

## On Ethnographic Intent

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[begin page 37 in original]

- 1 In May, 1981, I was invited to participate in a graduate student seminar hosted by the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Alberta. Our collective mission was to address issues of descriptive research. My assignment was to discuss ethnography.
- 2 The University Council for Educational Administration co-sponsored the seminar, and a summary of the sessions subsequently appeared in their newsletter, the UCEA Review. In reading that summary, I was reminded of an uneasy feeling I had experienced before and was conscious of during the seminar: here was another well-intentioned effort — on my part to inform educator colleagues about ethnographic research, on their part to become informed about it — that was going awry.
- 3 The sessions on ethnography were described as follows (Jefferson, 1981, p.6):

Ethnography was addressed in considerable depth, yet neither presenters nor participants were able to state clearly what an ethnography is. Instead, participants tended to fall into the trap of defining ethnography in the negative without really stating how an ethnographic study is distinguishable from other naturalistic inquiries explored through a qualitative methodology.
- 4 Although the conference reporter portrayed our failure to define ethnography as a general problem of the seminar in the summary just quoted, I appear culpable as the source of that problem in the more detailed report [begin page 38 in original] of the proceedings. Here is what was reported of my particular contribution (Jefferson, 1981, p. 6):
- 5 Wolcott described an ethnography by listing what it is not:
  1. Ethnography is not field technique.
  2. Ethnography is not length of time in the field.
  3. Ethnography is not simply good description.
  4. Ethnography is not created through gaining and maintaining rapport with subjects.
- 6 The only requirement that Wolcott placed on such research is that it must be oriented to cultural interpretation.
- 7 We had not been asked to prepare papers for the seminar. Thus, the words ascribed to me and quoted above were gleaned from a combination of brief introductory remarks and the ensuing dialogue. Subsequently, in reviewing my comments as summarized by someone else, I was satisfied that those were indeed the ideas I had hoped to convey, but, given another opportunity to express them, I would take

greater care to insure that each point was made clearly and to portray ethnography for what it is as well as what it is not. I would like to take the opportunity here to elaborate on my so-succinctly reported comments and to draw attention to what I have come to call “ethnographic intent.” I begin by reviewing the points listed above that discuss what ethnography is not.

## What Ethnography Is Not

### Ethnography Is Not Field Technique

- 8 More fully, I'd like to be on record as saying: *Field techniques in-and-of-themselves cannot an ethnography make.*
- 9 A researcher could conceivably use one major fieldwork technique (e.g., participant observation, interviewing), many techniques (the respectable multiinstrument approach or “triangulation”) or every field technique ever used by ethnographers, and still not come up with an ethnographic study. True, one would have the stuff from which ethnography is constructed, but that is not much of a boast when ethnography is made of such everyday stuff. [begin page 39 in original]

### Ethnography Is Not Length of Time in the Field

- 10 More fully, I'd like to be on record as saying: *Length of time spent doing fieldwork does not, in-and-of-itself, result in “better” ethnography or in any way assure that the final product will be ethnographic.*
- 11 Time is one of several “necessary but not sufficient” ingredients of ethnography: no sufficient ethnography without it, but no necessary ethnography with it. Based on any one researcher's skill, sensitivity, problem, and setting, optimum periods of fieldwork may vary as much as the circumstances for pursuing it.
- 12 If one can make a general observation about the duration of fieldwork in educational ethnography, it is that such research invariably is done in too short a time. Compared with psychometricians who may not actually visit schools or classrooms at all, our hours, days, or weeks of participant observation look respectable enough, but compared to our anthropological tribal elders — particularly the British social anthropologists who sometimes have devoted a major portion of their careers to working among only one “people” — our efforts pale. Yet even amongst educational ethnographers, I was privy to one long-term inquiry when researchers remained on site too long, faithfully satisfying contractual arrangements that failed to recognize that detachment is as important to the ethnographic process as is involvement (Wolcott, 1978; see also Powdermaker, 1966).
- 13 Although it is assumed that one will conduct fieldwork over a sufficient period of time to come to know the setting thoroughly, time itself is not the critical attribute. And although there is an unwritten consensus that one ought to remain in the field “at least a year,” 12 months in a setting as complex as a contemporary school, even if one's focus is narrowed to a single student, teacher, or administrator, might still result in what has become known appropriately in educational research as “Blitzkrieg ethnography” (Rist, 1980).

