Ethnographic Research in Education

Harry F. Wolcott

Cultural anthropologists conducting ethnographic research describe their activities with a modest phrase: they say they are "doing fieldwork." Several years ago anthropologist Rosalie Wax (1971) took that very phase, *Doing Fieldwork*, for the title of a fine account of her research experiences and some lessons she wanted to draw for future fieldworkers. It has not always been fashionable among anthropologists to concern themselves with methodological issues per se, but in the past two decades they have become both more self-conscious and more explicit about their research.

In recent years, ethnographic research has also been acknowledged, and to some extent even welcomed, as an alternative research strategy for inquiring into education. It is hard to imagine that ethnography will ever wring educational research from the iron grip of the statistical methodologists, but it is comforting to note the current receptivity among educators to other ways of asking and other ways of looking. Today one often hears educators discussing "ethnography" or the "ethnographic approach." The fact that educators use terms like ethnography and ethnographic approach does not, of course, assure that they have a clear sense of how ethnographers conduct their research or what ethnographic research shares in common with related approaches like participant observation studies, field studies, or case studies.

Let me illustrate how educators use the term without necessarily understanding it. One large-scale, federally funded educational project completed in the 1970s made it possible to employ a number of full-time "on-site" researchers to live in rural communities in order to document change processes in the schools and to study school-community interaction. Not all the researchers involved in the project were anthropologists, but the anthropologists among them—trained observers schooled in ethnographic techniques—were inclined to refer to their research as fieldwork and to describe their efforts as ethnography.

After living somewhat apprehensively under the watchful gaze of his resident 24-hours-a-day, 365-days-a-year ethnographer, the superintendent of schools in one of those rural communities received a preliminary copy of a report that had been prepared by the researcher. The superintendent's subsequent reaction, I'm told, was to note with a sigh of relief, "The stuff's okay. It's just pure anthropology."

In fact, the report he read was essentially history—an overview of the community's founding and early days. But I think it instructive to realize that the superintendent had been in association with a full-time anthropologist/ethnographer for months and months, knew that the project would include a major effort in descriptive research, and still had but the faintest idea of what to expect in the completed account. Something of a mystique does surround fieldwork for insiders as well as outsiders to the process—and I intend here to explore the basis for that mystique. I will not entirely dispel it, but I want to suggest that the *real* mystique surrounding ethnography, as any experienced ethnographer will attest, is not in doing fieldwork but in subsequently organiz-

ing and analyzing the information one gathers and in preparing the account that brings the ethnographic process to a close.

Ethnography as Both Process and Product

Ethnography refers both to the research *process* and to the customary *product* of that effort—the written ethnographic account. Essentially I will limit this discussion to describing the research techniques anthropologists use in doing fieldwork. That is a sufficient task for me as author of a chapter, but it is not sufficient to make an ethnographer out of an interested reader. The necessary next stop is to embark on a program of extended reading in cultural anthropology, giving particular attention to ethnographic accounts and examining how different ethnographers have conceptualized and written about different cultural systems. The references and annotated materials accompanying this chapter include a number of such studies. If possible, one should also enroll in anthropology classes in order not only to learn about the field but to appreciate the range of interest and perspectives extant among anthropologists themselves.

Ethnography means, literally, a picture of the "way of life" of some identifiable group of people. Conceivably, those people could be any culture-bearing group, in any time and place. In times past, the group was usually a small, intact, essentially self-sufficient social unit, and it was always a group notably "strange" to the observer. The anthropologist's purpose as ethnographer was to learn about, record, and ultimately portray the culture of this other group. Anthropologists always study human behavior in terms of cultural context. Particular individuals, customs, institutions, or events are of anthropological interest as they relate to a generalized description of the lifeway of a socially interacting group. Yet culture itself is always an abstraction, regardless of whether one is referring to Culture in general or to the culture of a specific social group.

Here, I recognize, would be the proper place to provide a crisp definition of culture, yet I am hesitant to do so. The arguments concerning the definition of culture, what one anthropologist refers to as "this undifferentiated and diffuse variable," continue to com-

prise a critical part of the ongoing dialog among anthropologists. To what extent, for example, does culture consist of what people *actually* do, what they *say* they do, what they say they *should* do, or to *meanings* they assign to such behavior? Does culture make prisoners of us or free us from a mind-boggling number of daily decisions? Does culture emanate from our minds, our hearts, or our stomachs; from our ancestors, our totems, or our deities? And if someone really devised a culture-free test, could we ever find a culture-free individual to take or to interpret it?

In terms of understanding the ethnographer's task, I draw attention to one relatively recent definition of culture that I have found instructive, a definition proposed by anthropologist Ward Goodenough (1976):

> 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 the society in the context of his dealings with them. (p. 5).

The appeal of this definition for me lies in Goodenough's notion that the ethnographer "attributes" culture to a society. That idea serves as a reminder of a number of critical points. First, the ultimate test of ethnography resides in the adequacy of its explanation rather than in the power of its method. Second, culture cannot be observed; it can only be inferred. Third, the preoccupation with culture per se, discerning its components and their interrelationships in any particular society in order to make explicit statements about them, is the professional task ethnographers have chosen for themselves.

Without ordinarily having to go so far as to try to make it all explicit or to try to obtain as comprehensive and "holistic" a view as the ethnographer might seek, all human beings are similarly occupied with trying to discern and to act appropriately within the framework of the macro- and micro-cultural systems in which they operate as members of particular societies. We all have to figure out and become competent in numerous microcultural systems and in at least one macro-cultural system (cf. Goodenough, 1976). Everyone, anthropologists included, does it out of necessity; ethnographers also do it as part of their professional

commitment. Ordinarily an outsider to the group being studied, the ethnographer tries harder to know more about the cultural system he or she is studying than any individual who is a natural participant in it, at once advantaged by the outsider's broad and analytical perspective but, by reason of that same detachment, unlikely ever totally to comprehend the insider's point of view. The ethnographer walks a fine line. With too much distance and perspective, one is labeled aloof, remote, insensitive, superficial; with too much familiarity, empathy, and identification, one is suspected of having "gone native." Successful ethnographers resolve that tension between involvement and detachment (see Powdermaker, 1966); others go home early.

