David Battersby

The Use of Ethnography and Grounded Theory in Educational Research

The term 'ethnographic' has been heard a good deal lately in educational research circles, used in somewhat loose analogy to a procedure of ethnography by which the researcher spends a period more or less immersed in the society under study. A person in this position not only becomes vividly aware of multifarious aspects of social life that he or she might otherwise have missed or ignored; as a human being involved either directly or by empathy in events, the ethnographer also is forced to give attention to personal responses, an attention that is by nature subjective. Research carried on in this manner therefore deviates sweepingly from the rigorous model of hypothesis testing and planned, objective data collecting that has hypnotised educational research for so long; but it too demands a discipline. Battersby sketches out steps in interaction between data collection and concept refinement, in which he focuses on the requirement of an element of planned qualitative data analysis only too apt to be overlooked in the hurly burly of participant observation.

A criticism often made of educational research is that it suffers from an excess of "psychologising." The plethora of theories and models about the processes of becoming a teacher and of teaching, derived from experimental and quantitative studies, is a solemn testimony to this trend. To date, however, critics of these hard data psychological approaches have been slow to act on what they consider to be an important priority: for educational researchers to be more closely attuned to empirical data.

This paper examines a potentially profitable anthropological strategy for meeting this priority, namely, the generation of grounded ethnographies. To exemplify this strategy in action, brief reference will be made to a current study of the induction and adjustment of beginning teachers.

Research on "processes": conditions of adequacy

Discussion of educational research, particularly on teachers and teaching, has tended to be within the conventional psychometric logico-deductive

paradigm. While work in this tradition is increasingly being challenged at both a fundamental and substantive level (Robinson, 1974), alternative approaches to the study of processes in education are slowly burgeoning. (*Processes* here is used as a generic term for on-going occurrences as, for example, in the *rites de passage* of neophyte teachers.)

One process I have focused on for a number of years is that of teacher socialisation. Indeed, because the tenor of discussion in this paper is, in part, a product of my own research experiences in this field, it seems essential that readers become *au fait* with my background and predispositions, particularly concerning methodology. Initially, my research endeavours in teacher socialisation were grounded in the traditional structural-functionalist perspective. Sceptical of solely qualitative research approaches, I utilised attitude questionnaires and role perception inventories in my original studies (see Battersby, 1976, 1977). These hard data instruments, however, proved unsatisfactory in tapping the dynamics and complexities of the processes involved in becoming a teacher. Increasingly I became aware of the shortcomings in functionalist perspectives and in positivistic research. Co-incidentally, and perhaps not surprisingly, I also realised that my strivings for objective value-free research were somewhat fruitless, and that *all* investigations, whether qualitatively or quantitatively based, are contaminated by the biases and perceptions of their researchers.

Several years and a number of research studies later, my methodological commitments to the study of processes in educational milieux (such as becoming a teacher) became engendered in what has been referred to elsewhere as the eight methodological conditions of adequacy. (Ramsay and Battersby, 1979) These conditions are, in summary form:

1. The research design must be longitudinal in form so that changes are monitored over a period of time. A longitudinal study does have the disadvantage of being susceptible to current environmental influences and is accordingly idiosyncratic to the time of investigation. Nonetheless, it appears to offer a much more reliable picture than a cross-sectional or a one-shot approach study.

2. The research design must allow the researcher to strip away the veneer of everyday behaviour in order to come to grips with the intentionality, reflectivity and autonomy of each subject (Schutz, 1967). Thus considerable effort must be made to become immersed in the social processes being studied. As Giddens (1976, p. 161) puts it, "immersion in a form of life is the only means whereby an observer is able to generate characteristics" and generalisations about the processes under observation.

3. When investigating group processes, the researcher should establish a reference group or groups from the group being studied in order to try out

hunches, as well as to ensure that the language and symbols being employed are understood by the researcher.

4. There must be a willingness on the part of the researcher to expand the scope of the enquiry by questionnaires, structured interview schedules, and scales, if and when necessary. However, if such devices are used they should be carefully piloted and checked for reliability and validity. In addition, they should retain some open-ended aspects to allow respondents to challenge basic assumptions. Too frequently, scales and questionnaires are devised which contribute to what Douglas (1970) calls the 'mechanistic fallacy', whereby an artificial province of actions is created which is unrelated to the intentions of the subjects, and this in turn creates a gap between the researched and the researcher's accounts.

5. Researchers should acknowledge the possibility of artifactual influence and should faithfully record it where it may have occurred. In this respect, researchers should also make an honest assessment and recording of their own predispositions before their enquiries commence.

6. Careful attention should be accorded to the terminology used in reporting findings so as to ensure that an accepted meaning is conveyed to readers.

7. Researchers must be willing to move beyond the level of description to an explanatory analysis. Argument by inference is not sufficient.

