ARTICLE

The transformation of ethnographic practice: past and current challenges

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ABSTRACT Ethnographic research design was virtually unknown in American educational research until the 1970s. Only in the late 1980s was it recognized by leading professional educational research associations. Using an historical analysis of the gradual evolution and legitimation of ethnographic design in education, this article redefines the principles guiding traditional ethnography. It argues that ethnography was marginalized because it was subversive to positivistic and entrenched conceptions of research rigor, and it privileged alternative ways of thinking, knowing, and viewing the world. Subversion was initiated by non-mainstream scholars who joined the Academy and introduced hitherto unasked or silenced questions about social relationships of power; it also resulted from the failure of experimental approaches to answer critical questions asked about the field. The article further addresses challenges to basic tenets of ethnography, showing how the concepts of culture, population, identity, the study site, and researcher stance traditionally used by researchers must be revised to conform to realities of contemporary technological, global, and multicultural, racial and linguistic existence.

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Over the past 40 years, ethnographic research has irrevocably changed awareness of how schools operate in culture and society. Ethnographic design has facilitated a shift from psychological to sociocultural understandings of education and, in so doing, created a basis for critiquing both decontextualized and behavioristic explanations of teaching and learning. It has consistently countered the limited, input-output, often ideological, one-size-fits-all

solutions to educational problems often favored by politicians and policy-makers by providing real-world, authentic analyses of complex problems and practices. Its increasing legitimacy in educational research has de-centered both experimental design as the only legitimated form of investigation, and positivistic epistemology as the dominant source of canonical authority in educational research. As it provided an epistemological alternative to the prevailing research canon, ethnographic design made it possible to question received truths and to ascertain whether or not what appeared to be a societal consensus – even one concerning legitimate canons for investigation within the educational research community – actually did consist of a universally shared set of values or whether, in fact, that apparent consensus was the product of hegemonic ways of looking at the world.

From a substantive point of view, ethnographic design has also made a significant contribution to our understanding of how educational processes work. First, it has highlighted the complexity of all educational phenomena which, in a context-free behavioristic world, had for decades been viewed as located between the ears of passive learners and devoid of social contexts – including language and culture. Ethnographic approaches proved subversive to the conventional set of concepts and models used to explain learning and study teaching; issues such as culture, social class, cultural knowledge, privilege, language, voice, power, contradiction, conflict and dissonance could no longer be ignored. Ethnography also legitimated the study of learning which took place outside conventional schools and classrooms (see, for example, Lave and Wenger, 1988; Millroy, 198?). As it transformed how researchers and educators understood educational processes, educational ethnography itself was transformed, transcending its roots in sociology and anthropology (LeCompte, 1997; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). It now borrows freely from fields as disparate as psychology, linguistics, semiotics, political science, literary and cultural studies, communication, and evaluation.

The advent of critical perspectives

While educational ethnography had existed for decades on the periphery of educational research, it began to achieve rapid legitimation by the educational research establishment only in the 1980s. It was given impetus by the advent of interpretivism and constructivist approaches to understanding teaching and learning (see, for example, Erickson, 1985–1986) and critical and conflict approaches to understanding educational phenomena. Critical perspectives on research, including feminist, post-modern, and post-structural theories, and critical race theory, queer theory and Third World perspectives, often rely heavily on interactionist and interpretive approaches to data collection and interpretation. These approaches, combined with the research concerns of female, gay and lesbian, and non-white, non-European or North American researchers who increasingly began to populate the Academy in

the late 1980s, acted to accelerate the process of dislocating the dominance of European-American, male and heterosexist perspectives in the social sciences and in education. Non-mainstream researchers were preoccupied with exploring their own conditions of life, their experiences in education, and with 'studying up' – or taking a critical look at the impact which practices and theories of colonial and colonizing (or dominant culture) powers had on the trajectories of their own groups; their research called into question the normative quality of white, European-American male and heterosexual experiences.