In my opportunities for ethnographic research—inquiries into the social behavior of particular culture-bearing groups of people—I have most often been in modern, industrial settings and never, anywhere in the world, have I met anyone "primitive." Yet I confess that whenever I conjure up an image of an ideal ethnographer, I always envision him or her pulling a canoe up on a beach and stepping into the center of a small group of huts among lightly clad villagers in an exotic tropical setting. The imagery is not entirely a figment of my imagination, for it was in conducting research among exotic, or at least unfamiliar, peoples that anthropology got its start and anthropologists built their discipline. Anthropologists have only recently begun to examine how their earlier traditions and experiences in exotic and numerically manageable settings both limit and expand the range of work they might do now and in the future (see, for example, Messerschmidt, 1981).

My old-fashioned image of the ethnographer-at-work evidences still more elements that contribute to a fieldwork mystique and that continue to exert an influence in contemporary settings. The exotic continues to have its appeal, not only for the romantic notions involved but for the fact that one's capabilities for observing, recording, and analyzing what Malinowski (1922/1961) referred to as the "imponderabilia of actual life" are presumed to be enhanced in unfamiliar settings.

I should not pass over that point too quickly. When we talk about ethnographic research in schools, we face the problem of trying to conduct observations *as though* we were in a strange new setting, one with which we actually have been in more or less continuous contact since about the age of six. Anthropologists continue to debate whether cross-cultural experience should be a prerequisite for conducting ethnographically oriented research in schools.

Note that I pictured my ideal ethnographer traveling alone. I might have included a spouse or field assistant, but I definitely do not picture a team of researchers or technical assistants. My image also assumes that the anthropologist is there to stay—to become, for a while, part of the village scenery rather than to remain only long enough to have each villager fill in a questionnaire, submit to a brief interview, or complete a few test items. Tradition even informs the expectation of how long my ideal ethnographer should remain in the field: at least one year. That is not to say that all ethnographic studies are of 12 months' duration; rather, in the absence of other determinants, one is advised to remain at least long enough to see a full cycle of activity, a set of events usually played out in the course of a calendar year.

Note also that my image of ethnographic research is an image of people. The ethnographer is the research instrument, the villagers are the population. That instrument—the anthropologist in person—has been faulted time and time again for being biased, inattentive, ethnocentric, partial, forgetful, overly subject to infection and disease, incapable of attending to everything at once, easily distracted, simultaneously too involved and too detached—the list goes on and on. Be that as it may, what better instrument could we ever devise for observing and understanding human behavior?

If we could actually step into my dream and inquire of my image ethnographer how she or he planned to carry out fieldwork in a newly-arrived-at-setting, it might be disconcerting to hear a somewhat ambiguous response posing a number of possible ideas but suggesting a certain hesitancy about pursuing any one of them to the exclusion of the others. I doubt that an old-fashioned ethnographer would be the least bit embarrassed to confess that after doing some mapping and a village census, she or he wasn't sure just what would be attended to next. Such tentativeness not only

allows the ethnographer to move into settings where one cannot frame hypotheses in advance but also reflects the open style that most (not all) ethnographers prefer for initiating fieldwork. That tentativeness is not intended to create a mystique, but to those comfortable only with hypothesis testing, an encounter with someone equally intrigued by discovering instead what the hypotheses are can be an unsettling experience. The hardest question for the ethnographer is not so difficult for researchers of other bents: What is it that you look at when you conduct your research? The answer is, of course, "It depends."

What one looks at and writes about depends on the nature of the problem that sends one into the field in the first place; on the personality of the ethnographer; on the course of events during fieldwork; on the process of sorting, analyzing, and writing that transforms the fieldwork experience into the completed account; and on expectations for the final account, including how and where it is to be circulated and what its intended audiences and purposes are. The mystique surrounding ethnography is associated with being in the field because we all harbor romantic ideas of "going off to spend a year with the natives." It is easy to lose sight of the ethnographer's ultimate responsibility to return home and to prepare an account intended to enhance our common human understanding.

Nonetheless, what anthropologists ordinarily do in the course of their fieldwork, regardless of whether their field site is an island in the Pacific Ocean or a classroom in the intermediate wing of the local elementary school, provides us with a way of looking at ethnographic research in action. So let me turn to a point-by-point examination of the customary research techniques of the anthropologist doing fieldwork.

Ethnographic Research Techniques

The most noteworthy thing about ethnographic research techniques is their lack of noteworthiness. No particular research technique is associated exclusively with anthropology. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that one will produce ethnography by using a variety of these techniques. I can make that statement even more emphatically: There is no way one could ever hope to produce an ethnography simply by employing many, or even all, of the research techniques that ethnographers use. Ethnography, as Frederick Erickson (1977) has reminded us, is *not* a reporting process guided by a specific set of techniques. It is an inquiry process carried out by human beings and guided by a point of view that derives from experience in the research setting and from the knowledge of prior anthropological research.

Unlike prevailing tradition in educational research, a preoccupation with method is not sufficient to validate ethnographic research. Ethnographic significance is derived socially, not statistically, from discerning how ordinary people in particular settings make sense of the experience of their everyday lives. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1968) has observed, "Anthropological interpretations must be tested against the material they are designed to interpret; it is not their origins that recommend them" (p. vii).

None of the field research techniques that I am about to describe, including ethnography's mainstay, "participant observation," is all that powerful or special. The anthropologist's trade secret, freely disclosed, is that he or she would never for a minute rely solely on a single observation, a single instrument, a single approach. The strength of fieldwork lies in its "triangulation," obtaining information in many ways rather than relying solely on one. Anthropologist Pertti Pelto has described this as the "multi-instrument approach." The anthropologist himself is the research instrument, but in his information gathering he utilizes observations made through an extended period of time, from multiple sources of data, and employing multiple techniques for finding out, for cross-checking, or for ferreting out varying perspectives on complex issues and events. By being on the scene, the anthropologist not only is afforded continual opportunity to ask questions but also has the opportunity to learn which questions to ask.

