

FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

TAPPING INTO COMMUNITY FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

Michael Genzuck, Ph.D.
University of Southern California
School of Education

This section will focus on the techniques and theories that teachers can adopt in an attempt to tap into the “funds of knowledge” that are present within their students’ households and communities. Assuming that the households of students are rich repositories of accumulated knowledge, teachers will conduct ethnographic school, home and community visits with the purpose of uncovering local knowledge bases. Rather than learning static ideas about their students’ “culture,” teachers can access firsthand the lived experiences of household histories and practices. This community-based knowledge can then be transformed by teachers into thematic units within the content areas of the curriculum. By adopting an anthropological lens in viewing students’ households, teachers are able to observe social science “up close and personal,” and to enhance their own professional development through ethnographic analysis. Parents and community members also respond positively to the validation of their own knowledge, and the opportunity to “tell their story” to an interested listener. This approach utilizes the notion of assisted performance, what a child can do with help, with the support of the environment, of others, and of the self. Vygotsky referred to this as the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), the distance between the child’s individual capacity and the capacity to perform with assistance is the ZPD, which is the distance between the actual developmental level of an individual, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable others (Díaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1992).

Theoretical Framework

In looking at the question of cultural connections between what teachers and students do in classrooms and what students experience in the community, it is important to look at investigations on topics such as “funds of knowledge” and the issue of cultural congruence. This body of research studies households’ social histories, methods of thinking and learning, and practical skills related to community’s everyday life, especially their labor and language, and attempts to derive instructional innovations and insights from such an analysis (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). The funds of knowledge concept is that every household is an educational setting in which the major function is to transmit knowledge from the elders that enhances the survival of its dependents. The content and manner of this transmission, the households’ “zones of proximal development”, are the central feature of the ethnographic home study. Ethnographic researchers look at the exchange of “funds of knowledge” as an operations manual of essential information and strategies households

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need to maintain their well being and perpetuation. In short, households' funds of knowledge are wide-ranging, diverse and plentiful. These transmitted funds are essential to home life and to the relationship of the families to others in their community. These bodies of knowledge have been referred to as the nuts and bolts for survival (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

This hypothesis states that these social relationships provide a motive and a context for applying and for acquiring knowledge. The key point is that funds of knowledge are constituted through events or activities. That is, funds of knowledge are not possessions or traits of people in the family but characteristics of people in an activity (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Knowledge is therefore obtained by the children, not imposed by the adults. This knowledge is clearly content or knowledge based and seldom insignificant. The notion of culture is a dynamic entity, not simply a collection of foods, clothes, and holidays, but a way of using social, physical, spiritual, and economic resources to make one's way in the world. They (funds) usually matter, that is, they are authentic. It is when the content of the interactions is significant or necessary that people are motivated to establish the social contexts for the transfer or utilization of knowledge and other resources. It is this social relationship that is so intriguing and carries with it the potential hypothesis for the importance of this dynamic cultural match between teacher and student. Without a focus on these social relationships and persons in activities, it is very easy for outsiders (educators) to underestimate the wealth of funds of knowledge available in ethnic, or working class households.

Many educators continue to devalue the household knowledge of non-mainstream children. Households are often viewed as units from which the student must be rescued, rather than as reserve of knowledge that can foster the child's cognitive development. The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning has shown that numerous "funds of knowledge," found within the households, could form the basis for curriculum units in science, math, language arts, and other subjects (Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales & Amanti, 1993). Funds of knowledge are available in these households regardless of the families' years of formal schooling or prominence assigned to literacy. Yet this knowledge and its forms of transmission, rarely make their way into classrooms in any substantive way (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Funds of knowledge represent a major, undeveloped resource for academic instruction that can be provided by teachers with cultural congruence, especially ethnic teachers with the same background and language skills. Greenberg (1989) has referred to classrooms without these arrangements as "zones of underdevelopment."

Cultural congruence does not mean an attempt to replicate a home or community environment in the classroom. Research on cultural congruence recognizes that the home and school are different settings with different functions in students' lives. Culturally congruent educational classrooms and practices include features of the students' home culture but do not result in activities and environments identical to those of the home. It recognizes that the home and school are unique environments with different functions in students' lives. Nor does culturally responsive instruction entail changes in the purposes

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of education or the goals of schooling. A review of the literature indicates that the research in cultural congruence has taken a rather moderate position by accepting that the goals of schooling for students of diverse backgrounds are essentially the same as the goals for students of mainstream backgrounds (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), that is, to help them acquire the skills and knowledge needed for success in the larger society. This type of instruction, however, need not be associated only with conventional school goals.

