**Descriptive Inference**

Session of May 9, 2007

*The specific value of description*

Even if explanation – connecting causes and effects – is the ultimate goal, description has a central role in all explanation, and it is fundamentally important in and of itself.

*Description and interpretation*

Ethnographers (and all other good social scientists) do look for observable behaviour in order to distinguish among their theories.

*Uniqueness*

The point [of uniqueness] is not whether events are inherently unique, but whether the key features of social reality that we want to understand can be abstracted from a mass of facts. (…Therefore,…) social science research should be both general and specific: it should tell us something about classes of events as well as about specific events at particular places.

*Models*

Models are never literally "true" or "false", although good models abstract only the "right" features of the reality they represent.

*Data Collection (section 2.4)*

The most important rule for all data collection is to report how the data were created and how we came to possess them. Every piece of information that we gather should contribute to specifying observable implications of our theory.
**Summarizing historical detail (section 2.5)**

A Summary of the facts to be explained is usually a good place to start but is not a sufficient goal of social science scholarship.

Summaries should focus on the outcomes that we wish to describe or explain.

A summary must simplify the information at our disposal.

**Examples for descriptive inference**

- Understanding variations in the district vote for parties in Britain in 1979
- Variance in conflict between West Bank communities
- Outcomes of U.S.-Soviet summit meetings between 1955 and 1990

➔ the ultimate aim of descriptive inference is separating systematic and nonsystematic differences