General Introduction

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Anyhing anyone wants to do that has no clear problem, no methodology, and no theory is likely to be called “ethnography” around here. — A state department of education official

1 This book has two purposes. The first is to define and describe a field of inquiry — educational ethnography — that has had a meteoric rise in the past decade, particularly during the past few years. The second purpose is to clarify the potential of this field for contributing to the solution of vexing educational problems and generally to the development of anthropological theory and method that relate to education.

2 Educational ethnography draws practitioners from sociology, psychology, and anthropology. It also attracts many who do ethnography but have no major professional disciplinary affiliation in the social sciences. In fact, “ethnography” has become virtually a household word in professional education, and it is the rare research project today that does not have somewhere in the table of operations at least one ethnographer and somewhere in the research design some ethnographic procedures. To those of us who have long struggled to persuade educators that ethnographic studies would help illuminate the educational process and fellow scientists that they should undertake ethnographic studies of this process, the sudden wave of popularity is exhilarating. It is also alarming. Inevitably, any movement that rapidly acquires many followers has some of the qualities of a fad, and this is true of educational ethnography. It is not surprising that some work called “ethnography” is marked by obscurity of purpose, lax relationships between concepts and observation, indifferent or absent conceptual structure and theory, weak implementation of research method, confusion about whether there should be hypotheses and, if so, how they should be tested, confusion about whether quantitative methods can be relevant, unrealistic expectations about the virtues of “ethnographic” evaluation, and so forth. Order must be brought into the effort to make use of ethnography in and about educational institutions.

3 This book does not attempt either to review or to represent all the types of “ethnographic studies” or ethnographically inspired interpretations of educational phenomena that now exist. Rather, the book focuses on the anthropological ethnography of schooling.1 It explores anthropological ethnography as applied to the study of educational process and searches for unifying features in these applications. We, the contributors to this volume, do not claim that ethnography can only be done by anthropologists, nor even that it is always done best by anthropologists. Nor do we perceive disciplinary boundaries as of great significance. However, we do claim historical priority, because the use of ethnography as a recognized part of the research procedures of contemporary social science began when the first anthropologists left their armchairs and went to the field around the turn of the century.

4 Ethnography is the field arm of anthropology. An anthropologist without ethnographic field experience is like a surgeon without experience in surgery or a clinical psychologist without experience in clinics.

1. The terms “ethnography of schooling” and “educational ethnography” mean nearly the same thing but are not exactly synonymous. At least in my usage, “educational ethnography” refers to the study of any or all educational processes, whether related to a “school” or not. “Ethnography of schooling” is therefore a little narrower in that it refers to educational and enculturative processes that are related to schools and intentional schooling, though this concept leaves room for studies of playgrounds, play groups, peer groups, patterns of violence in schools, and other aspects of school-related life.
Therefore when anthropologists first turned serious attention to schooling in our own society, they quite naturally did so in the ethnographic style. Anthropologists Solon Kimball, Jules Henry, George Spindler, and a few others were already doing the ethnography of schooling in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Many other anthropologists have entered the field since then.

Thus we anthropologists do have a certain proprietary interest in ethnography. But we certainly do not mean to imply that professionally trained people from disciplines other than anthropology should deny themselves the benefits of doing ethnography. In fact, many of us feel that ethnographic training can be very valuable for nonanthropologists and for people who do not expect to be professional researchers but who are directly involved in education. For guidance counselors, curriculum developers, administrators, and classroom teachers, ethnography can provide a sensitizing experience of great significance; under certain conditions these professional people should “do ethnography.” More will be said about this in the Concluding Remarks.

Nevertheless, because we anthropologists do have a proprietary interest in ethnography and because of our prior claims to its use, we should clarify what it is we are about — what methods of study we use and for what purposes. This book attempts to do this.