A review of the literature suggests that to be an effective teacher, you need an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, a repertoire of teaching strategies and a deep knowledge of the culture and history of the students you are teaching. The concept of providing “supportive environments for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987, p. 131)”... in which the validity and integrity of the (home) culture of the student can be confirmed as an extension of the knowledge base of the teacher is educationally enhancing. Cultural and linguistic identification between students and teacher is desirable as teachers provide positive role models that both enhance the self-esteem of their students and provide greater contextual and interaction opportunities (Walker, 1987). According to Cummins (1996), these types of interactions are central to the “empowerment of language minority students.”

Funds of knowledge for teaching involves five central activities: (1) training teachers in ethnographic methods of collecting information, (2) conducting ethnographic analysis of the transmission of knowledge and skills in the home and community, (3) analyzing the contents and methods of typical school lessons, (4) conducting collaborative study by teacher/researchers of ethnographic inquiries and classroom practices where teachers can use community information to experiment with classroom instruction; and (5) developing instructional units that use the content and methods of home knowledge to inform the content and methods of school learning.

The strategy of tapping into community funds of knowledge for developing instructional strategies is exemplified by the story of Jacobo, a Latino fourth grader in a South Central Los Angeles classroom.

Jacobo's Story

Concerned that Jacobo was unwilling or unable to engage in literacy activities, Jacobo's teacher had all but given up, describing him as "educationally handicapped".

Two student teachers, both Latinas, noticing that Jacobo had not displayed stereotypical antisocial or rebellious behavior associated with "educationally handicapped" students, decided to explore his home and community environment for clues to his literacy disposition. They requested and were able to set up a home visit with Jacobo's parents.

Jacobo was a bright young man who fared well with other students and did not cause "problems" in the classroom. He was well mannered in class, but refused to participate in any activities that included the use of reading and writing in the lesson. He enthusiastically participated in other activities where he could experience successful outcomes that did not require the need to communicate using the written word. The student ethnographers reported that Jacobo seemed to respond best when inquiries and instruction were conducted in Spanish and when the lessons or interactions were embedded in culturally relevant settings.

The two student teachers, the classroom teacher and the university supervisor participated in the subsequent parent interview at the student's home.

The meeting took place in a rather small single family dwelling located in what had once been considered an average middle class neighborhood but was now labeled "inner-city." The ethnic make up of the neighborhood consisted of both lower income African-American and Latino families. The front yard which had once sported a well manicured lawn was now exclusively brown dirt and was enclosed by a chain link fence. Four empty milk crates supported a rather old, stripped down automobile in the center of the yard.

The four educators were warmly greeted at the front door by Jacobo's mother and escorted inside the small, clean home to a small card table that was covered by a plastic red and white checkerboard patterned tablecloth. She offered the visitors soft drinks as they were being seated.

Jacobo's mother was a small woman with dark black hair, warm brown eyes and was simply but proudly attired. She displayed physical features that are often acquainted with the Mexican culture. Jacobo's father entered the room and shook each visitors hand as he courteously welcomed them. He too was a small man with parted black hair, a moustache and was dressed in a blue denim shirt and khaki slacks. His clothing was typical of that used by auto mechanics and garage attendants. Jacobo was also present, well groomed and appearing a bit nervous keeping his head lowered and never really looking directly at the educators.

After a brief sharing of introductions and small amenities the educators discovered that Jacobo's family had come from Guadalajara, Mexico. The father had been trained in *secundaria* (high school) in auto mechanics, specializing in hydraulics. As he began to share his personal history, Jacobo's demeanor noticeably changed. As the father talked of cars in general and hydraulics specifically, Jacobo's posture straightened and his attentive-

ness improved. All at once the normally quiet young man started to add to the discussion displaying a remarkable understanding of automotive discourse. His enthusiasm was evident to all, but what really was astonishing was his obvious knowledge of the subject. It was apparent to the educators that they had stumbled onto something important.

Conversation continued and a range of topics were covered including an invitation to Jacobo's father to visit the classroom to share his automotive expertise with the rest of the class. Jacobo displayed obvious pride in the invitation that was extended to his father. The educators eventually thanked Jacobo's parents for their hospitality as they left the house.

