Qualitative Inquiry

Social Semiotics and Fieldwork: Method and Analytics

Phillip Vannini

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Qualitative Inquiry* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://qix.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/13/1/113

Social Semiotics and Fieldwork

Method and Analytics

Phillip Vannini
Royal Roads University, Victoria, Canada

Drawing from recent analytical developments in semiotics and postmodern ethnography, this article exposes and assesses the combination of social semiotics and fieldwork as a form of qualitative inquiry. Approaches to semiotics and fieldwork are not new—structural ethnographers in cultural anthropology and structural interactionists in sociology and communication studies have previously laid the foundations for the integration of formal methods of analysis and inductive approaches to data collection—yet, as this article argues, structuralism's limitations have hampered the growth of semiotics within qualitative inquiry. By presenting social semiotics as a viable alternative to structural semiotics, by describing in clear pedagogical fashion how social semiotics can be used as a research strategy, and by exposing its potential for applicability, this article attempts to bring sociosemiotic ethnography to the forefront of contemporary qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: ethnography; methodology; social semiotics; theory

Despite the existence of a great variety of theoretical, methodological, and empirical works on the connection between semiotics and interpretive sociology (e.g., Denzin, 1987; Gottdiener, 1995; MacCannell, 1976; MacCannell & MacCannell, 1982; Manning, 1987, 1988, 2004; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Perinbanayagam, 1985, 1991; Vannini, 2004; Wiley, 1994), most sociologists still perceive semiotics as an arcane, precious, and unintelligible intellectual enterprise. As proof of its uncertain status, take the role played by semiotics in the universe of contemporary qualitative inquiry. For instance, the recent successful International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry featured no sessions on semiotics, and the sole significant mention of semiotics in the highly influential *Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000, 2005) dates as far back as its first edition (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). My goal for this article is to uncover, hopefully for once and for all, the potential of semiotics

113

for current qualitative inquiry, and in particular to shed light on the value of the combination between fieldwork and social semiotics.

Semiotic approaches to fieldwork are not a novelty. Examples of structural semiotic approaches to ethnological research are legion in cultural anthropology and cultural studies, and even sociologists and communication studies scholars have witnessed the genesis of unique combinations of semiotics and pragmatism for the solution of ethnographic research problems (see Manning, 1987, 1988). In this article, however, I am concerned with a different version of semiotics, one that differs significantly from the structural and Saussurean perspective embraced by anthropologists, cultural studies researchers, and some symbolic interactionists (e.g., Davis, 1994; Denzin, 1987; Manning, 1987, 1988; Perinbanayagam, 1991) and one that, I believe, holds greater use value. The approach to semiotics I advance here draws on the social semiotic tradition owing to Peirce and pragmatism (Rochberg-Halton, 1982), and classical and contemporary critical theory poststructural sociolinguistics (Gottdiener, 1995; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Vannini, 2004), and contemporary cultural studies (Saukko, 2003; Van Leeuwen, 2005). In this sense, the approach to *sociosemiotic ethnography* I propose here is entirely original and fraught with great potential for applications across the academic spectrum.

Because my goal in this article is purely pedagogical, I am going to provide readers with an introduction to the research strategy of sociosemiotic ethnography by surveying the key concepts and procedures for conducting sociosemiotic ethnographic analysis. I do so not on a mission toward orthodoxy but merely to explain in a clear manner how sociosemiotic ethnography can and does work as a form of qualitative inquiry. I begin my illustration by comparing structural semiotics with social semiotics, and by contrasting Manning's (1987) approach to semiotics and fieldwork with sociosemiotic ethnography. Subsequently, I explain in depth how I used social semiotics for fieldwork I recently conducted to understand the meanings associated with the practice of artificial tanning (Vannini & McCright, 2004). I focus in particular on the sociosemiotics of the body. Finally, I reflect on the potential of sociosemiotic ethnography and suggest one possibility for application.

Structural Semiotics and Social Semiotics

There are numerous differences between structural semiotics and social semiotics. The clearest and most important difference resides in the position

the two schools of semiotics take in relation to structure. For structural semioticians, systems (or structures) of sign and codes take precedence over "speakers and writers or other participants in semiotic activity as connected and inter*acting* in a variety of ways in concrete social contexts" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 1). Structural semioticians emphasize the importance of structures because they believe that the interrelations of semiotic systems hold the codes or rules "that govern the conventions of signification, whether these be in kinship, etiquette, mathematics, or art" (Manning, 1987, p. 26). Structural semioticians conducting ethnographic work, therefore, are primarily interested in understanding how signs and structures of semiotic rules make people, rather than in understanding how people make, use, and renegotiate semiotic rules. As Manning (1987) found, structural semiotics

> is not a descriptive technique that aims to lay out the historical or prior conditions necessary or sufficient for the appearance of a phenomenon . . . nor does it seek to describe the motives of individual actors who animate social life, nor indeed has any concern for individuals, their morals, attitudes, values, or behaviors except as they are symbolized within a system of signs. (p. 26)

It is then no accident that ethnographers, interpretivists, interactionists, and qualitative researchers have been dismissive of the use of semiotics. If ethnography is informal, inductive, empirical, descriptive, moral, sympathetic, and perhaps even subjective (or at least reflexive) structural semiotics is but formal, abductive, idealist, speculative, amoral and/or functional, detached, and objective (at least in pretension; see Manning, 1987, p. 10). In other words, if ethnographers have been skeptical of any attempt to combine the practice of fieldwork with structural semiotics, indeed they have been so for good reasons.

Social semioticians reject, instead, all forms of structural determinism. Whereas structural semioticians draw inspiration from the writings of Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and Mauss (for a review and critique, see Rochberg-Halton, 1982), social semioticians find inspiration in Peirce, Halliday, Bakhtin and/or Volosinov, Foucault, and in an oppositional reading of Saussure (see Gottdiener, 1995; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Vannini, 2004). Social semiotics attribute meaning to power instead of merely attributing power to meaning (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 2) and locate the origin of meaning within the field of semiosis, or in other words, within the process of context-bound and conflict-laden interpersonal interaction. For social semiotics, much like for symbolic interactionism, meaning emerges out of the concerted intercourse of humans, each with differing motives, goals, and

outlooks. The field where semiosis occurs is known as the *semiosic plane*, and the connection that is thereby generated between referents and representations is known as the *mimetic plane*. Semiosic planes and mimetic planes rely on their recipients for them to function as intended. In other words, meaning relies on the consequences of social action—a principle central to social semiotics as much as to pragmatism. In social semiotics meaning, therefore, relies on use or practice whereas in structural semiotics meaning relies on the operation of structures that are as deep as the linguistic, physiological, psychological, and cultural unconscious that determine self, mind, and society (see Rochberg-Halton, 1982, for a review).