Dislocating mainstream and hegemonic perspectives has, in turn, affected the purposes for which research was thought to be appropriate. During the 1970s and 1980s, the purpose of ethnography was descriptive, oriented at making known to outsiders hitherto unstudied social processes and group dynamics. A legacy of static functionalism and a 'hands-off', value-neutral positivism kept most educational ethnographers out of the activist arena, and disconnected their results from the social and political structures surrounding them. With the advent of the 'new sociology' (Apple, 1978) and more neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist class analyses, 'action research' (Schensul and LeCompte, 1999; Schensul and Schensul, 1992) or 'openly ideological research' (Anderson, 1989; Lather, 1986) began to move from the margins of left-wing social science. Scholars increasingly began to look at the characteristics of institutional racism, asymmetries of power and status, patterns of neglect and ignorance, and even legitimized greed and corruption, that systematically disadvantaged subordinate groups. Such a stance made adherence to primarily academic, value-neutral studies seem outdated and ridiculous. As a consequence, what had been known as collaborative ethnography or action research became increasingly popular among ethnographers, many of whom already did collaborative research and consulting with practicing teachers and saw their efforts as capable of empowering the people with whom they worked. This kind of research activity brought their 'action agendas' closer to those of policy-makers trying to ameliorate a wide variety of social problems, but the ethnographic research they produced as a consequence has not always found a ready audience in the halls of government.

Why policy-makers don't find ethnographic research to be useful

Ethnography has a long and honored tradition of artful writing which produces complex, lengthy, often literary, tomes that can be excellent reading. Ethnographic research also is very appealing to *practitioners*, because it represents what really happens in their own classrooms and work sites, and it often details just what educators are up against in the current educational and political environment (Nihlen et al., 1998; Nihlen et al., 1999). This has been especially true in studies of reading and writing, mathematics, bilingual edu-

cation, racial desegregation, and in some cases, special education. However, policy-makers are not always charmed by the authenticity of teacher-centered research, and they often find ethnographic writing too lengthy to be user-friendly, even if the results are extraordinarily compelling. Ethnographies frequently lack the neat tables and numerical results to which policy-makers are accustomed, and they usually cannot be produced on the tight timelines required for policy-oriented work. Ethnographers also have not been active lobbyists on behalf of their work. As a consequence, it has not been accorded the same visibility as that of researchers with better public relations.

To readers – including policy-makers – accustomed to experimental research and results expressed in tables of numbers, ethnography seems to lack rigor, since it lacks experimental controls and fails to generate the 'reliable and replicable' results too often required as the only hallmarks of legitimacy. One problem is the incompatibility alleged to exist between the inductive, hypothesis generating approach of ethnography and the deductive, hypothesis testing strategies of experimental design. While ethnography generally does use an initial inductive approach to social phenomena, and does focus on describing processes as they unfold, it does not totally eschew deduction. In fact, ethnographers engage in recursive cycles of hypothesis generating, testing, reformulation, and regeneration – all of which require both inductive and deductive reasoning.

Another myth involves the allegation that ethnography is – or should be – a-theoretical. However, no good researcher enters a site knowing nothing about it in advance. Such a state of 'open-mindedness,' in my opinion, is close to 'empty-headedness' or ignorance, because in fact ethnography is strongly informed at both formative and summative stages by tacit and explicit theories. Nonetheless, many educational researchers and most ethnographic novices believe that their studies cannot be 'ethnographic' if they embed their work, at least in the initial stages, in any theory at all. In this belief they are, I think, greatly misinformed; failing to make good use of theory makes data collection vague and fuzzy and rigorous analysis nearly impossible (LeCompte and Preissle, 1992; Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte, 1999).

