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# Ethnographic Research in Education: Strategies for reappraisal

## Abstract

*The term "ethnography" has been used too loosely in educational research. Preoccupied with devising and using defensible methodological techniques, some researchers have neglected a distinctive, indispensable, and informative feature of ethnographic inquiry: cultural description and interpretation. Educational researchers and writers need to reexamine this phenomenon of culture before pursuing fieldwork in settings such as schools; two views of culture are presented to indicate alternative orientations to research. Suggestions for developing meaningful ethnographic accounts of those cultural settings have also been lacking. Devices such as metaphor and analogy enhance thick description; but to make their accounts even more insightful ethnographers need to consider their audiences and engage their readers in the interpretative task. Reader-response theory is examined as a basis for advancing guides to better research reporting.*

Educational researchers have demonstrated commendable versatility in adapting and codifying ethnographic research techniques and developing checks and balances to ensure the reliability and validity of their educational ethnographies. Indeed, the concern to impose a structure on ethnographic data collection and analysis and to generate quality control standards equivalent to those used in quantitative investigation has become something of a preoccupation (e.g., Jacob, 1987; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). This concern appears to have arisen out of a desire to establish the collective reputation of ethnographic and other forms of naturalistic inquiry within a traditionally positivistic research discipline.

Although this effort has been beneficial in some respects, an unfortunate outcome has been a tendency among educational writers and researchers to neglect other critical aspects of the ethnographic mode of research. In particular, two matters which have concerned anthropologists greatly – the search for cultural understanding and the style of the ethnographic account – have been accorded insufficient and inappropriate attention by many scholars in educational circles. With regard to the former issue, that of ethnographic intent, Wolcott (see especially *On Ethnographic Intent*, 1985) has been a persistent but poorly supported voice among educational writers. The latter issue, of documenting cultural description and interpretation, has elicited somewhat more attention, although the discussion among educators has overlooked important developments in disciplines that have valuable advice for those who wish to recount findings from ethnographic investigations in educational settings.

This brief paper addresses both of these issues. It offers a reminder about the primacy of culture in ethnographic inquiry and reflects upon issues associated with the search for understanding of culture. It also proposes another emphasis in ethnographic portrayal – one which takes ethnographic and other approaches to qualitative research beyond mere defence of the "scientific" merit of methodology.

### The Cultural Perspective

Anthropological inquiry, from which the ethnographic approach to research derives, is founded upon a desire to understand cultures. Ethnography involves "the description of cultures" (Vivelo, 1978, p. 8) and an effort to "interpret cultural behaviour" (Wolcott, 1985, p. 190), and it is this cultural perspective which distinguishes ethnographic investigation from similar modes of research.

Some educational researchers (e.g., LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 31) have been quick to regard "ethnography" as synonymous with "qualitative" and "case study" research. Merriam (1985) noted the looseness with which those in educational circles use the label "ethnography." "The term ethnography has been used by educational researchers in particular, to refer to any study that is qualitative rather than quantitative" (p. 207). Interestingly, anthropologists choose methods – primarily qualitative, but at times also quantitative (e.g., Glazer, 1972; Spradley, 1979) – that best allow them to acquire cultural understanding in the various settings they study. More than this, Merriam pointed out that ethnography is also distinguishable from other qualitative approaches not so much by its methods as by the product of research: "grounded theory" strategies generate theoretical frameworks of high levels of abstraction; descriptive studies of specific individuals, programs, or policies report fully upon those "slices of

life"; but ethnographies provide interpretations of life in sociocultural settings. As Wolcott (1985) explained, then, ethnography calls for more than mere "chronicling of particular events"; it demands also "looking beneath them to understand how people cope with such events and maximize or minimize the likelihood of their recurrence." And this necessitates ethnographers' attention to "self-conscious reflection about the nature of culture. . . ." (p. 192).

Unfortunately, "culture", the central focus of anthropological investigation, continues to defy adequate and consistent definition. Spain (1975) described it as at once anthropology's "most venerated, vexatious and vital concept" (p. 13). Two main views of culture have been advanced: the "totalist" (or "sociocultural") view and the "mentalist" view. The former treats culture as the whole "way of life" of a society. This can lead ethnographers to pay attention to all the "artifacts, institutions, ideologies, and the total range of customary behaviours" (Cohen, 1974, p. 46), or at least to the "extensive system of organized activities" (Malinowski, 1972, p. 46), that comprise the cultural settings they investigate. Freilich (1970) commended the "way of life" view as a useful definition of culture for the fieldworker, for it is "simple enough to carry around in his head" while in the research setting (p. 507). On account of ethnographers' initial confusion about the nature of the settings they enter, this approach also provides a basis for commencing most fieldwork in foreign settings.