After meeting and discussing the home visit with the master teacher and the university supervisor, the two student teachers devised a strategy to bridge Jacobo's highly developed mechanical knowledge and abilities to the language arts curriculum. As suggested by the student teachers, the teacher asked Jacobo to develop a journal utilizing the language experience approach during "reading time." His assignment was to create an automotive/tool journal to be used as a resource in the classroom for other students interested in building and mechanics. Jacobo took to the task enthusiastically. After several entries in which Jacobo drew illustrations and described tools and other materials to the student teachers for their transcription into the student authored journal, Jacobo confidently moved on to writing other journals about topics of importance to him such as his siblings and a recent trip to an auto show with his father. These journals were utilized as reading material for Jacobo's literacy development. Rather than shy away from all things linguistic, he previously had refused any task requiring reading or writing activity, Jacobo became invested in journal writing. Indeed, he spontaneously began reading back his entries to the student teachers, often following them around the room to do so. The teacher felt that this was the first academic context in which Jacobo had experienced success. In her words, this was "a major breakthrough." She also felt that the cultural lens that the student teachers used to recognize Jacobo's talents was much the cause. Jacobo eventually was able to transfer the abilities he developed in journal composing (and reading) to other curricular areas in the classroom.

This use of the funds of knowledge from the home exemplifies how teachers' observations and access to community or family knowledge can be used to design and implement successful teaching strategies in which children's areas of cognitive strength and interest are used to engage crucial academic areas. In the face of increasing cultural diversity, educators more than ever need new avenues for understanding how children think. Utilizing existing funds of knowledge provides a lens with which to distinguish the diverse ways that children are able to solve important problems and fashion valuable products. Interventions such as Jacobo's tool journal demonstrate how teachers can use culturally responsive pedagogy to bolster students' weaknesses by capitalizing on their strengths and interests.

ACTIVITY ONE -- WHAT IS CULTURE?

3hr session - 10hrs outside class reading & group discussions in class

Goal

To become familiar with the concept of culture.

(The instructor will become familiar with the relevant aspects of teachers' background knowledge and experiences.)

Materials

Suggested Readings attached (others may be substituted, instructor may assign as many or as few readings as desired). These readings were chosen because they represent culture within educational settings. They are key to education. They were also chosen because their titles themselves are indicative of the content of the articles.

Procedures

Compose a short paper comparing different interpretations of what culture is:

As an opening activity, to be done outside of the class, read a variety of articles that conceptualize, somewhat differently, what culture is. For each reading, answer these questions:

- What constitutes culture, according to the author(s)?
- What dimension of culture, exactly, is the author analyzing?
- Where does culture come from?
- How is it formed? How does it affect us?

Once you have reviewed a fair sampling of ideas, write a short paper (no more than 5 pages) comparing and contrasting the main ideas of these readings. Be prepared to share your findings with the rest of your group.

Form a discussion group with two or three other teacher participants.

Determine the important characteristics of summary statements in the group.

Designate a spokesperson for the group, and participate in the large group discussion.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Banks, J.A. The Stages of Ethnicity. In: Richard-Amato, & Snow (1992). The Multicultural Classroom: Readings for Content-Area Teachers. pp. 93-101.
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ACTIVITY TWO -- CULTURE IN YOUR HOME

3hr session - Group discussions in class

Goal

To explore the concept of the culture of your own home and to discover differences among individuals.

Materials

Handout:

Activity Worksheet 2 (Appendix B.1)

Procedures

Most households are governed by a set of unwritten “rules” or norms. Since children grow up with these rules, they don’t think of them as rules at all, but simply as the way things are. Most of us take these norms for granted until we encounter people with very different norms. In this activity you are to examine who you are as a cultural being.

Individually complete Activity Worksheet 2 (Appendix B.1). Consider the different cultural elements in the first column and think about how they were addressed in your childhood household and how you have established them in your own adult household. Compare the two columns and determine the extent to which your own adult household is similar to that in which you were raised.

Form discussion groups with two or three other teacher participants, and compare your responses to the items on the worksheet. Identify any points of significant difference.

Participate in the general discussion about culture at home.

- What experiences have you had in which you were placed in a situation where you did not know the “rules”? How did you cope with it?
- Have you known students in a school setting whose home cultures were quite different from your own? How did you discover that?
- How did you help those students cope?

ACTIVITY THREE -- CLASSROOM CULTURE

3hr session - Group discussions in class

Goal

To recognize how the concept of culture can be applied to classrooms and the consequences for some students of being placed in an unfamiliar setting.

Materials

Handout:

Activity Worksheet 3 (Appendix B.2)

Procedures

Classrooms, like households, have cultures. That is, they have unspoken “rules” and norms that determine how people act and relate to one another. Most teachers are not fully aware of the cultures of their own classrooms, particularly if they are similar to those in which they were students. In addition, many teachers tend to create classroom cultures with norms similar to those in their own households.

In the same groups used for Activity Worksheet 2 (Culture in Your Home), complete Activity Worksheet 3 (Appendix B.2). You will have to determine ways in which different aspects of classroom culture are established in the classroom setting. You may have to make some educated guesses for some of the items.

Participate in the group discussion about classroom culture.