The perception that ethnography lacks rigor has been given some credibility by customary practice in ethnographic writing. Many ethnographers do *not* include in their research reports elaborate discussions of method, because they assume that all ethnographers share a common disciplinary culture about how ethnography is done. This leads them to assume, erroneously, that their readers likewise share an understanding of ethnographic data collection and analysis procedures. They also may fail to describe their analytic techniques in detail, in part because it often is difficult to make explicit the intuitive nature of some forms of analysis. This is not, however, a good reason for such omissions, because they create the appearance of poorly grounded work. In any case, because ethnographers have written as if the procedures of their

craft were universally understood, they have not fared well when writing for different audiences or when crossing disciplines. In the absence of details of analysis, the vignettes and thick description which are stock in trade for good evidence in ethnography can be criticized as mere 'story-telling.' An over-compensation some researchers engage in has been to create defensive – and extensive – presentations of method which even further lengthen already too-voluminous research reports. As recently as October 2001, one desperate young writer asked me for help because he was running out of space to discuss his research results in a journal manuscript. He told me that he was afraid that his article would be rejected if he didn't devote at least 10 pages to defending his choice of ethnographic method, and if he did that he'd have no space for the substance of the work. The sad part was that his choice of design was entirely appropriate, given his research question, and there was no need at all to defend it.

The moral of this story is that epistemological paradigms shift slowly; acceptance of new approaches comes even more slowly. Even today, some schools do not allow graduate students to do ethnographic dissertations, and in policy arenas ethnographic research may have less impact than it should because its purposes and procedures are poorly understood. However, the point is that epistemological paradigms *do* shift. What researchers and policy-makers must do is to recognize when shifts in method, question, and researcher stance are appropriate.

One further problem is that because they focus on what really is going on in a site, ethnographers can, and often do, address unpopular questions, talk to outsiders and the marginalized, and come to conclusions that question conventional wisdom and entrenched interests. Thus, more than their methods, the conclusions of ethnographers can render their work unpalatable to policy-makers. In fact, the castigation ethnographic design receives may be more a function of efforts to discredit its results than a real assault on the validity of the methods.

I now want to turn to challenges to the ethnographic research tradition which I feel could both impede its effectiveness if ignored, and increase its ability to inform policy, if considered.

Challenges to the ethnographic tradition

Ethnography traditionally has been thought of as the investigation of the culture of small, relatively homogenous, naturally or artificially bounded groups. However, fieldwork with such groups now is nearly impossible, not only because such sites and populations no longer exist, but because even if they did, doing such work smells so much of an undesirable colonial legacy of exploitation and domination. Since the late 1980s and 1990s, ethnography has had to find its populations within the multi-layered, multi-ethnic, highly diverse and often contentious groups that now characterize human existence.

Notwithstanding, it has adhered strongly to an absolute insistence on the importance of culture as an organizing principle in human life – a position that has become increasingly problematic in a post-colonial, globalizing world. Facing up to this problematic has meant redefining the very concepts which are basic to the research design: the concept of culture, issues of identity, the indepth investigation of discrete sites, and the elicitation of stable meanings and definitions from research participants.

Let me put it this way: What if the concept of culture no longer were viable? If people no longer could be found in specific sites, and if the whole concept of stable, shared meanings were meaningless? I would like to suggest that just as ethnography subverted traditional ways of knowing and learning and appropriated ideas from other fields, it will only survive in the future by being subversive to and redefining the conceptual definitions and operating tools which have been central to its execution for more than a century.

Redefining the concept of 'site'

Ethnographers traditionally located their groups for study in a physical site, whether it be naturally or artificially bounded. Today, however, the conventional meaning of the site is gone; sites no longer serve to anchor studies:

- when many of the community's members can communicate with relative ease all over the globe;
- when community may, in fact, exist in cyberspace and the site for a community's interaction may be a website on the Internet;
- when influences from every nation in the world have the potential for being more exciting and salient than influences from the immediate family or neighbors;
- when people move from place to place across states, nations and continents, and live in 'multiplicities' (Lankshear, 2002) of place, space, culture and language; and
- when community members occupy a wide range of sites and statuses from open and legal to hidden and illegal.

