An Ethnographic Approach to the Study of School Administrators

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THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S TASK is the selective recording of human behavior in order to construct explanations of that behavior in cultural terms. The standard ethnography thus provides an account of the way of life of some special human process (say, law or more narrowly, divorce) or of some particular group of people, such as the Tikopia or the Children of Sanchez. My approach in this paper is ethnographic in that the purpose of the research project is to describe and analyze in cultural terms the behavior of one elementary school principal and the behavior of those who interact with him, such as teachers, pupils, spouse and family, and other principals.

There are, of course, other ways to study the life style of school administrators. One alternative is to obtain such a position oneself, but there are limitations on the ability to observe objectively processes in which one is deeply involved as a participant. A second alternative is to draw upon existing literature. Unfortunately, the literature in educational administration is disappointing as a source of data for learning about the real world of the principal, since it tends to be hortatory or normative in content. It tells principals (or superintendents, or other administrators) how they *ought* to act. It is prescriptive rather than descriptive. Thus while it is an excellent source of information for learning about the ideal world of formal education, it fails to provide an account of what actually goes on or how the ideals are translated into real behavior.

The literature in educational administration that *is* empirically based, on the other hand, provides factual data which tell us too little about too many. For example, we can readily learn from current studies[1] that the average American elementary school principal is a married male between the ages of 35 and 49, has had between 10 and 19 years' total experience in schools, and was an elementary classroom teacher just prior to assuming his administrative post. However useful such data are as a source of census information, they provide virtually no insight into what it is like to be one of these people. Similarly, the ubiquitous questionnaires which plague public school people are constantly inventorying their training, habits and preferences; but because the people who compose them typically fail to do careful preliminary fieldwork, the information obtained (to questions like "Should a principal attend church regularly?")

may reveal more about the tendency of school administrators to give "expected" responses than about their actual practices. Furthermore, such questionnaires often ignore the consequences of the fact that if the questions asked are not crucial, differences in responses are not crucial either. The closest approximation to sources of data on the actual behavior of school administrators are various studies based on self-reporting techniques,[2] an approach beset with problems of subject reliability.

There is at least one facet in the literature on school administrators which to date has received little serious and sustained attention. This needed facet is a series of careful and detailed descriptive studies of the actual behavior of principals, viewed not only in the context of the formal educational system but also in terms of their lives as human beings living out their experience in the context of a total cultural milieu. It was to provide an in-depth study of one elementary school principal seen in the perspective of the cultural context in which he lives that the present research project was begun.

The most intensive period of fieldwork occurred during the first year of the two-year study. During that first year I attempted to spend some part of at least three days a week with the principal. Most, but by no means all, of this time was spent with him while he was at school. The school was an average-size suburban elementary school with a faculty of 18 classroom teachers, three teachers at each grade level from first through sixth, plus a staff including several additional certificated personnel (counselor, resource teacher, nurse) and noncertificated personnel (secretary, cooks, custodians). The school is located in a unified school district of some 20,000 pupils in a metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest.

Over the period of two years I focused my attention on the principal's actual behavior, both in word and in deed, and on the real situations which occurred in both his professional and personal life as these impinged on his behavior as a school administrator. I assumed that every aspect of his life had some relevance for the study. When I was asked (somewhat facetiously, I suppose) whether I planned to take his body temperature each day, I replied, not at all facetiously, that were it readily available I would like such information, just as it might be interesting to know what he ate for dinner each Sunday. Obviously, it was not possible to be quite so eclectic, and it was necessary to establish priorities in data gathering. My attention was drawn primarily to such aspects of a principal's life as the who, what, where, and when of his personal encounters; the cultural themes manifested in his behavior and in his attempts to influence the behavior of those about him; and what it is about the position of principal that those occupying it find more and less satisfying.

The purpose of this article is to examine the field methods employed to arrive at "The Ethnography of a Principalship;" the substantive content of the study will be reported elsewhere.[3] But first let me dispose of one surprising question several people have asked, "Did the principal know you were making the study?" I can assure readers that he did. I spent several weeks searching for a suitable and willing subject, and I did not proceed with formal permission to conduct the study until I had the personal permission and commitment of the individual selected. His family, his faculty and staff, his fellow principals, and many visitors to the school knew something about the project. Even a few pupils learned the nickname ("The Shadow") which members of the faculty assigned me as a semi-humorous acknowledgment of my presence and purpose at their school.