- In your own teaching, what kind of classroom culture do (or did) you establish? Do you think that there are some students for whom elements of that culture might be uncomfortable? If yes, why?
- What patterns can you identify in school settings with which you are familiar in which certain students are at a systematic disadvantage because of cultural mismatch between their homes and the norms of the school?

ACTIVITY FOUR -- ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Timeframe to be determined by instructor.* Group discussions in class. Fieldwork observations in students' classrooms and homes.

Goal

The case study is designed to develop the teacher as a researcher as well as to assist the teacher in better understanding the intersection of culture and schooling through the eyes of an individual student. This research endeavor will allow teachers to examine how issues such as language, culture, and social class effect students' life chances. It also provides a framework within which teachers define and shape the way they think about the role that schooling and culture plays in these students' lives. Teachers in essence become mini-anthropologists, or ethnographers. Case study analysis can be extremely useful not only in providing background information for the teacher to utilize in planning and implementing their instructional programs, but also to illustrate the multidimensional facets of this type of instruction.

Materials

Handouts:

Activity Worksheet 4 (Appendix B.3)

"A Synthesis of Ethnographic Research" by Michael Genzuk (Appendix B.4)

Multimedia needed for group presentation.

Procedures

Each teacher participant in the training will be responsible for conducting an ethnographic case study of a K-12 student whose race, ethnicity or language differs from his or her own. The student to be studied may be a member of the participating staff member's own class but need not be.

**The ethnographic assignment should be introduced and reviewed at the beginning of the workshop sessions by the instructor, with an understanding that it is both the primary focus and culminating activity of the workshop.*

Review "A Synthesis of Ethnographic Research" (Appendix B.4) by Michael Genzuk.

Each teacher participant will choose one K-12 student whose race, ethnicity or language differs from his/her own.

Collect ethnographic data.

By means of participant observation, you will observe the activities of your selected student. The physical characteristics of the school and social settings where your student resides, and what it feels like to be part of the scene. During the course of fieldwork the types of observation will change. You will begin by making broad descriptive observations, trying to get an overview of the social/academic situation and what goes on there. Then, after recording and analyzing your initial data, you will narrow your research and begin to make focused observations. Finally, after more analysis and repeated observations in the field, you will be able to narrow your

ACTIVITY FOUR -- ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY (Continued)3hr session - Group discussions in class

Procedures (Continued)

investigation still further to make selective observations. However, even as your observations become more focused, you will continue making general descriptive observations until the end of your field study.

Conduct ethnographic interviews.

There are many different forms of interviewing. Ethnographic interviewing is a special kind that employs questions designed to discover the cultural meanings people have learned. Such interviews make use of different kinds of questions. Participant observers most often formulate specific ethnographic questions and then ask themselves these questions. They come up with answers from field notes or new observations. When conducting ethnographic interviews, you can simply make use of the same questions with one or more of the informants, such as classroom teachers, parents, administrators, etc. It is useful to distinguish between two types of interviews: informal and formal. An informal interview occurs whenever you ask someone a question during the course of participant observation. A formal interview usually occurs at an appointed time and results from a specific request to hold the interview. Activity Worksheet 4 (Culture at Student's Home) will get you started.

Analyze ethnographic data.

The next step in the cycle cannot wait until you have collected a large amount of data. In ethnographic inquiry, analysis is a process of question-discovery. Instead of coming into the field with specific questions, the ethnographer analyzes the field data compiled from participant observation to discover questions. You need to analyze your field notes after each period of fieldwork and interviews in order to know what to look for during your next period of participant observation.

Write/Present your ethnography.

The last task in the cycle occurs toward the end of the project -- writing the case study and presenting the case study. For this exercise, two steps will be conducted-- (1) writing the individual case study, and (2) making a multimedia presentation based on what you have learned.

1. Writing the case study.

The first step to writing your ethnography is to choose an audience. Because the audience will influence every aspect of your ethnography, selecting an audience is one of the first things to be done. All writing is an act of communication between human beings and in that sense it is similar to talking. This will be your opportunity to "tell the story" in a manner that is both informative and interesting to your audience. The second step is to

ACTIVITY FOUR -- ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY (Continued)

3hr session - Group discussions in class

Procedures (Continued)

select a thesis. In order to communicate with your audience, you need to have something to say. A simple way to visualize this endeavor is to think of it as a recipe for behavior. Culture can be viewed as a set of instructions for carrying out life's ordinary activities. Your paper will try and show the recipe for being your observed student in the described environments. Once this description has taken on a meaningful form you can write both the introduction and the conclusion in an effective manner. You can write a rough introduction early, but save the conclusion until the end. Finally, review your manuscript and write the final draft.