### Ethnography Is Not Simply Good Description

- 14 Those six words seem just right: *Ethnography is not simply good description.* I hope their meaning is clear. Good description can lead to good ethnography, but the good ethnographer is capable not only of good description but of recognizing what elements most warrant attention when ethnography, rather than a novel, a travelogue, molecular biology, or anything else that requires careful and detailed description, is the intended outcome. Some ethnographers perform descriptive obligations rather perfunctorily; more often, would-be ethnographers provide exqui- [begin page 40 in original] site description but falter in the

essential and related task of trying to make sense of what they have observed. Their error lies in the mistaken assumption that observation is scientifically “pure,” something apart from scientists themselves, an idea referred to lightheartedly among descriptive researchers as the “doctrine of immaculate perception” (Beer, 1973, p. 49.)<sup>1</sup>

- 15 Would-be ethnographers also have the mistaken idea that description is a step that must be completed before one proceeds to the next step, analysis. In ethnography, however, data and interpretation evolve together, each informing the other. Additional data provide illustration, test the adequacy of the developing account, and suggest avenues for further inquiry. Fieldwork and interpretation go hand in hand as concurrent, rather than sequential, steps. Michael Agar describes this dialectic process in his informative monograph, *The Professional Stranger, An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (Agar, 1980, p. 9):

. . . Glaser and Strauss came up with the elegant statement that in ethnographic research, data collection and analysis are done concurrently rather than being separately scheduled parts of the research.

In many sociological surveys, for example, a questionnaire is designed. Then interviewers go out and “collect the data.” The data are then coded and keypunched. Only then does “analysis” begin, with the machine-readable data manipulated according to some statistical procedure. In ethnography. . . you learn something (“collect some data”), then you try to make sense out of it (“analysis”), then you go back and see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experience (“collect more data”), then you refine your interpretation (“more analysis”), and so on. The process is dialectic, not linear. Such a simple statement, so important in capturing a key aspect of doing ethnography. An anthropologist should have said it long ago.

- 16 Even more important is the ethnographer’s own sense — hopefully growing more acute as fieldwork continues — of what is relatively more [begin page 41 in original] significant to be looking at and looking for in a particular setting. An ethnography is not a mere chronicle of events. As Charles Frake has explained (Frake, 1964, p. 112):

To describe a culture . . . is not to recount the events of a society but to specify what one must know to make those events maximally probable. The problem is not to state what someone did but to specify the conditions under which it is culturally appropriate to anticipate that he, or persons occupying his role, will render an equivalent performance. This conception of a cultural description implies that an ethnography should be a theory of cultural behavior in a particular society. . . .

- 17 The ethnographer’s task, as Frake describes it, focuses not on recounting events but on rendering a theory of cultural behavior. More recently Ward Goodenough has defined the ethnographic process as one of “attributing” a theory of collective behavior to members of a particular group:

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1. Ethologist C. G. Beer refers to “pure observation” as the doctrine of immaculate perception in an essay entitled “A View of Birds”:

There is a view of science that sees the bird watcher’s kind of activity as the necessary first step in any field of scientific endeavor. According to Lorenz, “It is an inviolable law of inductive natural science that it has to begin with pure observation, totally devoid of any preconceived theory and even working hypothesis.” This view has come under attack from philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, who have argued that preconceived theories or working hypotheses must always be involved in scientific observation to enable the scientist to decide what is to count as a fact of relevance to his investigation. I myself have been a critic of this “doctrine of immaculate perception.” Each year my students hear why, for both logical and practical reasons, there can be no such thing as pure observation, even for a bird watcher (Beer, 1973, p. 49).

The culture of any society is made up of the concepts, beliefs, and principles of action and organization that an ethnographer has found could be attributed successfully to the members of that society in the context of his dealings with them (Goodenough, 1976, p. 5).

- 18 The idea that culture is “attributed” has proven helpful to me in understanding as well as in explaining ethnography. Culture is not lying about, waiting patiently to be discovered; rather, it must be inferred from the words and actions of members of the group under study and then literally assigned to that group by the anthropologist. “Culture” as such, as an explicit statement of how the members of a particular social group act and believe they should act, does not exist until someone acting in the role of ethnographer puts it there.
- 19 Each member of a group has a personal version (“theory,” if you prefer) of how things work in that particular group, and thus of its culture or, more helpfully, its “micro-culture.” Every society consists of myriad such groups, and everyone in that society needs a personal version of how things work in every one of its subgroups in which he or she has or seeks affiliation. Goodenough refers to these individual versions, these personal constellations of cultural knowledge as *propriospects* (Goodenough, 1981, p. 111).
- 20 There is a difference between culture as perceived by any member of a group and culture as attributed to that same group by the ethnographer. The ethnographer attempts to make *explicit* and to portray in terms of social interaction among *many* individuals — thus the microculture of the entire group, the collected *propriospects* — what its various members know only *tacitly* and understand *individually*. Ethnographers are rightly [begin page 42 in original] accused of making the obvious obvious (or, more kindly, of making the familiar strange, cf. Erickson, 1984, P. 62; Spindler, 1982, p. 15) because, quite literally, their task is to describe what everybody already knows. The catch is, of course, that no one individual, ethnographer included, ever knows it all or understands it all. Ethnographers recognize that they do not have to describe it all, either.