The difference between structural semiotics and social semiotics in terms of structural determination is so important that it cannot be stressed enough. Structural semiotics is a formalist undertaking keen on a "mode of analysis that seeks principles and rules that account for a known pattern . . . [and for the] rules that govern conduct" (Manning, 1987, p. 29). Language and its structures, therefore, work as the overarching mechanism providing speakers with voices and discursive action. For Lemert (1979) "from the structuralist view of language, the human sciences cannot idealize people as the strictly human, cultural, meaning-producing center of social life" (p. 100). In structural semiotics, the ultimate reality is no longer the human being but instead the codes of language. As Manning (1987) stated, paraphrasing Lemert (1979), "persons attain status only as elements of a signifying system" and therefore according to this view "sociology can be seen as a subfield of semiotics" (p. 33). For Manning, therefore, the combination between semiotics and ethnography occurs by sleight of hand, as an overtake of sociology by semiotics that ends up reducing social practices to "language bits" (Manning, 1987, p. 34) and culture to the "codes that order given domains within social groups, and the meanings and social and behavioral responses that are associated with such coding" (Manning, 1987, p. 35). Such overtake and reduction is not at all "consistent with the avowed intentions of the family of sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenological existentialism, and ethnomethodology" as Manning (1987, p. 35) claimed. As a matter of fact this form of linguistic and structural reductionism is diametrically opposed to the principles of agency and emergence espoused by Mead and Schutz. Structural semiotic determinism is a peril from which ethnographers must guard themselves if they want to retain their deeply humanistic and moral concern with human conduct and with the existential uniqueness of being-in-the-world.

Social semioticians view the conflict- and struggle-laden process of semiosis (Bakhtin, 1965/1984, 1975/1981; Volosinov, 1973) and not deep

structures, as the origin of meaning and therefore reject all forms of lin-
guistic and structural determinism. Within semiosis one finds the genesis of
logonomic systems. The word *logonomic* originates from the Greek *logos*
(thought or system of thought, and the words used to signify that thought),
and *nomos* (controlling mechanism). Hodge and Kress (1988) defined a
logonomic system as

> a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of
> meanings; which specify who can claim to initiate (produce, communicate)
> or know (receive, understand) meanings about what topics under what cir-
> cumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why). Logonomic systems
> prescribe social semiotic behaviours at points of production and reception, so
> that we can distinguish between *production regimes* (rules constraining pro-
> duction) and *reception regimes* (rules constraining reception). (p. 4)

A logonomic system, therefore, is a social product "of organized social inter-
course" (Volosinov, 1973, p. 21). People acting in concert with one another
originate logonomic systems that order future transactions and make such
transactions unambiguous. Of course, logonomic systems are not under
democratic control. Agents with different degrees of *logonomic power* have
more or less sway in the determination of the operation of new and existent
logonomic systems (Bakhtin, 1965/1984, 1975/1981; Volosinov, 1973).
Because of the social origin and because of the directly and inevitably social
and political consequences of the operation of rules contained in logonomic
systems, social semiotics is thus invariably social in nature—in direct con-
trast with the irreducible origin of structures in structural semiotics.

Another important difference between structural and social semiotics is
the stance that the latter takes in relation to the study of power. Because the
creation of logonomic systems is a social process, and because in contem-
porary capitalistic societies different individuals and groups have different
degrees of availability of power and other instrumental resources, logo-
nomic systems reflect the structures of sociopolitical domination present in
the social contexts where semiosis takes place (i.e., exo-semiotic contexts).
As Volosinov (1973) put it: "the form of signs is conditioned above all by
the social organization of the participants involved and also by the imme-
diate conditions of their interaction" (p. 21). Although logonomic systems
reflect structures of domination, they at the same time ensure that social
solidarity is kept stable. Logonomic systems, therefore, are ideological
complexes that work by sustaining cultural and political hegemonies. An
important identifying trait of social semiotics, therefore, is the attribution of

meaning to power. Let it be understood, however, that social semioticians are mindful of the ever-unstable conditions of hegemony and the consequent "multi-accentuality" (Volosinov, 1973) or heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1965/1984, 1975/1981, 1979/1986) of signs. As Hodge and Kress (1988) stated

> an excessive concentration on normative systems (logonomic systems, genres, ideology) contains an inbuilt distortion and reinforces the ideas of their dominance. These systems only constrain the behaviour and beliefs of the non-dominant in so far as they have been effectively imposed and have not been effectively resisted. . . . Meaning is always negotiated in the semiotic process, never simply imposed inexorably from above by an omnipotent author through an absolute code. Traditional semiotics likes to assume that the relevant meanings are frozen and fixed in the text itself, to be extracted and decoded by the analyst by reference to a coding system that is impersonal and neutral, and universal for users of the code. Social semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the meanings and effects that their authors hope for: it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied at the level of social action, and their effects in the production of meaning. (p. 7)

Thus, even though some structuralist semioticians also pay attention to the ideological functioning of codes, what truly distinguishes social semioticians is the attention they dedicate to the actual effectiveness, or activation in practice in all of its multiple and polyphonic (Bakhtin, 1965/1984) ways, of the power of logonomic systems at the level of individual and group "belief." As we see later when we observe the value of sociosemiotic ethnography, such social semiotic stance on the principle of logonomic activation is a very important characteristic indeed.

The third source of differences between structural and social semiotics exists in relation to the nature of the sign. Even though all semioticians study signs, they are divided by a fundamental difference over the way they envision signs. All structural semioticians tend to follow dyadic models of the sign, whereas social semioticians tend to be skeptical of dyadic models, using instead modified dyadic models or triadic models. Dyadic models generally draw inspiration from the seminal contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959). Saussure believed that signs are the unity of a mental concept (signified) and a symbolic vehicle used to express that concept to the self or to other people (signifier). Triadic models of the sign draw instead from the semiotic and pragmatic philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce (1931), who, like all pragmatists, believed that meaning existed insofar as anything symbolic had practical consequences. For Peirce, therefore, the

unity of a sign consisted of the relation among a referent (object), a sign vehicle used to express that referent (representamen), and the sense that someone made of the relation between the two (interpretant). Without the interpretant, the sign has no life, no consequences, and quite simply no meaning. Not all social semioticians are as explicitly Peircean as I am, yet all agree on this fundamental point: Signs do not stand for something that is pregiven and that transcends use. As we have seen earlier, because "signs may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse . . . [and because they] cannot exist, as such, without it" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 18) signs work in actuality as *semiotic resources.*

Social semioticians prefer to refer to resources, rather than signs, following the lead of Halliday (1978), who argued that signifying systems were not a set of rules but instead a "resource for making meanings" (p. 192). Resources for making meanings include

> the actions and artifacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically—with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions, and gestures, etc.—or by means of technologies—with pen, ink and paper; with computer hardware and software; with fabrics, scissors and sewing machines, etc. (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3)

Resources have a *theoretical semiotic potential* and an *actual semiotic potential.* The theoretical potential of a resource consists of all its past uses and potential future uses, whereas the actual semiotic potential of a resource consists the uses that are known by specific users with specific needs in specific contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005). The semiotic potential of a resource, in sum, refers to its potential for agentically achieving a communicative goal. Rather than a formal analysis of the operation of a code, therefore, social semioticians are interested in inventorying how resources "are used in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3). More will be said on this later.

