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Using Western Social Theory:
Towards a Moral Ethnography of Islamic Boarding Schools in West Sumatra, Indonesia

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KEYWORD

Teori Barat
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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to map various Western social theories so that they can be used in writing "moral ethnography" in modern Islamic boarding schools in the Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Indonesia. In this paper, the author shows how the three theoretical approaches allow different ethnographic production, in the search for ethnographic theoretical approaches that are appropriate to the moral goals of the form of education. The author begins with Goffman's "total institution" idea, which Goffman used as the basis of his book on "asylum" or mental hospital. It seems that the concept of "total institution" is very suitable for the description of the pesantren, and indeed Goffman followed the school with a guesthouse as an example of a total institution. The author shows how to use the example of a total institution to give life to the results of the particular description of pesantren. In this picture, it seems that the substitute Islamic boarding school is rather harsh, with a strong institutional structure, strong boundary patrols (and separation from family and society), and a very tight and regular day-to-day schedule. Then, the author explains Foucault's theory of power, tight relations or nexus between power and knowledge, and discourse, and elaborates how to apply this idea to ethnographic data. The author shows that these concepts are very powerful tools for the ethnography of Islamic boarding schools. In particular, the image of "panopticon" as a review tool from above, and the idea of "bio-power" (bio power) and "pastoral power" are suitable for showing the aspects or nature of the pesantren's sub-culture. Islamic boarding schools create santri who are very reviewing themselves and their friends, who really want to be open to the observation of Allah and to pesantren leaders, and are interested in living morally, and improving themselves, through knowledge and faith.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to survey some different Western social theories in order to work towards writing a moral ethnography of pondok pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in the homeland of the Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Indonesia. An ethnography is a genre of book, usually produced by an anthropologist who has lived within a society for long period of fieldwork. It is a picture or story of a society or culture – its structures and organisations, rules and conventions, systems of meaning and values – that aims to make sense of that society or culture by translating it into terms that are meaningful to the readers of the book, who usually

belong to a different society or culture. The principal methodology of anthropology, participant observation during long-term fieldwork, produces data in the form of field notes, as well as other primary sources such as interview transcripts, upon which the ethnography is based. There is often some tension between the ethnography as picture or story and the ethnography as analysis (Hammersley, 2006), the latter requiring more distance and abstraction than the former. I will return to this issue later.

The background to this paper is my work as a university lecturer and supervisor of postgraduate research students, and anthropological fieldwork conducted among the Minangkabau in West Sumatra, in various trips between 2004 and 2008. During fieldwork focussed on adolescents, I became interested in Islamic schools. I have long considered education to be of singular importance in Indonesia, and have always been struck by its neglect by Western scholars. There is a real dearth of scholarly work on education in Indonesia, and yet in the last generation we have witnessed an education revolution: from a society where education was the preserve of a tiny elite, Indonesia now manages to educate virtually all children of primary school age, about 80 percent of children of junior high school age and 57 per cent of young people of senior high school age (BPS, 2006). Indonesia has made solid progress in education since Independence, even though it is now severely criticized, especially by its own people, for being backward in educational development.

During fieldwork in West Sumatra, I was particularly struck by 'modernist' or Reformist *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and *madrasah* (Islamic day schools), some of which have a proud history of producing graduates of national and international stature (people like the intellectual, Hamka and the nationalist political leader, Adam Malik), and offer a truly impressive education. These schools are different to 'secular', state schools on the one hand and also different to the traditionalist or Classical *pesantren* that dominate the literature on Islamic schools in Indonesia on the other. I collected data from participant observation in these and other schools and more broadly in the community, from interviews with hundreds of students and adolescents, and with a much smaller number of teachers, parents and leaders in the community, from surveys and textual sources. However, I did not set out to study these schools, and I consider that I do not yet have enough data for a proper school ethnography.