The question then becomes, 'What happens when ethnography no longer is grounded in real geography?' For the future, ethnographers will need to examine ways to study diasporic cultures which are located in many sites and which take place on many levels – while remaining true to the ethnographer's mandate to search for patterns amidst the irregular and dramatic occurrences that punctuate daily life. It may also have to focus on phenomena which are not explicitly site-based. There are many examples of comparative case studies and multi-site ethnographies that provide models for such work. For example, the ethnographic studies of policy which Bradley Levinson and Margaret Sutton (1998) have initiated and encouraged are examples not only of the way ethnography always has been able to describe 'how things are

done', but also exemplify the multi-layered, multi-sited, multiple perspectives of the ethnography of the future (see, for example, Wortham et al., 2001). Levinson and Sutton also have carved out a new substantive topic – a focus on policy-making itself as a cultural construct. Further, ethnographers can, and should, heed the call by Dell Hymes (1983), and Elsie Rockwell (2000), for an *ethnology* of educational research (e.g. LeCompte and Preissle, 1992), one which would increase our understanding of educational processes by systematically comparing and contrasting the multitudes of existing ethnographies already done throughout the world.

The challenge of representation

Ethnographers once simply told the story of the people whom they studied. However, story-telling is no longer unproblematic. Post-modern thinkers in the last decade and a half have generated a healthy debate over how ethnographers should represent the stories and lives of the people about whom they write. The question of 'who gets to tell whose story' is still a lively one. It appears widely in basic ethnographic research, in cultural studies and critical ethnography, and even in educational policy, however veiled, in contestations over which groups in society are advantaged by proposed reforms, including those involving curricula, assessment, and reorganization of finance and control of schools. Since most of the educational current reform initiatives further disadvantage those who are already most marginalized in society, the persistent and consistent ethnographic 'voice' which tells *their* side of the story is critical to present policies.

This well-known tension between power and disadvantage has become amplified by questions about how stories to be told will be displayed. Suggestions have included presentation

- as narratives (Bloom, 1998; Clandinin and Connelly, 1994)
- as a dialogue between researcher and informants (see, for example, Lather's *Troubling the Angels*, 1997)
- in poetry (Richardson, 1994)
- as theatrical or other kinds of performance (McCall and Becker, 1990; Silverman's [1997] partially danced dissertation)

Going further: What if ethnographers sought to present their work on CDs? Or as videos? Or as fiction? As hypertext presentations or on websites?

As Geertz (1989–1990) and Marcus and Fischer (1986) have noted, ethnographers have begun to abandon the detached authoritative ethnographer's voice which perpetuated a fictitious identity of the ethnographer as an actual member of the group under study – a false kind of 'speaking for the "other"'. Post-modern ethnographies use many strategies to avoid presumptuously arrogating the lives and words of their informants. Some have even adopted representational genres used by the people they are studying to pres-

ent their work in an authentic manner (Von Gunten, 1998). We have not, however, arrived at a consensus on representation and, if an examination of the most prestigious conventional journals is an indication, we have a very long way to go. It is even more challenging to provide a post-modern representation to policy-makers; short video clips and Powerpoint presentations might work, but poetry readings and theatrical performances have little legitimacy as research in the legislative assemblies, deliberative committees, or with heads of state!

Changing concepts of culture

Culture *is* the basic element of ethnography, but definitions of even that basic element have changed. Culture was once viewed as the product of human behaviors and beliefs worked out over a span of historical time to create a functional response to a specific physical environment. Culture was defined in terms of sets of social roles that were appropriate for specific classes of individuals within the group. As long as the environment remained stable, the culture changed only incrementally from generation to generation. This reproductive model is not very useful for analyzing cultures in flux or ongoing crisis, since it operates on the assumption that 'old' cultures only will be abandoned as new ones are adopted, and that people always have some set of appropriate and workable models from which to choose as they adapt to their new conditions. In the 21st century, where communities and cultures exist within near catastrophic conditions, cultural transmission and reproduction theories, with their assumption of a more or less static world, do not generate research that addresses challenges to current conditions or creates policies to help humanity out of its current dilemmas. This is an arena where I think ethnographic design can help create a vision for the future.