Finally, structural semiotics and social semiotics differ in relation to their scope of analysis. In his *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure (1959) was interested in delineating a unique field for the science of signs he called *semiotics.* Saussure's trademark dyadic way of thinking led him to establish a set of binary oppositions in which one term was to denote a realm of interest for semiotic study, and one term was to denote a realm of study to be excluded. Table 1 summarizes Saussure's scheme; on the left side we can see the terms privileged by Saussure and on the right side the terms he discounted.[1]

Table 1
Saussure's Binary Oppositions

Semiotic Systems	Exo-Semiotic Phenomena
Language	Other systems
Langue (language)	Parole (speech)
Synchrony	Diachrony
Signifiers	Signifieds

Saussure's goal for semiotics was to concentrate on phenomena internal to semiotic systems, rather than disperse attention over the influence of society, politics, and culture on signification (exo-semiotic phenomena). For this reason Saussure (1959) identified the abstract system of rules characterizing language (langue), and in particular verbal language as the central element of semiotics, dismissing concrete instances of usage (speech) and other systems of signification (e.g., music, visual modes of communication, etc.) as peripheral to semiotics and subinstances of the general determining system. Saussure, to differentiate semiotics from linguistics and its etymological slant, also chose to focus his attention on signifiers as they exist at one time (synchrony), rather than as they change over time (diachrony). Furthermore, Saussure opted to privilege the study of signifiers rather than the study of their referents.

In response to Saussurean structural semiotics, social semiotics tends instead to favor the study of

- culture, society, and politics as intrinsic to semiotics
- other semiotic systems alongside verbal language
- *parole*, the act of speaking, and concrete signifying practices in other codes
- diachrony, time, history, process and change
- the material nature of signs (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 18).

Because culture, society, and politics are intrinsic to semiosis, sociosemiotic ethnographers ought to recognize that power dynamics—from the moment of research design to that of publication and reception—are not extraneous to their research practices. For this reason, sociosemiotic ethnographers must ensure that reflexivity inform their heroglot (Bakhtin, 1975/1981) *paroles*, or acts of speaking. By *reflexivity* here it is not only meant the process of explicit dialectic self-awareness but also the trait and process of polyvocality (Bakhtin, 1975/1981)—which informs the very

shape and validity of sociosemiotic ethnography, as I explain. In conclusion, the differences between structural semiotics and social semiotics are so numerous and so significant that they warrant an entirely new approach to the combination of semiotics and fieldwork, an approach that I am now going to discuss in some depth.

Sociosemiotic Ethnography

Sociosemiotic ethnography is a form of critical analytic ethnography. *Analytic ethnography* is a research strategy seeking to combine fieldwork and theory in an attempt to systematically understand and interpret social processes (Lofland, 1995; Snow, Morrill, & Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, sociosemiotic ethnography is a critical practice that emphasizes the praxiological relevance of critical emancipation and critical enlightenment (see Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003).

Manning's (1987) formulation of semiotics and fieldwork attempted to transcend two important limitations of classic ethnographic work: its lack of procedural analytical systematization and the somewhat-neglectful pursuit of its theoretical potential. Sociosemiotic ethnography has similar objectives. Nevertheless, as a form of postmodern and reflexive ethnography sociosemiotic ethnography stands in sharp contrast to Manning's (1987) call for a research practice "accompanied less and less by interest" in "the study of emotion, sentiment, and the messy particulars of life as a sociological domain" (p. 7). Sociosemiotic ethnography recognizes that "the researcher-as-*bricoleur*-theorist" cannot be but driven by and grounded within his or her emotions, passions, personal history, gender identity, race, class, and ethnicity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 9). Sociosemiotic ethnographers recognize that their tales of the field are always interpretive political narratives functioning as "processes of decentralization and disunification" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 67) marked by a critical sensibility and by an emancipatory agenda. Therefore, even though sociosemiotic ethnography attempts to be analytical and systematic, it never loses view of its critical, humanistic, moral, and richly descriptive engagement with lived experience, and its rejection of instrumental rationality and all forms of determinism.

If semiotics and fieldwork, as proposed by Manning (1987), strives to have "less feeling hanging around the text, less emotion between the lines, [and] fewer tales submerged or alluded to" (p. 7), sociosemiotic ethnography seeks to capture lived experiences of meaning by examining

the semiotic and exo-semiotic constraints of everyday life in thickly descriptive fashion. The sociosemiotic ethnographer is not an objective formalist but instead a reflexive and critical pragmatist who—prompted by his or her humanistic disdain with all forms of hegemonic inequality and ideological injustice—understands that "culture has to be viewed as a domain of struggle where the production and transmission of knowledge is always a contested process" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 441) and that "everything ideological possesses semiotic value" (Volosinov, 1973, p. 10). Sociosemiotic ethnography, therefore, attempts to have more feeling hanging around and behind the text and more tales alluded to, that is, more feeling of indignation for all forms of logonomic domination, and more tales about linguistic/discursive/material power.

Structural semiotics, in its cultural anthropological and cultural studies variants, has adopted criteria of validity typical of either positivism or a modified historical materialism. In doing so structural semioticians have pretended to hold the key to a privileged view of reality, designed and institutionalized their favorite interpretations and representations, and implicitly exonerated themselves, because of a lack of reflexive recognition, from the political responsibilities of being direct creators of that reality. Sociosemiotic ethnographers must openly acknowledge that their texts and discourses are but interpretive practices selected among a multiplicity of perspectives. Because the methodological scope of sociosemiotic ethnography revolves around a three-dimensional concern with discourses and texts, experiences, and social, historical, and geo-political circumstances sociosemiotic ethnographers must be prepared to embrace a multidimensional approach that is liable to "hold different perspectives in creative tension with one another" (Saukko, 2003, p. 32). Indeed, if the goal of sociosemiotic ethnography is to understand the political consequences of polysemy, sociosemiotic ethnographers must remain aware of the political consequences of the heteroglossia of their discourses and texts. *Heteroglossia* refers to the multiplicity of voices, codes, meanings, discourses, and values that inform signification (Bakhtin, 1965/1984, 1975/1981, 1979/1986; Volosinov, 1973). In conducting heteroglossic research sociosemiotic ethnographers can transcend the limitations of materialist structural semiotics. Research is inevitably "a force that alters or creates reality in both symbolic and material terms" (Saukko, 2003, p. 27), and it behooves all sociosemiotic ethnographers to understand that the moral goal of maximizing the inclusivity of their interpretive practices can only be achieved by way of ontological, theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and methodical polyvocality.

Sociosemiotic ethnography is also an attempt to further bridge the gap between symbolic interactionism and cultural studies. Sociosemiotics provides symbolic interactionists with a much-needed theory and analytics of the sign and ideology (Vannini, 2004), and symbolic interactionism provides a sociosemiotic cultural studies with much-needed attention to the particular, phenomenological, interpretive, and interactionist experience of everyday life (Denzin, 1992). As opposed to Manning's (1987) structural formulation of semiotics and fieldwork, sociosemiotic ethnography resides on long-standing principles of processual symbolic interactionism shared by a humanistic version of cultural studies. These are the principles of interactive determination, symbolization, human agency, and emergence (Snow, 2001). The application of these principles at the ontological and epistemological level of research practice should make sociosemiotic ethnography, as a fusion of cultural studies and symbolic interactionism

> aware of the danger of positing imaginary social unities as the *explanatory* basis for its accounts of cultural texts. Its constant impetus [should be] to think of cultures as being processes that divide as they bring together . . . to stress the diversity and the contestation always involved in "defining" social groups . . . and to question those totalizing notions of culture that assume that at the end of cultural processes there lies the achievement of a whole and coherent "society" or "community." (Frow & Morris, 2003, pp. 492-493)

In short, sociosemiotic ethnography as a cultural studies and interactionist project should bring together the two perspectives and their attention to discourses of politics, economy, aesthetics, gender, history, text, performance, and lived experience (see Denzin, 1992). Now that sociosemiotic ethnography has been fully introduced as an analytics, it remains to be seen how, procedurally, it can be used. In the following sections I describe sociosemiotic ethnography in some detail.