My main aim in this paper is not to produce the perfect ethnography of Islamic schools but rather to explore how different theoretical approaches enable the production of different sorts of ethnographies. I hope thereby to write a paper that has some pedagogical usefulness, showing the articulation of data, social theory and final written product or outcome, the ethnography, while at the same time investigating the possibilities for approaches to educational ethnography that do justice to the moral objectives of this form of education. I borrow a simple, common-sense understanding of "morals" from Raihani's Masters thesis (2002:103) : "the beliefs and principles of people about right or wrong that can be seen from their deeds and actions". In this sense, the paper is circular: I already think that Islamic education has a basically moral intent: i.e. that it aims to produce a particular type of person, a person who has strong Islamic morals (*akhlak*), and who possesses Islamic knowledge (Raihani, 2002). That is why I want eventually to write what I am calling a "moral ethnography" of Islamic education, and why I am searching for a theoretical approach to the data that does justice to the moral objectives of this form of education.

In my experience as a university lecturer and supervisor of postgraduate students, I have often found that "theory" poses problems for students. While the usually brighter students delight in the abstract, internally coherent world of the theoretical paper, many struggle to "talk the talk" themselves. Many have difficulty working out the relevance and uses of theory, and at a later stage, when writing research papers and theses, have trouble deciding which theory to apply to data, and justifying their choice. The typical undergraduate paper is fluffy in conception and awkward in expression in the introduction, when the student is setting out the topic, question, problem or aims, somewhat more solid when they describe what they intend to do, and why, and insecure when they try to show the significance of what they are doing. It is only when the student is able to present the "nuts and bolts" of information in the body of the paper that their thinking becomes clear and their expression precise.

So, what does social theory "do"? Is it any use? How does it work? How does it help the academic "think" or organise data and thoughts? How does it affect the final product – the student essay or the academic paper? Or does it just serve to allow grand performances by clever people? In this paper I am concentrating on the post-fieldwork, post-data collection stage, when the writer of an ethnography has to organize months of field notes and other data into chapters and themes in the writing-up stage: i.e. I am assuming that the scholar has

already collected loads of data – usually, in the case of anthropologists, more than they can ever hope to use – and is all set to start writing. I am focusing on the articulations of data, theory and ethnography. It is also important to consider the prior articulations: how theory shapes the posing of research "problems", questions and objectives, and how theory affects data collection, but I will not address these stages in this paper.

I am deliberately using rather simplified theory and a familiar institution – the school – in order to highlight the effects of theory. Of necessity I am using only the bare bones of theory, and cannot hope to do justice to great thinkers.

I begin with a brief consideration of the concept of the "total institution", formulated by Erving Goffman (1961). His example *par excellence* of the "total institution" was the asylum, or hospital for the mentally ill. He also suggested that the boarding school, along with other institutions such as the army and the prison, would be good candidates for study as "total institutions", so my proposed study of *pesantren* as a total institution was already presaged by Goffman (1961). After outlining Goffman's notion of the total institution, I suggest how one might present an ethnography of the *pesantren* according to his criteria for the constitution of a "total institution".

My next tack is to take up Foucault's notions of power, the power/knowledge nexus, and power relations and apply them to my ethnographic data. I show that the deployment of the image of the panopticon as surveillance, and the internalisation of that image by the students in *pesantren*, enable an incisive ethnography of the *pesantren*. 'Bio-power' and 'pastoral power' are other strong features of the *pesantren* subculture.

Finally, I express dissatisfaction with these two "hard" approaches, and turn to my own discipline, anthropology, for a "softer", more emic approach, borrowing Turner and Bruner's concept of the "anthropology of experience" (1986) and Good's argument for the necessity to make human experience central to anthropology to enable an ethnography of the *pesantren* that seems more in tune with the ethos of Islamic education.

The "total institution"

Goffman (1961:17) sets out very clearly his idea of the total institution. He writes:

> A basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these spheres of life. First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority.
>
> Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together.
>
> Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time to the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials.
>
> Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution.

