



Evidence and Authority in Ethnographic and Linguistic Perspective*

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Abstract

A mainstream narrative in the academy casts hidebound authority as the enemy of evidence and, in many cases, the truth. In this review, I argue for an ethnographic and linguistic approach to evidence and authority as communicative practices that are not inherently opposed but rather inseparably intertwined. For ethnographers, authority can usefully be viewed as authorizing acts (recognizing that the act includes the receiver), and evidence can be thus treated as a kind of authorization, an act of providing evidence. Viewed in this more dynamic framework, authority and evidence become observable practices in which actors deploy cultural forms—performances, experiments, verb tenses, quotes, narratives, pronouns—to persuade, argue, confirm, and mediate social and cultural relations.

INTRODUCTION

A 2010 tongue-in-cheek editorial by “Emmet Eminence” from “Know It All, USA” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery* begins as follows:

As president-elect of the Society for Authority-Based Medicine, I write on behalf of my colleagues with a plea to stop corrupting the minds of your readers with the slavish worship of evidence. Our society is dedicated to the time-tested principles of intuition, experience, and expert opinion as a basis for quality healthcare. Membership requirements include at least 20 years of clinical practice, commitment to case series as a test of efficacy, and letters of support from five members in good standing. (Rosenfeld 2010, p. 143)

Part of the humor of this piece derives from the unexpected privileging of authority and the denigration of evidence. From the perspective of a classically liberal, Enlightenment model of modern science that dates back (at least) to Locke, the process of freely drawing one’s own conclusions on the basis of an evaluation of evidence tends to be viewed in positive terms, whereas obedience to authority is more likely to be denigrated as “slavish” and hidebound. “Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth,” wrote Einstein in 1901 (Highfield & Carter 1994, pp. 78–79); for Boas, writing in 1911, blindness to such “fetters of tradition” limit our freedom of rational inquiry (Boas 1963, p. 201; Bauman & Briggs 2003, p. 267). Even today, the very juxtaposition of authority and evidence analytically conjures a modernist, Weberian narrative, a story that implicitly progresses from traditional authority to more individualistic, neoliberal, calculating forms of ratiocination based on evidence. The editorial comically upends this story line.

Indeed, after years of bumper-sticker exhortations to “question authority” (Sedgwick & Frank 2003, p. 125) and even declarations that the sources of authority are now deceased (Barthes 1997), one may be excused for wondering whether the concept of authority is even relevant anymore. Evidence, however, seems to enjoy continued positive reviews in popular discourse (e.g., Dawkins 2003, p. 248). The contemporary citizen-subject demands (or is told to demand) the right to evaluate evidence and make judgments accordingly (Chilvers 2012); practitioners of evidence-based medicine (EBM) promote alternative models of expertise designed to challenge authoritative practices (Ecks 2008).

However, evidence-based practices such as science tend to give rise to new kinds of authority (Bourdieu 1991). In actual experience, evidence and authority are not inherently opposed but rather inseparably intertwined. DuBois (1986, p. 322), for example, while recognizing a distinction between the two, observes that from the standpoint of the ethnographer and linguist, the act of “providing evidence is simply a special case of providing authority.” In what follows, I examine the interdependence of evidence and authority and its changing structure of relations in various contexts. Foucault (1970) chronicles these changing relations culturally and historically at the level of “epistemes”: He describes the shift from medieval scholasticism’s preoccupation with the “citation of authorities” to the impersonal “language of fact” in modern science. In this review, I argue for a more focused, ethnographic perspective to authority and evidence, an approach that places these ideas in their context of use in actual practices. I do not focus on the “underdeveloped language of evidence in sociocultural anthropology” (Engelke 2008, p. S3) so much as on the underdeveloped appreciation of our consultants’ and interlocutors’ language of evidence and the recognizable strategies they use for the evaluation of alternative claims about the world. To appreciate this variety presupposes a careful description of a communication system and the culturally defined situations in which relevant distinctions are made (Conklin 1962, 1968). The resources actors deploy to create such relevant distinctions may include not only referential and propositional data but also textual and intertextual qualities such as poetics, genre, and style (Silverstein 1976;

also see Frake 1977). Such pragmatic and metapragmatic devices amount to framing practices that cannot be separated from the interests of the actors involved (Briggs 1996b).

AUTHORITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC AND LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

In important ways, the contemporary scholarly significance of the term authority can be viewed as deriving from Enlightenment efforts to solve problems of social description by drawing on communicative models of cultural practice. As Peters (1958) observes in a classic article, the work of Hobbes in *Leviathan* [1662 (1651)] illustrates this definition well. Hobbes, notes Peters, was “impressed that a civil society was not a natural whole like a rook or a beehive; yet it is not a mere multitude of men. A multitude of men becomes an artificial person when each man *authorizes* the actions of a representative”:

Of persons artificial, some have their words and actions owned by those whom they represent. And then the person is the *actor*; and he that owneth his words and actions is the AUTHOR: in which case the actor acteth by authority . . . and as the right of possession, is called dominion; so the right of doing any action, is called AUTHORITY. So that by authority, is always understood, a right of doing any act; and *done by authority*, done by commission, or license, from him whose right it is. (Hobbes 1962, pp. 105–6)

Hobbes used a communicative model (i.e., the relation of speaking for someone else) to understand how something like authority could have a kind of reality to it, even though it was not a thing that could be observed in and of itself. Although we cannot see or point to authority as an entity, we can observe individuals who engage in acts of speaking and acting on behalf of others. Hobbes’s effort to differentiate roles, rights, and responsibilities for discourse adumbrates contemporary discussions about authorization (Lindstrom 1990, pp. 72–76), voice, and footing (e.g., Goffman 1979; Bakhtin et al. 1986; Bauman 2004, pp. 150–58).

Ever since Weber wrote *Economy and Society* in 1922 (Weber et al. 1978), the question of authority—the right to speak and act on behalf of another—began to be studied systematically as a social phenomenon, at least among German-reading academic circles. In Weber’s view, studying authority meant examining systems of authority comparatively across societies, sociohistorically over time, and in terms of subjective meanings for the actors involved. Although the communicative model was implicit in Weber’s work, he tended to assume (rather than explicitly analyze) the communicative aspects of systems of authority. Not until 1947 did parts of these studies become widely available to the English-speaking public (Weber et al. 1947); a complete edition of *Economy and Society* did not become available until 1968 (Weber 1968).

One of the central narratives guiding Weber’s progressive model of sociohistorical development describes the increasing abstraction; rationalization; and indeed, depersonalization of authority. As part of an effort to “classify the types of authority according to the kind of claim to legitimacy typically made by each” (Weber et al. 1947, p. 325), Weber isolates three “pure” or ideal types of “legitimate authority”: charismatic, traditional, and legal (Weber et al. 1947, p. 328). Charismatic authority is based on devotion to an individual who exhibits a particular characteristic, ideal, or exemplary quality that motivates others to adhere to the normative patterns sanctioned by that individual. It is highly personal and depends on the characteristics of that individual; once the individual is no longer available, it is difficult to reproduce those conditions for the sake of the continuity of the social order. Traditional authority is established by a belief in the “sanctity of immemorial traditions,” wherein the person who occupies this traditionally sanctioned position of authority is obeyed. Thus, the position of chief might be inherited through the father’s line,

creating the opportunity for a relatively smooth transition of power in the event of death or indisposition of the incumbent to the position. Legal authority is based on a belief in the legality of patterns and normative rule; loyalty is given to a legally established impersonal order and is based implicitly on the subject's rational consent. Typically, legal-rational authority is reproduced via written legal codes. Note that only legal authority and traditional authority are said to be based on beliefs; charismatic authority is not described as based on a belief per se but rather on devotion, which might be described as a set of practices. All three are compared in terms of the means through which authority is conveyed and reproduced rather than the outcome of the bestowal of authority.