There is no standard approach even for enumerating the most commonly employed fieldwork practices. The list that I present is adapted from a discussion by authors Pertti and Gretel Pelto in their text *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry* (1978). My

adaptation of the Peltos' list is designed to emphasize two major strategies in fieldwork: participant-observation and interviewing. Many anthropologists summarize fieldwork practice by referring only to those two terms, and some insist that "participant-observation" says it all.

In that sense, participant-observation causes some confusion. Like the term ethnography, it has come to have two meanings. Sometimes it refers to the particular technique of being a participant-observer, one of the important ways anthropologists obtain information. Collectively it can also refer to *all* the techniques that comprise fieldwork, and thus it serves as a synonym for fieldwork itself. Here I use it in the former, more restricted sense—participant-observation as a particular technique.

The review of research techniques that follows is organized into four sections representing four basic research strategies. Each strategy is illustrated by a familiar set of techniques and could be expanded to include still others. The four strategies include the two critical ones already noted—*participant-observation* and *interviewing*—augmented by two others, *use of written sources* and *analysis or collection of non-written sources*. Taken together, these four categories are sufficiently inclusive to encompass virtually everything ethnographers do to acquire information.

I should warn that approaching the topic of field techniques this way is better adapted to writing about fieldwork than to doing it. When one is in the field, matters of sequence and sensitivity in using different techniques can be far more important than the choice of them. Problems of "gaining entrée and maintaining rapport," coupled with the absolutely endless task of note writing, account for a good portion of the fieldworker's attention and energy. In the "bush," such everyday concerns as potable water, food purchase and preparation, sanitation, or even a reliable way to receive and send mail, may take precedence over all else. Whatever the contemporary equivalents of those seemingly romantic problems, I call attention here to the techniques themselves, not to how and when one uses them or how information learned through these techniques is subsequently processed. Those facets require one to *think* like an anthropologist, not just to act like one. I have limited this discussion to what

fieldworkers do, rather than to how they think about and interpret the information they get. Some important contrasts with more conventional educational research approaches will be apparent in this discussion and will provide the opportunity for summary remarks following the outline of techniques.

Participant-Observation

Participant-observation is such an integral part of fieldwork that some anthropologists might not think to include it in compiling a list of explicit techniques. I know that other anthropologists are appalled when they find colleagues appearing to reify the obvious fact that, as circumstances permit, their research strategy includes their presence among members of a group they are studying. We should be circumspect in describing participant-observation as a formal research technique and recognize ambiguity and contradictions in this seemingly simple solution to pursuing ethnographic research (cf. Martin, 1966/1968). Obviously, we are all participant-observers in virtually everything we do, yet we do all claim to be ethnographers. We are ethnographic observers when we are attending to the cultural context of the behavior we are engaging in or observing, and when we are looking for those mutually understood sets of expectations and explanations that enable us to interpret what is occurring and what meanings are probably being attributed by others present.

I think it is fair to ask anyone who claims title as a participant-observer to provide a fuller description about how each facet—participant, observer, and the precarious nexus between them—is to be played out in an actual research setting. As it turns out, each facet is intertwined with a host of conditions, many of which are quite beyond the control of the ethnographer. Even if we could assume that every ethnographer was equally capable of getting as involved as he or she wanted, and of always having an exquisite sense of just how involved that should be, there are other constraints on the extent to which one can engage in or observe human social behavior. And schools, like other formal institutions, impose rather strict constraints on how anyone—insider or outsider alike—may participate in

them. When outsiders come to school as interested observers, it is pretty hard to distinguish among a social scientist, a professor of education, a parent, or a teacher visiting from another school. Schools offer few role options, but one role that is well structured is observer-visitor. Most studies conducted in schools as "participant-observer" research are really "observer" studies augmented by an occasional chance to talk briefly with students or teachers (Khleif, 1974).

If taking a more active role than "observer" seems warranted in conducting ethnographic research in schools, I should point out that there are costs as well as benefits. In my own initiation to fieldwork (Wolcott, 1967), occupying the role of teacher in a cross-cultural classroom may have made a genuine participant-observer study possible, but it also diverted from my research effort the energy that full-time teaching demands. Richard King (1967,1974) and Gerry Rosenfeld (1971) are two other researchers whose ethnographic studies are from the teacher's perspective. More recently, Sylvia Hart (1982) found that by volunteering as a classroom aide she achieved an optimum balance between opportunities to participate and to observe in studying the social organization of one school's reading program. A few anthropologists have attempted to take the role of the student in the classroom (e.g., Burnett, 1969; Spindler & Spindler, 1982). It always amuses me to think of that huge George Spindler, a major contributor to anthropology and education, sitting at his third-grade desk in a German village. But is worth nothing that of the relatively few accounts obtained from the perspective of either the teacher or the student as participant-observer, the researchers who have conducted them represent several disciplinary interests—sociology (e.g., Everhart, 1983; McPherson, 1972), social psychology (e.g., Smith & Geoffrey, 1968), education (e.g., Cusick, 1973)—rather than only anthropology.

For my own purposes I have found it useful to make distinctions among different participant-observer styles to take into account whether the researcher has (and is able to use) the opportunity to be an *active participant,* is (or eventually becomes) a *privileged observer,* or is at best a *limited observer.* Regardless of ethnographic pedigree or prior experience, most fieldworkers in schools are privileged observers, not active participants. In some settings, the ethnographer must be satisfied with the role of limited observer; in such cases, other field techniques assume great importance. (I might note here that I think the role of active participant has been underutilized in educational research. I encourage those pursuing ethnographic approaches to give careful consideration to opportunities for being active participants rather than passive observers. In traditional fieldwork, one really had no choice.)