In Goffman's study of the mental asylum, patients are sequestered in a total-care institution. Contact and interaction with families and communities is minimal, and carefully controlled; patients are dressed in the homogenising, careful clothing of the institution and in many ways depersonalized and stripped of their individual identity; bodies and minds are controlled at all times – through regimes of drug-taking, through constant surveillance and monitoring, through timetabled activities, through measured inputs of stimulation and contrived outputs, and so forth. The new reality for new patients is the order and particular identity imposed by the institution, according to its diagnosis of their condition. There is a strict hierarchy – most crudely, staff are superordinate and patients are subordinate – and it is unthinkable that this could be reversed or transgressed. The total institution pays particular attention to the patrolling of its borders. It constructs physical borders that create a whole, ordered, physical world – patients' mobility is strictly controlled and there are usually bars on windows and high fences; there are different classes of patients (some are self-admitted, others are "committed") but the admission (and exit) procedures are formidable and strict. And the asylum

patrols the psychological borders of the patients' inner lives: their minds and emotions are supposed to be open to the authorities, such that there is no division of public and private: everything is public, everything is controlled.

If we were to take these features of the "total institution" and apply them to the *pesantren*, we would find much that fits. My ethnographic data for *pesantren* enable me to tick all four boxes, i.e. *pesantren* match all four criteria for the definition of a total institution, at least for students that board. All aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. All daily activity is carried on within the group, members of which are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. The day's activities are tightly scheduled, and imposed from above by a system of rules and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution. Those day students who attend from home or live nearby in *kost* are the main exceptions, because they don't sleep, play and work in the one institution.

The ethnography of the *pesantren* as a total institution would have to describe the "single rational plan…designed to fulfil the…aims of the institution": i.e. it would describe how *pesantren* aim to provide a holistic Islamic education that permeates every aspect of student lives. Because the students live-in, almost their entire lives are spent within the *pesantren* world for the time that they are students. For this reason it is common for scholars to refer to the "*dunia pesantren*", the *pesantren* world, as a "subculture", e.g. Raihani says that *pesantren* "have constituted a sub-culture of the whole Indonesian culture in which Islamic teachings and practices are assumed to be ideally applied." (Raihani, 2002).

The power hierarchy of the *moderen pesantren* is quite different from that of the asylum, and also different from that of the *tradisional* or Classical *pesantren*. The latter is often described as a kingdom; the king is the *kyai*, inadequately glossed as school principal and elder, scholar and leader. The *kyai* is the traditional founder of the *pesantren*, and is much respected by other teachers and students alike. But in most of the *moderen pesantren* in Sumatra there is no *kyai*. Some *moderen pesantren* are perhaps not significantly different in their collective management to large secular or Christian boarding schools in Australia, except that parents seem less important here. This is a significant departure from *tradisional pesantren* which are *kyai*-headed but also community-based organisations, run for and from the local, surrounding community.

The ethnography of the *pesantren* as total institution would describe how contact with students' families is minimal: many students only go home at the end of term, though some apply for and are granted permission to spend one day a week at home sometimes; many do not own mobile phones (and some schools forbid mobile phones); letter-writing is rare in my experience. Once the students enter the *pesantren*, and fees are paid, the parents are irrelevant to the running of the *pesantren* and the lives of the students. In many ways the *pesantren* stands as a substitute family for students.

Pesantren are like total institutions in their control of physical borders: the area or territory of the *pesantren* is usually fenced; truancy is not tolerated; the different sections of the *pesantren* (mosque, teaching areas, dormitories, teachers' quarters and so forth) are clearly demarcated and controlled; where there are male and female dormitories, these are carefully isolated and transgression is forbidden. The exception to this is that some schools have mixed-gender classes and other activities, with students allowed to mix in the common teaching areas. The issue of gender was never raised by Goffman, but it is a significant one in the world of Islamic education, and I would signal this as one aspect of the total institution that fits his paradigm: that is, control of gender difference is an elaboration of the regimentation and social order that the total institution imposes.

Goffman's model of the total institution encourages attention to the top-down management of daily life. Indeed the *pesantren* impose a full and dense schedule of daily activities, and students can recite their impressive timetables for prayers, classes, homework, other duties and activities such as teaching younger students, "housework" such as washing and cooking, and additional classes. The day typically begins very early, say at 4.30 am, with a brisk wash in cold water prior to first prayers. In highland Sumatra this is universally unpopular. Each day bar one is full to bursting until 10pm; it's not surprising that students often say they spend any spare time sleeping.