What, for example, is to be reproduced when entire cultural groups emigrate, either by force or choice? when entire environments are transformed by warfare or by environmental, technological or natural disaster? when the rate of technological change outstrips the capacity of people to develop appropriate responses to it? and when intermingling of all sorts of cultures, ideas and peoples occurs at an increasingly rapid pace and in increasingly numerous venues? when old meanings and definitions no longer match new realities, but the old patterns of discrimination and hatred based on them continue to persist? Under these conditions, the traditional concept of culture as a set of patterned and appropriate responses to a well-known environment needs revision.

Eisenhart and Finkel (2000), Levinson et al. (1996) and others have suggested that rather than focus on what people are doing and thinking in the static 'now,' ethnographers should begin to investigate what people are *producing*, including identities, aspirations and possible futures. Such a position no longer views culture as something which is 'given', or handed down by a

group to individuals, but rather reconceptualizes culture as something to be 'taken' by individuals, appropriated and constructed against a matrix of possible and appropriate selves. These selves or social roles then are embodied and enacted by individuals, through development of what Goffman (1961) called a kind of 'identity kit' of one's own. Culture does not disappear; it remains the substratum of opportunities available to people from their early socialization, or *habitus*, to use Bourdieu and Passeron's term (1977). But individuals can reach beyond their cultural habitus, or the previously available sets of possibilities to *produce* themselves through conscious acts of personal agency, rather than to be *reproduced* by some impersonal, disembodied cultural force.

Bourdieu's notion of *trajectory* is helpful in visualizing this process. Trajectory is an arc or pathway away from the *habitus* or natal culture, set in motion by a series of often very small but divergent choices made by individuals to distance themselves from the currently available set of culturally sanctioned – and therefore 'appropriate' – choices laid before them. Bourdieu suggests that people more or less accept what their natal culture intends for them unless – and until – they are presented with alternative possibilities, either because they move away from their natal culture or because external influences invade that natal culture and make themselves known.

While Bourdieu wrote about individuals, especially in his earlier work, and while he generally only conceived of intergenerational change, his concept of trajectory can be applied to the change experienced within a generation by both individuals and groups.

Although they didn't use the language of *habitus* and *trajectory* in their 1967 writings about the upward mobility of caste groups in India, Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph described how untouchable groups engaged in the same process of consciously-made, incremental decisions in order to achieve higher status. They consciously adopted the behavior patterns of groups with greater social status, and subsequently began to demand recognition for those changes in terms of reduction of the stigma traditionally attached to their group.

Such a view of culture shifts its definition from that of an historical artefact imposed on passively receptive individuals to one in which culture becomes a dynamic set of choices, actively sought out by empowered individuals – a conception which is more suitable to the global cafeteria of a world in which we currently live. Thus, while culture remains as a set of unavoidable constraints, these constraints are not totally deterministic ones.

The individual in context

Ethnography also provided a new way to study individuals not from the 'between the ears,' decontextualized perspective of psychology, but as historically and socially situated entities engaged in constructing their own realities through interaction with others in the social, political and cultural environ-

ments where they lived and worked. Ethnography further facilitated a shift in the locus of learning from an isolated act taking place in classrooms to 'everyday learning' in non-formal settings, apprenticeships, informal activities and all sorts of other settings. Researchers in Europe and Latin America, and anthropologists in the United States, had long done this kind of work, but educational psychologists in the United States had resisted both the idea of social influences on learning and studying learning outside classrooms, until it was introduced in the 1980s, primarily by Lev Vygotsky's followers who finally translated his work into accessible English (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky's theories now provide the underpinnings of socio-cultural approaches to learning, which are beginning to dominate educational research in anthropology, sociology, curriculum studies, or cognitive and developmental psychology (1987).