The alternative view, however, provides the ultimate focus for most modern ethnographic inquiry. From this perspective, although culture is reflected in a multiplicity of artifacts and behaviours, these are no more than expressions of underlying "shared knowledge and beliefs" which shape individuals' perceptions of themselves, their experiences, and their decisions and actions. Culture, then, is seen as a "system of rules or a pattern for behaviour" (Vivelo, 1978, pp. 16-17) – a conceptual pattern that explains and justifies, or gives meaning to, the observable behaviour and events; herein resides the real object of the ethnographer's search. The mentalist view of culture is well supported in the literature. Goldstein (1968), for example, contended that, beyond learning patterns of behaviour in a setting, the ethnographer must "make sense of such action . . . [by discovering] the mode of social existence which makes this sort of behaviour the thing to expect or the thing to do . . . . [That is, the researcher must] come to understand the presuppositions of social action in the subject's community" (p. 101). Likewise, Spradley and McCurdy (1975) saw the ethnographer's aim as one of discovering "people's perception and evaluation of their experience, their customary way of categorizing the world around them, and their definitions of behaviour" (p. 59). Murphy (1979) was still more specific in this regard:

Culture is a body of knowledge and tools by which we adapt to the physical environment; it is a set of rules by which we relate to each other; it is a storehouse of knowledge, beliefs, and formulae through which we try to understand the universe and man's place in it . . . . Culture not only tells us how we should act, but it also tells us what we can expect of the other person. (p. 23)

It is this view which educational researchers such as Van Maanen (1979) and Duignan (1981) have adopted. Van Maanen defined culture as "the socially acquired and shared knowledge available to participants or members of the setting" (p. 539), and Duignan alluded to the need to discover the "meaning" of behaviour which makes it "purposeful" (p. 286) in a cultural context.

By focussing on one important attribute of cultural behaviour, symbolic anthropologists, such as Geertz, have given insight about the mode of exploring this phenomenon. To these scholars, shared cultural knowledge is more than an identifiable "model of reality" in a setting; it shapes inhabitants' perceptions and guides their behaviour. In other words, expressions of cultural understanding also provide a model for reality, a guide to behavioural responses for inhabitants of the setting. As Geertz (1979, p. 43) stated it, such "common understandings" provide "a set of control mechanisms" (or guides for behaviour). This leads us to consider the ways in which inhabitants learn how to respond in their cultural settings. In Geertz's view, all behaviours and events serve as symbols of cultural understanding. As with the inhabitant, then, the ethnographer comes to regard all events, not simply as expressions of cultural knowledge, but as indicators of or signals about accepted and appropriate thought and action. Hence, the researcher attends to everyday observable occurrences but also searches for their symbolic meanings; they are seen "not as complexes of concrete behaviour patterns – customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters – but as a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions – for the governing of behaviour" (p.43). This explanation emphasizes a need to document commonplace events but then to go further – to consider the social meanings behind events as well as the events themselves.

One further aspect of culture deserves mention. Anthropologists recognize the interdependent nature of all cultural events (Dimen-Schein, 1977, p. 28); all events reflect and contribute to the development of cultural meaning in a given context. Consequently, the ethnographer should adopt a holistic approach to research in order to derive a full, composite understanding of a cultural setting. This is not to say, however, that all behaviours and characteristics of the setting exert influence in a consistent manner. As Dimen-Schein noted, some occurrences "interlock neatly" to

structure perceptions and events; others, though "contradictory" to the usual pattern, also exert influence on and form an important part of the overall cultural scene. In dealing with problems such as these, however, the ethnographic intent must be the guide: to acquire an extensive and balanced understanding of cultural meanings for occupants of the educational setting.

How, then, may this cultural learning be conveyed to readers – especially to those whose experience does not extend to the settings that are the objects of research? The following discussion advocates an approach that educational researchers, in particular, have heretofore ignored but which may be particularly appropriate for those who engage in participant observation and other in-depth studies of settings such as schools.

#### Preparing the Ethnographic Account

Writing, when properly managed . . . is but a different name for conversation . . . no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

The outcome of anthropological inquiry is an ethnography. On occasion, ethnographers compile documents containing no more than descriptions of events and circumstances in the settings studied; readers are left to form their own interpretations of meanings. The weight of opinion, however, now favours a style of presentation that incorporates descriptions of settings, inhabitants, and events as well as interpretations of their cultural meanings. As Wolcott (1985, p. 189) asserted, ethnography demands not just detailed description but an effort to "make sense" out of the data.