But it's not the detailed allocation of everyday time to particular duties that attracts the attention of the Western observer. Much more arresting is the communal nature of everyday life. Students live in a sort of

bubble with students of the same gender. They share almost everything: their food, their space, their homework, their faith, their teachers, their troubles, joys, complaints and gossip. There is little encouragement of the cultivation of individual personality or self-expression in the asylum, but in the ethos of the *moderen pesantren* there is careful scrutiny and cultivation of individual faith and piety, and there is strong encouragement for individual students to constantly examine their selves: the strength of their conviction, their consciences, the morality of their everyday practice, their sins, purity of motives and depth of knowledge of Islam. In these respects perhaps the *pesantren* is not much like the total institution: in the asylum, the state of the individual's self is judged by the experts in the institution and it is not a religious self that is in question: it is the psychological self.

Foucault and Power/Knowledge

I turn now to the work of French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1980). First I provide an account of relevant aspects of his work on power and how it works, and the power/knowledge nexus that produces discourse, then I see what sort of an ethnography appears when we apply his approach to ethnographic data on *pesantren*. Finally I raise some problems with his work.

The great subject of Foucault's life work was power. In *Discipline and Punish*, his history of the prison, he posited two types of power. The first is conventional power: top-down, authoritarian, and usually associated with nation-states and institutions such as prisons, hospitals and bureaucracies. Obviously one could analyse *pesantren* accordingly – the rules and regulations, punishments for transgressions, distribution of power to make rules and so forth. Such a study would not be dissimilar from the Goffman-style study.

Much more interesting and valuable is Foucault's conceptualization of a more diffuse, pervasive form of power which saturates diverse aspects of life from everyday language to aesthetics, medical knowledge to ethics.

This latter type of power, which he saw as hegemonic and all-encompassing, is insidious: it is tacit, it shapes subjects and relations of power and it creates and defines knowledge. This type of power is not just negative:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault, 1980).

The exposition of this second type of power was Foucault's major innovation and brilliant contribution to social analysis. For the purposes of this discussion on a theory for the representation of the *pesantren*, an important aspect of this second type of power is the centrality of the power-knowledge nexus:

> [T]here is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault, 1977).

Power creates and defines knowledge; in turn, possession of knowledge is a source of power. Power relations constitute a field or world of knowledge, often called discourse – discourse is what it is possible to think. Foucault's theory of power is all-encompassing. In Foucault's work, power is reified: power is the subject, the agent, the source of resistance, a productive, transcendent, omnipresent, omniscient ubiquity.

It is also pertinent to mention Foucault's notion of "bio-power", which emphasizes the disciplining of "docile bodies" through routinized bodily practices in locales such as families and institutions (such as hospitals, prisons and we can add *pesantren*). There are two poles of bio-power: control of the individual body, and control of the population or species, which, he argued, came together in the nineteenth century preoccupation with sex. They also come together when nation-states and individuals are involved in public health, mass education, family planning and social welfare (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983). An important insight was that bio-power constitutes a domain of expertise, and creates its own objects upon which that bio-power works and to which it responds – in our case, Islamic teachers are the experts and the *santri* or students are the objects which are labelled inexpert learners. The behaviours of students are defined by those in power (e.g. as lazy or clever or as lacking in discipline or as naughty) and the whole system is geared to work upon the student "body", legitimizing the education of both bodies and behaviours. Foucault's power works on *resistant* material – if it were not resistant, there would be no need for the exercise of power (Foucault, 1977).

For the purposes of an examination of *pesantren*, another highly relevant kind of disciplinary power that Foucault identified is "pastoral power". Foucault (1983) wrote that pastoral power "cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of conscience and an ability to direct it" (Foucault 1983: 214). Although this sounds as though Foucault (1983) was interested in the interior life of individuals, this was not the case, and forms one of the main criticisms of Foucault's approach. Before I get on to criticising Foucault, I think it's worth exploring his notion of pastoral power in more depth, because it is relevant in the investigation of modernist *pesantren*, which seem so committed to the project of self-improvement in their larger goal of bringing students closer to Allah.