Interviewing

Interviewing comprises the second major category of fieldwork techniques. Again I point out that the same techniques I mentioned here in association with ethnography are also used by sociologists, social psychologists, collection agencies, psychiatrists, and the CIA. The only distinction the ethnographer would be sure to draw is between his cherished and respected (and sometimes paid) informant and someone else's subjects or (sometimes paid) informers.

I will briefly introduce seven specific types of interview used by anthropologists: key-informant interview, life history interview, structured or formal interview, informal interview, questionnaire, projective techniques, and—primarily because we are considering school-related research—standardized tests and related measurement techniques.

One should recognize, of course, that I use the category "Interviewing" in a very broad sense. How else can I consider the collection of life history data, conducting a structured interview, and administering an IQ test to be a common set of activities? I include as an interview activity anything that the fieldworker does that intrudes upon the natural setting and is done with the conscious intent of obtaining particular information directly from one's subjects.

In the participant-observer role, ethnographers let the field setting parade before them. In the interviewer role, ethnographers take a critical step in research that can never reversed—they ask. And regardless of whether they ask you the sum of nine plus eight, what you "see" in a set of printed cards or drawings, or to tell your life story, they have imposed some structure upon the setting. In that sense, ethnographers are like other field researchers.

But they are also different, in at least two ways. First, they are less likely to put too much faith in any one instrument, set of answers, or techniques. And second, they are more likely to be concerned with the suitability of the technique in a *particular* setting than with the standardization of the technique across different populations. Ethnographers are more likely to prepare a questionnaire after coming to know a setting well rather than beginning a study by using a questionnaire already constructed (or mailing it in lieu of ever visiting at all). Or, given some highly standardized instrument like an intelligence test, they might even try "destandardizing" it, as Richard King (1967) did with Indian pupils in the Yukon Territory when he set out to see whether his pupils couldn't literally get smarter every week through practice and instruction in how to take standardized tests.

The idea of *key-informant interviewing*, the most purely "anthropological" of any of the techniques under discussion here, flies quite in the face of a prevailing notion in education research that truth resides only in large numbers. Anthropologists are so fond of their special term "informant" that they are inclined to refer to all their subjects that way. But informant has a special meaning—it refers to an individual in whom one invests a disproportionate amount of time because that individual appears to be particularly well informed, articulate, approachable, or available. For the anthropological linguist, one key informant is as large a sample as one needs to work out the basic grammar of an unknown language. Ethnographers do not usually rely that heavily on a single informant, but unwittingly or not, I suspect that most fieldworkers rely on a few individuals to a far greater extent than their accounts imply. Inscriptions in completed ethnographies attest to the contribution informants have made to the doing of ethnography (see also Casagrande, 1960).

Researchers using ethnographic techniques in schools have not made extended use of key informants in studies of contemporary education. My hunch is that most of us feel so well versed about what goes on in schools that we become our own key informant in school research. I refer to this approach as "ethnography-minus-one" (Wolcott, 1984). The phrase ethnography-minus-one serves notice that in school-related studies it is often the researcher who is telling us what everything means (and perhaps even how things *should be*) rather than allowing those in the setting to give *their* vision of *their* world (cf. Malinowski, 1961). This is another of the problems we face in doing descriptive research in settings already familiar, where our subjects are *us* rather than *them*.

The *life history* or biographical approach, while not uniquely anthropological, is uniquely suited to anthropology because it helps to convey how the social context that is of such importance to the ethnographer gets played out in the lives of specific individuals. Life history also helps anthropologists get a feeling for how things were before they arrived on the scene and for how people view or choose to portray their own lives (see, for example, Langness & Frank, 1981). Given pervasive anthropological interests in how things change and how they stay the same, attention to life history adds a critical historical dimension to the ethnographic account at the same time that it provides focus on somebody rather than on everybody.

As I have come to understand the extent to which personal ambitions of educators exert a driving force in American education, I have been thinking about the possibility of adapting a life history approach to help us learn more about the impact of personal careers on the dynamics of public education. Alternatively, looking at the "life history" of educational innovations, projects, fads, or movements provides an opportunity for discerning pervasive "patterns" in educator behavior (see, for example, Wolcott, 1977).

I contrast *structured formal interviews* with *informal interviews*, the next two techniques I wish to introduce, in order to emphasize that being in the field provides the ethnographer with almost unlimited opportunity to talk informally with subjects. Informal interviewing—that is, interviewing that does not make use of a fixed sequence of predetermined questions—is possible because the ethnographer is the research instrument. Ranging as it does from casual conversation to direct questioning, informal interviewing usually proves more important than structured interviewing in an extended study (see also Agar, 1980). It is my impression that being on the scene also facilitates getting information from people reluctant

to provide a structured interview but willing to talk casually to a neutral but interested listener. I have found that people often will grant a lengthy face-to-face interview although they may insist they are too busy to fill out a questionnaire.

I include *questionnaires* to point out that "relatively systematic" procedures popular among some researchers may also be used by ethnographers, particularly when they are working in settings with sophisticated, literate, and busy people from whom some base-line census data might be helpful, warranted, and perhaps all one can hope to get. But I have seen anthropologists register surprise when colleagues claim that mass survey techniques comprise part of their customary field procedures. I think that most anthropologists would feel obliged to explain why they employed such techniques in a particular setting, just as researchers of other orientations might feel an obligation to explain why they did not use them on a particular occasion. In connecting census data or genealogical data, or in following the formal eliciting techniques of the so-called "new" ethnography or "ethnoscience" approaches, ethnographers follow procedures that are entirely systematic—but they utilize them because they deem them appropriate for understanding the case at hand rather than to sprinkle their findings with ritual doses of scientific legitimacy.

It is important to remember that, unlike most research reported by educators or psychologists, the ethnographer never intends to base a study on the findings of only one technique, one instrument, or one brief encounter. Take a look at the appendices anthropologists include with their studies. They do not ordinarily provide copies of questionnaires or interview schedules; instead, they provide additional information about their subjects: maps; household composition; glossaries; descriptions of ceremonies, songs, chants, magic; maybe a report about the fieldwork experience; but not a copy of a mailed questionnaire form and the accompanying cover letter.