There have been extensive critiques of Weber's models of rationality (Brubaker 1984), his unilinear models of history (Roth & Schluchter 1979), and his predictions of disenchantment (Gane 2002). Perhaps the best known of these critiques are Foucault's penetrating discussions of how power and authority are not persons or commodities but rather practices embedded in both patterns of social interaction and institutions (Foucault 1970, 1973; Foucault et al. 1988). Most suggestive for our purposes are the critiques of authority that seek to elaborate on it as a communicative process. Friedrich (1958, pp. 35–36) for instance, observes:

[W]hen I speak of authority, I wish to say that the communications of a person possessing it exhibit a very particular kind of relationship to reason and reasoning. Such communication[s], whether opinions or commands, are not demonstrated through rational discourse, but they possess the potentiality of reasoned elaboration—they are “worthy of acceptance.” Seen in this perspective, authority is a quality of communication, rather than of persons, and when we speak of authority of a person, we are using a short-hand expression to indicate that he possesses the capacity to issue authoritative communications.

Habermas (1984) focuses on communication, outlining in normative (indeed, prescriptive) fashion the features of authority in the modern world, as characterized by communicative rationality, and its relation to the life-worlds of modern citizens.

ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO AUTHORITY AS COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE

Far less discussion has been devoted to the ethnographic description and analysis of the actual language of authority: the observable linguistic practices through which influence is constructed, circulated, learned, and adopted. Weber himself has little to say about language (but see Weber et al. 1947, pp. 138–39) and does not attempt to link it with his ideas about authority, although others have attempted to do so (Bernstein 2003). Weber's ideas about authority were developed at a time that privileged an increasingly autonomous view of language, one that emphasized its independent character as an expression or embodiment of a national *Geist* (spirit) that had its own unique sui generis structure to it but had little to do with everyday communicative practices (Hymes 1970). There were perhaps good political reasons for this emphasis on the analytical and conceptual independence of language from social life, as it was believed to be a form of impersonal, impartial evidence for legitimating the formation of nation-states in a way that seemed scientific and transcended particular individual interests (Newmeyer 1986).

Not all social scientists in the 1930s and 1940s were content to describe and theorize about patterns of authority without reference to the communicative practices that reproduced them, however. Mead (1937), for instance, compares the Balinese, Iatmul, and Arapesh in terms of how they make reference to traditional authority in defining reality. In post-World War II academic research on both sides of the Atlantic, challenges to the autonomy of both language and authority as topics of research were intensifying (Newmeyer 1986). Not only were Foucault and Bourdieu

challenging the compartmentalization of authority by stressing its pervasive integration into all systems of knowledge (Foucault 1970, Bourdieu 1991), but the boundaries of language study were also being questioned by scholars advocating social approaches to language on the one hand (Hymes 1974) and more cognitively oriented approaches on the other (Chomsky 1965). The work of Bernstein, although not initially concerned with authority, was positioned among that of the scholars exploring the boundaries of language and social life. Claiming inspiration from Sapir, Bernstein (2010) wished to examine how the language of socialization and education, through its relationship to modes of thinking, contributed to the reproduction of certain kinds of systems of authority. Although he was not a fieldworker himself, he was interested analytically in the contrasting forms of language he observed in schools: public versus formal language (later termed restricted code versus elaborated code), a contrast he likened to the sociological distinction between the face-to-face *Gemeinschaft* (community) and the more formalized *Gesellschaft* (society) [Tönnies 1963 (1887)].

Central to Bernstein's ideas was the concept of a class division in ways of speaking, with context-bound forms of language (ellipses; short, grammatically simple sentences; limited, restricted use of adjectives; frequent use of confirming tag questions; hand gestures; etc.) characterizing the speech of working-class people (a restricted code, i.e., restricted in its options for referring to things outside the immediate context of use) and a more context-independent elaborated code that "characterized the speech of middle class people. The latter way of speaking (and of writing) was what was required for school success[;] i.e., the assumption was that for working class students there was a mismatch between the ways of speaking used in the home and those required in the school" (Erickson 2009, p. 135). To help explain how these differences emerged, Bernstein postulated that the social classes socialized their children into different communication codes. Among the working class, children were socialized into so-called closed systems of positional authority, and their language use reinforced their identities as members of these fixed, ascribed statuses [exemplified by the classic Ring Lardner joke, "'Shut up!' my father explained" (Lardner 1962)]. In the middle class, Bernstein hypothesized, childrearing practices emphasized individuality, achieved statuses, and open-ended identities for the child, as well as the elaborated code. The latter was characterized by flexible syntax; (relative) lack of context restrictions; large vocabulary; and a highly explicit, instructional style of childrearing—all of which were thought to reinforce middle-class values (Bernstein 2003).