Power "is at its best" (Eageton, 1990), or most effective, when "the laws of the State and the laws of the heart [are] at last identical" (Foucault, 1961). Nilan writes,

> Ideally, pastoral power exercised by institutions creates individuals who are willing – perhaps even eager – to be visible, open to scrutiny, and take correction. Obviously this is neither good nor bad in essence. Pastoral power is salvation-oriented – linked to the micro-level production of a particular discourse of truth about the nature of the individual which claims to be in their interests. In the *pesantren* context, operations of pastoral power aim to produce the morally self-regulating individual committed to the collective proselytising project of faith (Nilan, 2004:4).

Foucault used the powerful image of the pan-opticon, an architectural feature of prisons in times past, that allowed the prison authorities to be all-seeing, ie to continually be able to observe all the activities of the prison inmates. The force of his theory of pastoral power is that, to continue his analogy, the prisoner criminals would want to subject themselves to continual surveillance from the pan-opticon because they would have internalized the moral objectives of improvement and salvation taught by the prison authorities. The good *pesantren* student wants to subject themselves to scrutiny from their teachers and ultimately from God. Mastuhu, in his 1994 study of *pesantren*, could not find written statements of the objectives of *pesantren* education (*visi misi* statements had not become popular then) but concluded from interviews that the goal of a *pesantren* education was to "develop the personality of pupils to become *muhsin*."(Raihani, 2002). Raihani (2002) explains that "*muhsin*" comes from the Arabic term *ihsan*, that means the belief within a Muslim that they are always being watched by God. Thus, the operation of bio- and pastoral power in *pesantren* produce, if you like, a willing slave, one who is committed not only to developing their own morality and faith but also one who is committed to bearing witnessing to the power of God in missionary work.

I want to stress that the product of this productive power should not be assumed to be fictional or unreal, or unthinking: Foucault is saying that technologies of the self – which include disciplining bodies as well as minds – work because they promise to reveal the truth about one's self.

In the *moderen pesantren* there is a focus on self-improvement, the agency of the individual and the capacity of the individual to determine their own fate according to the values of Islam. *Ikhlas*, or sincerity, is a key value, and students are constantly evaluating their own virtue and *keikhlasan* (sincerity) as well as that of their friends. This is not to say that teachers and other, especially older, students, do not monitor and assess the students: there is constant surveillance, both horizontal and vertical, and also surveillance of the self. Students are hyper-critical of their friends and constantly train each other: from evaluation of clothes, academic work and reading material to constant commentary on virtue, morals and values, everyday practice and personal traits. I can attest that female students at least keep up a steady stream of critical commentary on fellow-students' laziness or industry, bitchiness, cleverness or stupidity, lack of punctuality, lateness with homework, messiness, greed, selfishness or selflessness, prickliness or sweetness of nature, and so on.

If we apply these principles and framework to the data on *pesantren*, we can build a particular picture of *pesantren* that focuses on how the *pesantren* constitutes a pervasive and persuasive power/knowledge nexus. It is quickly evident that it is not the power that "says no" that is relevant: it is the positive, constructive operation of power, power that constructs and defines knowledge, arbitrates on what sort of knowledge is important (e.g. it is important to know Arabic, it is not important to know Latin or Sanskrit), and instils values of respect and discipline, belief in the importance of correct moral values (*akhlakh*), Islamic knowledge and devout faith. Thus, Islamic knowledge and the other knowledge that the *pesantren* power-holders define as important, constitute a discourse. I am curious to know how Muslims react to this theory, and would welcome your comments.

I want to turn now to some criticisms of Foucault's work, especially in relation to education and religion. The first point to note is that these were not subjects to which he really applied his approaches, but he did provide an account of eighteenth century Catholic school practices in France (1977: 180). In his work on other types of institutions and his famous work on the history of sexuality, he relied heavily on official records, and never attempted to see how stated policy in official records was or was not implemented in actual practice. As one who is mainly interested in low-level, everyday behaviour, thinking and beliefs of ordinary people, I find his assumption that practice follows theory is very problematic. As an example from *pesantren* practice, I noted above how students can recite their dense timetables of activities that seemingly fill up every minute of every day, but on the other hand, at any one time, in the dormitories, one could find some students praying, some ironing, some talking with their friends – and all this at a time that was supposed to be allocated to homework and study.