2. Multimedia presentation based on what you learned. Throughout the staff development you will be working in collaborative/cooperative groups to get to know the community in which you are doing your study. As a finale to the effort, groups will present what they learned. Utilizing the activities above, and additional literature and experiences the group will provide a "multimedia" presentation on your findings and conclusions. You should do more than just stand up and talk. You do not have to turn in separate papers, a group paper is encouraged.

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Appendix B.1

Activity Worksheet 2 CULTURE IN YOUR HOME

In the boxes below write a brief description of how different elements of culture were handled in the household of your childhood and in your own adult household today.

Cultural Element	My Childhood Household	My Adult Household
Mealtimes		
Care of Siblings		
Discipline of Children (Who Does? How?)		
Children's Homework		
Watching TV		
Who makes the Rules? How?		
Language of the Home		
Other		

Appendix B.2

Activity Worksheet 3 CLASSROOM CULTURE

	Math	Language Arts	Reading
Type of Questions			
Rules for Speaking			
Pace of Instruction			
Language of the Classroom			
Affirmation of Diversity			
How Knowledge Is Displayed			
Other			

Appendix B.3

Activity Worksheet 4 CULTURE AT STUDENT'S HOME

In the boxes below write a brief description of how different elements of culture were handled in the household of your student and in the household of the parent or guardian when they were a child.

Cultural Element	Student Household	Parent/Guardian Childhood Household
Mealtimes		
Care of Siblings		
Discipline of Children (Who Does? How?)		
Children's Homework		
Watching TV		
Language of Household		
Who makes the Rules? How?		
Other		

Appendix B.4

A SYNTHESIS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH BY: MICHAEL GENZUK, PH.D.

**University of Southern California
Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research**

AN ETHNOGRAPHY

"When used as a method, ethnography typically refers to fieldwork (alternatively, participant-observation) conducted by a single investigator who 'lives with and lives like' those who are studied, usually for a year or more." -- John Van Maanen, 1996.

"Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people.' An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information collected through fieldwork." --Marvin Harris and Orna Johnson, 2000.

"Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The description may be of a small tribal group in an exotic land or a classroom in middle-class suburbia." --David M. Fetterman, 1998.

Ethnography is a social science research method. It relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation, by researchers trained in the art of ethnography. These ethnographers often work in multidisciplinary teams. The ethnographic focal point may include intensive language and culture learning, intensive study of a single field or domain, and a blend of historical, observational, and interview methods. Typical ethnographic research employs three kinds of data collection: interviews, observation, and documents. This in turn produces three kinds of data: quotations, descriptions, and excerpts of documents, resulting in one product: narrative description. This narrative often includes charts, diagrams and additional artifacts that help to tell "the story" (Hammersley, 1990). Ethnographic methods can give shape to new constructs or paradigms, and new variables, for further empirical testing in the field or through traditional, quantitative social science methods.

Ethnography has its roots planted in the fields of anthropology and sociology. Present-day practitioners conduct ethnographies in organizations and communities of all kinds. Ethnographers study schooling, public health, rural and urban development, consumers and consumer goods, any human arena. While particularly suited to exploratory research, ethnography draws on a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, moving from "learning" to "testing" (Agar, 1996) while research problems, perspectives, and theories emerge and shift.

Ethnographic methods are a means of tapping local points of view, households and community "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), a means of identifying significant categories of human experience up close and personal. Ethnography enhances and widens top down views and enriches the inquiry process, taps both bottom-up insights and perspectives of powerful policy-makers "at the top," and generates new analytic insights by engaging in interactive, team exploration of often subtle arenas of human difference and similarity. Through such findings ethnographers may inform others of their findings with an attempt to derive, for example, policy decisions or instructional innovations from such an analysis.

VARIATIONS IN OBSERVATIONAL METHODS

Observational research is not a single thing. The decision to employ field methods in gathering informational data is only the first step in a decision process that involves a large number of options and possibilities. Making the choice to employ field methods involves a commitment to get close to the subject being observed in its natural setting, to be factual and descriptive in reporting what is observed, and to find out the points of view of participants in the domain observed. Once these fundamental commitments have been made, it is necessary to make additional decisions about which particular observational approaches are appropriate for the research situation at hand.

VARIATIONS IN OBSERVER INVOLVEMENT: PARTICIPANT OR ONLOOKER?

The first and most fundamental distinction among observational strategies concerns the extent to which the observer is also a participant in the program activities being studied. This is not really a simple choice between participation and nonparticipation. The extent of participation is a continuum which varies from complete immersion in the program as full participant to complete separation from the activities observed, taking on a role as spectator; there is a great deal of variation along the continuum between these two extremes.

