Ethnography

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The terms 'ethnography' and 'ethnographic' have been in common use within research on education since at least the 1950s (Spindler, 2000). Initially, they had a relatively specific meaning, referring to anthropological research that focused on the process of cultural transmission within schools, studied against the background of local communities, and usually with a particular interest in the experience of minority or subordinated groups. However, from the 1960s onward, within education and beyond, the word 'ethnography' began to be used in other disciplines and in a wider range of ways, with some other methodological labels treated as near-synonyms – including 'case study', 'field research', 'interpretive inquiry', and 'qualitative method'. Moreover, where previously the label had referred to studies employing participant observation over relatively long time periods, now the data collection tended to be of shorter duration and some studies relied primarily if not exclusively upon in-depth interviews. Diversity in orientation also increased: some of this more recent ethnographic work formed part of evaluation projects, some drew on sociological theory and on sociolinguistics, and some of it was influenced by Marxism, feminism, and other critical and activist approaches – though critical and activist strands can be traced within US anthropology of education from quite early in its development (Yon, 2003). There was also dispersion in geographical terms: prior to 1960 almost all ethnographic work in education was carried out by US scholars, but from that decade onward there was considerable growth in this kind of research elsewhere, most notably in the UK, but also in Australia and on the European continent (for the case of Sweden, see Larsson, 2006). The result is that there is now a huge amount of work that labels itself as ethnography.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, there was also diversification within anthropological research in education, for example with some of it developing an international comparative dimension, while another flourishing genre focused on language-use, stimulated by the ethnography of communication and other work in sociolinguistics. A further influential strand developed within the Chicago tradition of US sociology, with studies of schoolteachers (for instance, Lortie, 1975; and the work of Becker, see Burgess, 1995), and of students (e.g., Geer *et al.*, 1961). From the 1960s onwards, outside of anthropology and sociology, there were many investigations of life in classrooms (Jackson, 1968), some of which could be described as ethnographic. In the UK, some early ethnographic work focused on the effects of streaming or tracking in secondary schools (e.g., Lacey, 1970). Subsequently, in the 1970s and 1980s, developments around the new sociology of education led to a considerable range of studies concerned with both teacher and student perspectives in the context of classroom interaction (see Hammersley, 1999). Under the influence of feminism and anti-racism, this work spread out into a range of investigations concerned with inequitable treatment within the education system. More recently, in the UK and elsewhere, much ethnographic work has been concerned with investigating the character and consequences of managerialist forms of educational policymaking (for instance, Woods *et al.*, 1997; Troman *et al.*, 2006). There has also been a small amount of work that has extended the focus beyond teachers and students in state-funded mainstream schools, for example, looking at religious schools (Peshkin, 1988), at vocational training (Atkinson *et al.*, 1981), and at educational processes in non-institutional settings (Delamont, 2006).

The Meaning of Ethnography

In etymological terms, 'ethnography' means writing about a people, and came to refer to producing an account of the way of life of a particular community or society. In early twentieth-century anthropology, what was aimed at was a descriptive account that captured a distinctive form of social organization or culture. Initially, ethnography was contrasted with ethnology, an influential form of nineteenth-century anthropological work which focused on the historical and comparative analysis of societies, and was usually based on accounts produced by travelers and missionaries. Over time, the term 'ethnology' fell out of favor, and 'ethnography' came to refer to theoretical interpretation of cultures on the basis of firsthand investigation carried out by anthropologists and other social scientists themselves. Moreover, the word has a double meaning, referring both to a form of research and to the product of that research: in other words, ethnography as a practice produces ethnographies as published accounts. A contrast has also sometimes been drawn between doing ethnography and using ethnographic methods. This distinction has been employed by some anthropologists in an attempt to mark off their own practice from what passes for ethnographic work within sociology and evaluation studies (Wolcott, 1999). However, the distinction raises a more general issue: that the various methodological ideas and strategies associated at any particular time with

ethnography have been by no means universal or fixed. So, if we look back from the twenty-first century a hundred years or more, across different disciplines and different countries, we find considerable variation in the nature of ethnographic principle, practice, and products. Even anthropological research has changed considerably over this period, and become more diverse in methodological terms. For many anthropologists in the past, ethnography required living with a group of people for an extended period – for a year or even several years – in order to document and explain their distinctive way of life, the beliefs and values integral to it, the social institutions (including those relating to education) characteristic of it, and so on. However, today, ethnography has come to be defined in more specific methodological terms as the use of participant observation and/or in-depth interviewing; though even this meaning has been breached by the notion of virtual or internet ethnography, where the primary form of data is online rather than face-to-face (Silva, 2002).