The Fieldwork Methods

Although the ethnographic approach implies commitment to a special perspective in regard to both the gathering of data in field research and the subsequent handling of data in research writing, it does not always explicate the methods for doing either. As a brief descriptive label for the methodology, Zelditch's term "field study" is perhaps the most useful, primarily because he makes an excellent case for the participant-observer approach without going to the extreme of insisting that participant observation entails only participating and observing.[4] Zelditch argues that "a field study is not a single method gathering a single kind of information;"[5] in fact, the participant-observer employs three methods: "enumeration to document frequency data; participant observation to describe incidents; and informant interviewing to learn institutionalized norms and statuses."[6] The three elements of the field study which he identifies provide a useful framework for describing my research activities. The following account of data gathering and data handling in the ethnographic study of a school principal makes use of these three categories—enumeration, participant observation, and interviewing.

ENUMERATION. Census data of various sorts as well as a wide variety of other numerical or potentially numerical data are available in virtually every public school. Not all such data are equally relevant, of course, but a few examples will illustrate the ways and the ethnographic purposes for which frequency data were gathered in this study.

It was possible, for instance, to collect all official notices issued at the school or distributed at school on behalf of the school district's central office. Collecting these items was facilitated by having an assigned mailbox in the school office; like the regular members of the staff, I received copies of a great deal of memoranda simply as a matter of office routine. For correspondence and reports originating from the school office, the secretary often made an extra carbon copy for me. At the end of the school year in June, some of the year's records (for example, the daily notices written in a faculty notebook, and a personal log of incidents which the principal kept during part of the year) were turned over to me simply because they had no further use at school and would ordinarily have been discarded had I not expressed an interest in them.

Such data made possible frequency counts of the kinds and content of messages and interactions which were otherwise recorded in my daily journal entries as single rather than as recurring events. Official reports also provided a permanent record of attendance and other changes accountable to the school district central office during the year. Even the *lack* of personal correspondence emanating from the principal's office (in contrast to the number of formal announcements addressed collectively to all pupils, parents, or staff) provided useful data by supporting the observation that most of the "business" of the principal was conducted verbally.

Another source of enumeration data was tapped through a "time and motion" study: notation was made, at 60-second intervals over a carefully sampled period of two weeks at school, of what the principal was doing, where he was, with whom he was interacting, and who was doing the talking at the time. Had I not been strongly encouraged to include attention to this type of data by one of my colleagues in sociology, I might well have missed an excellent opportunity to get "hard" data with which to support the more content-oriented field notes. In organizing the field notes I have been impressed with the utility of being able to lend quantitative support regarding the relative amount of time the principal spent in various parts of the school building as well as to the frequency of his interactions with certain categories of people and the extent to which he was the person doing the talking.

Another quantitative aspect of the fieldwork included the projects of mapping and photographing the school and the neighborhood. Initially these procedures helped to orient me within the school building and within the school's attendance area. Mapping the attendance area has led to two further independent but related studies carried on by my research assistant, one exploring how a school administrator can use a map as a way of organizing the census data available to him at school,[7] the other a critical examination of the concept of "community" as used in the familiar phrase "school and community."[8] It is hoped that in the monograph (now being prepared), photographs taken of the school and of homes and businesses in the immediate neighborhood will help educators and other readers assess for themselves the extent to which the setting of this study is similar and dissimilar to other elementary schools with which they are familiar.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION. The initial phase of participant observation began with the search for a willing and likely subject. My search was initiated on a personal and informal basis by asking friends and colleagues familiar with the general region in which I wished to conduct the study to recommend principals who might be helpful in my search. These initial contacts recommended persons whom they felt would be likely as well as "representative" subjects. I sought a principal who would fit the description of the average American elementary school principal given previously, with the obvious added qualification that he be willing to work closely with an observer over an extended period of time. I was able to identify several likely prospects and to spend some time in trial runs with them as a test for them and for myself. Finally, I extended an invitation to one principal and asked him to take whatever time he needed and to consult with anyone he wished before making a decision. Several days later I received his personal commitment to take part in the study. Until that time no attempt had been made to secure the formal permission that was ultimately obtained from the school district. I had been concerned that had I worked initially through

formal channels some school superintendent might have "assigned" a school and principal to me, thus making the project dependent on administrative fiat rather than on volunteered cooperation.