The importance and difficulty of the interpretative task derive from the nature of the ethnographer's understanding of the cultural context, for investigation is focussed on acquiring an emic perspective – one that reflects world views, beliefs, values, conceptual categories, and behaviours that are foreign and, therefore, largely incomprehensible to readers from the researcher's own culture. The ethnographic document must capture the sense of that cultural setting and make it intelligible to readers from another setting. Clearly, the reporting task calls for translation of emic understandings into etic conceptual equivalents in ways that – to use Goodenough's (1966) standard – "give the reader a basis for learning to operate in terms of the culture described . . ." (p.10).

Ethnographers usually deal with this problem by presenting their findings in the form of "thick descriptions." As Owens (1982) explained,

"Thick description" is more than mere information or descriptive data: it conveys a literal description that figuratively transports the readers into the situation with a sense of insight, understanding and illumination not only of the facts or the events in the case, but also of the texture, the quality, and the power of the context *as the participants in the situation experienced it . . . it "takes the readers there."* (p. 8)

Geertz (1974) noted that this effect can be achieved only where ethnographers engage in "dialectical tacking between" minute detail and pervasive expressions of cultural character; through this "advancing spiral of general observations and specific remarks," experience-near accounts of other people's experiences are constructed in a way that creates the desired "illuminating connection" with experience-distant conceptual understandings (pp. 235-236, 224).

However, as Geertz (1974), Sanday (1979), and other writers have commented, the procedures for generating good thick description are not readily explicated. In addition, "it takes more than method to do thick description. It requires an almost artistic insight which can be perfected in those who have it but which cannot be taught" (Sanday, p. 536). In Miles and Huberman's (1985, p. 221) view, qualitative researchers in general have much to learn from novelists' strategies for capturing and presenting meanings and events. In particular, these writers saw the metaphor as an important device for translating and portraying in vivid and concise terms the essence of different cultural settings. An associated tool for communicating meanings to readers is describing cultural scenes, events, and concepts in conjunction with analogous concepts from the researchers' cultural context. Wax's (1971) skillful use of analogy and metaphor made the following depiction of an Indian ceremony particularly informative:

Things started off with some hair-raising songs. The singers sang in as high and intense range as possible, beating the drum with a force that made the walls of the room vibrate. Even higher was the piercing song of the old woman: for sheer carrying power I have never heard a human sound like it. But the sound was as nothing compared to the emotion expressed by the singers. All my life I have heard people pray in church or sing songs in which, ostensibly, they are addressing themselves to God. These Indian songs were different. The best I can say is that the church prayers and

songs usually sound like people rehearsing a speech to themselves. The Thrashing Buffalo songs sounded as if the singers knew for a fact that some powerful being was within hailing distance. When they really got warmed up, it was almost more than one could endure. They yelled like people calling for help from inside a burning building. Someone began to dance with an occasional stamp that felt as if a two-hundred-pound weight had been dropped to the floor. Then every sound stopped, and the silence was like diving under water. Everybody listened. Not a sound. Then at last a tiny piping began, just as Tom had said, like baby birds, and one could hear in response the voice of the medicine man, speaking in the gentle tone a man might use to coax a nervous pet to settle down. The piping grew louder and one could hear the wing beats of very large birds.

Now that the spirits had arrived . . . (p.236)

Although metaphor and analogy can provide useful vehicles for communicating cultural experience, two prior, interconnected decisions about the intended audience and desired effect of the report, should be considered for the ethnographer's focus and style of documentation. First, as Smith (1979) observed, the researcher's primary concern may be to inform policy makers, fulfill academic expectations, or attract financial reward or scholarly acclaim; a particular reporting style and register are appropriate for each readership.