Secondly, I am concerned that despite his assumption that I quoted above, that the operation of pastoral power requires the minute examination of people's thoughts, souls and innermost secrets, he himself was not at all interested in these things. Foucault's attention to "the gaze" and to technologies of power elides the validity of the subject, and particularly the experience and intentionality of subjects. He wrote:

> ...analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention of decision ... [but rather] at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices... [Power] is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault, 1983:97-98).

In fact, in Foucault's work, the individual subject is only ever really an object of power or discourse. There is an absent active subject in Foucault's analyses; this might be the individual, "as a thinking, feeling and social subject and agent" (Weedon,1987), but in other circumstances it might be collectivities, the subjectivities or inter-subjective experience of those occupying common subject positions, experiencing a ritual or forming a social movement. "[S]ocial collectivities or real individuals are represented as objects of power; they are denied effective or authentic intention – in a word, agency."

This denial of agency "is not only fatalistic, it significantly misrecognizes the realities of social life.". I agree with Good : "For the anthropologist, this inattention to the lived experience of the subject is ultimately untenable... It contradicts the centrality of persons and of intersubjective experience in the field research of the anthropologist."

A final problem that I want to mention is that Foucalut's theory of power is ultimately conservative rather than potentially transformative of social relations (Hartsock, 1990). Said has pointed out that,

> Foucault's imagination of power is largely *with* rather than *against* it ... [H]is interest in domination was critical but not finally as contestatory, or as oppositional as on the surface it seems to be. This translates into the paradox that Foucault's imagination of power was by his analysis of power to reveal its injustice and cruelty, but by his theorization to let it go on more or less unchecked. (Said, 1986:152)"

Practice theory, agency, and the Antropology of Experience

My unease with the absence of individual human beings as subjects in Foucaultian analysis, combined with the need to represent the participants' experience of *pesantren* schooling ethically, drive me to turn to a "softer" theoretical approach, such as so-called "practice theory" and the anthropology of experience, which enable a different perspective. This is more empathetic to the beliefs and understandings of the students, and more attuned to the aims of the school. I argue that the religious ethos of the school and the community in which it is based, the moral and more material objectives of parents, and the emotions, ambitions, dreams and experiences of the students (*santri*) are all important aspects of the *pesantren* world that a more anthropological and emic approach brings out.

So-called practice theorists attend to the everyday practices, and interpretations of these practices, of usually subaltern subjects – the people are the central subject. "Practice theorists" share an oppositional stance to a view of the world that said it was ordered by rules and norms, structures and systems (Ortner, 1984).

Giddens, Bourdieu, and Ortner are the three central figures in so-called "practice theory". Ortner (1984) describes practice theory as "a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand and the nature of human action on the other" (Ortner, 1989:11). One of Giddens' important contributions was to posit the interdependence of action and structure "in time and space", producing what he called his theory of structuration (1984).

Bourdieu is more difficult to place. Some have seen his work as basically providing a series of metaphors – habitus, social capital, cultural capital (Jenk,1993)– that explain how large-scale social inequalities are established and reproduced, not at the level of institutions but through subtle but totalizing domination "exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The term Bourdieu used for this was "symbolic violence". With his sophisticated awareness of how the social is naturalized into the corporeal, Bourdieu (1990:53) posited the notion of "habitus", a "system of durable, transposable dispositions that mediates an individual's actions and the external conditions of production". Similarly, Bourdieu (1977:164) wrote that, "Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness." His theory of practice is an holistic method for explaining social and cultural reproduction.