Further, ethnography provided a way to explore what Goodenough (1981), and then Wolcott (1991), have termed *propriospect,* or the unique culture of discrete individuals. This approach draws on the time-honored practice of anthropologists who used life-history interviews and the stories of key informants as a way to typify the culture of a group. These methods demonstrate how individuals are constrained by cultural norms, but also how they develop in accordance with their own talents, characteristics, predilections, and the social roles which they occupy within the culture. Using techniques from biography, oral history and socio-linguistics, such narrative inquiry explores the life experiences of individuals – teachers, students, and community members. It is, in a way, an ethnography of everyday life, seen through the eyes (or articulated in the words) of everyday individuals. Thus, ethnography provided a way to embed individuals within a cultural framework without losing their unique and separate qualities or reducing them to a collection of abstract traits.

What I have just said about the study of individuals may not seem particularly revolutionary. However, such stories provided a way for critical researchers to privilege the voices and stories of marginalized people so that they could be inserted into studies of larger systems or used to contest the practices and assumptions of the dominant culture. Importantly, this research, for which ethnography is so well-suited, provided a way to see communities not as monoliths, but as collections of individuals, whose often contentious interactions constitute the fabric of a culture full of hitherto unnoticed diversity. The emphasis on individuals and their agency has introduced new strategies for analyzing text and discourse, and made good use of insights from the work of theorists such as Gramsci, Bakhtin, and Foucault. It also has facilitated looking at identity as socially constructed and historically mediated.

A new concept of identity

Culture is a concept applied to groups, but increasingly we see that cultures

are made up of individuals, each with unique identities. The notion of identity always has proven somewhat problematic for anthropologists and sociologists, given the traditionally deterministic definition of culture and society that they used. However, even the new and more dynamic definition I have just outlined, in which culture is taken, not given, appropriated, not handed down, becomes problematic when there are no appropriate or available models with which people can identify, or workable strategies by which to create them. What happens, for example, to individuals who are multi-ethnic or bi-racial? Traditionally, they have identified with the group they most resemble, and preferably the group with the highest status, if they can 'pass' as a member of that group. Often, however, doing so runs a high risk of being 'outed' when members of the group whose identity they wish to claim deny the validity of that claim (see, for example, Goffman, 1974). In the US, people of mixed white and black or African-American heritage have been viewed as African-Americans, unless they are very light skinned. In such cases, they may choose to 'pass' as white, but doing so means that they also must carefully hide all links to a 'darker' community. Now, however, people are choosing *not* to choose, and are identifying as *both* white and black (Tatum, 1997), or as multi-ethnic, like the American golfer, Tiger Woods, whose ancestry includes Asian, White, African-American and American Indian roots. What kind of identity does this create, and how should it be defined? Hybrid identities of this kind have been difficult to legitimate, especially when white, Asian, American Indian and black cultures historically have been treated as distinctly different, even setting aside differences which derive from patterns of systematic discrimination.

Or: What happens to Latin American children whose parents move to the predominantly white communities of the rural United States for work? (see, for example, Wortham et al., 2001) Or Japanese children who attend American schools because their fathers are working in the United States branches of Japanese corporations? Such children cannot appropriate the identity of local children, since they not only are the wrong color and speak the wrong language, but often are constrained by the prejudices of their new community from ever being accepted as a local person. They also can't easily return to the home country. For some, return is impossible; for others, it is impossibly difficult because even if they did move their bodies back home, the gender and cultural behaviors they have learned no longer fit what is proper at 'home', and they can't speak their native language as well as do real 'natives'. The diasporic experience has irrevocably changed them in ways that make fitting in difficult (Martinez, 1998, 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

