

## What Makes School Ethnography ‘Ethnographic’?

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*This paper began as a long memorandum to participants in a research training session on ethnographic research conducted for the American Educational Research Association in 1972. One of the participants attending that session was Arthur A. Katz, then one of John Singleton’s students. Katz edited my essay for publication in the Anthropology and Education Newsletter. The editing was skillful and I am grateful for that. I have made a few changes in revising the article for this reprinting. Almost all of them consist of material retrieved from the original essay, notably the references to the interdependence of ethnography and ethnology. I also have eliminated all citations, since many of the original ones are out of date. That in itself is testimony to the growth of the field in the past fourteen years. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH; ETHNOLOGY; FIELDWORK; INQUIRY PROCESS.*

- 1 The main point of this essay is that ethnography should be considered a deliberate inquiry process guided by a point of view, rather than a reporting process guided by a standard technique or set of techniques, or a totally intuitive process that does not involve reflection. The shape of the research techniques and instruments used in fieldwork is determined by the ethnographer’s explicit and implicit questioning process as informed by experience in the field situation and knowledge of previous anthropological research. The fieldworker generates a situation-based inquiry process, learning, through time, to ask questions of the field setting in such a way that the setting, by its answers, teaches the next situationally appropriate questions to ask. The framing of researchable questions also is influenced by the researcher’s knowledge of the literature of anthropology and sociology.
- 2 Fieldwork is heavily inductive, but there are no *pure* inductions. The ethnographer brings to the field a theoretical point of view and a set of questions, explicit or implicit. The perspective and questions may change in the field, but the researcher has an idea base to start from. What results from questioning-in-the-field is a description of (1) regularities of social behavior in a social situation considered as a whole, (2) as the ethnographer experienced those regularities by *being there* in the social situation, and (3) as he or she views the situation and situational behavior in the light of the wide variety of human behavior found throughout the world. What I mean by the terms of this proposition—“regularities,” “social situation,” “whole,” “being there,” “his or her view,” “variety of human behavior”—forms the content of the rest of this essay.

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## Ethnography and Ethnology: Etymological Definitions

- 3 “Ethnography” literally means “writing about the nations”; “graphy” from the Greek verb “to write” and “ethno” from the Greek noun *ethnos*, usually translated in an English dictionary as “nation” or “tribe” or “people.” A more refined definition of *ethnos* is found in Liddell and Scott’s *Greek Lexicon*: A number of people accustomed to live together, a company, a body of men.
- 4 What this implies is that the “ethnos,” the unit of analysis for the ethnographer, need not be a nation, linguistic group, region, or village, *but any social network forming a corporate entity in which social relations are regulated by custom*. In modern societies a family, a school classroom, an entire school, a work group in a factory, a whole factory are social units that can be described ethnographically (as well as nonethnographically). What makes a study ethnographic is that it not only treats a social unit of any size as a whole but that the ethnography portrays events, at least in part, from the points of view of the actors involved in the events. This emphasis on local meaning is essential to Malinowski’s definition of ethnography in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Before Malinowski there were many accounts of primitive people written by travelers. What distinguished Malinowskian ethnography from a traveler’s account was the attempt (not always successful) to characterize meaning from the actor’s point of view.
- 5 Ethnology contrasts with ethnography, and the two are interdependent in the researcher’s conduct of inquiry. “Ethnology” literally means the study of the meaning, or significance, of a human group’s organization and customs. The “meaning” to be elucidated by ethnology is not the meaning of a behavior complex within the context of the particular culture in which it is found, as in ethnographic analysis. The project of ethnology is to identify the principles of order in the social behavior of mankind as a whole. Its method is comparative. Each society is seen against the backdrop of all the known forms of human sociation; the lifeways of a given society are contrasted with all the other known ways of conducting daily affairs and special events.
- 6 Interest in the variety of customary forms of human behavior began, in the West, among the Greeks. Herodotus had interests that were [begin page 53] ethnological as well as ethnographic. In the second century A.D. the Greek skeptical philosopher Sextus Empiricus conducted a cross-cultural survey of morality, showing that what was considered right in one society was considered wrong in others. He worked from the accounts of travelers, which continued to form the basis for comparative knowledge about human behavior to the late nineteenth century.
- 7 We can see that ethnography and ethnology are not new. Prescientific ethnography differs from scientific ethnography, which can be considered to have begun with Malinowski’s fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands in the teens of the twentieth century. Unlike the traveler, the trained anthropologist brought to the field an explicit — more often implicit — ethnological perspective, within which his description was conducted, as well as an ethnographic concern for the local meanings of behavior. The traveler may have been an excellent journalist but his account lacked comparative perspective and a commitment to uncovering the local meanings at hand. The ethnographer combined firsthand experience with an awareness of other forms of social life beside his own. What resulted, at best, was (1) more accurate descriptions of all the essential partial aspects of a society, described with reference to the society as a whole and, at least implicitly, to other societies as wholes; (2) more systematic definition of the social whole and its parts in terms established by the then growing disciplines of sociology and ethnology; and (3) less ethnocentric explanations of “strange” customs in terms of their intelligible functions and meanings in the society being described.
- 8 Thus ethnography became more painstaking in data collection and more closely tied to a body of