This clarification of the central features of an anthropological ethnography of schooling will interest both educators and anthropologists. Educators, particularly, are concerned because the tried-and-true methodologies and research designs used most widely in educational research have failed to answer pressing questions. These experimental and correlational approaches that isolate variables from context and overlook the all-important dimensions of meaning in human behavior have been overworked. As Lee Cronbach said in his Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award address to the American Psychological Association in 1974:

The experimental strategy dominant in psychology since 1950 has only limited ability to detect interactions. . . [And further] The two scientific disciplines, experimental control and systematic correlation, answer formal questions stated in advance. Intensive local observation goes beyond discipline to an open-eyed, open-minded appreciation of the surprises nature deposits in the investigative net. . . . [And in conclusion] Social scientists are rightly proud of the discipline we draw from the natural science side of our ancestry. Scientific discipline is what we uniquely add to the time-honored ways of studying men. Too narrow an identification with science, however, has fixed our eyes upon an inappropriate goal. The goal of our work, I have argued here, is not to amass generalizations atop which a theoretical tower can someday be erected (cf. Criven, 1959b, p. 471). The special task of the social scientist in each generation is to pin down the contemporary facts. Beyond that, he shares with the humanistic scholar and the artist in the effort to gain insight into contemporary relationships and to realign the culture’s view of man with present realities. To know man as he is is no mean aspiration.

Ethnography can shed new light on old problems and ask new questions that will make some of the old problems obsolete. Ethnography cannot do this, however, if it is prematurely killed by the hostility inevitably directed at such more qualitative and more descriptive research methods — methods most profes-

1. Henceforth we will refer to anthropological ethnography as *anthroethnography* and to our sibling field disciplines as *socioethnography* and *psychoethnography*. It is also proper to refer to the collection of data in the field through observation and interviews as *ethnography* and to its interpretation as *ethnology*, as Dell Hymes suggests in his Presidential address to the Council on Anthropology and Education (Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 1980, 11:3-8).
sional educators and social scientists have been taught to believe are not acceptable. But ethnography must not invite justifiable hostility. Its real potential as a source of new knowledge and understanding for educators will not be realized if its practitioners tolerate ambiguous, loose, and conceptually and methodologically inadequate research. Such inferior research is more likely in the absence of specific criteria for excellence. This book does not give the final word on what ethnography is or what it can and cannot do. It does furnish models for excellence and explicitly defines criteria for the appropriate use of ethnography in the study of education.

9 This book must also serve the interests of anthropologists. Our discipline emerged as a by-product of a colonialized world where exotic “have-nots” were studied by scholars from the “haves.” That we fostered receptivity for cultural differences and argued for cultural self-determination, encouraged respect for the integrity of other cultures, and worked against ethnocide is not to be denied. And our contributions to the development of social, cultural, and psychological theory and research methodology are significant. Nor do I, for one, see the anthropologists of this earlier period as simply servants of the colonial enterprise. After all, anthropologists have always tended to see things from the bottom up rather than from the top down. But the fact remains that we collected knowledge, facts, and insights from politically powerless peoples largely outside the benefit structure of modern economic and political systems. In doing so we gained a better understanding of the world and we built a discipline.

10 Now it is time to apply the tools and insights of this discipline to problems that plague people everywhere, particularly people in our own complex, conflict-ridden, multicultural, dynamic society. We must study the poor and the rich, the mainstreamers as well as the minorities, and their interaction. (We have done better on the poor and the minorities than on the rich and the mainstreamers, so far.)

11 We can turn our attention and energy to questions such as these: Why do bright children distinguished from the mainstream by ethnicity and/or social class not learn to read? How does socialization for the mainstream take place in the schools? Why do desegregated schools often become storm centers for violence and the disruption of schooling? Why do primeval forms of instruction, subject matter, and classroom management persist despite repeated attempts at reform? Why don’t bicultural education programs work (when they don’t)? How do schools perpetuate and reinforce unequal distribution of access, success, and reward in our society? Not merely why but how do failures in communication occur between teachers and students when there is either a social class or ethnic difference between the two?

12 These are problems of crucial significance that anthropologists can sink their teeth into. In so doing they can help implement the democratic ideals that are held to be paramount in our society and simultaneously feed back into their own discipline the energy and decisiveness that are generated when complex, compelling, significant, and relevant phenomena are studied. The chapters in this book center on problems such as those just stated. You will recognize them as you read it.