I have included *projective techniques* in this listing more to record an era in fieldwork than to describe customary practice, particularly if the topic brings to mind such standbys as the use of Rorschach Ink Blot cards or pictures from the Thematic Apperception Test. Ever in search of a unifying theory of humankind, anthropologists were intrigued by the psychoanalytic interpretations of the Freudians; in the 1930s and 1940s it was common for anthropologists not only to use projective tests and to cast their observations in psychoanalytic terminology but also to undergo psychoanalysis before venturing into the field. Those interests permeate much of the ethnography recorded in that period. Not many ethnographers today could produce a set of Rorschach cards, although anthropologists continue to share interests with psychologists and psychiatrists. However, given the diversity that the fieldworker confronts, there is obvious appeal in using any technique that can be administered to everyone alike. George and Louise Spindler continue to report success with their Instrumental Activities Inventory, a set of culture-specific drawings used to elicit comments from young respondents about the kind of activities in which they expect to engage, ranging in choice from traditional/rural to modern/urban (Spindler & Spindler, 1965, 1982).

The final type of interview activity I include here, *standardized tests and other measurement techniques*, serves as a reminder that any fieldworker may use virtually any kind of test as a way of eliciting information. For all the obvious attractions of obtaining quantifiable data so well known to educational researchers, however, I should point out that fieldworkers are often reluctant to use such materials themselves and may object vigorously to being required to administer tests or questionnaires selected or devised by others in connection with a large-scale research project. As educators, we are inclined to forget how intrusive test-taking can be and how different it is to test *in* school, where evaluation is a way of life, and to test in populations *out* of school. Anyone who has listened to an adult describe the trauma associated with having to take a driving test (or even the written examination required to obtain a driver's license) after years of not taking tests. is reminded how tests can frighten and alienate.

I have not forgotten the experience of a colleague who wished to obtain some test-like data early in the course of his first fieldwork. He began by making a house-to-house census in the village where he was conducting

research. While collecting that information, he also decided to explore the sociometrics of villager interaction and their perceptions of personal power and influence. Because he was residing in the village, was accepted by the villagers, and had requested their cooperation through both formal and informal channels, they dutifully answered his questions about private and personal judgments. But, once having complied, for the next three months no one volunteered further information on *any* topic. Only slowly did he regain the rapport he once had and then lost. Questioning can be rude work. Ethnography is not intended to be rude business. Persistent, maybe, but not rude.

Use of Written Resources

In order to emphasize the importance of historical documents and public records in ethnographic research, I use the term *archives* to refer specifically to one type of written sources and use a broad catch-all term, *other written documents*, to include everything else. The importance of archival materials in ethnographic research may reflect the close link between colonial administrations and the early development of both British and American anthropology. In any case, it is important to note that anthropologists use all kinds of written records; they do not limit themselves to what is available in libraries.

Like historians, ethnographers find primary documents of all sorts—letters and diaries, for example—of great value. In working with populations that include school-age children, ethnographers have sometimes sponsored essay contests to encourage young people to write of their experiences (e.g., Kileff & Kileff, 1970). I have already mentioned fieldwork of my own in which I found that assuming the duties of village teacher seemed to hamper my opportunity for interaction. I was so busy keeping school that I often had a little idea of what was going on in the village. Eventually, I discovered that the problem had a compensating side. My customary classroom practice of having students write in class every day was providing not only a daily account of village events but the extra bonus of the students' own views of those events as given in the seclusion of written rather than spoken

comments. Furthermore, the youngsters chronicling the events were at an age when they moved easily throughout the village, more easily than I could and far more easily than did their circumspect elders. My only hesitancy in relating this episode is that it took me so long to realize how valuable my students' written accounts were in my efforts to learn about village life.

Analysis or Collection of Nonwritten Sources

Far too many "data-gathering" procedures are designed with an overriding concern for getting data that are manageable, codable, punchable. To date, ethnographers seem impressed by what computers can do but they are not so intimidated that they have begun to think like them. They still collect their information in a variety of forms, rather than with an eye to the degrees of freedom afforded by a punchcard or computer program. Perhaps that is why some anthropologists have an expressed preference for the term "fieldwork" rather than for the phrase "data gathering."

It is hard to envision a scene in which colleagues eagerly assemble to see what a quantitatively oriented researcher has brought back to the office after an intense interlude of data gathering. It is hard to imagine an ethnographer who would not have collected pictures, maps, or examples of local handiwork, even if the field site was a nearby classroom. The wall adornments of anthropologists' offices and homes display the results of compulsive collecting. But the use of nonwritten sources is primarily for examination and illustration, not ornamentation, and the linguist with his tapes, or the ethnographer with his photographs, films, or artifacts, find such primary materials invaluable in analysis and write-up, as well as in later testing the adequacy of his developing descriptions and explanations.

I trust I have provided sufficient examples of this fourth and last major category, nonwritten sources, to make the case for the importance of *maps, photographs and film, artifacts*, and *video and audio tapes*, in pursuing ethnographic research. These are virtually indispensable aids in all fieldwork. The use of photography, particularly in ethnographic filmmaking, has

received special attention (J. Collier & M. Collier, 1986; Heider, 1976) and has been applied effectively in classroom research, particularly for examining nonverbal communication (J. Collier, 1973; M. Collier, 1979; Erickson & Wilson, 1982).

The subject of mapping brings me full circle to participant-observation, for one of the first things the ethnographer is advised to do in a new field setting is to make a map. Just think how interesting it would be to teachers, and how natural an activity for an ethnographer, to prepare a map of a school and school-ground, to plot how different categories of people at the school move through its space, and to probe reasons they might offer to explain how things happen to be used or placed as they are. Is that the principal's car or a handicapped employee's car in the specially marked parking space? Why is the nurse's office so near the front office? Do nurses usually have offices? If the principal is the instructional leader of the school, why is the Instructional Materials Center so far from his or her office? How do new students learn about "territory" in the school? Under what circumstances can certain territory be invaded? You see how quickly one thing can lead to another—and how a knowledge of the setting and the people in it helps one get a sense of which questions to ask, of whom, when, and in what manner.