### **Ethnography Is Not Created Through Gaining and Maintaining Rapport with Subjects**

- 21 More to the point, I'd like to be on record as stating: *Not even the capacity to conduct oneself brilliantly during the course of fieldwork — with all due concern for building trust, respecting confidences, being privy to people's innermost beliefs and practices, and in every way conducting oneself so that future researchers may further the investigations — necessarily leads to or assures successful ethnography.*
- 22 As a matter of fact, the opposite is probably more often the case. Ethnographers who are arrogant, self-serving, and self-centered; who are abominable fieldworkers; who work with seeming disregard for either their colleagues or their “people”; and who have violated a host of ethical canons — sometimes have produced satisfactory ethnographic accounts, whereas other ethnographers (or would-be ethnographers) have been overcome by humanitarian, ethical, and personal considerations that effectively prevented them from ever producing the accounts that everyone encouraged and expected them to write.
- 23 Ultimately there is only one test of ethnography: the satisfactoriness of the completed account. We cannot review, critique, cite, or build intellectually upon good intentions or hard-won rapport. There is nothing about ethnography that precludes anyone from acting as a thoughtful, compassionate human being. Commendable as such behavior may be, however, it is neither a prerequisite nor a substitute for ethnography. If you know many ethnographers, you know there are few saints among them!

### **What Ethnography Is**

- 24 Recall that the summary of my remarks about ethnography listed points describing what ethnography is not, and concluded with a brief statement treated as though it, too, was part of the trap I had fallen into by defining ethnography in negative terms: “The only requirement that Wolcott placed on such research is that it must be oriented to cultural interpretation.”

- 25 Happily, that is exactly the idea I hoped to convey: The purpose of [begin page 43 in original]ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behavior. The statement is neither negative nor incidental. My tactical error during the seminar was that I did not make that declaration forcefully enough nor often enough, and I did not underscore how it gives a sense of direction to the whole ethnographic endeavor. Quite frankly, prior to the seminar and newsletter feedback, I had not fully realized the implications of how this crux of ethnographic research, the critical attribute that distinguishes it from other qualitative approaches, is taken for granted among anthropologists yet remains virtually unrecognized among nonanthropologically-oriented educational researchers.
- 26 This latter statement is far more important than any of the points discussed previously or, for that matter, all of them put together. And any list that begins “Ethnography is not. . .” could be expanded to eight, a dozen, or any number of such negations: Ethnography is not empathy; ethnography is not merely first-person accounting or “Being There”; ethnography is not new-found respect for another culture; ethnography is not “a day in the life”; ethnography is not role study; and so on — although all these may be among its ingredients. If words spoken could appear in neon lights or pyrotechnic displays, my statement would brighten the sky with carefully chosen words: *The purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behavior.*
- 27 Notice that I have eliminated “only” and “requirement” from the statement as originally paraphrased. Cultural interpretation not a “requirement,” it is the essence of the ethnographic endeavor. When that concern for cultural interpretation is not evident in an observer’s account — either explicitly, through a self-conscious examination of human social behavior and a corresponding effort to “attribute” culture to a group, or at least implicitly, as evidenced by what the observer has selected to observe, report, and discuss — then the account is not ethnographic, regardless of how adequate, sensitive, thorough, or insightful it may be. And its “ethnographicness” is not enhanced simply by noting that the researcher borrowed some fieldwork techniques used by ethnographers, spent unduly long at the field site, provided carefully-detailed description, maintained a high level of rapport, or came to a profound appreciation for some other group’s resolution of its human problems.
- 28 It has been dismaying in recent years to watch educational researchers affix the label “ethnography” to virtually any endeavor at descriptive research. My own position is that the label, should be reserved for descriptive efforts clearly ethnographic in intent. There are numerous other broad, inclusive terms we can employ to refer to work that is not ethnographic in intent, and care should be given to selecting a broad “generic” label or one that accurately portrays a particular research approach or strategy from among such terms as on-site research, natural istic research, participant observation study, non-participant observation [begin page 44 in original] study, descriptive research, qualitative research, case study, or field study. (See Wolcott, 1982a for a discussion of strategies that share similarities with ethnography without assuming cultural interpretation as the outcome.)

### **The Ethnographer in Each of Us**

- 29 In this zealous effort to identify the essence of ethnography, I hope I do not create the impression that it is either so simple that anyone can do it or so esoteric that it can be done only by a chosen few who have already proven themselves. There is something of the perceptive ethnographer in each of us. “The trick in everyday life, as in history or in ethnography,” Frake observes, “is to sort out those strands, and discover those events, that have crucial significance for coping with the present situation and anticipating its outcomes” (Frake, 1980, p. 67).
- 30 Although few ascribe to the formal role of ethnographer, each of us must succeed as intuitive participant and observer for sheer survival in a social milieu. Each of us must figure out how to cope with the world we encounter, the unexpected as well as the expected.