Despite variation in meanings given to the word, in practical terms of method ethnography usually involves many of the following features:

1. People's actions and accounts are studied primarily in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher – such as in experiments or in highly structured interview situations. In other words, research takes place in the field or is naturalistic in character.
2. Data are gathered from a range of sources. While participant observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones, documents, artifacts, and even statistical data may also be employed.
3. Data collection is usually relatively unstructured, in the sense that it does not involve following through a fixed and detailed research design setup at the beginning. Nor are the categories that will be used for interpreting what people say or do generally built into the data collection process itself – via prestructuring of observation, interviews, or documentary analysis. Instead, they are to be discovered or constructed during the course of inquiry.
4. The focus is usually on a small number of cases, perhaps a single setting or group of people, occasionally just one person, as with some forms of life history and auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 2001). Sometimes a larger number of cases are studied, notably where these are small-scale, for example, school lessons.
5. The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, and usually also how these are implicated in local, and wider, contexts. What are produced by ethnographic analyses, for the most part, are verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories; quantification and statistical analysis play a subordinate role at most.

There have been continuing disputes about whether any of these features is essential, and about the relationship with other work of various kinds that is placed today under the broader heading of 'Qualitative method'. There is no definitive answer to these questions, they are a matter of dispute.

Ethnography as a Distinctive Methodological Orientation

As a practical approach, ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings. However, it involves a more deliberate and systematic attitude, as with any form of research, and also a distinctive mentality. This can perhaps best be summarized as starting from an attempt to make the strange familiar – in the sense of finding intelligibility and rationality in what is initially inexplicable – and, at the same time, making the familiar strange – by suspending those background assumptions that immediately give apparent sense to much of what we experience, at least in contexts with which we are well-acquainted (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Over the course of its development, ethnography has been influenced by a range of methodological and theoretical movements. Early on, within anthropology, it was shaped by German historicist ideas about the difference between the human and the natural sciences, by folk psychology, but also by nineteenth-century positivism. Subsequently, in the form of the case study approach of the Chicago School, it was informed by philosophical pragmatism, while in more recent times phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, and post-structuralism have all played an important role. As noted earlier, it has also been influenced by various critical orientations: Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, disability activism, and queer theory. The forms that ethnographic work has taken, and the particular influences operating on it, have varied across different fields and different countries, as well as over time.

Despite these diverse influences, at an abstract level ethnography tends to be characterized by a few distinctive methodological ideas about the nature of the social world and how it can be understood. These have influenced how ethnographers have studied educational structures and processes. They can be summarized as follows:

1. Human behavior is not an automatic product of either internal or external forces or stimuli. People's responses to the world are constructed and reconstructed over time and, across spaces, in ways that reflect the biographies and socio-cultural locations of the actors, how they interpret the situations they face, and how these situations develop over time.

2. There are diverse cultures that can inform human behavior, and these vary not just between societies or local communities but also within them.
3. Human social life is not structured by fixed, law-like patterns, but displays emergent processes of various kinds that involve a high degree of contingency.

While these generic ideas have informed much ethnographic work, they have been interpreted in a variety of ways, and have generated some tensions.

Tensions Within Ethnography

In recent times, there has been some dispute over the character of the phenomena that ethnographers study and how they should study them. There are a number of dimensions to this.