emerging social science theory. This process continued during the 1920s and 1930s as ethnographers increasingly came in touch with one another's leading ideas and main questions, even though there was considerable disagreement among them as to the best form for the leading ideas and questions.

- 9 What does all this have to do with studying schooling or education in American society? I have presented this brief review of the history of ethnography (admittedly oversimplified) to serve as a backdrop to the consideration of how one might pursue ethnography in American schools.
- 10 We are forced to start by recognizing that the specifics of what an anthropologist like Malinowski did in his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands will not work in the case of American schools. Some of his general principles of fieldwork and reporting can serve as a model for school ethnographers, but not his specific methods, for his social unit differs from ours both in size and in kind. An American school is not a Trobriand village. There may be points of analogy between the two, but there are many points at which the analogy breaks down. For example, the village involves the life of its members 24 hours a day over many generations; the school does not. In the village, political authority and exchange relations are heavily influenced by kinship statuses and [begin page 54] rules, while in the school special treatment according to kinship status is expressly forbidden by a bureaucratic (and meritocratic) rule system.
- 11 Accordingly, we cannot transfer the particular methods of standard ethnographic field research to the study of schools. But we can identify the general principles for doing the ethnography of a primitive village — a total community in which members hold ascribed statuses, are bound together by reciprocal rights and obligations, exchange goods, and in which knowledge is traditional and slowly changing and local meaning systems are identifiable. We can try to identify which of these general principles still apply when one turns to doing the ethnography of a school — a partial community whose members (ideally) hold achieved statuses, in which rights and obligations are not reciprocal, in which the goods and services exchanged differ markedly in kind, and in which knowledge is nontraditional and rapidly changing.
- 12 Malinowski's theories and methods do not work on schools because these methods are not situationally appropriate. Nonetheless, his example, which became the paradigm for a whole generation of ethnographers, can be useful for us as well, provided we do not take his model literally. Malinowski viewed society as divisible for analytic purposes into categories of activity that fulfilled the most basic human needs — social organization (including kinship, marriage, and descent rules), economics, technology, language, belief system.

## Views of the School According to Malinowski's Categories

### *Social Organization*

- 13 As a way of thinking about the school as a small community, we could apply to it the fundamental terms of discourse about social organization — person, status, role, rights, obligations — taking very little for granted initially. We can construct propositions about the statuses and roles that exist for persons in the school, and the networks of rights and obligations that link various statuses together:

Teachers are obliged to obey the principal, whose right it is to be obeyed.

The principal is obliged to protect the teacher from outside interference and the teachers have the right to be protected by him.