But his theory is less useful for the explanation of cultural innovation and social change, and the role of individuals in this. This struggle to describe how the subject and the structures, the individual and society, co-exist as one and yet as different, forever engaged in mutual constitution, preoccupies us all. This interface is the locus of agency. This is the great and most argued-over topic of twentieth century social science: how to represent the human subject adequately, giving due credit to the forces of "structure" and "agency" (Gidden, 1984:145). As Ortner (1984: 146 – 147) said,

> the idea of agency, and the wider theoretical matrix of so-called practice theories in which it must always be embedded, is precisely concerned with the mediation between conscious intention and embodied habituses, between conscious motives and unexpected outcomes, between historically marked individuals and events on the one hand, and the cumulative reproductions and transformation that are the results of everyday practices on the other.

In my research, which is usually based on anthropological fieldwork, I have found the concept of agency very useful: it allows one to see both the forces that work on individuals, and the ways they can think and act to survive, to make life meaningful for them, to create their own identity and sometimes to change the structures and forces that press upon them (Parker, 2005). In fieldwork, it is individual human beings that are always the subject at the centre of research; it seems unethical to displace them with institutions or forces such as power. I have found that accessing the experience of individuals – usually simply by talking with them, but also by observing them – reveals much, not only about the individual and how society works on them, but also about the society and its institutions, values and rules, structures and meanings, itself. I will demonstrate.

How can we use practice theory, agency and the anthropology of human experience to analyse *pesantren* education? Interviews, conversations and observations of school life (both in and out of the classroom), with students and, to a lesser extent, teachers and parents, are my simple techniques of fieldwork. I find this a common-sense way to proceed that "lets the outsider in". One example I can recount is a conversation I had with an older student of a high-achieving and famous *pesantren*. I will call her Noer.

> I had spent the day at her *pesantren*, interviewing students, giving a seminar and leading a very interesting small group discussion. She walked with me as I left the school; we were both going home. It was quiet and peaceful as we wandered along the road, past *sawah* and houses with their fish ponds and rows of vegetables, the sun setting and bats starting to swerve and dip. She told me she might drop in at a *warnet* on her way home to chat with or email her brother, who was at university in Egypt. He had gone to this school too, and her aunt had taught her at the school. I asked if I could record our conversation; she agreed. She told me that in fifth grade of primary school she was presented with three choices for high school: she could go to a new school locally, she could live in at this high-achieving *pesantren*, or she could go to the famous Gontor *pesantren* in East Java. She described her reasons for her

choice of school, emphasizing that going to this school meant she could stay close to her family, especially as two members were actually at the school.

Noer had been a boarder at the school through high school, i.e. for the three years of junior high and into senior high, then during her fifth year she had decided to live with her parents for a while. She said, "penulis ingin sekali membalas jasa mereka dengan cara mengabdikan diri ke pada mereka, jadi kalau penulis sudah berulang dari rumah ke sekolah penulis bisa membantu mereka sepulang dari sekolah." But then she admitted that she had had a boyfriend, and for a long while she hadn't told her parents. When she eventually told her parents about him, it was both the happiest and the saddest day of her life: she had been very scared beforehand, thinking that once they knew they would be very angry and would disown her, so she felt very happy to have told them, and relieved because they didn't disown her but just advised her about the best thing to do about him now; it was also the saddest day in her life because she felt she had done wrong by her parents, lying to them, and also done wrong by her future husband, because really a husband should be the first love of her life.

I was able to discuss Noer with the teachers at the school at a later date, and confirm that once the school knew about the boyfriend relationship, she had been asked to leave the school, but because of the long-standing relationship between the family and the school, the family were able to negotiate that she remain a student, but as a day student, not a boarder. The school was concerned about her influence on other students, and about the reputation of the school.