Particularly during the first year—once the study was formally underway—my primary methodology was that of participant observation. As often as necessary the principal introduced me as being "from the university and doing some research in which I'm involved." It was usually possible to maximize the opportunity to observe and record while minimizing my participation (other than by my very presence), by standing or sitting just far enough from the principal that those with whom he was interacting could not easily engage us both. I made it a practice to carry my notebook with me and to make entries in it as often as possible. My intent was to create a precedent for constant note-taking so that it would seem natural for me to be writing regardless of the topic or event at hand.

Regarding the taking of notes, several guidelines proved helpful. Notes were taken in longhand in complete and readable form. When the nature of the events was such that I could not take notes as completely as I wished and yet thought it essential to continue a period of observation, I jotted brief notes in the margins of my note book and completed my full account later. I never returned to the school until all the notes from the previous visit were completed. I felt that nothing was gained by my mere presence as an observer; until my notes from one visit were a matter of record, there was no point in returning to school and reducing the impact of one set of observations by imposing a more recent one. Customarily I did not attempt to do an intense job of notetaking for more than two hours at a time.[9] When a single event (e.g., the regular meetings of all the elementary school principals in the school district) extended much beyond two hours I noticed a considerable diminishing in my attention and an increasing succinctness in the notes.

Ultimately the longhand entries were transcribed onto 5x8 papers in duplicate. Each entry describes one single event to facilitate sorting and organizing the data. Here are two brief examples from notes made in October, 1967:

> *October 4. Lunchtime.* The principal and an all-woman faculty group [none of the three male teachers happened to be present] are in the faculty room finishing lunch when I arrive at school. The principal is watching the World Series on a classroom TV set he has brought into the room. The volume is rather loud. One teacher jokes with me about whether I had realized there were "so many ball fans" on the faculty. Another teacher tells me to write down that the principal is "practically useless when the World Series is on," but she hastens to add that "he doesn't have time to watch as intently as he used to—he just used to sit there and never leave the set." No one gave evidence of displeasure at the TV dominating the lunchroom. Later, however, when the principal returned after being called out to the hall by some upper-grade boys and went to shut off the TV he asked, "Does anyone mind if I turn this off?" and a cheer went up in approval. But by then the game was over and only the commercials were being shown. As the principal switched the set off he turned to me and quipped, "Put it in your notes as a day of my sick leave." At 12:15 he left the faculty room to set up the TV for the older pupils in the cafeteria as he had promised them earlier [on the assumption that the day's game would still be going during their lunch period].

> *October 19.* The principal briefed me on an argument he had yesterday with the night custodian, precipitated over where the custodian should park his car. The principal reported: "He got so mad I thought he going to fight me. But I told him I wasn't afraid of him; I'm from the 'show-me' country, too. We're having a meeting on Monday with the maintenance supervisor. Maybe we'll let him go. This has been building up. He seems to resent any authority. If a teacher asks him to do something, he does it, but if I tell him, he gets all in a huff. We can't keep him around if he won't take directions. It'll be tough on him, too. He's pretty old, and he can't do hard labor. And we won't be able to give him a recommendation."

One of the objectives of this study was to see the principal in as many different settings as possible. A table and chair (more symbolic than functional) were moved into the principal's office for my use. At the school I was excluded, by prior arrangement, only from a few "touchy" parent conferences. I had opportunity for extended observations at all school activities and meetings, at district-wide meetings of teachers and administrators, at meetings of local, regional, and state educational associations, and at formal and informal staff gatherings, at school and away.