The methodological and class biases of Bernstein's work have been rightly criticized, most notably by Labov (1969). However, approaching the communicative system of a group by examining its relation to authority on the one hand and context on the other can be productive. Du Bois (1986, pp. 317–20), focusing on ritual speech as an example of authoritative language, suggested that many groups deploy linguistic features that imply a relationship of detachment to the immediate context of use: archaistic and borrowed elements, euphemism and metaphor, meaning opaqueness, parallelism, marked voice qualities, fluidity, personal volition disclaimers, avoidance of shifters such as personal pronouns, and the use of reported speech (Keane 2006). The last feature is a crucial and ethnographically ubiquitous way in which language and systems of authority are intertwined in actual practices (Briggs 1993, Hill & Irvine 1993, Silverstein 1993).

As Briggs & Bauman (1992) observe, another crucial construct in the ethnographic description of communicative systems is genre. This construct is important because, as Bakhtin puts it, "utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language" (Bakhtin et al. 1986, p. 65). The "drive belt" of history [or "natural" histories (Silverstein & Urban 1996)] renders these genres unequal in function, value, and relation to context. As societies change and differentiate, so do their communicative forms develop and evolve (cf. Kay 1977). As Bakhtin observed, an important dimension in which genres differ is in

their relative formality and detachment from original context of use. The different genres through which actors speak for their authors are not all of the same or of equal importance, nor are they related to context of use in the same way.

One way of thinking about the relations among these genres of communication is entextualization (Kuipers 1990, Briggs & Bauman 1992). In Urban's succinct definition, entextualization is "a process of rendering a given instance of discourse a text, detachable from its local context" (Urban 1996, p. 21). Because the crucial relation of authority—that is, that of communicating on behalf of someone (or something) else—inevitably presupposes detachment of the originator's discourse from its original context of utterance, it can often be understood to involve a relation of entextualization. This process of extracting texts from their original context often renders them coherent, effective, memorable, and authoritative.

The processes of textual production and reproduction differ widely across societies. In the Weyewa highlands of the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba, the relations between context, text, and authority were integral to their entire political and religious structure, up until the early 1990s (Kuipers 1990). For this society, ancestors were viewed as the sources of life, health, and prosperity, conditions that the descendants enjoyed in exchange for following and reproducing the *li'i marapu* (words of the ancestors): wise promises, stories of past practices and obligations conveyed via a poetic, couplet-based form of parallelistic ritual speech known as *panewe tenda*.

When, as inevitably happens, someone forgets, neglects, or deliberately ignores the words of the ancestors, misfortune necessarily follows: fires, accidents, lightning strikes, famine, disease. These calamities set in motion a process of recovering the "word," beginning with a highly interactive, personal, and contextualized ritual inquiry in which a specialist diviner manipulates instruments to determine which ancestor was offended, which promise was neglected, and what amends might be demanded (Kuipers 1990, pp. 81–107). These words are then appropriated by a *zaiiso* (specialist singer), who placates the angry spirits by narrating the tale of the misfortune, describing how it happened and what the descendants plan to do to rectify the underlying moral transgression. The ultimate performance draws on these two earlier performances by reaffirming the descendants' commitment to the words of the ancestors and reenacting their promises through elaborate rites of fulfillment in which dozens of water buffalo, pigs, and chickens may be exchanged and slaughtered. The intertextual trajectory of these discourses involves progressive depersonalization (gradual reduction of personal pronouns); fewer references to the here and now; and broad use of repetitive poetic structures, place names, and personal names (Kuipers 1990, 1992; Keane 2006).

Rather than viewing authority as a static, fixed institution, the Weyewa consider authority to be a process of authorization—"the process of rendering discourse authoritative" (Bauman 2004, p. 150)—that is central to an understanding of systems of authority. Just as Weyewa ritual specialists gradually (over the course of the series of rites of misfortune) come to speak more directly in the words of the ancestors, so their discourse and the event associated with it gain more binding authority over the participants. Many scholars approach authority as something already given. Bakhtin, for example, suggests that "we encounter [authoritative discourse] with its authority already fused to it . . . already *acknowledged* in the past" (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, p. 343). As Bauman observes, "missing from Bakhtin's treatment is any consideration of *how* discourse becomes authoritative, the process by which it is infused with authority" (Bauman 2004, p. 151).