- 31 In our everyday lives personal routines fit like an old glove: we do not have to think about proper forms of address, whether to go to work, how much toothpaste to squeeze out, how much of what to pour or to serve for breakfast, or where to stand or look while talking to another member of the group. Finding ourselves in a new setting, we momentarily become more attentive while we figure out what is expected (and perhaps discern what we can get away with), comforted by the concomitant expectation that those already familiar with a setting may be briefly forgiving while the newcomer learns the ropes. We will be reminded, perhaps gently at first, that this is a setting where we are (or are not) expected to wear a hat, make eye contact, take a larger (smaller) helping than we would prefer, initiate a conversation, or call so many (or few) meetings. We may make some of our newfound knowledge explicit perhaps by asking “informed” questions or by explaining how things work to someone less experienced than ourselves. How quickly we once became know-it-alls on the school playground, just as today we quickly become “oldtimers” at the baggage claim area, informing others of what we ourselves learned only moments before. For the most part, however, we acquire and demonstrate newfound competence the way we always have, almost totally out-of-consciousness.
- 32 Some people display a knack for understanding — or at least for being able to explain to neophytes — how things work in a particular social system. Just as ethnographers seek out such individuals as informants, we ourselves seek them out in everyday life as sources of help and insight. They are “intuitive” ethnographers in terms of the ability to [begin page 45 in original] observe, understand, and enlighten. Properly schooled in fieldwork traditions and in ethnographic writing, they conceivably could become ethnographers of their own people, just as they could become historians, novelists, or teachers.
- 33 They will not become ethnographers, however, unless their overriding preoccupation is for discerning cultural patterning in the behavior they observe. To accomplish that, they must also engage in a second and related activity, an ongoing dialogue dealing with the nature of culture itself. Thus they need to concern themselves not only with “recounting events” but with how one discerns what qualifies as something of collective social significance as contrasted with the purely idiosyncratic, with personality, with biological determinants and predispositions, and so on. They need constantly to probe the dimensions of culture even as they use the concept to guide their observations and their analyses.

### The Culture Concept

- 34 It is the absence of self-conscious reflection about the nature of culture that bothers me in reading most educational research of supposed ethnographic orientation. Not that I expect — or ever want — someone to provide the definitive statement of precisely what culture entails, but our gonzo-ethnographers never seem to agonize over (or even acknowledge) how their “working resolution” of what constitutes culture is critical to what they look at, what they look for, and how they are trying to make sense of it.
- 35 So basic an issue as whether one is inclined toward the view that culture is best revealed in what people *do*, what they *say* (and *say they do*), or some uneasy tension between what they *really do* and what they *say they ought to do*, poses different strategies for data gathering: whether, for example, one is going to give more credibility to one’s skills as participant observer, to words of informants gleaned through one’s skill as interviewer, or through some blend of these two seemingly similar but deceptively different ways of pursuing fieldwork. This is why experienced ethnographers are elusive when confronted with straightforward questions such as, “Just tell me what it is that you actually do when you are doing ethnographic research” or “What is the first thing an ethnographer does, then the next, and the next?” About all one can say is “You have a look around to get a ‘feel’ for the setting and the people in it.” As often, the answer is simply, “It depends.” Ethnography can be talked about in the abstract, but it is not practiced that way. Making the ethnographic process explicit is almost as difficult as making culture explicit.

- 36 One of the awkward things about hooking one's career with ethnography (and thus with anthropology more generally) is that its core concept — [begin page 46 in original] culture — is itself intriguing but elusive, all-encompassing yet conceptually weak (for a recent critique see, for example, Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, and Kurzweil, 1984). I have heard some anthropologists deny that the concept holds or even warrants a place in contemporary anthropological thought, but for myself I am sore pressed to contemplate an anthropology without it. Yet when one envisions the intellectual leap from the difficult-enough task of observing and recording behavior in everyday settings to the lofty and even arrogant business of proposing statements about implicit, underlying, mutually-understood-yet-never-examined assumptions and expectations that guide behavior (or even “determine” it — and here again, one's perception of culture's influence in shaping our interactions becomes critical), we realize not only the difficulty of instructing others in how we go about ethnography but also the absolute necessity of involving them in the dialogue of what “culture” is all about.