Sociosemiotic Procedures: A Case Study

In 2003, a colleague and I conducted a study on the meanings associated with the practice of artificial tanning (Vannini & McCright, 2004). The study utilized a combination of semistructured, open-ended interviews, unstructured conversations on and off the "field," analysis of text, and participant observation. In total, I spoke to 40 individuals who artificially tanned, at the time or at some point in the past, and 1 tanning salon manager and 1 tanning salon worker. The sample consisted of a slight majority of females,

and of individuals in the age range 18 to 52 years (most, however, were in their 20s). All were of European background, with the exception of 2 Japanese men, and all were born and lived on the West Coast of the United States and Canada. All came from a broadly defined middle-class background.

Even though this is not the place to report in detail the findings of the study, it is worth to remark that all individuals—without exception—artificially tanned because of aesthetic reasons. In other words, they perceived tanned and bronzed skin to be more attractive and appealing than pale or unevenly tanned skin. It is interesting enough to note that individuals also perceived tanned skin to look healthy and healthier than untanned skin, despite their explicit awareness that UV-ray skin exposure is linked to higher risk of contracting skin cancer. As we reflected in our article, it seemed as if the meaning associated with tanned skin was defined according to the rules of a sexual and seductive frame of reference, rather than to a medical frame. We concluded that tanned skin had semiotic power, a form of power dependent on the definition of the situation and the frame to be adopted to define the situation under specific ideological, politico-economic, social-psychological, gendered, and other exo-semiotic circumstances. At the time of writing, mostly because of length limitations, we could not and did not elaborate on our methodology and research strategy, and therefore in what follows I intend to take the opportunity to do so.

Sociosemiotic ethnography is an interpretive strategy and not a method of data collection. In other words, social semiotics is neither a body of pure theory, nor a self-contained perspective (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 1). Sociosemiotic research strategies are always combinations of theoretical perspectives oriented to the solution of specific research questions and problems. As a research strategy, semiotics is but a form of inquiry with concepts that vary depending on research contexts. By itself, therefore, sociosemiotic ethnography offers no answers, it merely "offers ideas for formulating questions and ways of searching for answers" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 1). Furthermore, sociosemiotic ethnography refuses to bend to the "Manichean machinery that splices the world into heroes and villains and mothers and whores" (Saukko, 2003, p. 105) typical of structuralist cultural studies and anthropology. What sociosemiotic ethnography can do is allow us to

> begin to see the fussier side of the cultural and social world, which does not fall so neatly into dichotomies and plots, but where there twists, tweaks and blurrings that may reflect and change meaning and history in quite consequential ways. (Saukko, 2003, p. 105)

Much like sociosemiotic ethnography benefits from the combination of various critical and interpretive analytical perspectives, it also benefits from the free combination of methods of data collection such as observation, participant observation, unstructured, semistructured, or structured interviews, and the gathering of textual data. These and other methods can yield useful empirical material for sociosemiotic ethnographic analysis. Sociosemiotic ethnography shares a common preoccupation over such procedural issues as the formulation of research questions, sampling, and data collection with other ethnographic methods, and it is therefore beyond the scope of this writing to examine those.

It is important to emphasize one important difference between sociosemiotic ethnography and social semiotics in general. Sociosemiotic ethnography is concerned with the study of lived experience of meaning and with the actual, practical use of semiotic resources. Whether sociosemiotic ethnographers are interested in understanding, collecting, documenting, cataloguing old or new semiotic resources they must remain focused on how actual social agents, individually or in groups, produce, create, distribute, exchange, use, consume, or interpret semiotic resources in specific exo-semiotic contexts. This, as seen earlier, is also an important difference between structural semiotics and social semiotics; whereas the former focuses on structural relations between syntagmatic and paradigmatic systems of difference between signs, the latter focuses not only on systemic relations amongst semiotic resources but also on practical and social relations between semiotic resources and their producers and users. Sociosemiotic ethnography, therefore, is primarily interested in the functions that semiotic resources play in social contexts, and it matters greatly that sociosemiotic ethnographers go beyond theoretical semiotic potential to understand the actual semiotic potential of resources through investigation of lived semiotic experience.

Given what was said above, it should be understood that the expression *sociosemiotic ethnography* ought to serve as a broad umbrella term for a variety of research approaches that transcend the classical denotation of the term *ethnography*. *Ethnography* in the seventh historical moment of qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) is not limited to participant observation (for an opposing view, see Gans, 1999). In the postmodern moment, *ethnography* refers to any representation of lived experience of cultural meaning, and *sociosemiotic ethnography* in particular refers to any representation of how people experience, use, practice, talk about, contest, critique, understand—and in general, interact—with polysemic meanings of semiotic resources. Furthermore, as a form of postmodern ethnography,

sociosemiotic ethnography recognizes the limitations of "expert discourse." Sociosemiotic ethnographers make it a point of seeking how social agents interpret meanings in its complexity and contradictions because they reject the prescriptive character of the ontological and epistemological omniscience of the "expert, who interprets the truth of the person's experience back to her and prescribes 'diagnosis'" (Saukko, 2003, p. 76.

Sociosemiotic ethnographers ought not to be excessively preoccupied with technical specifications over method and procedures; in other words, sociosemiotic ethnography, as a form of postmodern ethnography, ought to be concerned with ontology and meaning more than epistemology, method, and instrumental rationality (Denzin, 1989). As an investigation of semiotic experience, sociosemiotic ethnography is about the ideological worlds that people make through semiotic resources and about the contested meanings and subjectivities that semiotic resources shape. Yet there are no ideological, social, cultural, or structural totalities in sociosemiotic interpretation. More simply, there are systems of interaction of multiple meanings and different social agents with diverse goals and life worlds. Sociosemiotic worlds thus demand that observers actively engage with the interpretation of the various texts and performances in which they manifest themselves. Sociosemiotic ethnography is thus always problematic political interpretation, and not objective or realist explication. Then as I discuss in what follows, an example of the heteroglossia of sociosemiotic analytics comes from my examination of the multiple logonomic rules concerning the interpretation of tanned skin, as a source of seductive meaning, and/or as medical evidence. These contradicting interpretations expose the nuanced and multifaceted nature of reality. Indeed, as Saukko (2003) remarked,

> contrasting several, potentially contradicting, lived realities, helps to overcome the temptation to think of a particular lived experience as the "truth" on a matter and to do justice to the specificity of each experience, while bearing in mind their particularities. (p. 68)

Nevertheless, sociosemiotic ethnography must remain analytical. Its goal is to uncover the much-neglected theoretical relevance of the lived experience and use of semiotic resources, and in this sense it must involve attempts at theorizing. As Snow et al. (2003, p. 184) remarked, ethnographers have often neglected to formulate guidelines for the analytic moment of the research process. Lofland too (1970, p. 37) earlier remarked that field researchers' antipathy toward analytical systemization has resulted in the conceptual impoverishment of ethnography. If postmodern ethnography

can truly be interpretive as well as critical and existential as Denzin (1989) specified, it must rely on careful conceptual development. If we understand *conceptual development* as a process that entails at least "a focus on making empirical events meaningful via conceptualization" and "a discourse that facilitates explanation of empirical events" (Snow et al., 2003, p. 185) then we must share a toolbox of useful concepts for sociosemiotic ethnographic analysis. Old and new concepts must be extended to various research contexts and to the solution of diverse research problems and must be refined and generated anew throughout the process of coding empirical material. In what follows I introduce the reader to a variety of sociosemiotic concepts drawn from the literature and now applied to my previously cited study on the artificially tanned body.