Considering authority to be part of an intertextual process of authorization helps us view several otherwise apparently isolated, and independent, contexts anew, as part of an ideologically and institutionally or bureaucratically arranged whole. This analytical construct—authority as a system of interconnected authorizing acts—has broad applicability (Kuipers 1989, Briggs & Bauman 1992, Silverstein & Urban 1996, Caton 2006). Conceived as entextualization, various

and diverse processes by which richly contextualized face-to-face interviews, meetings, diagnostic visits, or interrogations come to be appropriated and recontextualized as fixed, autonomous, and authoritative verdicts; rulings; decisions; and diagnoses. These intertextual relations have several parallel formal patternings, as well as connections with one another and with other lines of investigation that are currently under way. In Habermasian terms, entextualization might be viewed in some instances as a “colonization of the life-world” in which the “systemic imperatives of bureaucratic rationality absorb and dissolve” the patient’s (or client’s or customer’s) self-understanding of a particular social, medical, or legal problem and recontextualize it in line with the dispersed systems of authority (Habermas 1984).

As Bauman (2004, p. 153) observes:

[T]he process of authorization . . . demonstrate[s] by [its] very design the dominance of the temporally prior source utterance over the target utterance. The mediator’s replication of the course utterance, by preserving its integrity and displaying special care in its reproduction, amounts to an act of discursive submission, the subordination of present discourse to discourse that emanates from the past. Moreover, I would suggest, submission to the *form* of the source utterance has a concomitant effect on the rhetorical power of the text: upholding the integrity of the form opens the way to the acceptance of the validity of the message. In this way, the meditational routines . . . are reflexive enactments of the process by which discourse is invested with authority.

In one example from middle-school science education, Viechnicki & Kuipers (2006) describe a 3-day sequence of entextualization in which the class moves from a highly contextualized lab to a highly decontextualized law of nature. When the results of the in-class experiments do not conform with the law of the conservation of matter, the teacher asks the students to chant it out loud (Viechnicki & Kuipers 2006, p. 123), thus preserving the form of the law of nature and collectively enacting a sort of act of discursive submission (to use Bauman’s terms). We argue that the process by which the students and teacher make sense of this failure, together preserving the authority of the lab (its results and the conclusion to be drawn from them), recalls and refracts the discursive process of entextualization, by which certain inscriptions in science come to be known as facts (Viechnicki 2002).

In a highly suggestive piece, Bucholtz & Hall (2006, pp. 382–87) argue that such acts of authorization are part of what they call “tactics of intersubjectivity” by which identities are negotiated; ratified; or alternatively, as they argue, “illegitimated.” Tactics is a term they use to refer to the local, situated, and often improvised quality of authorization (Certeau 1984); the term intersubjectivity highlights the place of agency and interactional negotiation in this process. In this model, students in classrooms seek identities through legitimate participation strategies that include enacting their own discursive submission to the laws of nature (Lave & Wenger 1991).

EVIDENCE AND CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF THE SUBJECT

If authority for Hobbes was a legal and logical starting point for communicative acts of authorization defined by ownership, then future Enlightenment thinkers, such as Boyle, began to bolster, support, or even challenge such authorizing acts with evidence, conceived as a separate thing that could “point beyond itself” (Hacking 2006 p. 33; Shapin & Schaffer 1985). Laboratory objects and demonstrations of the actions of inanimate things came to be viewed as impersonal facts, evidence that stood apart from the interests or foibles of untrustworthy men and women.