## *Economics*

- 14 In Mahnowski's model social behavior is viewed as *exchange*. Exchange includes the exchange of valued goods through barter, exchange of symbols of value in a money market, or the exchange of behaviors in some form of parity.

The classroom can be seen as an economic system of behavior — a political economy — in which students offer deference to the teacher in exchange for kind treatment and the purveying of knowledge. [begin page 55]

## *Belief System: Religion, Folk Philosophy, and Ritual*

- 15 The school can be seen as having a world view or ideology perpetuated by the inculcation of religious belief (through myth and ritual) and grounded in a folk philosophy whose elements are: terms of definition, principles of valuation, rules of logic, methods of explanation for cause, and forms of predictive statements.

## *Myth*

- 16 Features of the school “religion” that have received much attention in the last few years and are the mythic archetypes and motifs in the curriculum:
- 17 *Creation Myths*. The Coming of the Pilgrims, The Revolutionary War, The Opening of the West, The Civil War, The Rise in the Standard of Living.
- 18 *Mythical Ancestors in Hero Tales of the Creation Myth Cycle* — John Smith, The Pilgrims, Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lee, Andrew Carnegie.
- 19 *Subsidiary Figures Who Advance the Action of the Hero*. The Evil British King (Charles I, George III); The Treacherous and Savage but Occasionally Noble and Loyal Indian (Pontiac, Blackhawk, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Squanto, Pocahontas, Sacajawea); The Happy but Lazy Slave; The Competent and Hardworking Immigrant Who Cleared the Forests, Tilled the Fields, Worshipped God in His Own Way, Came to Work on Time, and Did Not Strike.

## *Folk Philosophy*

- 20 The belief system of occupants of various statuses in the school social structure is another researchable aspect of cultural world view in the school. The varying folk philosophies (metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics) inherent in teacher culture, administrator culture, and student culture may provide *cultural lenses* through which the same events look different. Differential perceptions through the different lenses may account partially for differences between administrator, teacher, and student rationales for and responses to social interaction in the school.
- 21 For example, some constant features of a teacher belief system, a body of conventional wisdom, can be identified. This folk philosophic system can be seen as composed of the following elements: (1) basic terms, (2) relations between basic terms in the form of statements of basic premises, and (3) relations between terms and premises in the form of statements of correlation/probability, causal explanation, and prediction.
- 22 More concretely, some basic terms are student, child, parent, individual, reader, worker, high, low, good, under, over, slow, pushing, attentive, readiness, troublemaker. Single terms may be joined to form [begin page 56] two-element combination terms such as good student, under-achiever, slow reader, hard worker, reading readiness.

- 23 More complex combination terms might be: keeping up with the rest of the class, father-absent family (broken home), no books in the home, cultural deprivation (bad family background), good family background. One aspect of research on terms is to define precisely what is meant by terms like individual, good student, troublemaker, good family background.
- 24 Basic terms are related to each other in premises of definition and causation — each child is an individual, a good student is a hard worker, a culturally deprived home has no books, good family background leads to high reading readiness.
- 25 *Causal Factor Propositions.* Premises are linked together in propositions that relate particular persons and events to causal factors, probability/correlation, or predictive statements in the form “if X then Y.” “John is a (troublemaker/slow student/slow reader) because he comes from a (father-absent family/broken home/culturally deprived background).” “Judy is a slow reader but she comes from a good family background so she must be an underachiever.”
- 26 *Probability/Correlation Propositions.* “Students who come from a culturally deprived background are likely to have low reading readiness.” “Your troublemaker is often a slow reader, and may come either from a broken home or from a good family background in which the parents push too hard.”
- 27 *Predictions.* “If John would pay more attention he would be able to keep up with the class.” “Without more individual attention, slow readers will not be able to keep up with the class.” “If you move to the door just before the bell rings, the students will line up, walk in order out into the hail, and not stampede.” “If you don’t keep the kids quiet, the principal will give you a bad evaluation and you won’t get tenure.”
- 28 Some of these statements resulting from *teacher logic* are not totally false. Many of the recommended practices work, many of the predictions come true. But the practices and predictions may be confirmed for reasons other than the causes assumed by the teacher system of conventional wisdom, in which terms and premises often go unexamined, and logic is not rigorous (according to traditional standards). For example, children from father-absent families may have trouble learning to read, but because of self-fulfilling prophecy rather than any inadequacy inherent in lacking a father. If the teacher’s expectations are lowered because she knows a child has no father, the child may have difficulty learning to read. (The existence of orphans who learn to read makes the “father absence causes reading inability” premise logically absurd. The relationship, if it holds at all [and it may] is not so simple as that of direct causation.)
- 29 An overall pattern in the logic of the folk belief system of teachers seems to be that blame for a low valued outcome usually is fixed outside the classroom — either “down and out” to the home, or “up and [begin page 57] out” to the principal, or to the system. This pattern makes researchers suspicious of the folk wisdom of teachers. Perhaps the suspicion is unjustified, for wisdom generated through daily experience may work quite well in daily life even though the system may be predicting mislabeled outcomes for partially or even totally wrong reasons. Faulty or not, if teacher folk wisdom exists, it is a factor that should be contended with, both in an ethnographic description and in plans for educational change.