The meetings which I attended with the principal were seldom so large that I could accompany him unnoticed, but in the long duration of the fieldwork I was present often enough that I believe most of his professional colleagues conducted business-as-usual in my presence. One individual who seemed to remain ever conscious of my presence as a note-taker was the superintendent of schools;

he never conducted a meeting which I attended without at least once directing some comment to me in the manner one might use with a newspaper reporter.

Except for engaging in light social banter, I minimized my interaction in the field settings to avoid being pressed for feedback regarding what I was recording or how I felt about it. Thus I felt somewhat at a loss in terms of being able to "give" in exchange for the cooperation I was getting from the principal and his colleagues. I discovered that by offering to provide transportation to meetings in my automobile, I was able to perform a service much appreciated by the principal and his fellow administrators. Serendipitously I discovered that the usually free-wheeling conversation of a group of principals riding together to and from a meeting provided another source of information.

I was concerned lest I should be overidentified at the school with the principal, particularly since he was the formally appointed status leader of the school. Therefore, I expressed interest in the lives and work of the teachers and other staff members, and made a point of visiting the school on days when I knew the principal was away. "Oh, checking up on us, eh?" someone would inevitably comment, leading me to feel that the possibility of being overidentified with "the boss" was not too remote. Such visits also provided an opportunity to observe the school as it operated during the frequent periods when the principal was away from the building.

In those settings where I observed the principal acting outside his formal administrative role, I had no apprehension about being overidentified with him, but there are very few guidelines to direct a research while accompanying a subject to see about a new battery for his car or to attend his service-club luncheon. Nevertheless I was able to include observations of the principal's life at home with his family, at business meetings at his church, teaching his weekly Sunday School class, during trips to local businesses for school and personal reasons, and at Kiwanis luncheons. I was present during occasional brief meetings with old friends and neighbors. A family wedding provided an opportunity for me to meet more family and friends as well as to discuss with the principal a guest list which served research interests by providing a sort of family sociogram. These out-of-school observations provide the data necessary to place the principal within the broader cultural context of his life as a human being who happens to be a school administrator rather than as a principal viewed only incidentally as a human and cultural being.

INFORMANT INTERVIEWING. In the context of a long-term field study, interviewing can provide not only for learning about institutionalized norms and statuses, but also a means of obtaining systematic data about the range of perceptions among a group of people regarding both persons and events. For example, taped interviews of approximately one hour duration, structured but open-ended, provided excellent data concerning the principal's family life (interviews with his wife and mother) and in the perceptions of him as a school administrator (interviews with thirteen faculty and two staff members). The typescripts of these interviews have proved extremely valuable for uncovering the range of perceptions and for the extent of the affective content expressed by the teachers regarding their work and the people with whom they are associated professionally. The fact that each interview was requested as a personal favor and that no interviewing was done until I had spent over half a year at the school undoubtedly contributed to the ease with which these interviews were held. Collectively the interviews provide a basis for content analysis in terms of what people talked about and how strongly they felt about it. More importantly for this study, they provide illustrative material about the problems of those whose lives are enmeshed personally or professionally with the principal. Recognizing as they did how my study focused on the principal, it was fascinating to me to see how quickly and directly many teachers began discussing their perceptions about administration or their specific points-of-view as they reflected their own successes and problems of the year during the interview sessions.

Toward the end of the school year I asked all the pupils in each fifth and sixth grade classroom to write (anonymously, if they wished) what they thought they would remember about the principal. The phrases which I suggested to them to start their writing were "What kind of a principal is he?"; "Pleasant memories are . . ."; and "One time I won't forget. . . ." The comments I received ran the gamut of opinion, from the succinct response of one pupil who wrote that his principal is "a Dam stopit one," to "He is the kind of a principal who helps you figure it out." Like the teacher interviews, these statements lent themselves to content analysis (e.g., positive *vs.* negative responses of

boys and girls) and provide a source of data for illustrative purposes.