Preparing the Written Account

As I have noted, for me the real mystique of ethnography is in the process of transforming the field experience into a completed account. Rosalie Wax (1971) wisely counsels would-be ethnographers to allow at least as much time for analyzing and writing as one plans to spend in the field. I can only underscore that time for analyzing and writing should be reckoned in equivalents of "uninterrupted days." Fair waning is hereby given that the time commitment is great in terms of customary expectations for research in education. My own fieldwork-based doctoral dissertation added two years to my graduate program in education and anthropology—one full year in research, a second full year to write it up.

It is in the write-up, rather than in the fieldwork, that the materials become ethnographic. What human beings do and say is not psychological, sociological, anthropological, or what have you. Those disciplinary dimensions come from the structures we impose on what we see and understand. It is in the ethnographer's pulling together of the whole fieldwork experience, an activity informed by the observations and writings of other anthropologists, that the material takes ethnographic shape as both description of what is going on among a particular social group and a cultural interpretation of how that behavior "makes sense" to those involved (see Wolcott, 1985). As the term ethnography has caught on in educational research, I think astute observers who have produced excellent descriptive accounts have frequently been tempted to tack on the label ethnography as though it were synonymous with observation itself (see Wolcott, 1980). Let me emphasize again that one might utilize all the field research techniques I have described and not come up with ethnography, while an anthropologist might possibly employ none of the customary field research techniques and still produce an ethnographic account (or at least a satisfactory ethnographic reconstruction).

I should also note that not every cultural anthropologist cares that much about producing ethnography. Some are more theoretically or philosophically inclined. These days some have become interested in method, the analysis of other people's data, or computer solutions to classic anthropological problems. The more action-oriented look for ways to make better use of the huge corpus of data already available. One journal in the field of cultural anthropology (*American Ethnologist*) went so far as specifically to exclude descriptive ethnographic studies from its purview during its first 5 years of publication. Nevertheless, descriptive ethnographic accounts are the building blocks of the discipline of cultural anthropology, just as fieldwork itself is the *sine qua non* of the cultural anthropologist.

Only recently—since about the mid 1960s—have anthropologists given much explicit attention to their research approach. Even less attention has been directed to the difficult business of organizing and writing, other than to repeat well-worn maxims that field-

work amounts to naught if the notes are not transformed into an ethnographic account, to advise neophyte fieldworkers to begin writing early (preferably to complete a first draft while still in the field), and to acknowledge, more with awe than with instruction, when an occasional ethnographer seems to have made a literary as well as a scholarly contribution. Critical attention to ethnographics as texts has only begun (Marcus & Cushman, 1982; Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

For the beginning writer of a descriptive account, I can offer a few suggestions that have proven useful in my own work and in guiding the work of others. First, I suggest that every effort be made to couple the writing task to ongoing fieldwork. It is splendid indeed if one is able to follow the advice to prepare a first draft while fieldwork is still in progress. In attempting to set down in writing what you understand, you become most acutely aware of what you do *not* understand and can recognize "gaps" in the data while time remains to make further inquiry. But lacking the time, practice, or perspective required for drafting a full account, one can nonetheless begin to "think" in chapters, sections, or expanded outlines, and thus keep tuned to the difficult task sometimes dismissed as simply "writing up one's notes."

Wherever and whenever the task of writing begins, a second bit of advice is to begin at a relatively "easy" place where you are well informed and know (or should know!) what you are talking about. One good starting point is to describe your fieldwork: where you went and what you did. That material may subsequently become part of your first chapter, or an appendix, or a separate, publishable paper. Another good starting point is to begin with the descriptive portion of the account, resisting any temptation to begin making inferences or interpretation but simply telling the story of what happened. Not only will this help to satisfy the anthropological preference for providing a high ratio of information to explanation (Smith, 1964), but it also invites your reader into the interpretive act because he or she shares access to your primary sources. Description and interpretation need not be so dramatically separated in the final account (i.e., treated as separate chapters), but I think it a valuable exercise for someone new to descriptive writing to begin by preparing an "objects" account

as free as possible from one's own inferences and preferences.

My next bit of advice might seem to have come from a short course on writing, but I came upon it in the instructions for assembling a wheelbarrow: Make sure all parts are correctly in place before tightening. There is a certain fluidity in developing an ethnographic account. Problem and interpretation remain in flux and in turn influence decisions about what must be included or may be deleted from the descriptive narrative. In that sense, ethnographic accounts can *finished* but they are never really *completed.*

Finally, let me offer the advice here that I frequently give to my students and colleagues: I would not be inclined to use the term "ethnography" in my title or to lay claim to be providing ethnography in my written account unless I was quite certain that I wanted and needed to make that claim. That point goes beyond merely finding an appropriate title, and I will turn to it in concluding this discussion.

"Doing Ethnography" Versus "Borrowing Ethnographic Techniques"

Armed with a list of fieldwork techniques such as those reviewed above, and duly cautioned about the critical complementary tasks involved in the subsequent write-up, is a neophyte researcher ready to start "doing" ethnography? I think not. Let me repeat reservations noted earlier and then attempt to provide a perspective on ethnographic research.

First, none of these fieldwork techniques is exclusive to anthropology, so no single one, including participant-observation, guarantees that the results will be ethnographic.

Second, although one can be reasonably certain that the anthropologist will use several techniques, there is no magic formula. Anthropologists conduct their studies of human social behavior by watching and by asking. When you stop to think about it, most of us have been doing those two things, and for basically the same reasons—to acquire cultural knowledge—since we first were able to watch and, subsequently, to ask. Our continued practice in

that regard is scant basis for thinking that we will suddenly start producing ethnography instead of merely continuing to act appropriately. At the same time, here is a gentle reminder to all researchers. In learning to become functioning human beings, we ourselves have relied on numerous sources, numerous techniques, and ample time for attending to multiple significant facets in our lives, not just to a few that were easy to understand or that satisfied rigorous statistical tests.