### *Ritual*

- 30 Grade school microrituals involving only part of the whole school (each classroom), such as Pledge of Allegiance, and macrorituals involving the total school society, such as Christmas Program, accompany a sharp decrease or increase in the rates of interaction. The Pledge of Allegiance accompanies the intensification of interaction on a daily time cycle (contact between teacher and students is about to

begin for the day) and the Christmas Program accompanies decrease of interaction on a quarterly cycle (the school term is about to end and students and teachers are about to leave).

- 31 The factor of *change in interactional rates* among ritual participants also may be accompanied by the factor *change in status* among participants. This holds true in such high school rituals as awarding athletic letters and initiation into a national honor society, which publicly acknowledge that not only have certain individuals entered new and higher statuses but they also have entered into new forms of social relations with fellow high status members and new relations with former peers, who are now outsiders of lower relative status. The rituals give, formal expression to the social fact that athletes associate more with each other (by participation on a team) and with the most socially prestigious girls than with non-athletes and not-so-prestigious girls, and that honor students tend to associate more with one another (or at least less with members of the informal prestige system of athletics) both because they constitute a separate status hierarchy within the school and because within their group the higher socioeconomic status is likely to be over-represented.
- 32 In the initiation rites for athletic and academic honors, the existence of the dual system of status and association is proclaimed formally and celebrated. The school thus gives official sanction to the dual system. Ideally the academic system is more licit than the athletic, but in the daily operation of the school both systems exist and both must be legitimated so that order can be regulated and maintained. Through the dual system a principle of distributive justice obtains, whereby the academic achievers and nonachievers, WASPS and non-WASPS, higher SES and lower SES, culturally mainstream and culturally different students all can derive valued commodities (prestigious statuses with attendant rights and privileges) through participation in the school. If all can't catch the brass ring, all at least can ride the merry-go-round. If one stays on his horse and causes no trouble, he eventually graduates to the adult carousel.