Participant observation is an omnibus field strategy in that it "simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection. In participant observation the researcher shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the people in the observed setting. The purpose of such participation is to develop an insider's view of what is happening. This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but "feels" what it is like to be part of the group.

Experiencing an environment as an insider is what necessitates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, however, there is clearly an observer side to this process. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the experience as an insider while describing the experience for outsiders.

The extent to which it is possible for a researcher to become a full participant in an experience will depend partly on the nature of the setting being observed. For example, in human service and education programs that serve children, it is not possible for the researcher to become a student and therefore experience the setting as a child; it may be possible, however, for the research observer to participate as a volunteer, parent, or staff person in such a setting and thereby develop the perspective of an insider in one of these adult roles.

It should be said, though, that many ethnographers do not believe that understanding requires that they become full members of the group(s) being studied. Indeed, many believe that this must not occur if a valid and useful account is to be produced. These researchers believe the ethnographer must try to be both outsider and insider, staying on the margins of the group both socially and intellectually. This is because what is required is both an outside and an inside view. For this reason it is sometimes emphasized that, besides seeking to "understand", the ethnographer must also try to see familiar settings as "anthropologically strange", as they would be seen by someone from another society, adopting what we might call the Martian perspective.

METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Following are three methodological principles that are used to provide the rationale for the specific features of the ethnographic method. They are also the basis for much of the criticism of quantitative research for failing to capture the true nature of human social behavior; because it relies on the study of artificial settings and/or on what people say rather than what they do; because it seeks to reduce meanings to what is observable; and because it reifies social phenomena by treating them as more clearly defined and static than they are, and as mechanical products of social and psychological factors (M. Hammersley, 1990). The three principles can be summarized under the headings of naturalism, understanding and discovery:

1. **Naturalism.** This is the view that the aim of social research is to capture the character of naturally occurring human behavior, and that this can only be achieved by first-hand contact with it, not by inferences from what people do in artificial settings like experiments or from what they say in interviews about what they do elsewhere. This is the reason that ethnographers carry out their research in "natural" settings, settings that exist independently of the research process, rather than in those set up specifically for the purposes of research. Another important implication of naturalism is that in studying natural settings the researcher should seek to minimize her or his effects on the behavior of the people being studied. The aim of this is to increase the chances that what is discovered in the setting will be generalizable to other similar settings that have not been researched. Finally, the notion of naturalism implies that social events and processes must be explained in terms of their relationship to the context in which they occur.

2. **Understanding.** Central here is the argument that human actions differ from the behavior of physical objects, and even from that of other animals: they do not consist simply of fixed responses or even of learned responses to stimuli, but involve interpretation of stimuli and the construction of responses. Sometimes this argument reflects a complete rejection of the concept of causality as inapplicable to the social world, and an insistence on

the freely constructed character of human actions and institutions. Others argue that causal relations are to be found in the social world, but that they differ from the "mechanical" causality typical of physical phenomena. From this point of view, if we are to be able to explain human actions effectively we must gain an understanding of the cultural perspectives on which they are based. That this is necessary is obvious when we are studying a society that is alien to us, since we shall find much of what we see and hear puzzling. However, ethnographers argue that it is just as important when we are studying more familiar settings. Indeed, when a setting is familiar the danger of misunderstanding is especially great. It is argued that we cannot assume that we already know others' perspectives, even in our own society, because particular groups and individuals develop distinctive worldviews. This is especially true in large complex societies. Ethnic, occupational, and small informal groups (even individual families or school classes) develop distinctive ways of orienting to the world that may need to be understood if their behavior is to be explained. Ethnographers argue, then, that it is necessary to learn the culture of the group one is studying before one can produce valid explanations for the behavior of its members. This is the reason for the centrality of participant observation and unstructured interviewing to ethnographic method.

3. **Discovery.** Another feature of ethnographic thinking is a conception of the research process as inductive or discovery-based; rather than as being limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses. It is argued that if one approaches a phenomenon with a set of hypotheses one may fail to discover the true nature of that phenomenon, being blinded by the assumptions built into the hypotheses. Rather, they have a general interest in some types of social phenomena and/or in some theoretical issue or practical problem. The focus of the research is narrowed and sharpened, and perhaps even changed substantially, as it proceeds. Similarly, and in parallel, theoretical ideas that frame descriptions and explanations of what is observed are developed over the course of the research. Such ideas are regarded as a valuable outcome of, not a precondition for, research.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD

In terms of method, generally speaking, the term "ethnography" refers to social research that has most of the following features (M. Hammersley, 1990).

(a) People's behavior is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.

(b) Data are gathered from a range of sources, but observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones.