This concept of evidence—as an impersonal fact that a responsible individual must evaluate to distinguish unreliable and even devious claims from more trustworthy and honorable ones—is

one that has a popular audience today. Dawkins, in a letter to his 10-year-old daughter, expresses his profound conviction in the power of evidence [cf. Locke 1970 (1690)]. He counsels her,

All through the day, you see and hear lots of little tidbits of evidence, and they all add up. Next time somebody tells you something that sounds important, think to yourself: ‘Is this the kind of thing that people probably know because of evidence? Or is it the kind of thing that people only believe because of tradition, authority or revelation?’ And, next time somebody tells you that something is true, why not say to them: ‘What kind of evidence is there for that?’ And if they can’t give you a good answer, I hope you’ll think very carefully before you believe a word they say. (Dawkins 2003, p. 248)

His model for evidence is objectivist, is highly externalized, and presumes an autonomous liberal subject: “Have you ever wondered about how we know the things that we know? . . . [T]he answer to these questions is ‘evidence’” (Dawkins 2003, p. 242).

Habermas also constructs a normative model of these authorizing acts but focuses on an evaluation of the relations among the participants. He posits an “ideal speech situation” in which all participants can equally participate in an egalitarian manner by questioning and giving evidence for or against truth claims (Habermas 1984). As society moves toward complex modernities, national education systems produce rational subjects who internalize the laws, rules, and systems of argumentation (Giddens 1987). These rational citizens are considered as producing actions or statements that “can be criticized or defended by the persons involved, so that they are able to justify or ‘ground’ them” (Giddens 1987, p. 229). As Johnson & Blair (1994, p. 167) observe, to wholly embrace this vision of modernity, we must

investigate and evaluate the claims we are invited to adopt on the say-so of others. People who decide for themselves what to think are regarded as more *fully realized human beings* than are people who accept unquestioningly what others say. (cited in Goodwin 2011, p. 287; emphasis added)

But Johnson & Blair admit that this image of an “autonomous, self-guiding, belief-scrutinizing individual as a person who sets off completely independently, an isolated rational agent” is a fantasy. As Goodwin (2011, p. 287) observes, “we are dependent on others for much of what we know, since we don’t have the time to investigate everything for ourselves, and many things are accessible only through the testimony of others.”

The whole concept of an “autonomous, self-guiding, belief-scrutinizing” individual presupposes an independent realm of knowledge that such an individual can evaluate: evidence. Despite popular faith in the scientific method, people tend to prefer the evidence that affirms their views and tend not to like the evidence that challenges them (Dresser 2001, Grinker 2010). But if, in actual practice, we are inseparably interdependent on others for our knowledge of the world, the concept of witness to that evidence is crucial, and those witnesses—dressed up as experts—inevitably perform their knowledge in ways that cannot be separated from their interests (Collins & Evans 2007). The ways in which evidence, witnesses, and their testimony are intertwined historically, culturally, and situationally are thus essential components of any models of authority.

RELATIVIZING EVIDENCE: HISTORICAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACHES

Even a cursory review of concepts of evidence around the world exposes striking differences along significant dimensions of comparison. World religions, for example, differ considerably in the felicity conditions (Austin 1962) for the communicative act of providing evidence. In Judaic

criminal cases, the evidence of at least two witnesses is required for any conviction and punishment. Documentary evidence may be presented. In Shari'a or divine law in Islam, the three methods by which such testimony can be provided are confession (*iqrār*), testimony (*shahāda*), and oath (*yamīn*). In Islamic law, all the juristic schools (*madhab*) of Islam require two men as witnesses; if two men are not available, then one man and two women may testify instead (but see Ragab 2010).

Within many Muslim traditions, when documents are involved, the problem of truth is more complex. In general, written documentary evidence is not admitted into Shari'a courts, although there are exceptions (Kaptein 1997). However, when the documents in question are the Qur'an (the unquestioned word of God) or the *hadith* (the sayings and acts of Muhammad and his companions), there is more room for discussion. Whereas the Qur'an is viewed as the direct word of God and thus as infallible, the authority of the *hadith* depends on its verified authenticity. The process of establishing this authority is described as the chain of authorities attesting to the authenticity of a particular *hadith* (*isnād*). *Hadith* that can be traced to an early and trusted source were considered sound, whereas those with a less dependable provenance were considered weak. Steele (2011, p. 539) observes that, although "generally speaking, *isnad* takes the form of 'it has been related to me by A on the authority of B on the authority of C on the authority of D (usually a Companion of the Prophet) that Muhammad said . . .'," some Indonesian Muslim journalists claim to be following a Muslim journalistic code or law (*fikh*) that required them to ask "Who said that? From where did you hear about this?" (Anam 2009, p. 57; also see <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296158/isnad>).