## Some Reasons Why Traditional Ethnography is Inadequate to the Study of Schools

- 33 But schools are more than all this. My descriptions of school beliefs and social organization may not ring true, either because of sarcasm or because I have left out crucial details.
- 34 Belief in ultimates, whether in Washington, the flag, the team, or in the intelligence of children from good families — or counter-belief — in the underground newspaper, the motorcycle, the beauty of blackness, or in the eschatology of the general strike — usually seems absurd from outside the system within which the ultimates have meaning and value. Myth may not only be necessary as an undergirding to social life, but the old philosophic proposition may be true in the reverse — the *unmythic* life may not be worth living. It is not enough for an ethnographer just to stand outside and sneer.
- 35 The school is far more complex than my descriptions of it. At best, my descriptions are only caricatures. They could not be mistaken for real life even though one might agree that some of them are true to life.
- 36 Caricature is systematic distortion — abstracting what the artist perceives to be the most salient features of his subject and presenting those features in exaggerated form, with broad strokes of the pen. Fine details are left out intentionally, for they may distract the viewer from the overall pattern of main features the artist wants to emphasize.
- 37 The caricaturist's ability to abstract, which allows him to get his point across unambiguously, is both his greatest strength and greatest weakness. By choosing different details to emphasize he can present his subject as a titan or a pompous ass, lover or lecher, saint or madman. Similarly, the ethnographer, by

selectively reporting details of everyday life in his description of a society — by leaving out a lot and by slanting his description of those details he leaves in — produces not only a caricature (which is inevitable, since he cannot present every detail) but a caricature that is drawn from a particular point of view and that communicates that point of view relentlessly.

- 38 So the following “test questions must be asked of my ethnography, and of every ethnography
- How did you arrive at your overall point of view?
  - What did you leave out and what did you leave in?
  - What was your rationale for selection?
  - From the universe of behavior available to you, how much did you monitor?
  - Why did you monitor behavior in some situations and not in others?
  - What grounds do you have for determining meaning from the actors’ points of view?
- 39 I believe that a good ethnography should not only be able to answer those questions, but should provide data to illustrate the decisions made during the research process and (perhaps in an appendix) descriptions of the kinds and amounts of data that were not available, plus examples of available data that were inconsistent with the overall point of view presented in the ethnography; In other words, the ethnographer should provide readers with guidelines for the falsification of the analysis, should a reader decide to replicate the study.
- 40 This is almost never done in ethnographic reports. It leaves ethnography wide open to charges of subjectivity, journalism, and ideology by positivistic critics. While I do not agree with the positivists, especially those who dominate educational research, I see no reason to leave ethnography of education in an indefensible position before its critics. The positivists have a point. Although I may object to their particular rules of evidence, I am forced to admit that some systematic rules of evidence are necessary.
- 41 Whatever rules of evidence the ethnographers choose, they should choose some, live by them, and make clear to their audience what they were and how they affected the course of the research. However, every anthropologist I have ever met has his or her own opinion on what he or she thinks the rules of evidence ought to be. Some think there should not be “rules” at all — that the process is too complex and intuitive to reflect upon as you are doing it. But I think that it is best to make the research process as reflective as possible — that this informs and empowers intuition rather than stifles it.

## Doing School Ethnography

- 42 Those of us who choose to do ethnography of schooling choose to do so in complex modern societies (or in rapidly developing traditional ones), for in traditional societies most intentional culture transmission (education) is not institutionalized schooling.
- 43 So we begin with a unit of analysis, the institution of schooling, which involves only some members of the society, some hours of each day, some days each year. Schooling transmits only some of the cultural material of the society. The organizational form of the institution of schooling, the school, is located in a limited geographic-demographic setting, with relationships of rights and obligations between the school and that place and its people. The school also is linked by a network of communication, rights, and obligations to larger social units — the school system and school board (which in the United States is a govern-[begin page 60] mental entity), with city, state, and federal government. The school is linked by the formal and informal political process to the economic, ethnic, and religious group interests that activate the political process.