### Doing Ethnography

- 37 In a graduate course that I offer entitled “Ethnographic Research in Education,” I set for my students the impossible task of “doing” ethnography within the time constraints of an 11-week term. Their assignment includes identifying an informant or setting, completing a series of interviews and exercises in participant observation, and submitting a final paper that transcends these individual field reports and at least points the way toward the development of a full-blown ethnography. The charge I give to help orient them is to try to identify common patterns that seem to account for a large portion of the behavior they have observed or that seem unduly to preoccupy informants' discussions. The relationship of individual to family, the importance attached to reputation, the measures of and routes to success, the nature of external forces that can threaten or smile on one, the qualities admired or feared in others, all offer clues to underlying world views revealing of culture.
- 38 The very label one chooses to describe these patterns or preoccupations tends to shape one's search and subsequent analysis. Agar refers to them straightforwardly as “key concerns” (Agar, 1980, p. 164). In my own fieldwork and teaching, the term “themes” has proven useful. It couples nicely with culture to suggest “cultural themes.” Although the idea of themes is not used widely by anthropologists (it was introduced in the 1940s by Morris Opler but seems not to have captured the anthropological imagination), neither has it been burdened with definition from other social sciences (see Opler, 1945).
- 39 Goodenough's term “standards” — standards for “perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting” (Goode-nough, 1981, p. 110) — provides another organizer, a particularly useful one when informants express their [begin page 47 in original] views in terms of what they and others *should* or *should* not do. Educators are inclined toward such proclamations (e.g., “Principals should be instructional leaders,” “Teachers should be careful spellers,” “Children have a right to read” [although apparently no equivalent right *not* to read]), language highly revealing of the way things are *supposed* to be, the ideal if not necessarily the real.
- 40 There are other terms that seem as though they should serve but in practice do not. The concept of “values” is so linked to personal preferences that it is hard to keep students from imposing their own values and value hierarchies on their informants. “Expectations” invite outlining at a level of detail that obscures rather than reveals underlying themes. “Cultural postulates” or “ideological premises” may seem a bit pretentious at the outset, although they do set one on a proper course toward cultural interpretation. “Rules,” in the sense of tacit guidelines for social behavior (for example, as Sue Estroff has used them in *Making It Crazy*, 1981), provide another way to identify culture in process. However, my experience has been that students tend to lose sight of the distinction between implicit and explicit rules. They set out to identify tacit guidelines but find themselves listing “laws” and “commandments” instead, in the process also forgetting that it is not usually the breaking of rules (like speeding or being late to work or class) that is of concern, but rather the consequence of being caught at breaking them.

- 41 Given the impossibly short duration of time for “fieldwork” in a oneterm class, I have found another way to optimize (although not guarantee) the possibility that my students will observe and interpret behavior for its cultural dimensions. Virtually all behavior is influenced by culture, of course, but I want culture to jump out at my students the way it did for ethnographers when anthropology was in its infancy and locating an exotic tribe of one’s own was the marching order of the day. I insist that my Americanized students locate an informant from a “dramatically different” society (they may not select a fellow student from overseas, although foreign spouses of overseas students who are not students themselves are okay) or locate a cultural setting or “scene” dramatically different from their previous experience (thus, a class in karate might be acceptable, but a jazzercise, pottery-making, or figure drawing class probably is not). Conversely, my foreign students are welcome to select an American individual or family as informants, or an American cultural scene (a local sorority or co-op, a church group of a different denomination from their native one).

### **Ethnography Versus Role Study**

- 42 Students with prior coursework in cultural anthropology or extensive reading in ethnography often have some idea of an individual or a setting [begin page 48 in original] they would like to study and are off-and-running as soon as they realize that the essential requirement of the course is to produce a “beginning ethnography.” Others are baffled by the vagueness of the task: They don’t want to begin until they have a clear sense of where it all is supposed to lead. Still others become annoyed because they came prepared to try their ethnographic wings (perhaps even to test an idea for a dissertation study) but can hardly believe that the author of *The Man in the Principal’s Office: An Ethnography* (Wolcott, 1984a) will not allow them to go to a nearby school district — or the one back home — to “shadow” another teacher, principal, or superintendent. As soon as I make culture the critical attribute, they become disoriented. They had understood ethnography to be role study.
- 43 Role studies are something that educators and sociologists do so well that ethnographers don’t have to join the effort. I doubt that my study of the principalship is of help to students confused about the difference between ethnography and role study, since it is so role-oriented in conception. Conducted as it was under the auspices of the Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, it had to be oriented that way to warrant institutional sponsorship. However, I do think the study provides an adequate model of thoroughness in moving from data to analysis, and, at least in its closing chapters, in providing a modest example of cultural interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Interviewing an Informant**

- 44 For students who remain troubled with how to proceed, I can offer a bit more advice based on personal experience as well as the collected wisdom of others who teach fieldwork to educational researchers.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that they work with one or a small number of informants through a series of semistructured interviews. Interviewing an informant has proven to be an excellent starting place for beginning an ethnography. As each interview is completed and transcribed (no small task, it turns out), the researcher begins to

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1. I have discussed the problem of the book as a model for ethnography in a separate article, "Mirrors, Models, and Monitors: Educator Adaptations of the Ethnographic Innovation," Wolcott, 1982b.

2. See the Fall, 1983 issue of the *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Volume 14, Number 3, devoted to the special topic and a bibliography on “Teaching Fieldwork to Educational Researchers.” Recent and useful texts on fieldwork include Agar (1980) and Whyte (1984); for applications in educational research, see also Goetz and LeCompte (1984).

accumulate a respectable amount of tangible “data,” recorded in informants’ own words and amenable to searching and sorting for themes. There is no better way to start this process than by letting people tell their personal “story” to an interested listener.