13 Questions of the kind already mentioned can always be asked at two levels. The first is the level at which we have just been operating/the level of public concern, the level of questions and problems of significance to the well-being of a society or group within it. But there is another level that more immediately guides our research. We must translate our ethical concerns, our frustration at failure to reform, our anger over injustice, into disciplined questions and ways to pursue them. What is sociocultural knowledge?

1 By “sociocultural knowledge” we mean the knowledge participants (students, teachers, principals, mothers, fathers, friends, etc.) use to guide their behavior in the various social settings they participate in. Such knowledge is complex and subtle; it includes specific knowledge of social roles and rules and generalized, usually only dimly conscious, knowledge of categories and management skills that makes it possible, for instance, to detect shifts in conversational contexts. “Cultural knowledge” is often used rather than “sociocultural,” but I wish to call attention to the inclusiveness of this knowledge held by participants in social interactions. More will be said about such knowledge as we go on.
How does it make it possible for people to interact sensibly and productively or, conversely, insensibly and nonproductively? What is the difference between general sociocultural knowledge and situationally specific knowledge, and how does each influence behavior? How are the different kinds of sociocultural knowledge generated and acquired? Are symbols and behavior coterminous? How is social organization created, and how does it constrain behavior? How do differing perceptions of the realities of life in the classroom develop, and how do they act as barriers to effective teaching/learning? How do models drawn from descriptive linguistics help to explain “hidden curricula” and implicit cultural knowledge that may defeat the intention of schooling? How far does the context of a social event have to be explored to make the event understandable? These and similar questions will be encountered in various forms in the chapters of this book.

The Criteria for a Good Ethnography of Schooling

14 We have not defined the criteria by which you will recognize anthroethnography as you read this book. This volume is in itself a definition of anthroethnography, though not a final or complete one. Its contents exhibit the qualities of good anthroethnography, though not in equal degree and never perfectly. However, all of the researches reported in this book hold some of these attributes in common. Though their full meaning can only be grasped by reading the articles reporting the researches, stating them succinctly now will help orient us to what will be encountered in the rest of the book. These criteria may be taken together as an operational definition of anthroethnography as applied to the study of education.

- Observations are contextualized. The significance of events is seen in the framework of relationships of the immediate setting being studied but is pursued, as necessary, into contexts beyond.
- Hypotheses and questions for study emerge as the study proceeds in the setting selected for observation. Judgment on what is significant to study is deferred until the orienting phase of the field study has been completed.
- Observation is prolonged and repetitive. Chains of events are observed more than once.
- The native (any participant in a social setting) view of reality is brought out by inferences from observation and by various forms of ethnographic inquiry: interviews, other eliciting procedures (including some instruments), even, at times and only cautiously, questionnaires.
- Sociocultural knowledge held by social participants makes social behavior and communication sensible to oneself and to others. Therefore a major part of the ethnographic task is to understand what sociocultural knowledge participants bring to and generate in the social setting being studied.
- Instruments, codes, schedules, questionnaires, agenda for interviews, and so forth, are generated in the field as a result of observation and ethnographic inquiry.
- A transcultural perspective is present, though frequently as an unstated assumption. That is, cultural variation over time and space is considered as a natural human condition. All cultures are adaptations to the exigencies of life and exhibit common as well as distinguishing features.
- Some of the sociocultural knowledge affecting behavior and communication in any particular setting being studied is implicit or tacit, not known to some participants and known only ambiguously to others. A significant task of ethnography is therefore to make explicit what is implicit and tacit to informants and participants in the social settings being studied.
- Inquiry and observation must disturb as little as possible the process of interaction and communication in the setting being studied.
- Since the informant (any person being interviewed) is the one who has the emic, a native cultural knowledge (in varying degrees of self-conscious articulation), the ethnographic inter-

1. By “emic” is meant the view from within the culture, the folk view, in terms of native categories.
viewer must not predetermine responses by the kinds of questions asked. The conversational management of the interview or eliciting interaction must be so carried out as to promote the unfolding of emic cultural knowledge in its most heuristic, “natural” form.

- Any form of technical device that will enable the ethnographer to collect more live data/immediate, natural, detailed behavior — will be used, such as cameras, audiotapes, and videotapes.