I think a certain reserve is warranted in educational research when we claim to be "doing ethnography" yet restrict our research arena solely to schools. The anthropologists conducting research in educational settings would expect to attend to a broad cultural context, but educational researchers do not ordinarily attempt to produce ethnographies or even "micro-ethnographies" per se. Rather than make the claim that they are doing ethnography, when that is neither what they are doing nor what they intend to do, I think educational researchers are well advised to display some modesty in noting in their research how they may at times avail themselves of several techniques for getting their information, how their approach may have been influenced by the characteristic long-term thoroughness of the fieldworker, or how their perspective or analysis may have been informed at least in part by relevant prior work in anthropology. I think it useful to distinguish between anthropologically informed researchers who *do ethnography* and educational researchers who frequently *draw upon ethnographic approaches* in doing descriptive studies.

It is not the techniques employed that make a study ethnographic, but neither is it necessarily what one looks at; the critical element is in interpreting what one has seen. In research among pupils in classrooms and in other learning environments—work generated out of ethnographic interests—a few ethnographically oriented researchers have been looking at smaller units of behavior, such as classroom teaching and learning styles, or at the classroom "participant structures" through which teachers arrange opportunities for verbal interaction (Philips, 1972). They are developing an ever-increasing capacity for examining fine detail—for example, in repeated viewings of filmed or videotaped seg-

ments of classroom behavior. But they are also embedding their analysis in cultural context. (See Wolcott, 1982, for a discussion of "styles" of descriptive research.)

We know we do not need to describe everything. We seek to identify those dimensions critical to our understanding of human social behavior and then to describe them exceedingly well. With his pithy phrase, "It is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something," anthropologist Geertz (1973, p. 20) reminds us that we may make headway through modest increments.

I am distressed when I hear educators lament that we have made no progress toward providing *an* ethnography of schooling, but I am also concerned when I hear others imply that we will someday complete *the* ethnography of schooling. The task of description, and thus the potential for ethnography, is endless. We need to look for those purposes in education to which ethnographic research seems best suited, an issue that continues to excite much discussion in the field of anthropology and education.

I think ethnography is well suited to answering the question, "What is going on here?" That is, anthropologically, a question of behaviors and, especially, a question of meanings. Such inquiry proceeds best under conditions where there will be time to find out, and where there is reason to believe that knowing "what-things-mean-to-those-involved" could conceivably make a difference. It also requires some understanding of how one particular instance, or event, or case, or individual, described in careful detail, is not only unique but also shares characteristics in common with other instances or events or cases or individuals. The ethnographer looks for the generic in the specific, following a "natural history" approach that seeks to understand classes of events through the careful examination of specific ones. Geertz (1973) reminds us that there is no ascent to truth without a descent to cases.

The ethnographer, like other social scientists, is concerned with the issue of "representativeness" but approaches that problem differently, by seeking to locate the particular case under study among other cases. The question, as Margaret Mead once noted, is not "Is this case representative?" but rather, "What is this case representative of?" You conduct your

research where you can, with whatever available key informant or classroom or family or village best satisfies your research criteria, and then you undertake to learn how that one is similar to, and different from, others of its type.

The ethnographer's concern is always for context. One's focus moves constantly between figure and ground—like a zoom lens on a camera—to catch the fine detail of what individuals are doing and to keep a perspective on the context of that behavior. To illustrate: An ethnographer assisting in educational program evaluation ought to be looking not only at the program under review but at the underlying ethos of evaluation as well. What meaning does evaluation have for different groups or individuals? How do certain people become evaluators of others? Who, in turn, evaluates them? Or, in studying cases of conscious efforts to introduce educational change, ethnographers ought to be looking at the "donors" of change as well as at the recipients or targets of it. Frederick Erickson has posed a question that guides much current ethnographic research in classrooms: What do teachers and children have to know in order to do what they are doing?

The Role of Ethnographic Research in Education

Will ethnographic research become a potent force in shaping the course of formal education? I would like to tell you that it will, since it is the kind of research that most interests me. But I am pessimistic. I don't believe that educational research of any type has yet had great impact on educational practice, and descriptive research portraying how things really are does not seem to capture the imagination of those impatient to make them different.

In and of themselves, ethnographic accounts do not point the way to policy decisions; they do not give clues as to what should be done differently, nor do they suggest how best to proceed. Ethnographic attention tends to focus on how things are and how they got that way, while educators are preoccupied with what education can become. Educators tend to be action-oriented, but ethnography does not point out the lessons to be gained or the action that should be taken. Worse still, anyone who takes the time to read a descriptive account will probably realize that the complexity of the setting or problem at hand has been increased rather than decreased.

We have not yet found or created a strong constituency of informed consumers who have realistic expectations about ethnographic research in education. Perhaps that is where you can help. Let me conclude with three recommendations for how you might simultaneously benefit from and participate in furthering the use of ethnographic approaches in educational research.

First, expand your reading in professional education to include descriptive studies. Like the linguist who can amaze you by explicating rules of your own language that you never knew you knew, ethnographers' accounts of education should have a ring of authenticity to you as a native member of the group being described. And they ought to help you better understand the central process in which you are engaged both professionally and personally: human learning. If they do not, speak out regarding how, in your perception, observers are missing the point about what is going on or what teachers are trying to accomplish. It is not too unlikely that even in trying to explicate the difference between what observers see and what teachers try to do, you will begin to understand the important and useful distinction between what we do and what we say we do, between culture "on the ground" and culture as a system of mutual expectations about what ought to be.

Second, become familiar with the variety of field techniques described here and watch for instances where a multi-instrument approach would be preferable to relying on only one source of information. You might even watch yourself in action as teacher or administrator and ask whether, in your own professional circumstances, you tend to place too much reliance on too few ways of finding out. It is a ready trap for practitioner and researcher alike.