- 44 In addition to being a part within a larger scale, the school is a whole composed of parts — differentiation of persons according to different classes of formal and informal statuses and roles (teachers, students, administrators, paraprofessionals, custodians, parents), with different rates and modes of interaction between statuses, and different spheres and amounts of authority and influence accruing to various statuses.
- 45 But this is far too much information available to the ethnographers. They must, it seems to me, have strategies for eliminating some of the welter of information, for sorting into categories the behavior and rules for behavior that confront them. Everything that happens inside the school is potentially significant, but some things are more significant than others. Following Malinowski, most of what happens inside the school is somehow related to what happens outside it, but some of these relationships are stronger than others.
- 46 One can't study the city as a whole, or the school neighborhood, or the school itself. Too much is there to monitor holistically, yet holism cannot be eliminated, or caricatures based on tunnel vision may result.
- 47 Problems of social unit definition, how to study interaction as unit boundaries, deciding on a sample, generating researchable questions, operationalization, all become increasingly insistent as one thinks about doing a school ethnography. The research process begins to sound like ordinary educational research, which is what many of us are disillusioned with already.
- 48 In addition to the problem of how to do ethnography on a single institution within a complex society, there is the problem of how ethnographers who are members of that society think and feel about their society, and how their point of view affects their description. Some of you may have disagreed with the tone of my caricatures of American schools presented earlier in the article because you disagree with my opinions and feelings toward American society as a whole. My caricatures would not be true to life in terms of your social theory.
- 49 It was *I* who was *there* doing the fieldwork, not somebody else. My fundamental assumptions and prejudices are part of my *me*. I cannot leave them home when I enter a site. I must study the place as me. But you are not me, and you are not there. It's I who have *been there*. So I should at least make explicit to you the point of view I brought to the site and its evolution while I was there, as well as the point of view with which I left. The desirable goal is not the impossible one of disembodied objectivity (I am a subject, not an object) but of clarity in communicating point of view as a subject, both to myself and to my audience.
- 50 In addition to being *me* to my audience, as an ethnographer I have an obligation to have *been there*. Really *being there* means experiencing [begin page 61] strong relationships with whomever else is there (one's informants). Some of these relationships may feel good and others may hurt. All of them *affect me and change me*. However one does participant observation — as mostly observer or as mostly participant—it is not involvement with a site at arm's length.
- 51 One reason I do not yet have my teacher folk wisdom material well enough in hand is that my most intensive field experiences have been with kids, not with teachers. My descriptions of teachers are still from a distance; they ring true, but not true enough. Only after I have really been there with teachers will I be able to show how sensible is the system of unexamined conventional teacher wisdom when viewed from within that system.
- 52 This is the ethnographer's *tour de force*: to make sense of "outrageous" behavior complexes (eating blood-clot soup, public circumcision of adolescent males [no anaesthetic], gallows humor, sharing one's wife with a guest, teacher explanations for why children fail) by placing the behavior complex in

its sociocultural context. To pull this off as an ethnographer one must not only suppress a sense of outrage while in the field, but still stay in there and take advantage of one's rage, using it as a barometer to indicate high salience. Those aspects of a culture that simply are intolerable are probably the key to the difference between that culture and one's own. The method is not that of objectivity, but of *disciplined subjectivity*.

- 53 If there is a culture of elementary school teachers it is certainly not, in its distinctive features, my own. If I want to describe it adequately I must stay around until it makes sense and then report it so that it makes sense. In my report I may choose to condemn it or not condemn it, but in either case I am obligated to make it intelligible as seen from within, and to portray the actors in the situation as humans — not as stick figures or monsters. Maybe not nice or good or wise people but human people.
- 54 It seems to me that much of the ethnography of schooling in our own society has fallen short on this point. As ethnographers (and as journalistic describers of schools) we give in to our rage too self-indulgently and present schools, teachers, and students as essentially and irredeemably inhuman; at best guided by an impenetrable ignorance, or at worst motivated by zealous malevolence.
- 55 I am not proposing here a flabby relativism. But to show that a social process has evil outcomes it is not necessary to describe every actor in the process as either a villain or a klutz. To caricature an American school community in a way that is true to itself, one must show that teachers, students, administrators, parents, politicians, businessmen, are motivated by good as well as ill, guided by wise as well as foolish elements in their conventional wisdoms, often confused, sometimes acutely aware of what is happening, muddling through. Such a caricature would not exclude them, but would be true to them in a way [begin page 62] that much recent writing about schools is not, whether the writer is a defender or attacker of the system.
- 56 Some may feel that to use one's outrage as a tool in fieldwork, to explain the outrageous act as intelligible, is itself outrageous — a schizoid perversion of the emotionally and ethically “normal.” Then one should not try to do ethnography, for in that inquiry process the highest law is *faithfulness to one's subject matter*, however schizy one must become in the process of research. Anthropologists have tried hard to do this as they describe such “outrageous” institutions as the Kachina Ceremony, in which Navajo men dress as gods in masks and whip children, but anthropologists often fail to do this as they describe the “outrageous” institutions of American schooling.
- 57 I have characterized ethnography as an inquiry process with one foot in the field situation and the other in the anthropological literature. In conclusion, I want to illustrate this by sketching the first steps of a fieldwork inquiry process — what kinds of questions one might bring to what one is seeing, what kinds of significance one might assign to what one sees, and what kinds of logic and basic premises one might use in doing so.