8. Researchers must acknowledge that they are concerned not with a "pregiven universe of objects, but with one which is produced by the active doings of subjects" (Giddens, 1976, p. 160).

Grounded ethnography

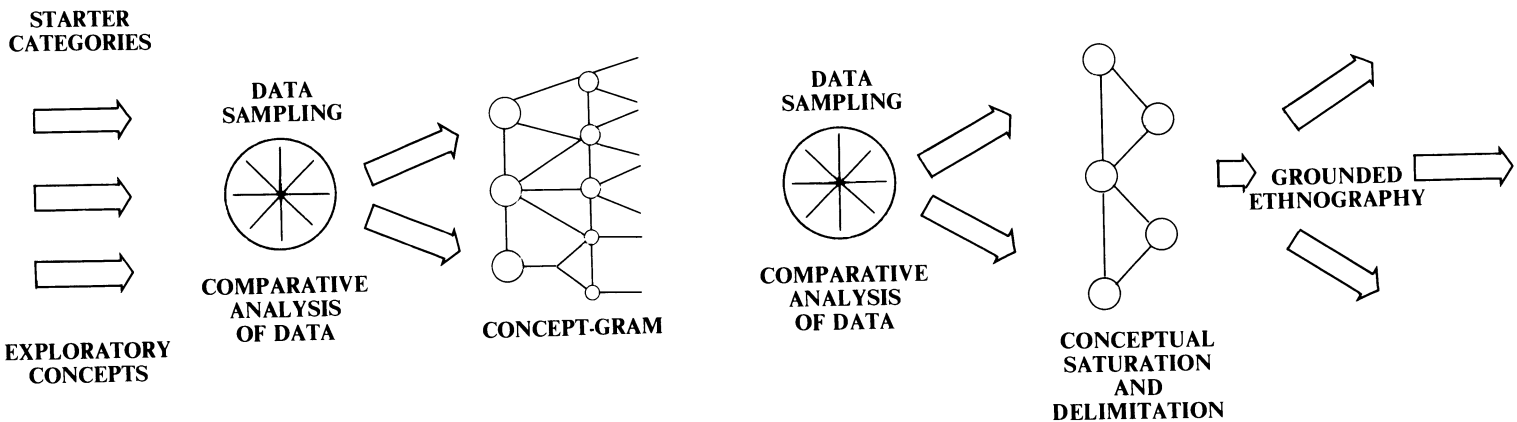
Implicit in these methodological conditions is a commitment to what can be labelled a grounded ethnographic style of research. In the following discussion, this approach is outlined and illustrated with reference to a current study of the induction and adjustment of beginning teachers.

Grounded ethnography (or GE) can be referred to as a strategy which utilises the "multi-instrument" approach (Pelto, 1970) of the ethnographer to generate a thesis or picture of certain social processes. This strategy revolves around two key elements which are illustrated in Figure 1: data sampling, and data comparison.

Data sampling

This is the process of data collection. A researcher usually begins generating his thesis by building on concepts found in the literature or from personal experiences which designate some of the principle features of the

Figure 1



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process being studied. For instance, in attempting to account for the induction and adjustment of neophyte teachers, it became obvious, both from my personal experiences as a teacher and from reading the plethora of literature on the topic, that the head teacher and staff enacted a paramount role in the induction process. Beginning or starter concepts emerging from this type of information provide a foothold for gathering preliminary data from which to generate a thesis.

Once this initial data has been collected, it is coded. (In my current research, coding consists of noting concepts on margins. Its main purpose is to systematise and simplify the analysis procedure.) The data is then analysed to find 'leads' for further data collection and also to ascertain the existence of concepts. As a concept emerges, and as data begin to fit the concept, some of its properties, including its relationship to other concepts and the conditions under which it is pronounced and minimised, become discernible. With further collection, coding and analysis of data, some concepts are discarded or are merged with more powerful and explanatory ones, while others are gradually refined and developed into a framework. To illustrate this process in action, we focus on the teacher study once again.

During initial visits to several schools, I found among other things that 'senior-staff-leadership' emerged as one useful concept to explain the process of inducting inchoate teachers into a school. In seeking additional evidence to support, disconfirm or modify this tentative hunch, more data was yielded which gave rise to a higher order concept called 'supervisory style'. This concept referred to the latent and manifest ways head teachers, senior teachers, and to a lesser extent other school staff attempted to mould the beginning teacher according to the pattern of normal teacher behaviour in the school. I gathered further verifying data on 'supervisory style' until I was confident that the concept had become saturated.