- 45 [begin page 49 in original] Clifford Geertz refers to the process as “the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers” (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). It is my personal conviction that every human has a story to tell — if a right person comes along to ask and to listen sympathetically.
- 46 And what story to ask? Michael Agar suggests two approaches to get the interview process started (Agar, 1980; see also Langness and Frank, 1981); my students find both approaches helpful and seem to move back and forth between the two rather than follow either one exclusively. One approach is to invite informants to tell their life story, with each newly introduced person or event providing the perceptive interviewer a possible topic for future elaboration. The other approach is to ask informants to recount the events of their daily lives and routines. Again, each event offers a point of potential elaboration as the ethnographer probes for underlying themes and patterns. Both approaches provide access and beckon us to view our subjects as people, rather than people as our subjects: to recognize that people live fully contextualized lives in which one is a human being all the time, but a student, or teacher, or administrator only part of the time — and not necessarily the time of one’s most interesting or fulfilling moments.
- 47 In fieldwork conducted through the years I sometimes have relied more heavily on interviewing, sometimes on participant observation. (I never would want the two in perfect balance; one or the other ought to be the preferred mode for any specific research project as meanings or actions compete for the ethnographer’s closest attention.) I encourage students to emphasize whichever of the two approaches, interviewing or observing, “feels right.” But for students who lack any intuitive sense of how best to proceed, I point to Michael Agar’s bias in favor of interviewing as the primary research activity. Subsequent opportunities for participant observation can serve to check perceptions and to suggest topics to explore in depth during interviews.
- 48 Given the time constraints of a term, most students find that their efforts focus on a limited number of interviews with one informant. To round out the experience I urge them to join their informant(s) in some activity that might allow them to experience the participant observer role, but that effort frequently proves to be another interview instead, albeit an informal one.

### **Small Ns and Big Generalizations**

- 49 Sample size has never been a problem for me: anthropologists ordinarily work with one of whatever they study: one informant (thus, a “key” informant like Sun Chief), one family (Children of Sanchez), one tribe or clan (The People of Gilford), one village (Life in Lesu), one society (We, [begin page 50 in original] *the Tikopia*). But with our intentionally small Ns, we do confront a critical problem: How do you work with one informant (or family, or tribe) and still manage to move toward *cultural* interpretation?
- 50 Knowingly I take the risk that my students will indulge in cultural stereotyping. Abhorrent as that notion has come to be in our newfound and self-conscious pluralism, stereotyping also happens to be the business we all must engage in if we are ever to generalize about the expectations or standards that categories of other people hold for us. Ethnographers must engage explicitly in cultural stereotyping if there is to be ethnography.
- 51 If the truth be known, ethnographers, like the rest of us, make whopping generalizations from rather modest observations of a few cases. Their forte lies in knowing those cases exceedingly well and in recognizing a critical distinction between generalizing and overgeneralizing (cf. Goodenough, 1981, p. 102), but limits of time preclude my students (like some educational ethnographers) from attaining sufficient information to recognize what degree of generalizing or stereotyping is warranted. The resolution I suggest is that students endeavor to catch themselves in the act of generalizing and stereotyping, and thus to

couch their accounts with appropriate tentativeness, rather than allow me to catch them at it with unkind comments scribbled in the margins of their papers. Two cautions seem to help. The first is to stay rather close to what one has actually observed or heard, and to posit how culture may be reflected in that behavior, rather than flatfootedly to equate observed behavior with “culture in action.” Here again is an opportunity for the reminder that culture is never observed directly; it can only be inferred.

- 52 The second caution is to regard and present one’s work as the modest *beginning* of an ethnography. Originally I referred to these class projects as “mini-ethnographies,” but a student convinced me how much more helpful it was to represent the work as in its *early stages* rather than merely as modest in scope. Ethnographers employ these same caveats, and for good reason. Because of the very processes of human social life that it claims to reveal, ethnography never can be more than partial and incomplete. Even accounts that enjoy a brief moment as definitive works portray at best only part of the total way of life they profess to depict.