### *Making the Familiar Strange*

- 58 The continual question one can ask in the field is this: Why is this \_\_\_\_\_ (act, person, status, concept) the way it is and not different? The assumption behind the question is that human behavior varies enough throughout the world that in some other society there is either a quite different conventional way of doing whatever activity I happen to be seeing, or in some society they may not do the activity at all and get along quite well without it.
- 59 I don't pay conscious attention to that question all the time but it is always there. Especially in doing ethnography in our own society it is important to keep in mind the oddness and arbitrary nature of the ordinary everyday behavior that we, as members, take for granted. This is the philosopher's technique

of deliberately making the familiar strange. Upon entering a non-Western society the fieldworker doesn't have to do this. Everything is unfamiliar and much is strange. But when describing institutions of his or her own society, the ethnographer must adopt the critical stance, of the philosopher, continually questioning the grounds of the conventional, examining the obvious, that is so taken-for-granted by cultural insiders that it becomes invisible to them. Often it is the taken-for-granted aspects of an institution that in the final analysis turn out to be most significant.

60 The tool for unearthing the obvious is the question, Why is this \_\_\_\_\_ the way it is and not different? In more particular forms this question might be:

1. Why is there an American flag hung in this classroom? Are [begin page 63] there any cases in which it is absent? What happens in these cases?
2. Why does the teacher touch the heads of her students? Are there any regularities in who she touches or who she doesn't touch? What might happen if she began to touch the untouched, or stopped touching altogether?

61 Compared with the most common ways in which education has been practiced throughout most of human history, American classrooms are odd not only in terms of what happens there, but in terms of what *does not happen*. We might ask, "Why is there no circumcision rite for eighth-grade boys?"

62 So the first assumption is that much of what goes on in school, while it may be commonplace to us as observers and to the participants, is nonetheless extraordinary. The next assumption is that what goes on in school is not only a matter of relations between individual teachers and students and parents but of relations among students as groups, among teachers as groups, and between the school as a whole interacting with other social units as wholes outside it (community groups, the larger school system, political and economic entities). In short, it is assumed that the full significance of many events inside school can be seen only in the context of events throughout the whole school, influences on the school from outside it, and influences of the school on the larger society.

### *Stating Researchable Questions*

63 At this point, it might be appropriate to step back, move to a higher level of abstraction, and ask questions that define more clearly the terms of inquiry, as well as lead us to evidence about the relationship of schools to other sociocultural entities. Here are some examples of possible questions that speak to relationships between the organization of teaching in urban schools and the issue of ethnic succession into occupational niches. If one wanted to study such an issue, these are the kinds of research questions that might guide one's inquiry.

1. Are there groups (which meet whatever criteria for the definition of "group" we might choose to establish or adopt) in which ethnic status is a criterial attribute for membership? What about groups based on business and financial status, and groups composed of political office holders?
2. How are these groups distributed in terms of residence, occupation, socioeconomic class, religious affiliation, political affiliation, and the involvement and exercise of authority? [begin page 64]
3. What is the nature of relations between groups?  
Are some groups subordinate to others? Which are, and how?  
Where are the more recently arrived groups located in the social structure relative to less recently arrived groups?