Third, take a cue from the ethnographer and develop a keener appreciation for context in educational research. Whether reading the research reports of others or trying to understand a setting in which you yourself are a participant, keep probing for more, rather than fewer, factors that may be involved. Researchers have a tendency (and, realistically, an obligation) to oversimplify, to make things

manageable, to reduce the complexity of the events they seek to explain. Ethnographers are not entirely free from this tendency; if they were, they would not set out to reduce accounts of human social behavior to a certain number of printed pages or a reel of film. But they remain constantly aware of complexity and context. There are no such things as unwanted findings or irrelevant circumstances in ethnographic research. I wonder if it is the characteristic researcher inattention to broader contexts that makes educational research appear so irrelevant to its practitioners. If so, the ethnographic concern for context may be the most important contribution this approach can make.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

Just as the ethnographer attends both to what people do and to what people say they do, a student can learn about ethnographic research both by reading the accounts produced by ethnographers and by reading what ethnographers say they do or how they advise others to go about their research. The references suggested here for further study distinguish between ethnography dealing specifically with education and ethnography in more traditional settings.

Ethnographic Studies of Formal Educational Settings: Bibliographies, Edited Collections, and Series

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Anthropological Accounts About Ethnographic Research in General

Agar, M. H. (1980). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography.* New York: Academic Press. The style, the emphasis on interview data, and the attention to early stages in fieldwork make this a valuable introductory book.

Bowen, E. S. (1954). *Return to laughter.* New York: Harper and Brothers. This is one of the earliest personal accounts of fieldwork experience.

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Pelto, P. J., & Pelto, G. H. (1978). *Anthropological research: The structure of inquiry* (2d ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. These authors present a point-by-point discussion of each of the techniques described in the chapter.

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Spradley, J. P., & McCurdy, D. W. (1972). *The cultural experience: Ethnography in complex society.* Chicago: Science Research Associates. This little classic presents a short introduction to the "New Ethnography" followed by 12 beginning ethnographies conducted by Spradley and McCurdy's undergraduate students using that approach.

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An Ethnographic Sampler

(Original date of publication is given but most of these classics are available in paperback editions. Mead and Turnbull are good authors to read first.)

Firth, Raymond: *We, the Tikopia* (1936).

Malinowski, Bronislaw: *Argonauts of the western Pacific* (1922).

Mead, Margaret: *Coming of age in Samoa* (1927); *Growing up in New Guinea* (1930). Simmons, Leo (Ed.): *Sun chief: The autobiography of a Hopi Indian* (1942).

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Contemporary Ethnography

Edgerton, R. B. (1967). *The cloak of competence: Stigma in the lives of the mentally retarded.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Suggested General Reading for Learning About the Field of Cultural Anthropology

Benedict, R. (1934). *Patterns of culture.* Always available in paperback editions, this best-seller gives an excellent portrayal of cultural diversity although its anthropology is dated.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books. To a collection of his previously published articles Clifford Geertz added a brilliant introductory essay that makes this book a "must."

Keesing, R. M. (1981). *Cultural anthropology: A contemporary perspective* (2d ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Virtually any introductory text or collection of readings in cultural anthropology provides a good introduction to the field. Keesing's book is cited here as an especially good example of a single-author text that has undergone several revisions.

Kluckhohn, C. (1949). *Mirror for man.* Like Benedict's *Patterns of culture*, this book's timelessness has been proven through repeated printings.

The Forum

The study materials noted above offer the interested student an opportunity to become more familiar with ethnography by reading widely among readily available materials. In addition, there are several national organizations whose members include individuals with particular interests in ethnographic research and whose annual meetings and journals provide a forum for scholarly exchange. Attendance at their meetings or inspection of their journals is an excellent way to learn about current issues, find others who share interest in a specific problem, or begin an active organizational involvement. Details about subscriptions and memberships may be obtained by writing to the addresses listed.

Council on Anthropology and Education, 1703 New Hampshire Avenue, NW, Washington, DC, 20009. (Publication: *Anthropology and Education Quarterly.*)

American Educational Research Association, 1230 17th Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20036. (Association publications: *American Educational Research Journal; Educational Researcher; Review of Educational Research.*)

Society for Applied Anthropology, P.O. Box 24083, Oklahoma City, OK 73124-0083. (Publications: *Human Organization, Practicing Anthropology.*)

Study Questions

1. What are the differences, if any, between the role of hypotheses in ethnographic research and in more quantitative research methods, such as experimental research or correlational research?

2. Is it correct to say that in ethnographic research, in contrast to other research methods in education, decisions on the collection of specific data evolve, rather than being prespecified?

3. Discuss the role of "triangulation" or the "multi-instrument approach" in ethnographic research. Given an example of the way you might employ triangulation in an educational research study.

4. If you were to attempt to develop an ethnographic account of a third-grade class over the period of an entire school year, what roles might allow you to be a participant-observer? What are some possible advantages and limitations for each role?

5. What types of interviewing techniques might be employed in ethnographic research in education? Give an example of how life history interviews might be used in an ethnographic study of a school system.

6. Survey research is usually considered a separate research method. Is it therefore appropriate for an ethnographic researcher to use survey techniques? In using survey research methods, is an ethnographer stepping outside of his/ her role and abandoning ethnography?

7. Could an ethnographer use standardized tests in gathering information about third-grade students? If so, would the ethnographer be likely to use the tests in the same way they are used by a school system's director of testing? How would these two uses of standardized tests likely differ?

8. Are "key informants" critical in doing ethnographic research on a school system in the United States? Discuss the relative usefulness of key informants in studying U.S. school systems and Japanese school systems, assuming you were attempting to do the research.

9. We usually think of ethnographic research as an attempt to portray a culture in its present-day totality. If this is correct, can historical records, whether formal or informal, play a role in developing an ethnography? Can you give an example of the way historical documents might be used in ethnography? Can you give an example of the way historical documents might be used in ethnographic research in education?