Concept saturation (see Figure 1) is the criterion used to judge when to stop sampling data for a specific category. Saturation occurs when the researcher makes an intuitive, but informed, judgment that he can find no additional information to further embellish a concept. One way to expedite this is to assume that no one kind of data on a concept nor any one data-gathering method is necessarily *the* most appropriate. The result of commitment to this venture is

> . . . a variety of 'slices of data' that would be bewildering if we wished to evaluate them as accurate evidence for verifications. However . . . this variety is highly beneficial, because it yields more information on (concepts) than any one . . . technique of collection. This makes the research very exciting to the analyst providing motivation to keep him at the task. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 66)

In order to acquire a variety of relevant slices of data, the researcher is guided by the other important element of GE, namely, the comparative analysis of data. This is the procedure whereby comparative sources of information —

referred to as 'groupings' — are purposefully selected to provide data for generating and saturating concepts.

Comparative analysis of data

A researcher using this method in conjunction with data sampling (see Figure 1) can make simple comparisons amongst different groupings of the same substantive type, as is being done in the teacher study referred to previously. By comparing different types of groupings (such as beginning teachers from colleges and universities, and from primary and secondary schools) the researcher is able to generate a thesis of wider scope. Generality can be further increased by comparing different types of groups within larger groupings. For instance, a person undertaking research in schools could compare certain types of learning behaviours in traditional cellular classrooms to those in all kinds of classrooms in all kinds of schools. But the researcher may also conceive of classrooms as a subgroup of a larger group of learning environments (like the family, the work place, the church group, and so on).

Once the scope of the thesis has been determined, a conscious selection of comparison groupings with maximum and minimum differences is made by the researcher. Initially, contrast among groupings is minimised to promote the generation of basic concepts. Once this is accomplished, the analyst focusses on maximising grouping differences. This not only acts as a cross-checking system for verifying the applicability of emergent concepts, but it also stimulates their generation and further refinement. The following field memo illustrates how this active search for comparative sources of information can lead to the selection of particular groups for study.

> Visits to various primary schools were scheduled as follows: I first wished to look at school-based induction courses that would possibly minimise the reality shocks experienced by neophytes, and so I first looked at schools which ran intensive formal induction programmes. For the same reason, I observed schools which ran informal brief induction courses for new teachers. I next looked at schools where the reality shocks of neophytes would possibly be maximised, and so I visited schools where no induction course was programmed. While I was looking at these induction procedures I also observed the above types of programmes at other primary schools. (Battersby, 1979, p. 8)

After choosing relevant groupings — either to maximise or to minimise differences in data — the researcher employs the data sampling technique to collect, code and analyse slices of data. Then, as concepts emerge and are refined and saturated, the framework of the thesis begins to solidify. In turn, this framework becomes continually subjected to delimiting features of the data comparison method as more powerful concepts replace those generated earlier, and as underlying uniformities and interrelationships among concepts are discovered (see Figure 1). Before I make some brief mention of how to present and to convey the credibility of GE, three important issues relating to the data comparison method need emphasising:

1. The scope of an analyst's thesis, and in turn the selection of comparison groupings, will be constrained by the conditions of the research (such as finances, availability of subjects, and so on).

2. Specific details of the number and types of groupings selected for comparative analysis usually cannot be cited until an analyst has completed his or her thesis. A strict adherence to a pre-planned set of groupings, as in statistical sampling, might severely limit data sampling.

3. Through data comparison, a high emphasis is placed on the emergent conceptual framework as a 'process'. That is, the end product of GE is seen as an ever-developing entity (as represented in Figure 1) to be extended, modified and reformulated.

Presentation

Implicit in the GE approach to educational research is a commitment to construct a thesis or picture of a social process or processes which is intimately linked to, and verified by, data. Further, in the subsequent presentation of the study there also exists a need to provide fairly extensive samples of data. One worthwhile and practical approach to presentation is to provide data as evidence for conclusions, thus illustrating how the researcher obtained the conceptual framework from the data. There is a multiplicity of devices for doing this. For instance, the researcher can

> ... quote directly from interviews or conversations that he has overheard. He can include dramatic segments of his on-the-spot field notes. He can quote telling phrases dropped by informants. He can summarize events or persons by constructing readable case studies. He can try his hand at describing events and acts; and often he will give at least background descriptions of places and spaces. Sometimes he will offer accounts of personal experiences to show how events impinge upon himself. Sometimes he will unroll a narrative. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 229)

Conclusion

In summary, GE provides a means whereby a researcher, having identified a problem, begins to collect data which is then organised into various concepts and provides the basis for further data collection. In conjunction with this, the comparative analysis of data eventually leads to a refined and delimited number of concepts which provide the framework for the study.

This approach to educational research is not built upon a structured and pre-determined methodology, but rather it represents a strategy for continually redesigning research in the light of emergent concepts. This kind of flexibility not only aids the creative generation of a conceptual framework, but it also ensures that it is intimately linked to data. For educational researchers, then, this anthropological strategy provides one opportunity whereby they can become more closely attuned to empirical data.

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