(c) The approach to data collection is "unstructured in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; nor are the categories used for interpreting what people say and do pre-given or fixed. This does not mean that the research is unsystematic; simply that initially the data are collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible.

(d) The focus is usually a single setting or group, of relatively small scale. In life history research the focus may even be a single individual.

(e) The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.

As a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the sort of approach that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings. It is less specialized and less technically sophisticated than approaches like the experiment or the social survey; though all social research methods have their historical origins in the ways in which human beings gain information about their world in everyday life.

SUMMARY GUIDELINES FOR FIELDWORK

It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a precise set of rules and procedures for conducting fieldwork. What you do depends on the situation, the purpose of the study, the nature of the setting, and the skills, interests, needs, and point of view of the observer. Following are some generic guidelines for conducting fieldwork:

1. Be descriptive in taking field notes.
2. Gather a variety of information from different perspectives.
3. Cross-validate and triangulate by gathering different kinds of data. Example: observations, interviews, program documentation, recordings, and photographs.
4. Use quotations; represent program participants in their own terms. Capture participants' views of their own experiences in their own words.
5. Select key informants wisely and use them carefully. Draw on the wisdom of their informed perspectives, but keep in mind that their perspectives are limited.
6. Be aware of and sensitive to the different stages of fieldwork.
 - (a) Build trust and rapport at the entry stage. Remember that the researcher-observer is also being observed and evaluated.
 - (b) Stay alert and disciplined during the more routine middle-phase of fieldwork.
 - (c) Focus on pulling together a useful synthesis as fieldwork draws to a close.
 - (d) Be disciplined and conscientious in taking detailed field notes at all stages of fieldwork.
 - (e) Be as involved as possible in experiencing the observed setting as fully as possible while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork: to conduct research.

(f) Clearly separate description from interpretation and judgment.

(g) Provide formative feedback as part of the verification process of fieldwork. Time that feedback carefully. Observe its impact.

(h) Include in your field notes and observations reports of your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings. These are also field data.

Fieldwork is a highly personal experience. The meshing of fieldwork procedures with individual capabilities and situational variation is what makes fieldwork a highly personal experience. The validity and meaningfulness of the results obtained depend directly on the observer's skill, discipline, and perspective. This is both the strength and weakness of observational methods.

SUMMARY GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWING

There is no one right way of interviewing, no single correct format that is appropriate for all situations, and no single way of wording questions that will always work. The particular evaluation situation, the needs of the interviewee, and the personal style of the interviewer all come together to create a unique situation for each interview. Therein lie the challenges of depth interviewing: situational responsiveness and sensitivity to get the best data possible.

There is no recipe for effective interviewing, but there are some useful guidelines that can be considered. These guidelines are summarized below (Patton, 1987).

1. Throughout all phases of interviewing, from planning through data collection to analysis, keep centered on the purpose of the research endeavor. Let that purpose guide the interviewing process.
2. The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.
3. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of different types of interviews: the informal conversational interview; the interview guide approach; and the standardized open-ended interview.
4. Select the type of interview (or combination of types) that is most appropriate to the purposes of the research effort.
5. Understand the different kinds of information one can collect through interviews: behavioral data; opinions; feelings; knowledge; sensory data; and background information.
6. Think about and plan how these different kinds of questions can be most appropriately sequenced for each interview topic, including past, present, and future questions.
7. Ask truly open-ended questions.

8. Ask clear questions, using understandable and appropriate language.
9. Ask one question at a time.
10. Use probes and follow-up questions to solicit depth and detail.
11. Communicate clearly what information is desired, why that information is important, and let the interviewee know how the interview is progressing.
12. Listen attentively and respond appropriately to let the person know he or she is being heard.
13. Avoid leading questions.
14. Understand the difference between a depth interview and an interrogation. Qualitative evaluators conduct depth interviews; police investigators and tax auditors conduct interrogations.
15. Establish personal rapport and a sense of mutual interest.
16. Maintain neutrality toward the specific content of responses. You are there to collect information not to make judgments about that person.
17. Observe while interviewing. Be aware of and sensitive to how the person is affected by and responds to different questions.
18. Maintain control of the interview.
19. Tape record whenever possible to capture full and exact quotations for analysis and reporting.
20. Take notes to capture and highlight major points as the interview progresses.
21. As soon as possible after the interview check the recording for malfunctions; review notes for clarity; elaborate where necessary; and record observations.
22. Take whatever steps are appropriate and necessary to gather valid and reliable information.
23. Treat the person being interviewed with respect. Keep in mind that it is a privilege and responsibility to peer into another person's experience.
24. Practice interviewing. Develop your skills.
25. Enjoy interviewing. Take the time along the way to stop and "hear" the roses.