The principal naturally served as a primary informant, since he was not only the focus of the research but was indeed a colleague and partner in the fieldwork. I was never too explicit about what data I was gathering, nor did I share my hunches or tentative analyses with him, but he correctly assumed that a brief recounting of what had occurred at school since my last visit would be helpful to the study. He enjoys talking and visiting (I found him to be doing the talking one-third of the total school day during the "time and motion" part of my study), so this self-imposed task came easily to him. At times he reflected on his personal feelings and philosophy and these statements provided valuable insights into his "ideal world." The juxtaposition of actual behavior and ideal behavior provides excellent means for describing and analyzing a cultural system, because it helps point out the satisfactions, the strains, and the paradoxes between real and ideal behavior. I was fortunate in having an informant who talked easily about aspects of his ideal world.

On a few occasions I formalized the informant role and asked the principal to relate specific accounts. Plans were always discussed in advance when these sessions were to be taped. Three important tapes of this "informant" type were a session in which the principal summarized the opening of school and gave a forecast of the coming year, the session mentioned previously in which he discussed from the wedding list the people who had been invited to his daughter's wedding and reception, and a session recorded in my automobile as we drove through the school attendance area while the principal described the neighborhood to three new teachers accompanying us. In each of these cases he was providing me with perceptions of his universe and/or of his personal value system, each bit of information fitting or challenging the developing ethnographic picture as I have attempted to organize it following the fieldwork.

One final task of informant interviewing was the development of a ten-page questionnaire designed for and distributed to the faculty and staff at the end of the fieldwork. The questionnaire was particularly valuable because it enabled me to obtain systematic data about all the staff, since it had not seemed possible, practical, or even necessary to hold a long taped interview with all 29 members of the regular and part-time staff. This questionnaire provided standard census data and information concerning each teacher's perceptions of the school, the community, and his own classroom. It also provided an opportunity for every staff member to comment on his feelings about his principal, about principals in general, and about his feelings of what an ideal principal should be.

The use of the questionnaire also provided me with a chance to thank the staff for their patience and help during the study. I felt that the questionnaire might give me an opportunity to elicit staff reaction to the research project, and the last statement was an open-ended one: "Some things the researcher may never have understood about this school are. . . ." The question did not evoke much response, but it was flattering to read, "I think you probably understand more than we may think," and I delighted in the humor of one teacher who assumed (correctly) that I did not know "there is no Kotex dispenser in the [women's] restroom."

Comment

A small but growing body of literature gives indication that more attention is being given to anthropologically-oriented field studies in education of the kind described in this paper.[10] That educators are becoming interested in drawing on a broader research base than that provided by either experimental psychology or sociological survey methods is a heartening sign, especially as it means that what actually goes on in classrooms and schools has become a legitimate focus for research efforts.

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss an ethnographic approach the study of a school administrator. The research has been described here as a field study approach, the specific methodology entailing a major effort in participant observation, complemented by the extensive collection of enumeration and interview data. The potential of being able to provide a substantial ethnographic account of a principalship has provided the *raison d'être* for the study.

I should conclude this discussion by pointing out at least some of the pitfalls in this approach, lest this study and others like it should suddenly and inadvertently precipitate a deluge of field studies in education research by students dissatisfied with methods which appear to be more "rigorous."

Participant observation is not intended to be an apology for an absence of method. It is an excellent method for obtaining certain kinds of data—its proponents argue its superiority to any other

single method—but it cannot by itself provide the whole picture. My detractors constantly plague me with the question, "But what can you prove by studying only *one* principal?" An administrator of an elementary school in Harlem has already warned me, "If you had really wanted to learn about administering an elementary school, you would have come to mine." One always faces the problem of generalizability in pursuing an in-depth study of a single case.

The participant-observer approach is a high risk, low yield adventure. It is high risk because unless the fieldwork is eventually translated into a significant, readable (and read) monograph, the only possible gain is in the experiential repertoire of the researcher himself. It is low yield because of the great investment in time and personal effort to obtain basic and often rather commonplace data. The researcher who adopts this approach must face the problems common to participant observation in any setting, especially including a confrontation with oneself as a research instrument.