Semiotic resources. People strategically use their body and personal appearance as props in a variety of situations to achieve a host of different goals (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1962). Tanned skin is one such body prop. Artificial tanners assign tanned skin great aesthetic value and find their tanned body and the body of tanned others to look youthful, healthy, sexy, and affluent. Artificial tanners, therefore, use the tanned body as a semiotic resource to enhance their self-esteem and physical capital. Generally, semiotic resources have great *semiotic potential*, or affordance (Gibson, 1979). *Affordance* or *semiotic potential* refers to the possible uses of a semiotic resource. Tanners use their tanned skin in a great variety of (often contradictory) ways, for example, as a resource in situations where some level of romantic or sexual relationship is sought, or to mask the body's natural process of ageing by toning down the appearance of wrinkles, or to hide lack of muscular tone and the presence of bodily fat, or to look healthier in presence of family members, and so on. A resource such as tanned skin, therefore, has great affordance, and some of its meanings may yet to be discovered. During my fieldwork, I continuously learned of new and somewhat unusual uses of tanned skin. Tanners would use their bronzed complexion to hide acne, to work as a "base" for future sunbathing, to be "in" with the latest fashion, or even to be more in touch with their ideal ethnic identity, as one young woman told us:

> I wish I was Black. I don't have anything against White people, but I like black skin a lot. I mean, obviously I won't ever be Black by tanning but just to get darker and darker is something that I like a lot.

An important goal of sociosemiotic ethnography is to study how resources are used by people under specific circumstances. To understand

theoretical semiotic potential and actual semiotic potential of resources, sociosemiotic ethnographers must make inventories of past, present, and possibly even future resources and their uses. Collections of resources may be achieved through the combination of observation, interviews, field con- versations, various degrees of participation, gathering of textual material, and so on. Because the meaning of resources always depends on the sense that is made of them (the Peircean interpretant), it is always important to consider how different interpretive communities may assign different mean- ing to heteroglossic resources. Not everyone views tanned skin as aestheti- cally pleasing, for example. Followers of the Goth subculture, for example, find an extremely pale complexion to be much more attractive and morally healthy than other people do. A paradigmatic analysis (i.e., a comparative analysis) of resources across different sociosemiotic systems should then be helpful in cataloguing theoretical and semiotic potential of resources.

Modality. In sociosemiotics *modality* refers to the "reality value" (Jewitt & Oyama, 2003, p. 151) of a semiotic resource. *Modality*, in other words, is a matter of truth(s) and its (their) strategic achievement. Sociosemiotic ethnographers must be concerned with how semiotic resources are used to express truth(s) and with what kinds of modality are used to achieve truth(s). There are different kinds of modality, or ways of achieving reality value. For example, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and Van Leeuwen (1999) discussed different forms of modality existing in semiotic modes such as the linguistic, sonoric, and visual. Because here I am exclusively concerned with the visual semiotic mode (tanned bodies, after all, are meant to be seen and not heard or read or spoken), I briefly discuss only naturalistic and sensory modality.

Tanned skin is an index (Peirce, 1931) that the body has been exposed to UV rays. In the Peircean distinction between icons, indexes, and sym- bols, indexes work as the most "innocent" and "obvious" types of signs, and therefore as the ones with highest modality. Indexes, in fact, are merely the semiotic effect of natural phenomena. Smoke, for example, is indexical of fire; raised hair is indexical of fear, and so on. What we are dealing with in the case of naturally (i.e., as a result of exposure to the sun) tanned skin is high modality because the claim to truth (exposure to the sun) made by tanned skin is definitely a strong one. In many contexts of everyday life *nat- uralistic modality* is quite dominant. In other words, things seem true because they seem to be naturally so, as in the case of suntanned skin.

Even the most seemingly natural resources, however, depend on deeply social and cultural associations. In our consumer society, what seems

natural is often a myth (Barthes, 1972), or in other words an ideological claim. Artificial tanners, for example, claim (most do so implicitly through their skin) that they have the financial and social capital to afford leisure time spent sunbathing outdoors. Indeed, it is no accident that most people artificially tan during holiday seasons and during summer time when one is more likely—and therefore somewhat expected—to have the time and the financial means to go on holiday. In this sense their artificially tanned skin seems like a natural index (indexing exposure to the sun); however, in actuality its modality is different from that of suntanned skin because it also depends on an ideological association.[2] Such ideological association is possible because—among other things—of sensory modality. In the words of Van Leeuwen (2005):

> in sensory modality visual truth is based on the effect of pleasure or displeasure created by visuals, and realized by a degree of articulation which is amplified beyond the point of naturalism, so that sharpness, colour, depth, the play of light and shade, etc., become—from the point of view of naturalistic modality—"more than real." (p. 170)

Artificial tanning's claim to truth and to aesthetic value is then dependent on relations between semiotic resources and people—relations that are obviously deeply enmeshed in culture. Jean Baudrillard (1983) went to great lengths in showing how our contemporary culture is dependent on the sensual gratification afforded by various forms of simulation and hyperreality and the culture of artificial tanners—with their preference for the artificial over the real—clearly corroborates this. In sum, sociosemiotic ethnographers must pay close attention to how resources achieve truth value. The working of ideology is a very important concern for sociosemiotic ethnography, and therefore attention to modality is imperative.

Semiotic change. The concept of *semiotic change* or *semiotic transformation* refers to the how meanings of resources mutate over time. Peirce (1931) identified semiosis as the most important of all semiotic processes. *Semiosis* is interpersonal interaction over time and succession of habits of thought, habits that result in the diachronic transformation of meaning. Sociosemiotic ethnographers must therefore not only catalog semiotic resources but must also contribute to our understanding of how resources are differentially used over time. Semiotic transformation can be quite difficult to study. Change may occur with some groups but not others, and it may be subject to contestation and resistance. Nevertheless, it is important

that sociosemiotic ethnographers transcend the Saussurean emphasis on synchrony and that they make the study of diachronic change one of their main preoccupations.