Second, each writer needs to consider the intended effect of the ethnography on these readers: "What do you expect to happen to them when they read it?" On one hand, the traditional, "scientific interpretation" approach, which calls for an "objective," impersonal style and an emphasis on "factual" statements, can result in accounts that, other than offering introductory remarks about the researchers, are substantially sterile and that, in their air of apparent finality, imply that there is no need for readers to question or interpret the findings. Smith (1979) was critical of the use of this approach in ethnographic reporting:

... what are we to make of a style of communication which attempts to remove the reader from the direct experience of perception by using a scientific idiom which presents data as only theoretically problematic (i.e., to be solved "within the book"), while remaining pragmatically *ex post facto*? By this last expression I mean that the work of interpretation is supposedly completed within the book and by the author, rather than beyond the book and, at least partly, by the reader. (p. 40)

Recognizing that the researcher's interpretation is not exhaustive, he advocated instead a concern for rendering "subjective experiences" and emphasizing self-conscious styles of expression; this enables the writer to "provoke" each reader to reflect upon issues and become involved in interpreting the situation. In this way, the ethnographer can not only portray meaningfully the unfamiliar cultural experience but can help readers to consider and draw their own meanings from the depiction of circumstances and events.

Literary theory – in particular, "reader-response criticism" – provides useful tools for understanding these issues, for it highlights the significance of the reader to the outcomes of ethnographic research and reporting. Reader-response theory (Abrams, 1981, pp. 149-150) examines the reader's involvement with and contribution to a text. (For the present purposes, "text" may be taken to mean an account of a cultural setting.) According to reader-response theory, readers ascribe meanings as they interact intellectually and emotionally with the record before them. A work of literature is therefore transformed into "an activity on the stage of the reader's mind" that is created in conjunction with the expectations, attitudes, emotions, and experiences of each reader. In other words, "at least to some degree, the meanings of a text are the 'production,' or 'creation,' of the individual reader. . . ." Reader-response critics disagree about the extent to which a text shapes readers' impressions. For example, Iser (1978) argued that the text partly controls readers' responses but that "gaps" in the text must be creatively completed by each reader. Culler (1975), on the other hand, asserted that literary rules and conventions serve as guides so that readers can interact meaningfully with a text.

Most important for the present analysis is critics' recognition of the reader's crucial role in creating "meaning" in a text. What is required of the ethnographer, then, is a style of presentation which carefully documents the cultural setting but which also invites each reader to reflect upon and contribute to the interpretation of situations and events.

In our view, there is a place for straightforward description as well as more complex evocative portrayal in an ethnographic thick description of a cultural setting. The scientific style of presenting evidence, through its standardizing, directive influence on readers, has merit for presenting factual accounts of physical states and initially recounting the experiences, observed attributes, and behaviours of cultural inhabitants. The reader needs such basic information to build up a sense of the situation. However, there remains considerable value in the researcher using imaginative writing devices and including personal impressions, open-ended questions and challenges that make the reader emotionally and intellectually involved in the situation. By drawing analogies and using metaphorical representations,



for example, the researcher conveys meanings evocatively so that they become more colourful and involving. Moreover, these figurative devices provide a crucial bridge between the unfamiliar cultural setting and the reader's own situation.

By identifying unresolved issues and including open-ended questions, researchers can prompt their readers to evaluate the situations being presented. Questions afford readers opportunity and stimulation to construe the researcher's portrayals in ways that they find individually meaningful and instructive. Moreover, they alert readers to the researcher's function as a facilitator of discussion rather than merely a provider of solutions. Far from making the researcher subservient to readers' responses, the researcher here assumes an important role in identifying the crucial issues for the reader's consideration. This kind of portrayal also helps to overcome one of the deficiencies of "objective" scientific reporting. By incorporating the personality of the researcher in the ethnographic presentation, readers can learn much about the quality, predispositions, biases, and trustworthiness of that critical "research instrument."

Of course, a danger associated with the creative style of ethnographic reporting is the development of accounts that surpass or distort the reality of the setting. The ethnographer remains a "describer," an "interpreter," of events – not a novelist. Effort and enthusiasm to communicate cultural meanings vividly, to demonstrate aspects of the researcher's own personality and research competence, to capture readers' interest and attention, and to engage them in personal reflection and interpretation must not be allowed to supplant or prejudice the fulfilment of this research role. Each educational ethnographer, then, must be conscious of this responsibility and prepared to assess his or her own work critically in this regard.

### Conclusion

Central to anthropology and ethnographic research is the search for cultural meaning. Likewise, educational researchers who lay claim to the ethnographic mode of inquiry need to focus their attention more clearly on the thorny yet indispensable matter of culture. Furthermore, if that understanding is to be faithfully, lucidly, and meaningfully conveyed to readers, if those readers are to be prompted to reflect upon questions of personal importance and concern, and if they are to be permitted to decide for themselves the quality of the researchers and the veracity of their accounts, then educational ethnographers should employ reflexive and imaginative techniques for documenting their interpretations of cultural meaning.

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