In both these cases, no amount of simple wanting will make an appropriate set of identities appear. There simply aren't any models. There also are no models for people who choose *not* to accept any of the existing available or appropriate models – even if they could – because they view them as boring,

corrupt, or stultifying. A synthesis of existing identities will not exactly work; a 'third way' must be found. This third way constitutes 'a state of in-between-ness . . .an almost unlocatable place . . .[that] becomes something more than the middle of oppositions' (Franquiz, 1999: 31). Drawing on work by Anzaldua (1993) and Mora (1993), Franquiz calls this in-between space by the Nahuatl name *nepantla,* or 'being positioned or positioning yourself somewhere "in the middle" ground between available positions. [It is] an uncertain terrain an individual or group crosses as each moves from one state of understanding to another' (1999: 31). Occupying this contested terrain are young working-class people in the suburbs of Paris, living in apartment complexes filled with people from Northern Africa, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and France itself. They share each other's music, popular culture and lack of meaningful employment, and they develop hybrid languages. They have no idea as to what work might become possible for them or what the future might hold. Seeing themselves as neither French nor Moroccan nor Algerian nor Serbian, they don't even have a good name for what they *do* see themselves to be. They are becoming transformed as they 'live between ideas of self, other, the world, and one's place in the past, present and the future' (Franquiz, 1991: 31). In the process, they are constructing themselves, but in a context that provides far less guidance than young people ever have had before. They are free from the strictures of the past, but in that freedom also lies the peril of radical alienation. Mobin Shorish's research in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed how educational programs run by Islamic militants helped de-racinated and hopeless young Afghani, Kurdish, Yemeni and Pakistani men living in refugee camps on the borders of Pakistan find a support system, a sense of mission and an identity. The result, a decade later, was the Taliban militia. In my case, I hope for alternative forms of identity construction, but I know that the creation of a group like the Taliban is not an isolated case.

Yet another challenge to identity involves people who do not even have an opportunity to reject the new cultures of technology because they have no access to them. What does identity as a 'global citizen' mean to people who cannot fathom a technologically globalized world? Who will never have an opportunity to learn the 'new technological literacies' (Lankshear and Peters, 2000)? People who will never ride on the Information Highway because they have no access to computers? This, then, is one of the challenges for ethnographers: What *is* the process of identity construction, and what is its product, in a global environment? What *are* the conditions or factors that make it possible for people to envision new opportunities and possibilities for themselves? How do we study such things?

And how are educators to respond, saddled as they are with an organizational and bureaucratic structure rooted in the 1930s? On one hand, they are charged with implementing tightly coupled manpower planning and human capital development strategies more suited to the centralized planned

economies of Soviet-style Russia at a time when most industries are becoming increasingly decentralized and virtually virtual (LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991; Weick, 1976). On the other, they are faced with the necessity of supporting public schooling envisioned as a civic responsibility funded by all for the good of all. Arching over all is, in the industrialized world, a highly divisive and elitist critique by middle- and upper middle-class communities of all ethnic persuasions to abandon both civic responsibilities and the public arena by establishing their own schools. In the impoverished sectors of the industrialized world, and in many developing nations, this critique finds an equally powerful counterpart in rejection of any form of westernization and western education in favor of social and political reaction and religious fundamentalism.

The challenge of solving local problems in a global community, or, finding the local in the global and vice versa

