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