The social world of artificial tanning and sunbathing has undergone drastic changes over time. Various civilizations throughout time and space have made adoration of the sun one of their primary sources of spirituality and health, moral and physical. Closer to our age, the sun has been recommended as a source of purity, well-being, and energy. Consider for example the role the sun played in medicine, as this excerpt from a 1938 article by Dr. Herman Bundesen (cited in Randle, 1997), one-time president of the Chicago Board of Health, shows:

> No deficiencies that children develop are of greater significance than those caused by the lack of sunlight. . . . Sunlight is good for mankind. When it shines on a child it helps his bones and teeth to form properly, promotes the quality and circulation of his blood. The sun is the constant mortal enemy of germs. . . . Sunlight plays an important part in a baby's health; the notion that the baby should not have direct sunlight is a mistake. . . . When the baby is a month old, place him directly in the sunlight. . . . Don't be afraid of the sun. Push the hood of the baby carriage down, take off the baby's bonnet, uncover his legs and feet. Place him on one side for a few minutes so that one cheek gets the sun's rays; then turn him on the other side. . . . After the child is six months old, let him have his sunbath on his blankets spread out on the lawn. . . . But let us get out into the sunshine with the children as often as possible. The sunbath is just as important as the water bath. . . . Do this! For your child's health now, this summer, and see how much healthier he will be in the year round. (p. 462)

The association between the sun and health has now drastically changed. These discursive changes inform the meanings of tanned skin in different ways, thus positing the semiotic meanings of tanned skin as heteroglossic and conflict laden (see Bakhtin, 1979/1986). The sun has been for some time at the center of panic-driven discourses that have resulted in health promotion campaigns to inform people all over the world of the various danger linked to UV-ray exposure (Coupland & Coupland, 1997). The connotations of tanned skin have also changed significantly. Eighteenth-century European upper-class ladies protected themselves from the sun by using parasols and preferred a powder-white skin to a bronzed complexion. At the time tanned skin connoted exposure to the sun on working fields, where farmers and other workers would become tanned by necessity. It was only with the transition from a production-oriented society to one driven by leisure and

conspicuous consumption that the meanings of tanned skin changed. As the wealthy discovered the value of the great outdoors for lawn tennis play, golf, beach going, swimming, and resort life, tanned skin began to connote upper social standing, refined taste, and sociability (Randle, 1997).

As the meanings associated with specific resources change, transformations are likely to manifest themselves in nonlinear and multiaccentual ways (Volosinov, 1973). The property of multiaccentuality betrays semiotic conflict and contradiction as the norm, rather than the exception. Dialogic semiotic resources (all resources, that is) signify the existence of struggle over the definition of the situation. For example, as more and more medical experts recommend caution over UV-ray exposure, seemingly more and more voices in the pop culture and fashion world on the other hand sing the praises of a bronzed complexion. The logonomic clash between proponents of the medical discourse and proponents of the discourse of seduction manifests itself at the semiotic level of hegemony; discursive hegemonies indeed are constantly subject to contestation, resistance, negotiation, and change, and it is very important for sociosemiotic ethnographers to identify the dynamics involving social agents throughout processes of semiotic change.

Semiotic rules. Another important concept in social semiotics and in sociosemiotic ethnography is that of *semiotic rules.* There are at least two types of rules, which social semiotics shares with general semiotics. The first types of rules are *lexicon rules*, which establish the relation between referents and sign vehicles. For example, then, it is a lexicon rule that links tanned skin to social status, physical attractiveness, youthfulness, and so on.

According to Saussure (1959) lexicon rules are arbitrary or unmotivated; however, for social semioticians rules are often instead direct expressions of sociopolitical power. In the words of Kress (1993): "signs are always motivated by the producer's 'interest,' and by characteristics of the object" (p. 173). This is, of course, a very important difference between structural semiotics and social semiotics. Social semiotics tells us that signs, or better yet resources, work because people with specific interests and specific strategies produce signs to achieve their goals. Of course not everyone has equal power in creating such rules for the use of resources. Agents with varying degrees of social power have different influence in how rules are stipulated, followed, and changed. For example, in the case of tanning, it is hardly possible for most people to change the connotations of tanned skin. And yet, the history of tanning shows that selected powerful individuals and groups have had great influence over the lexicon rules of tanned skin.

Coco Chanel, for example, was among the very first socialites to promote the aesthetic value of tanned skin and was quite influential in changing the masses' disposition toward it (Randle, 1997). As of recent years, medical interest groups and notoriously pale celebrities (e.g., Kate Moss, Nicole Kidman) have also had great sway over the waxing and waning of the tanning fashion. These cases show that the lexicon rules of tanning are never arbitrary but always initiated by individuals and groups who have clear goals in promoting their agendas. Logonomic systems, therefore, are closely connected to sociopolitical systems, and semiotic power is also inextricably connected with sociopolitical power (Volosinov, 1973).

The second category of rules is known as *grammar rules*. Just like the linguistic mode of communication has its grammar, so do other modes such as the visual, the aural, and so on. Much like in the linguistic case, *grammar* refers to a body of rules stipulating how message units are made up of smaller subunits. In the case of language it is linguistic grammar that establishes how I am supposed to write this sentence, by using verbs, nouns, adjectives, and punctuations in a specific manner. In the case of artificial tanning, it is a different kind of grammar that establishes what constitutes a good-looking body. All of my informants, for example, explained that tanning must come in a "package" of body-related props that include nice clothing, a toned silhouette, and so on. It is therefore at a grammar of practices that sociosemiotic ethnographers must look in their investigative processes.

Because it is people that make semiotic rules, and not the opposite, sociosemiotic ethnographers must investigate how rules are achieved in practice in specific social contexts. Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 53) suggested that the student of semiotic rules ought to investigate one or more of the following: (a) How is control exercised, and by whom? (b) How is it justified? (c) How strict are the rules? (d) What happens when people do not follow rules? (e) Can the rules be changed, and if so, how and under what circumstances? Furthermore, Van Leeuwen (2005, pp. 53-58) catalogued at least five different categories of rules, including rules of personal authority, impersonal authority, conformity, role models, and expertise. There are, obviously, many other types of rules, and it is precisely the sociosemiotic ethnographer to make an inventory of semiotic rules to study how semiotic power is achieved in specific social settings.

Semiotic functions. As said, signs work as resources with which social agents can accomplish a variety of goals, including informative, imaginative and/or ideal, heuristic, personal and/or expressive, interactive and/or relational, regulatory, and instrumental (see Halliday, 1978). These categories

of goals correspond to some functions that semiotic resources can serve. Functions often overlap, and it is never easy nor necessarily advisable to establish boundaries between them.

Because people intend to use resources in a goal-driven manner, they often take great care in managing their appearances (Goffman, 1959). Artificial tanners utilize a variety of strategies to do so. For example, they reduce the distance between others and their skin by choosing to wear revealing and seductive clothing. By revealing more of their bodies in social settings, they also "demand" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 145) something from onlookers, namely to be narcissistically gazed at. The narcissistic and scopophiliac practice of tanning can therefore be said to revolve around contact. Messages that "demand" to be looked at depend on strategies that maximize the chance of contact. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) call such messages *offers* (also see Halliday, 1978).

Another pair of important analytical concepts in social semiotics is that of *framing* and *salience.* The concept of *salience* simply indicates that some communicative elements are more functional (i.e., important) than others. Artificial tanners, for example, know that during the winter and autumn months of the year, the face is the most salient element of their presentation of embodied self, and for this reason they often focus their artificial tanning on the face only, reserving instead full-body tanning for the spring and summer when more revealing clothes are worn. *Framing*, instead, indicates that "elements of a composition can either be given separate identities, or represented as belonging together" (Jewitt & Oyama, 2003, p. 149). Male artificial tanners, for example, connect tanning and weight lifting in an attempt to justify their gender-bending tanning practices. Tanning, after all, is perceived by most males to be an act that they find to be typical of "vain women." By claiming that the visual effects of weight lifting (a more traditionally "masculine" activity) are enhanced through the practice of tanning, male artificial tanners frame the two together.