15 There is no single one of these attributes of anthropological ethnography that is equally or uniformly represented in all the reports of research in this book. Nor is there any single attribute that is represented in only one report. All of the attributes are represented in some degree in most of the reports, and each of them is expressed in full form in several.

Limitations and Capabilities

16 These attributes are not those of a loose, ambiguous, undisciplined research field. They call for a discipline that is as demanding as that required by any experimental design or correlational research strategy. Yet ethnographic inquiry by its nature focuses on single cases or at most on a limited setting of action. Thus there are searching questions about using ethnographic data for scientific generalization, as well as for policy formation and decision-making. There are answers, of course. For example, ethnographers feel that an in-depth study that gives accurate knowledge of one setting not markedly dissimilar from other relevant settings is likely to be generalizable in substantial degree to these other settings. Ethnographers also usually feel that it is better to have in-depth, accurate knowledge of one setting than superficial and possibly skewed or misleading information about isolated relationships in many settings. In other words, the results obtained by survey methods that educational decision-making has often been based on are ethnographically suspect because they may have been distorted by the fractionalization of inquiry and by ignoring meanings shared by informants.

17 Another answer is that in-depth ethnographic study should enable instruments to be constructed that can collect information that is subject to quantification and the application of inferential statistics. There is no argument between qualification and quantification, even though some people who should know better maintain that there is. Many anthropoethnographers use quantification and inferential statistical data treatments. Most field research done by graduate students in modern departments of anthropology uses quantified data at some point and many students use inferential statistics of a high degree of sophistication in their analysis of data. Actually, quantitative and qualitative data and methods should be interdependent. Qualitative data obtained from ethnography can tell us what may be significant on a wider scale. The two strategies may often simply be phases of a larger research project, and ethnography may or may not come first. In some cases, the analysis of survey results indicates where an ethnographic probe in depth should then be carried out.

18 A final answer to questions about generalizability is that correlational and experimental research designs are also subject to severe strictures. They also sample universes. And if these designs fail to take context and meaning into adequate consideration, their results may be significantly less generalizable than the results from a good ethnographic study.

19 Though the papers comprising this book exhibit the attributes of good ethnography, they are separable into groups on the basis of differences in research strategies, theoretical background and concept formation, and focus. The criteria for separation cannot be applied with entire consistency since the researches have much in common and at the same time express so much variety. The separation, however, makes this volume easier to digest and contributes to the definition of an emerging ethnographic character structure.¹
Plan of the Book

Part I, "Self-Appraisals: Concerns and Strategies," sets the stage for what is to follow. Its three chapters share some features with those in the rest of the book, but they also differ sharply from them. They are like the other chapters in that they are research centered; they contain information about completed field research and some of its results. They differ in that they are ruminative and reflective. They are in varying degrees personal documents, more concerned with what the fieldwork was like, what motivations lay behind it, and what doubts the authors have about it. Alan Peshkin's goes farther than the other two in the personal dimension. He reflects on what there was about his own socialization that led him to do ethnography and to value doing it in a small Middle Western community with a tight nexus with its schools. The Spindlers describe fieldwork in two research sites, one in the elementary school in a California community, the other in an urbanizing German village. The teachers in both of these schools resisted change, in different ways and for different reasons, and the authors discuss this. Their emphasis, however, is on a different problem — that reflected in the title, "Roger Harker and Schonhausen: From the Familiar to the Strange and Back Again."

1. This Introduction was written after some months of extensive reading in the field and editorial work with the contributed papers. It is difficult to single out the reading that has particularly influenced me, but I select the following as especially important: Dell Hymes, “What Is Ethnography?”, a paper delivered to the Ethnography and Education Conference, Philadelphia, April 8, 1978; Shirley Brice Heath, “Ethnography in Education: Toward Defining the Essentials,” to be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in Ethnography and Education: Children in and out of School, edited by Perry Gilmore and Allan A. Glathorn; Harry F. Wolcott, “Confessions of a ‘Trained’ Observer,” an unpublished paper prepared for a seminar on Field-Based Methodology in Educational Research; Frederick Erickson, “Some Approaches to Inquiry in School-Community Ethnography,” 1977, Council on Anthropology and Education Newsletter, 8(2):58–69.