### Maximizing Differences

- 53 Requiring my students to select informants or scenes from societies radically different from their own is a relatively recent condition that I have imposed on the assignment. I imposed it to enhance the likelihood that the differences students identify will be associated with aspects of culture at a national or macrocultural level rather than at a *microcultural* [begin page 51 in original] one (cf. Goodenough, 1976), at differences of the magnitude of whole belief systems rather than minor, within-culture variations among teachers in adjacent classrooms or principals in neighboring schools. On a grander scale, that same argument has obtained in the strongly voiced preference for having anthropology (and “anthropology and education”) students do their first major fieldwork — typically the dissertation study — in a distant society, or at least with a dramatically different microculture (e.g., migrant workers, gypsies, an ethnic minority, a religious sect) rather than in the all-too-familiar “culture” of the school or classroom.
- 54 That raises another of the issues that make school ethnography so difficult and even so unlikely. The people interested in doing it are, for the most part, individuals who have invested virtually their entire lives in school, first as students, then as students of the teaching process, and finally as professional educators. Being so totally immersed in and committed to formal education, they are as likely to “discover” school culture as Kluckhohn’s proverbial fish are likely to discover water. The cross-cultural and comparative basis that helps ethnographers identify something they are tentatively willing to describe as culture in someone else’s behavior — because it is readily distinguishable from their own — is lacking. These hopelessly enculturated insiders accept as natural and proper the very things an ethnographer from another society — or even an ethnographer from our own society not so totally familiar with schools — might want to question.
- 55 Why, for example, do educational administrators have “offices,” and usually “front offices” at that? Why do school desk heights change in recognition of physical maturing but door knob heights remain always the same? Why does it seem “natural” that school should be held Monday through Friday, but that school convened on Saturday or Sunday is limited to religious, extracurricular, or punitive reasons? Why are teachers expected to do their preparations in public, rather than in private as administrators (and professors) do? Why are teachers customarily expected to remain after school to do their work and chastised if they try to do that same work in an equivalent period of time before school? How does higher status, or the authority to conduct evaluations, come to be in the hands of people who do not have classroom responsibility? If evaluation is so critical to the educational enterprise (and how have we come to that position?), who evaluates the educational evaluators?
- 56 There are clues to educator subculture and to its broader cultural context in the interpretations we might offer for such observations. For example, we make things convenient for children, who attend school fleet-

ingly, as long as we do not inconvenience the adults who inhabit these same schools year after year. Conversely, because we remain unsure how to judge the *quality* of teacher performance, we like to have teachers [begin page 52 in original] work where at least we can judge quantity (i.e., time). And classroom teachers are far too busy evaluating and adjusting their teaching, and too aware of their own vulnerability, to be preoccupied with systematically measuring and criticizing the performance of their colleagues.

### **Ethnography In Educational Research**

- 57 The problems inherent in ethnography are not unique to doing ethnography in schools and they are not insurmountable, but they do need to be recognized and addressed. For example, the disadvantages of being an insider, totally familiar with and at home in schools, may be more than compensated for by the understanding a perceptive insider can bring; the same argument is proffered by persons who hold memberships in other groups and wish to study their own people, on the grounds that insiders best understand the total complexity of a system. Some educators have proven astute at identifying pervasive themes, at recognizing cultural influences in their lives, and at analyzing their own professional expectations and their basis for holding them. There are some intuitive as well as some trained ethnographers in their ranks, and many have given attention to the systematic study of anthropology, including voracious reading of ethnography. They comprise a cadre competent to conduct ethnographic research in educational settings and to guide others who would like to pursue that approach. A number of committed educational anthropologists have found opportunities to do cross-cultural fieldwork in addition to turning their attention to schools and educational processes in their own society.
- 58 There is still another reason for touting the role and potential of ethnography in educational research with caution. A critical question is: Who really needs it?
- 59 Good, solid ethnographic accounts do the very thing they promise. They help us understand how particular social systems work by providing detailed descriptive information, coupled with interpretation, and relating that working to implicit patterns and meanings which members of that society (or one of its subgroups) hold more or less in common. But such accounts do not contain the basis for judging systems to be good or bad, effective or ineffective, except as people within the group being studied express those judgments or reveal frustration in achieving their own purposes, or as the people conducting studies impose judgments of their own. In and of themselves, ethnographic studies do not point the way to how things can or ought to be improved.
- 60 For the most part, the kind of information that ethnography is *not* well [begin page 53 in original] suited to provide is the kind of help educators most often seek; educational ethnography usually is undertaken with educator preoccupation for improvement (or at least “change”) in mind. To paraphrase the late Solon T. Kimball, most so-called educational research is really educational reform in disguise. The ethnographic goal of understanding another way of life is not sufficient for the reform-oriented educator who expects “understanding” to be linked with efforts at improvement. The educator typically wants to swing into action at that very point where the ethnographer may regard his or her work as finished. To the ethnographer’s careful rendering of the status quo, a critical insider rightfully may be expected to react, “Of course that is how we do it, but, so what?”
- 61 Educators have their own “good customs.” The system works; they understand it, at least implicitly; they know how to get their tasks accomplished. For the most part, in managing their daily rounds busy teachers and administrators really need studies of school culture (and school roles) about as much as busy Puerto Ricans or Kwakiutl or Japanese need studies of their cultures. In that sense, traditional ethnography has been and remains largely “academic” in nature and intent, providing modest increments in our efforts to understand human social life but not providing a basis for discerning what humans should do differently or better. Nevertheless, studies of all these groups, schools included, do exist. Under the very

eyes of critics who claim they are still waiting to see it, a substantial literature devoted to the ethnography of schooling, as well as to education more broadly conceived, has been accumulating for years. More encouraging still, anthropologists are reporting successful collaborative efforts in helping educators address pressing problems in ethnographically informed ways (see, for example, Schensul and Eddy, 1985).