The Greek and Roman traditions separated legal and religious authority, so conceptions of evidence were not as closely tied to sacred texts as they were in the Islamic world. However, the act of providing evidence was crucial to developing traditions of scientific knowledge. Within the scientific tradition in seventeenth-century Europe, establishing a truth required a certain kind of performance with a witness. Shapin & Schaffer (1985) argued that in the late seventeenth century the possibility of producing undisputable facts through experiments was still questioned. Only after the figure of the objective scientist was established by Boyle in seventeenth-century England did this concept become the norm. Boyle established the idea of objective science through his famous air-pump experiment/performances, in which he demonstrated that fire does not burn and sound does not travel without the presence of air. Performed under the auspices of the Royal Society, this experiment was famous for establishing the modern empirical tradition, one in which science became a public enterprise. Knowledge claims could therefore be tested by demonstration and exhibition. They describe this scientist, established by Boyle through these experiments, as a "modest witness" because he was able to approach the world objectively and independently and therefore confirm the veracity of an experiment and its claim to produce new knowledge. This new culture of science promoted the scientific method as unaffected by belief or prejudice and was critical to modern conceptions of science and evidence. Shapin (1994) later argued, drawing on data from the history of Western Europe, that such standards of impersonal truth also drew heavily on ideologies of gentlemen's honor and on relations between trust and sociability.

EVIDENCE IN ETHNOGRAPHIC AND LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

The role of evidence in communicative practices varies not only historically but also contextually and cross-culturally. Contexts in which evidence often arises in authoritative communications are disputes and situations of conflict. Observing that "narratives constitute crucial means for generating, sustaining, mediating and representing conflict" (Briggs 1996b, p. 3), several ethnographers have analyzed the ways in which stories of conflict manage the presentation of evidence. Haviland (1996), for example, describes a Tzotzil marital squabble in which an angry wife bolsters her story

by using poetic couplets; O’Barr & Conley (1996) show how judges in US small-claims courts seem to prefer decontextualized, depersonalized, rule-oriented narratives from claimants even as they espouse an ideology of community justice. Drawing on a distinction between narrated events (the words and actions that are represented) and narrative event (the discursive context of the telling) (Jakobson 1971, Bauman 1986), Briggs (1996a) describes how Warao verbs can be marked for past + perfective or nonpast + durative in storytelling as a way of managing how close (and thus legally relevant) the narrated events are to the present audience. The degree to which narrators and audiences focus on narrated versus narrative events is thus a significant dimension of comparison. Heath (1983), for example, describes how storytelling in white working-class Roadville is more likely to be challenged for evidence supporting the narrated event, whereas in black working-class Trackton, audiences are more likely to dispute features of the storytelling style.

Languages vary in the extent to which they formally recognize sources of evidence. Evidentials are a class of particles or grammatical processes by which speakers indicate the nature of the evidence for a given statement. In Chafe & Nichols’s (1986) pioneering volume of essays on evidentiality, grammar is a significant resource in the construction of truth, construed as an authoritative representation of the external world. Eastern Pomo, for instance, marks verbs differently depending on whether the statement uttered is something the speaker saw, felt, inferred, or heard about secondhand (Aikhenvald 2004). Taking a more pragmatic approach, Fox (2001) shows that concepts of evidence—as reflected in English evidentiary markings in ordinary discourse—are linked closely to the relationship of speaker to hearer and to the sequential position of the utterance in a conversation.

Speech events vary in the extent to which the importance of evidence is explicitly recognized. In science classrooms, however, the practice of providing evidence depends not only on the correct application of grammatical distinctions, but also (and crucially) on the institutional expectations of the teacher, the curriculum textbook, and most broadly the politics of education. In one case observed in a middle-school science classroom in suburban Washington, DC (Kuipers 2011), two boys (“Brad” and “Ian”) struggled to fill out a worksheet following a lab assignment involving observations designed to teach basic Newtonian physics by watching the motions of tennis balls at rest and in motion. Brad reads aloud from the textbook: “Is it possible for an object to start moving itself?” Brad interprets this initially as a yes/no question. Ian then says to Brad that they need to provide a written description of their evidence, prompting their search for a way to recode their experience in more elaborate terms.