In an ethnography of *pesantren* education I could use such an intimate conversation as the basis upon which to analyse two important features of *pesantren* education:

a. the links between *pesantren* and family for children. This articulation is multi-valent: e.g. firstly, in some ways the *pesantren* is like a family, providing dependent children much of the structure and support that is normally provided by family; secondly, often a *pesantren* education is passed down a family – i.e. parents educated at a *pesantren* often like to send their children to the same school; thirdly, sometimes the *pesantren* and the family have to negotiate the exact terms of their mutual engagement; and fourthly, although not relevant in this case, the *pesantren* is often a family affair, organised like a model family under the patriarchal leadership of the *kyai* as father-figure, with family management and passed down through generations of a family, with high levels of endogamy (Srimulyani, 2008).

b. the conversation with Noer clearly demonstrates the ways *pesantren* education sets a model of moral behaviour for teenagers, clearly setting boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In Noer's case, the *pesantren* and her family were reasonable about her misdemeanour, even though she had sustained a long, secret relationship with a boyfriend and the school has a clear rule, no boy/girlfriends. It seemed to me that they could easily have expelled her from the school and thereby created a rebellious and intractable young woman, whose future would have looked quite grim; their negotiated solution enabled her to re-build herself as a respectable young woman. They enabled her agency.

The chat with Noer is of course just one conversation. Any data from a single conversation has to be checked against a large amount of data from other sources – preferably including similar conversations with other students, triangulated with data from other sources such as teachers and parents. So I would note the importance to Noer of closeness to her family – hence her decision not to go to Gontor – and see if that is a continuing theme in other conversations. In fact, one of the recurrent themes of these conversations with girls was strong homesickness, as well as the mutual support of girlfriends in the *pesantren*. Most girls described weeks, if not months, of crying and loneliness after they left home to start life in a boarding school.

I was very surprised to discover that a significant number of students in *pesantren,* like Noer, actually live within easy commuting distance of their natal home, i.e. close to their parents, or the homes of other family members. Preliminary work suggests that parents of girls want their daughters to have the strong moral education that the *pesantren* offers, even to the point of them "leaving home" to board at a nearby *pesantren*. Some *moderen pesantren* diverge from the well-known pattern wherein *pesantren* service the poor: there are *pesantren* that are high-quality educational institutions that serve pious, middle-class families, and/or families where parents want their children to have a strict moral upbringing. Data from other sources suggest that parents choose some private and Islamic schools such as *madrasah negeri* when children achieve low marks in

their examinations such that they do not gain entrance to the desirable state academic or general schools (SMPN, SMAN).

CONCLUSION

I want to briefly return to my main motivation for writing this paper. I wanted to show how social theory works if we are trying to construct a 'moral ethnography' of *pesantren*. I would argue that the three approaches have the potential to make a different contribution to the analysis of *pesantren* education; and of course it would be possible to write an ethnography that uses all three approaches. I mentioned at the beginning that there is potentially some tension in the classic ethnography between simple description and analysis. I think it is easy to see that the first two approaches are easily grouped together, because they are more abstract and analytical than the third or last approach, which is more descriptive because it is closer to the actual, practised education, it is working from the inside out. Nevertheless, I hope I have shown that that process of abstraction, of comparison and trying to fit to exterior models, such as the model of the asylum, involves some injustice, some violence, to the intentions and ideals of religious education.

Using a boiled-down version of the notion of the "total institution", we saw that, unsurprisingly, Goffman's theory encourages the consideration of the ways the *pesantren* is structured as a discrete institutional sub-culture: the ways space is contained and borders patrolled, the way time is structured and daily routines dense, the way rules and values enforce the single, top-down authority.

Using Foucaultion theory, the resulting ethnography might be felt to portray the *pesantren* in a rather cynical fashion: religion can be reduced to discourse; belief and faith can be represented merely as tools of power. The objective of creating *santri* who are pious and sincere, full of Islamic knowledge and well equipped for this life and the next, might be seen as the exercise of the powerful on the powerless, and to be wielding symbolic violence to the motives and ethos of Islamic education. It is this theoretical approach which results in an ethnography which is furthest from the ideals and practice of Islamic education. This approach displays that tension that I mentioned at the beginning, that tension in ethnography between description, that is true to the ethos of practice, and analysis, which is quite happy to abstract, critique and perhaps distort the intentions of practitioners.

Using the concept of agency and approaches such as the anthropology of experience and "practice theory" allows a depiction of *pesantren* as a moral and religious institution, which provides an education that is highly valued by students and parents. This sort of theory encourages an ethnography of *pesantren* that is more in accord with the ethos, objectives and nature of the *pesantren*.

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