Discourse. The meanings of semiotic resources depend on our knowledge of the conventions and practices existent in the universes in which specific resources are used. Such knowledge is referred to as *discourse*. *Discourse*, following Foucault (e.g., 1980), is a socially constructed body of knowledge that too works as a resource for representation (see Van Leeuwen, 2005). Making sense of the tanned body, for example, is a process that depends on the operation of discursive resources that allow us to determine for ourselves whether tanned skin is beautiful or sick—among other possibilities. Much like it is the case in the social world of tanning—where

at least two discourses (the medical and the seductive) compete for the framing of the meaning of the tanned body—discourses are plural, and their coexistence is the very condition of logonomic and social struggle (Bakhtin, 1965/1984; Hodge & Kress, 1988).

Among the objects of sociosemiotic ethnography must be that of identifying and interpreting how "the discourses we use in representing social practices . . . are versions of those practices *plus* the ideas and attitudes that attach to them in the contexts in which we use them" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 104). In other words, discourses are about the what of communication, as much as they are about the how (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2003), as well as the imputed why. Discourses inform social practices by providing social agents with resources that allow them to make aesthetic, moral, and logical sense of meaning. Thus, for example, the medical discourse allows certain interpretive communities to view excessive exposure to UV rays as irrational and self-abusive behavior, whereas the seductive discourse allows others to consider it to be a rational choice for the fulfillment of aesthetic goals, and other types of goals.

Sociosemiotic ethnography must be concerned not with the study of discourse in abstract and general terms but instead with the analysis of specific instances of discourse. Much too often in academic parlance the concept of *discourse* is used as an ineffable excuse to justify analytical claims. Discourses are visible and present in everyday life, and sociosemiotic ethnographers must be sensitive to how they inform what people do (actions, or practices), how they do what they do (manner), where (spaces) and when (times), who these people are (social actors), how they present themselves in interaction with others (presentations), and what semiotic resources they use throughout their interactions with others (resources; see Van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 105-109). Therefore, it is not sufficient to say that people tan because our culture is permeated by the discourse of beauty. Such discourse must be investigated by learning about how it works in practice. Throughout my study, for example, I learned that some young university students, especially female, would increase their tanning frequency before heading back home to their family for holiday breaks to look healthy for their parents, siblings, and relatives. They did so not to seduce them sexually but to allure them to believe that they were healthy and took good care of themselves while away from home for the first time. Consideration of these practices and of the heteroglossic meanings of seduction therefore allowed me to expand my understanding of the discourse of seduction.

An important way in which discourse works is by turning a specific reality into an instance of a larger case. For example, when someone tans with

a high frequency—say, every day of the week—that person is bound to be labeled a "tanorexic" or "tanaholic." Discourse then works by turning a specific reality into an instance of the larger discourse of addiction. It behooves sociosemiotic ethnographers to understand how discourse work in this way by excluding, rearranging, adding, and substituting elements of a specific social practice to fit them into larger categories of premade discourses (Van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 110-111). While doing so, sociosemiotic ethnographers ought to never lose sight of the fact that discourses never do this on their own; it is always people who use discursive resources in one way or another to accomplish their goals.

Style and genre. Style is an important concept in social semiotics. *Style* refers to metasigns that work by sustaining the difference and uniqueness of social agents. Style is primarily concerned with the manners in which people use semiotic resources. For example, for many of my informants tanning was associated with a series of common lifestyle practices such as fitness, "healthy" eating, nightlife, shopping, socializing, and so on. Their style in presenting themselves through the use of semiotic resources such as fashionable clothing, makeup, dyed hair, and so on was radically different than the style of independent music producers and consumers that I studied before (identifying reference). Style then works as a marker of individual and collective identity, and as a telling characteristic of culture and subculture. Cultural studies ethnographers have also paid extensive attention to the politics and practice of style (e.g., Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 1991), and therefore not much explanation of this concept seems needed here.

The genre of a communicative act is synonymous with its type. Communicative acts can be typified into genres because they share similar characteristics. Genres can be typified in relation to content, form, or function of communication, or a combination of the three. Therefore, just like the concept of *style*, the concept of *genre* also refers to the how of communication. More precisely, from the perspective of social semiotics, genre refers to how semiotic resources are utilized in accordance to similar or common rules.

Sociosemiotic ethnographers ought to pay attention to the genre of all kinds of semiotic resources because genres are particularly effective in legitimating ideology. Tanning salons, for example, utilize the genre of scientific and medical communication when they portray artificial tanning as a medically sound practice by highlighting its potential for combating depression, seasonal affective disorders, dermatological problems (e.g., acne), stress, and decreases in self-esteem and body image. By utilizing the

genre of medical communication therefore tanning salons present themselves to their customers as experts in their field, and such expertise undoubtedly helps in legitimizing tanning as a medically safe practice. The tanning industry uses other genres of semiotic resources as well. Romantic and utopian narratives, both utilizing elements of the visual and linguistic mode, are often present in marketing campaigns. For instance, artificial tanning is advertised through the visual utilization of young, physically attractive, heterosexual couples portrayed wearing swimsuits and romantically strolling hand in hand on a sunny and deserted tropical beach. Through the utilization of such romantic and/or utopian resources tanning salons attempt to seduce customers into suspending the belief, at least for 20 min or so, that they find themselves nowhere but in a suburban minimall and that their suntan is inauthentic.

In sum, the study of styles, genres, discourses, semiotic functions, rules, change, and modality of semiotic resources ought to allow sociosemiotic ethnographers to focus on the practical uses of semiotic resources in social settings and to understand how semiotic practices are always inextricably linked with sociopolitical configurations of power.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I argued that the combination of social semiotics and fieldwork ought to allow qualitative researchers to transcend the realism and formalism of structural semiotic ethnography. Sociosemiotic ethnography is as a form of reflexive, critical, analytical, interpretive, and constructionist ethnography that focuses on the study of how social agents use semiotic resources in practice. As a research strategy, sociosemiotic ethnography can be easily approached from a variety of critical and constructive analytical perspectives, such as contemporary critical theory, cultural studies, queer theory, feminisms, and symbolic interactionism. Methods that can be used to gather data for sociosemiotic ethnographic analysis include observation and participant observation, reflexive introspection, biographical methods, interviewing, text analysis, and more. The goal of this article is to alert scholars conducting various forms of qualitative inquiry to the usefulness of sociosemiotic ethnography, and to provide them with sociosemiotic concepts and with an idea of what procedures sociosemiotic ethnographic analysis entails.

As a research strategy based on interpretivism, constructionism, and reflexivity, sociosemiotic ethnography transcends the formalism and positivistic

pretensions of structural semiotics. Drawing from a relativist epistemology of multiple validities (Lather, 1993) sociosemiotic ethnography acknowledges the polysemic nature of reality, its plural political underpinnings and consequences, the existential uniqueness of the researcher, and the multidimensionality of the "rules" for doing research and for examining validity. Oscillating among "dialogic," "deconstructive," and "contextualist" validity (Saukko, 2003, p. 19) various sociosemiotic ethnographic projects would be able to subscribe to different but complementary versions of validity. Indeed sociosemiotic ethnography abides by criteria of truthfulness, self-reflexivity, polyvocality, postmodern excess, genealogical historicity, deconstructive critique, and sensitivity to social context (for a further discussions of these criteria in general, see Saukko, 2003, pp. 20-22). Of course, different projects may emphasize one or more aspects at the expense of others, nonetheless sociosemiotic ethnographers ought to remain mindful of all.