- 62 Most so-called school ethnography, however, is really quick description (not to be confused with “thick description”), the purpose of which is to reveal weaknesses, point out needs, or otherwise pave the way for change and reform efforts already underway. It is, at best, ad hoc, pragmatic, utilitarian ethnography designed to gather evidence rather than to gain understanding. It reveals far more of the educator commitment to what is possible (an important aspect of educator world view, I might note), than to the ethnographer’s painstaking efforts to document — and even to “respect,” in the sense of deferring judgment — what already is.
- 63 For years I have been cautioning and urging educational researchers whose purposes transcend (or subjugate, depending on one’s point of view) ethnography to recognize and to state forthrightly whenever they are merely borrowing ethnographic techniques to accomplish purposes [begin page 54 in original] other than those of “pure” ethnographers (see, for example, Wolcott 1975, 1980, 1981, 1984b).<sup>1</sup> In most such endeavors educators are not doing ethnography because they do not seek or intend to employ cultural interpretation; rather, they are linking descriptive research to short-term efforts at change and improvement.
- 64 By insisting on the distinction between borrowing ethnographic techniques and doing ethnography, I hope that those true ethnographers of education — fewer in number, but with a contribution of their own to make — can continue with the essentially “academic” pursuit of attributing culture both to the smaller social units of immediate concern to professional educators — students at school, teachers in classrooms, administrators of school systems — and to the macro-systems in which they are embedded. Not everybody in education needs to go seeking after culture, but we cannot hope to achieve a full or balanced understanding of what we are up to or how we are going about it if the cultural dimensions of human behavior are ignored or obscured because of our own traditional and psychologically dominated “ways of looking.”
- 65 Anthropology’s major contribution to education in the 3 decades since George Spindler first convened a conference of anthropologists and educators to discuss their common problems (Spindler, 1955) has been a recognition (beginning with a tolerance, expanding in the 70s to an almost too wholehearted embrace) of the contribution of qualitative/descriptive research to a well-rounded educational methodology. I think it is time for anthropologists to take a next step and suggest (with caution at first; more boldly later) that to the ethnographer *method itself is not all that important: never was, never will be*. What ethnographers strive for is to “get it right,” and in the long run the elusive “it” of determining in any particular social setting just what constitutes the cultural dimensions of behavior creates more difficulty than the also-elusive rightness of the account.
- 66 Ethnographic research does not provide the comforting underpinnings of acceptable levels of significance, adequate rates of return, or Ns sufficient to assure that a value greater than “0” will appear in every

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1. Apparently I have overdone it a bit: In some circles of educational ethnographers I am known as “Harry the Pure.” But at least I (and others of like mind) have been heard, and I believe that educational researchers — doctoral students in particular — boast more frequently and with confidence that they are drawing upon ethnographic techniques in conducting their work where their predecessors felt some misgivings about the claim that they were “doing ethnography.” The immodest number of citations to my own writing is intended to identify other articles in which I have elaborated upon aspects of this distinction in my quest to preserve ethnographic purity.

box on a matrix. But ethnography comes closer than any other research strategy to explain, for example, why Ed Bell, the key figure in my [begin page 55 in original] ethnography of the principalship, could rail against having to see that the custodian chased a dog off the school playground or to tracking down which second-grader ate someone else's sandwich during morning recess, yet obligingly went ahead to handle these tasks lest he be accused of failing to perform satisfactorily as an educational administrator. A commitment to cultural interpretation invites (and implores) us to take a broad look at the behavior we are observing and to examine that behavior in its social context. Without attempting to predict, to record, or to recount all the possible "events" of the minisociety of a suburban elementary school, we pretty well know how we expect a proper principal (or teacher, or pupil, or even parent) to act. Organizing and presenting that information explicitly — searching out the "shoulds" and "oughts," the ideals and realities, the satisfactions, contradictions, and paradoxes — is the ethnographer's task. That principals, like other educators, talk about their role as they wish it to be but accept it as it really is, provides more of that "stuff" out of which ethnography is made. Understanding of that sort is unlikely to make principals "better," although conceivably it could make some of them wiser. That is purpose enough.

- 67 Let educational researchers of other persuasions do the counting and measuring they do so well. Ethnographers have their commitment and their unique contribution to make within the educational community. That commitment is not to technique per se, to time in the field, to providing "pure" or "complete" description, to gaining rapport, nor to a host of other procedural aspects of fieldwork: it is to cultural interpretation. And the contribution is in helping educators better understand both the little traditions of schools and the big traditions of the larger society. Granted, not all educators seek that kind of understanding, but many do. Education's would-be movers and shakers would be well advised to pay culture more heed if they are ever to fathom how schools remain so remarkably the same in spite of persistent and well-intended efforts to change them.

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