- B: [*reading aloud*] “Is it possible for any object to start moving itself?”
 I: You got to, you got to tell **why** it doesn’t move itself.
 B: **Why** does it move itself. You just said no, man. It doesn’t say, it doesn’t say—”
 B: It says write [*your answer*].
 I: It says [*reading aloud*], “What evidence.” “What evidence do you have for your answer?”
 B: No.
 I: So, what evidence do you have for your answer?
 I: Lie.
 B: Okay, okay.
 I: “We are looking at it.” Duh.
 B: Oh yeah [*speaking what he writes*], “We—”
 I: [I mean] **I** am looking at it—put “**I**.”
 B: [Shit!]
 B: “[I am] looking . . .”
 I: “[I am looking] at . . .”—stop Quincy!

I: Dang!

B: Man, for real!

The call for evidence—read out loud and verbatim from the textbook—prompted a set of recontextualizing moves in the group. Ian knows that the concept of evidence in a science laboratory implies something that is experienced directly. He joins the idea of experience (in this case, “looking”) with evidence and comes up with a way of depicting his evidence that he hopes might gain approval at the table: “We are looking at it,” he declares; the “it” refers to the stationary ball in front of them. (Kuipers 2011, p. 88)

Although the assignment was manifestly collaborative, Ian recoded the “we” as “I” because he knows that the teacher requires each child to produce an individual worksheet for which she or he will be individually accountable, a word much in use during the George W. Bush-era mandates associated with the No Child Left Behind law.

Much as Brad and Ian make the evidence fit the rhetorical requirements of the worksheet they are struggling to finish, a team of physicists faced with a deadline of presenting a conference paper use the process of working through matters of rhetoric—what to say, what to display visually, what evidence to leave out, and in what order the evidence should be presented—as a way to construct a working consensus on matters of physics: theoretical and experimental data explaining the properties and dynamics of the physical universe (Ochs & Jacoby 1997). As described by Ochs & Jacoby, the evidence the physicists deploy is not invented, fictitious, or made up, but neither can it be understood as impersonal fact, outside of the communicative context of its use.

Strathern (2008, p. 22) calls for a relational definition of evidence in anthropology as a “construct pointing to practices that imply the ability to reduce, digest and otherwise summarize information in such a way as to yield a yardstick or measure by which other information can be judged, proved or verified.” In contrast to the purely experiential but impersonal definition of evidence taught to students in science classes, anthropological approaches to evidence seek to place it in its context of use. Strathern critiques our “evidence-based society” with its “audit culture” (Power 1997) and attendant ideologies of “transparency” (Strathern 2000) for failing to appreciate the crucial decisions we make when we use of one set of materials rather than another to understand a matter at hand (Chua et al. 2008, Engelke 2009). Within anthropology itself, there is a disciplinary politics regarding the textual presentation of evidence (Clifford & Marcus 1986). Hart (2008) worries, for example, that younger scholars trying to establish themselves in the discipline might force themselves to sacrifice their intellectual ambitions to a realist paradigm of writing, even though ethnographies based on numerous life experiences—and not only what is typically labeled research—could in some cases be intellectually superior.

CONCLUSIONS

I argue that efforts to juxtapose authority and evidence by making them compete against each other for our attention are not likely to produce much besides comedy. The problem arises when they are viewed as things—impersonal objects or externalizable items—rather than as communicative practices. To better understand and trust our processes for generating authoritative truths, we need to repersonalize them in ways that reveal, rather than obscure, the role of authority and evidence as communicative practices. For ethnographers, a first step involves viewing authority as authorizing acts (recognizing that the act includes the receiver) and realizing that evidence can be thus treated as a kind of authorization, an act of providing evidence. Viewed in this more dynamic framework, authority and evidence become observable practices in which actors deploy cultural forms—performances, experiments, verb tenses, quotes, narratives, pronouns—to persuade, argue,

confirm, and mediate social and cultural relations. Conceived as communicative events, authority and evidence are characteristics of not only the activities of the people we study but our own professional interactions as well (Clifford 1983, Pratt 1986, Engelke 2008).

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