SITE DOCUMENTS

In addition to participant observation and interviews, ethnographers may also make use of various documents in answering guiding questions. When available, these documents can add additional insight or information to projects. Because ethnographic attention has been and continues to be focused on both literate and non-literate peoples, not all research projects will have site documents available. It is also possible that even research among a literate group will not have relevant site documents to consider; this could vary depending on the focus of the research. Thinking carefully about your participants and how they function and asking questions of your informants helps to decide what kinds of documents might be available.

Possible documents include: budgets, advertisements, work descriptions, annual reports, memos, school records, correspondence, informational brochures, teaching materials, newsletters, websites, recruitment or orientation packets, contracts, records of court proceedings, posters, minutes of meetings, menus, and many other kinds of written items.

For example, an ethnographer studying how limited-English proficient elementary school students learn to acquire English in a classroom setting might want to collect such things as the state or school mandated Bilingual/ESL curriculum for students in the school(s) where he or she does research, and examples of student work. Local school budget allocations to language minority education, specific teachers' lesson plans, and copies of age-appropriate ESL textbooks could also be relevant. It might also be useful to try finding subgroups of professional educators organizations which focus on teaching elementary school language arts and join their listservs, attend their meetings, or get copies of their newsletters. Review cumulative student records and school district policies for language minority education. All of these things could greatly enrich the participant observation and the interviews that an ethnographer does.

Privacy or copyright issues may apply to the documents gathered, so it is important to inquire about this when you find or are given documents. If you are given permission to include what you learn from these documents in your final paper, the documents should be cited appropriately and included in the bibliography of the final paper. If you are not given permission, do not use them in any way.

ETHICS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Since ethnographic research takes place among real human beings, there are a number of special ethical concerns to be aware of before beginning. In a nutshell, researchers must make their research goals clear to the members of the community where they undertake their research and gain the informed consent of their consultants to the research beforehand. It is also important to learn whether the group would prefer to be named in the written report of the research or given a pseudonym and to offer the results of the research if informants would like to read it. Most of all, researchers must be sure that the research does not harm or exploit those among whom the research is done.

ANALYZING, INTERPRETING AND REPORTING FINDINGS

Remember that the researcher is the detective looking for trends and patterns that occur across the various groups or within individuals (Krueger, 1994). The process of analysis and interpretation involve disciplined examination, creative insight, and careful attention to the purposes of the research study. Analysis and interpretation are conceptually separate processes. The analysis process begins with assembling the raw materials and getting an overview or total picture of the entire process. The researcher's role in analysis covers a continuum with assembly of raw data on one extreme and interpretative comments on the other. Analysis is the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units. The analysis process involves consideration of words, tone, context, non-verbals, internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity of responses and big ideas. Data reduction strategies are essential in the analysis (Krueger, 1994).

Interpretation involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions. Once these processes have been completed the researcher must report his or her interpretations and conclusions

QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTION

Reports based on qualitative methods will include a great deal of pure description of the program and/or the experiences of people in the research environment. The purpose of this description is to let the reader know what happened in the environment under observation, what it was like from the participants' point of view to be in the setting, and what particular events or activities in the setting were like. In reading through field notes and interviews the researcher begins to look for those parts of the data that will be polished for presentation as pure description in the research report. What is included by way of description will depend on what questions the researcher is attempting to answer. Often an entire activity will be reported in detail and depth because it represents a typical experience. These descriptions are written in narrative form to provide a holistic picture of what has happened in the reported activity or event.

REPORTING FINDINGS

The actual content and format of a qualitative report will depend on the information needs of primary stakeholders and the purpose of the research. Even a comprehensive report will have to omit a great deal of the data collected by the researcher. Focus is essential. Analysts who try to include everything risk losing their readers in the sheer volume of the presentation. This process has been referred to as "the agony of omitting". The agony of omitting on the part of the researcher is matched only by the readers' agony in having to read those things that were not omitted, but should have been.

BALANCE BETWEEN DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

In considering what to omit, a decision has to be made about how much description to include. Detailed description and in-depth quotations are the essential qualities of qualitative accounts. Sufficient description and direct quotations should be included to allow readers to understand fully the research setting and the thoughts of the people represented in the narrative. Description should stop short, however, of becoming trivial and mundane. The reader does not have to know absolutely everything that was done or said. Again the problem of focus arises.

Description is balanced by analysis and interpretation. Endless description becomes its own muddle. The purpose of analysis is to organize the description in a way that makes it manageable. Description is balanced by analysis and leads into interpretation. An interesting and readable final account provides sufficient description to allow the reader to understand the analysis and sufficient analysis to allow the reader to understand the interpretations and explanations presented.

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