Ethnography has a unique ability to help define community, and to help people identify how they fit within communities. It also can facilitate the identification of problems – and their solutions – in terms that fit with the world views and *propriospects* of people within those communities. It seems to me that ethnographers face a tremendous challenge in the fractured, fragmented, tormented and chaotic communities of this 21st century world – the challenge of helping people develop social and educational policies to re-build meaningful and supportive schools and communities. Such a challenge requires a new stance for ethnographers, one which mandates at least a concern with solving problems, which may require activism, and certainly requires liaison with policy-makers. A case in point is a proposed study I recently reviewed. Jim Schechter (2000) plans to study the identities constructed by young men currently interned in a refugee camp in East Africa. The impetus for the study is the United Nations' High Commission on Refugees' (UNHCR) decision to seek a 'durable solution' to the problem of refugees by forcibly repatriating them to their homelands. The young men who are the focus of this study are minors from 34 different tribes; none are accompanied by their families. Most experienced extreme trauma in the transition from homeland to refugee camp, and most have been in the camp for a lengthy period of time. The researcher proposes to examine their current affiliations, identities and allegiances to see if they maintain enough connectedness to their homeland to render repatriation a viable solution or, to the contrary, if these young people have embarked on a trajectory which has led them so far from their home that they can never safely or happily return – the UNHCR's policies notwithstanding. The alternative can be found in a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* called 'From Hell to Fargo', which traces the lives of some of these young men from the alienation of African refugee camps to a different but equally alienating home in Fargo, North

Dakota.

The results of Schechter's study, which examines the genesis and the decay of identity and community will have profound implications for policy. The study may strongly contradict long-standing practices regarding the treatment of refugees, even if the researcher himself does not play an active role in bringing change about. Schechter's study resonates with Bradley Levinson's recently completed study of *secundaria* students in Mexico (1993), which examined conflicts between the stated goals of the school in inculcating a sense of citizenship and counter pressures from both the students' own peer group and historical currents in Mexican national culture. Regular perusal of the newspapers show that similar studies could be useful in many places: East Timor, the states of the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Northern Ireland, many sites in Latin America – and *in every state, city, and community within the United States*. This kind of ethnography, with its focus on multiple sites, practical usage, complex population dynamics and fluid contexts, emphasizes the building of viable communities and individuals in a post-modern and often post-cataclysmic world. It may help lead to policies countering the types of education which produce Taliban-like groups. It also expands our knowledge of what we know, because it examines similarities among what we know, identifies what we don't know, makes clear how schools work, how societies do or do not support them, and how teachers teach and students learn. Ethnography can also provide insights as to the kinds of learning which take place completely outside, but which are completely relevant to, learning inside schools.

Ethnography 'puts researchers into other people's worlds' (Hall, 2001). And that's the only place to study them, especially if we don't know much about those worlds or if we are operating on assumptions about, rather than real experience of them and their problems. For example, educators, politicians and policy-makers – especially in the technologically rich United States – increasingly assume that everyone is – or should be – on-line and technoliterate. This assumption underlies many of our new approaches to collecting ethnographic data. Certainly many of our new ideas for how to display data and represent our 'stories' take on-line capability for granted. But these are presumptuous and arrogant assumptions, not only about the viability of such representations, but also about people who aren't techno-facile! I was heavily criticized personally by my academic colleagues for not having email access in summertime during the years I spent on the Oregon coast. They could not fathom that I was living in one of the few rural communities in America without a local Internet service provider.[1] The fact that I had two telephone lines, a fax machine, and daily overnight mail service wasn't sufficient – even though only a few years before, the possession of a fax machine marked one as truly a member of the technological elite! Further, even today, only an astonishingly small percentage of American households have home computers. Most people use computers at their workplace, and only for activities

related to their jobs – which may be limited to pushing virtual buttons in fast food emporia. Only the more privileged in our nation really are technoliterate. And techno-illiteracy isn't the only problem. Researchers cannot even assume that the populations they wish to study possess text-based literacy. Surprisingly large proportions of the world's and even of our own nation's population are illiterate or semi-literate, or have levels of literacy that don't include the nicely constructed story narratives in which we who are almost terminally 'schooled' describe our experiences (see, for example, Heath, 1996; LeCompte, 1997). We as researchers need to get into these strange new worlds and learn to understand them and communicate with their inhabitants . . . before those inhabitants blow us up as the semi-literate Taliban blew up the ancient Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, and their leaders subsequently destroyed those quintessential symbols of wealth and power, the World Trade Towers. This, it seems to me, is where ethnographers, with all their old and new tools at hand, should be heading.

NOTE

1.   Local Internet access became available in 1999.

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