Examples of published full-blown sociosemiotic ethnographic studies are scarce if not altogether inexistent. To clarify concepts and illustrate otherwise abstract procedures I utilized a research study I recently conducted on the meanings of the practice of artificial tanning. To my knowledge, only one other published study has adopted a sociosemiotic ethnographic framework, albeit in a less explicit manner than the one proposed in this article (Griffiths & Machin, 2003). In their study, Griffiths and Machin (2003) drew from participant observation and interviews conducted with school-aged children to understand "what children do with what they watch on television" (p. 147). More precisely, Griffiths and Machin found that children used television discourse as a resource to express self-identity, gender, and group affiliation and therefore engaged in an active process of interpretation of mediated communication. By utilizing a sociosemiotic framework Griffiths and Machin avoided not only the old structuralist semiotic problem of imputing effects on media audiences but also the pitfalls of blind voluntarism by never losing sight of the ideological content of the messages examined. Griffiths and Machin's study beautifully exemplifies how ethnographers can pay attention to the working of ideology in practice, or in other words to how social agents utilize ideologies as practical resources for the achievement of everyday life goals.

Numerous possibilities for the application of the sociosemiotic ethnographic framework exist. What seems particularly appealing to this writer, perhaps because of my interest in cultural and media studies, is the utilization of sociosemiotic ethnography for the study of the lived experience of media communication. Much too often cultural studies, media studies, and

even sociosemiotic scholars limit their analysis to texts abstracted from their use in practice. Instead, a sociosemiotic approach to media studies would allow researchers to treat processes of mediated communication as sets of practices oriented around media (Couldry, 2004; Machin, 2002). By directly engaging with the actual semiotic potential of mediated resources in specific social settings, sociosemiotic ethnographers of media would be able to transcend the limitations of deconstructive textual analysis and situate their study within a broader anthropological framework built around the critical study of practice and everyday cultural knowledge (Couldry, 2004; Machin, 2002). Such approach could allow interpretive researchers to posit ideology not as the automatic product of ephemeral and conspiratorial structures but as actual semiotic resource and meaning-making practice. To a world of qualitative inquiry more than ever before keen on an interpretive and critical research, sociosemiotic ethnography ought to serve as nothing but a powerful ally and tool.

Notes

1. This table is adapted from the diagram found in Hodge and Kress (1988, p. 16). The interested reader is invited to learn more about "Saussure's rubbish bin" by consulting pages 13-36 of Hodge and Kress.

2. Ideology is intended here as a condition opposed to truth, and yet perceived as such.

References

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1975)

Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1965)

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays.* (C. Emerson, Ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1979)

Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations.* New York: Semiotext(e).

Couldry, N. (2004). Theorising media as practice. *Social Semiotics*, *14*, 115-132.

Coupland, N., & Coupland, J. (1997). Bodies, beaches, and burn-times: Environmentalism and its discursive competitors. *Discourse and Society*, *8*, 7-25.

Davis, F. (1994). *Fashion, culture, and identity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1987). On semiotics and symbolic interactionism. *Symbolic Interaction, 10*, 1-19.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). Review symposium. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *18*, 89-100.

Denzin, N. K. (1992). *Symbolic interactionism and cultural studies: The politics of interpretation*. New York: Blackwell.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2000). *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (2003). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (pp. 1-46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2005). *The handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge.* Brighton, UK: Harvester Press.

Frow, J., & Morris, M. (2003). Cultural studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (pp. 489-539). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gans, H. (1999). Participant observation in the era of "ethnography." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *28*, 540-548.

Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Anchor.

Gottdiener, M. (1995). *Postmodern semiotics: material culture and the forms of postmodern life*. Oxford and Cambridge, UK: Blackwell.

Griffiths, M., & Machin, D. (2003). Television and playground games as part of children's symbolic culture. *Social Semiotics*, *13*, 147-160.

Gubrium, J., & Holstein, J. (2003). Analyzing interpretive practice. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (pp. 214-248). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jewitt, C., & Oyama, R. (2003). Visual meaning: A social semiotic approach. In T. Van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of visual analysis* (pp. 134-156). London: Sage.

Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A., & Willis, P. (Eds.). (1991). *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies.* London: Routledge.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotics.* London: Arnold.

Hodge, R., & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kincheloe, J., & McLaren, P. (2003). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (pp. 433-488). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kress, G. (1993). Against arbitrariness: The social production of the sign as a foundational issue in critical discourse analysis. *Discourse and Society*, *42*, 169-193.

Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design.* London: Routledge.

Lather, P. (1993). Fertile obsessions: Validity after poststructuralism. *Sociological Quarterly*, *34,* 673-693.

Lemert, C. (1979). Structuralist semiotics. In S. G. McNall (Ed.), *Theoretical sociology* (pp. 96-111). New York: St. Martin's.

Lofland, J. (1970). Interactionist imagery and analytic interruptus. In T. Shibutani (Ed.), *Human nature and collective behavior: Papers in honor of Herbert Blumer* (pp. 35-45). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Lofland, J. (1995). Analytic ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *24*, 30-67.

MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist.* New York: Schocken.

MacCannell, D., & MacCannell, J. F. (1982). *The time of the sign: A semiotic interpretation of modern culture.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Machin, D. (2002). *Ethnographic research for media studies.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Manning, P. K. (1987). *Semiotics and fieldwork.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Manning, P. K. (1988). *Symbolic communication.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Manning, P. K. (2004). Semiotics, pragmatism, and narratives. In L. Reynolds & N. Herman-Kinney (Eds.), *Handbook of symbolic interactionism* (pp. 1021-1040). Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.

Manning, P. K., & Cullum-Swan, B. (1994). Narrative, content, and semiotic analysis. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (1st ed., pp. 463-478). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Peirce, C. S. (1931). *Collected papers.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Perinbanayagam, R. (1985). *Signifying acts.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Perinbanayagam, R. (1991). *Discursive acts.* New York: Aldine.

Randle, H. (1997). Suntanning: Differences in perception throughout history. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, *72*, 461-466.

Rochberg-Halton, E. (1982). Situation, structure, and the context of meaning. *Sociological Quarterly*, *23*, 455-476.

Saukko, P. (2003). *Doing research in cultural studies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Saussure, F. de (1959). *Course in general linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Snow, D. (2001). Extending and broadening Blumer's conceptualization of symbolic interactionism. *Symbolic Interaction*, *24*, 367-377.

Snow, D., Morrill, C., & Anderson, L. (2003). Elaborating analytic ethnography: Linking fieldwork and theory. *Ethnography*, *4*, 181-200.

Stone, G. (1962). Appearance and the self. In A. M. Rose (Ed.), *Human nature and social process* (pp. 86-118). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Van Leeuwen, T. (1999). *Speech, music, sound.* London: Macmillan.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics.* London: Routledge.

Vannini, P. (2004). Toward an interpretive analytics of the sign: Interactionism, power, and semiosis. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, *27*, 151-176.

Vannini, P., & McCright, A. (2004). To die for: The semiotic seductive power of the tanned body. *Symbolic Interaction*, *27*, 309-332.

Volosinov, V. (1973). *Marxism and the philosophy of language.* New York: Seminar Press.

Wiley, N. (1994). *The semiotic self.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Phillip Vannini is assistant professor of communication and culture at Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia. His writings on social semiotics, symbolic interaction, the sociology of the body, and more have appeared in such journals as *Symbolic Interaction, CTheory, Journal of Popular Culture,* and *Critical Discourse Studies*.