In educational settings, a researcher contemplating the ethnographic approach faces certain rather unique problems as well, for he undertakes not only a cross-cultural and comparative approach to studying events within his own society, but he must also attempt the difficult task of suddenly assuming the role of formal observer within an institutional framework with which he has probably been in continuous contact since the age of six. Perhaps cross-cultural field experience should be an ordinary prerequisite for conducting ethnographically-oriented research within the narrow cultural boundaries of our American educational system. Even if such a prerequisite cannot always be met, calling attention to it serves the useful function of requiring the researcher to consider the crucial nature of himself as instrument in collecting data through participant observation and interviewing techniques.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See, for example, the recent survey of the elementary school principalship completed by the Department of Elementary School Principals of the National Education Association, Washington, D. C. *The Elementary School Principalship in 1968,* the fourth such report completed since an initial survey conducted in 1928.
2. The four national surveys conducted by the Department of Elementary School Principals cited above are based exclusively on self-reporting techniques. An unpublished doctoral dissertation by Bill Jay Ranniger, "A Summary of the Job Responsibilities of the Elementary School Principal," University of Oregon, 1962, describes a number of such studies conducted typically as doctoral studies or as research surveys made by statewide organizations of school principals.
3. Harry F. Wolcott, *The Ethnography of a Principalship* (in preparation). An overview of the study appears in a chapter, "The Elementary School Principal: Notes from a Field Study," in George D. Spindler (ed.), *Education and Cultural Process: Approaches to an Anthropology of Education,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York (forthcoming). A brief statement on methodology in that chapter is based on the same original paper as the discussion presented here. The chapter also contains one detailed episode and analysis from the field study, an episode dealing with the selection of new principals in the school district.
4. Morris Zelditch, Jr., "Some Methodological Problems of Field Studies," *American Journal of Sociology,* Vol. 67, 1962, pp. 566-576.
5. *Ibid.,* p. 567.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 566.
7. John A. Olson, "Mapping: A Method for Organizing Data About Your School Attendance Area," Bulletin of the Oregon School Study Council, College of Education, University of Oregon, Vol. 12, No. 7, March 1969.
8. Mr. Olson, an experienced geographer, is completing a study of the ecology of the school attendance area to compare the "school community" as the principal and other school personnel perceive it with the community as perceived through the perspective of a geographer. Mention should be made of Mr. Olson's important contribution in the analyses of other enumeration and interview data in the study. His lesser involvement in the school setting was undoubtedly important in insuring that the analyses were objectively restricted to the data at hand.
9. In a paper entitled "Issues in Anthropological Fieldwork in Schools," presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, November 1969, Professor Bud Khleif argued that the fieldworker in the school or classroom cannot be a participant. Although I would hold that by the very nature of his approach the fieldworker always functions in both participant and observer roles to some extent, participant observation in schools does indeed provide far more extensive opportunity for observing and ordinarily makes minimum demands on one as participant. The fact of long, virtually uninterrupted periods of observation helps account for the problem of observer fatigue noted here, after blocks of time that might otherwise be considered brief in utilizing a participant-observer approach. For further discussions of fieldwork problems in schools and classrooms see Peter S. Sindell, "Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Education," *Review of Educational Research,* Vol. 39, No. 5, December 1969; and Louis M. Smith and J. A. Brock, "'Go, Bug, Go!': Methodological Issues in Classroom Observational Research," Occasional Paper Series, No. 5, Central Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory, Inc., St. Ann, Missouri, January 1970.
10. For a summary of this literature see, e.g., Harry F.

Wolcott, "Anthropology and Education," *Review of Educational Research,* Vol. 37, No. 1, February 1967, pp. 82-92. More recent publications include Jacquetta Hill Burnett, "Ceremony, Rites, and Economy in the Student System of an American High School," *Human Organization,* Vol. 28, No. 1, Spring 1969, pp. 1-10; Estelle Fuchs, *Teachers Talk: Views from Inside City Schools,* Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1969; Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1968; A Richard King, *The School at Mopass,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1967; Eleanor Burke Leacock, *Teaching and Learning in City Schools,* Basic Books, New York, 1969; Louis M. Smith and William Geoffrey, *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom: An Analysis toward a General Theory of Teaching,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1968; Harry F. Wolcott, "Concomitant Learning: An Anthropological Perspective on the Utilization of Media," in Raymond V. Wiman and Wesley C. Meierhenry (eds.), *Educational Media: Theory into Practice,* Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, Columbus, Ohio, 1969, pp. 217-247.