Are there networks of acquaintance between individuals from different groups? Are there individual foci or within-group acquaintance networks? Who is in the networks?

Are different groups over-represented in certain occupational and other kinds of statuses? In organizations dominated by an over-represented majority, what is the nature of their relations with the under-represented minority? Are there formal or informal understandings whereby the under-represented have access to certain kinds of jobs, influence, contracts, and the over-represented have control over other areas of organizational turf? Who controls what? Does a relationship of parity or distributive justice obtain about which both groups agree? By what process is parity determined?

4. If the relationships suggested in questions 1-3 obtain for residential, ethnic, and occupational patterns in the neighborhoods, businesses, and governmental organizations for the city as a whole, how does this relate to the structure, operation, and function of the schools?

Is there over-representation of some categories of persons — ethnic, residential, religious — in the various statuses in the schools (e.g., local administrators, teachers, janitors, clerks, students, school-related social agency personnel)?

How does this distribution look at various organizational levels — e.g., upper echelon administrators, the school board, the building and maintenance contractors, those who lease school-owned real estate, etc.? What is the distribution of income (and other specifiable benefits) among the categories?

In a given local school, and for the system as a whole, do various categories of persons (who identify themselves as such) perceive parity vis-a-vis other groups? Who does and who doesn't? What is their definition of parity?

5. What is the effect of 1-4 above on the organization of everyday life in a given school?

What do the different categories of persons do most of the time?

Does ethnicity, residence, religious affiliation, etc., affect the quality of relationships between administrators and teachers? Between teachers and teachers? Between clerks and teachers? Between teachers and students? Etc. [begin page 65]

What is "behavior unaffected by ethnic factors"?

What is "behavior positively affected by ethnic factors"?

What is "behavior negatively affected by ethnic factors"?

Who relates to whom in what way?

What do various categories of persons say about this in formal-informal conversation? Inside and outside school? What do they do about it formally and informally?

6. What are the school outcomes valued highly by the various categories of persons?

Outcomes for teachers and administrators? For students? For parents? For businessmen? For governmental officials?

What is the distribution of opinion within a given aggregate?

What is the distribution of desirable and undesirable outcomes (as defined by any of the aggregates above) among a given ethnic, residential, religious, socioeconomic class of persons?

If undesirable outcomes are heavily over-represented, how does this relate to that aggregate's definition of "distributive justice?"

### *An Inquiry Process*

- 64 Obviously, no one ethnographer could cover all of these questions in uniform detail. But if from reading the literature, from informants, and from observations, one began to sense that ethnic factors could

explain patterned behavior in a school community, then one would need to touch bases with various kinds of information on ethnic factors operating in the larger social units of which the school community was a part, and in smaller social units within the school community, right down to the classroom or to the individual parent-teacher conference. The ethnographer would be led to this body of information by a variety of research questions. When considering research questions for inquiry, my rule is that one's microquestions must always lead to macroquestions and vice versa. When considering the evidentiary warrant for assertions, my rule of evidence is that for any assertion of a high level of abstraction we must be able to show clear linkages across a chain of lower order research questions and answers, down to the lowest possible levels of inference in observation and interpretation of visible and audible human action.

- 65 I think that ethnography, because of its holism and because of its cross-cultural perspective, provides an inquiry process by which we can ask open-ended questions that will result in new insights about schooling in American society. Many of these insights can be useful to policy [begin page 66] planners and community groups. But not as the "God's Truth" they may want yesterday. None of our insights can be billed as "positive knowledge," nor should they be. By presenting our conclusions as *possible* rather than *certain*, I think we can achieve credibility without mystification. To people of action, our ethnographic inquiry can be useful by providing new vantage points for reflection; a modest goal, but an honest one resistant to that inflation of hope whose end is cynicism.