One is a tension between naturalism and constructionism. For the first, the task of ethnography is to document stable cultures, patterns of social interaction, institutions, and so on, as they exist in the world independently of the researcher. By contrast, constructionism is concerned with the interactional or discursive processes whereby cultures and institutions are ongoingly, and contingently, produced and sustained. Indeed, in its more radical forms, constructionism treats the phenomena studied by ethnographers as effectively constituted in and through the research process itself, and especially through the process of writing (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

These disputed assumptions about the nature of the social world are closely linked with ideas about how we can understand it. And here too significant differences in approach come to the surface. One of these concerns the nature of context. On the one hand, some ethnographers focus on the details of what happens in specific, small-scale contexts on particular occasions, and perhaps on how participants themselves define these contexts. On the other hand, there are ethnographers who insist on the need to locate what has been studied within a theoretical understanding of some larger social whole. Over the past few decades there has been a trend towards more micro-focused ethnographies (Erickson, 1992), but there has long been, and remains, a counter-tradition which stresses the need to locate what is studied in a wider context, whether a national society or the global pattern of social relations (Burawoy *et al.*, 2000).

Parallel to this have been criticisms of much ethnography for being ahistorical. It is sometimes portrayed as preoccupied with describing and explaining what happens at some particular place and time, thereby neglecting longer-term trends. One response to this has been to advocate longitudinal ethnographies, for example following the development of students' lives over several years as they traverse the education system, investigating the changes experienced, the adaptations made, and the outcomes (see Pollard, 2007). Also relevant here are restudies (e.g., see Smith, 1983; Burgess, 1987), and life history investigations that trace, for instance, the patterns of teachers' careers and the factors shaping these (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

A third tension within ethnographic thinking is between a focus on the unique and the use of comparative analysis: between seeking to study the distinctive aspects of particular cases and being concerned with producing generalisations or building theories. Ethnographers vary considerably in their position on this dimension, but most seek to satisfy both demands simultaneously in one way or another, to at least some degree. The concept of thick description (Geertz, 1973) represents one sort of trade-off, where theories are primarily means for understanding what is going on in particular cases; but are developed in the course of this. Toward the other end of the spectrum are grounded theorizing and analytic induction, where the intended product of ethnographic work is some kind of general theory, albeit evidenced through data from particular cases (see Hammersley, 1989, 2008).

Another issue concerns whether the emphasis is on description or explanation. For some, the primary ethnographic task is explicating the perspectives, or cultural orientations, of the people being studied in their own terms. For others, the goal is to explain why people see the world and act in the ways that they do, and perhaps also to account for the consequences of this. The first approach emphasizes the role of careful description, of understanding the meanings people give to the situations they face and to their own identities, perhaps even seeking to amplify their voices. By contrast, the second often produces accounts that raise questions about the validity of people's beliefs about themselves and their world. This may involve explaining their attitudes and actions in terms of causal factors whose existence or significance they do not acknowledge, or even explicitly deny. Sometimes these two approaches have been applied selectively within the same study, with the perspectives of some actors being presented as at least partly representing genuine understanding of the world while other aspects of their perspectives, or the perspectives of other people, are treated as ideological (see Hammersley, 1998).

A related variation concerns attitudes toward the distinction between appearance and reality. Some ethnographers see their work as challenging official or public appearances, the fronts people display, in order to find out what people really believe or what is really going on. A somewhat different orientation involves viewing social life as a matter of socio-cultural performance, with the task being to study the processes or strategies by which people bring off particular performances on particular occasions (Bloome *et al.*, 1989; Atkinson and Coffey, 2002). From this second point of view, there is no true

or fundamental reality behind appearances, only constitutive, interactional processes that generate one set of phenomena rather than another.

Even for those ethnographers who place emphasis on documenting people's perspectives, there are questions about the nature of understanding. How far it is ever possible or necessary for ethnographers to understand participants' perspectives 'from the inside?' It has been suggested that this involves reducing the Other to the Same, forcing what is different into terms that are familiar. At the same time, ethnography has also sometimes been accused of Othering, of rendering non-Western societies or marginalized groups within Western societies exotic and alien, a criticism that parallels Said's discussion of orientalism (Said, 1978). Closely related are criticisms of the totalizing orientation of much older ethnography, where cultures are described as if they were objects in the world that are internally homogeneous, and as if membership of a culture determined everything of importance about any individual person.

A further dimension of difference in orientation concerns whether an appreciative or a critical stance is judged to be most appropriate. In some influential forms, ethnography has involved a concern to capture the beliefs and actions of the people being studied in such a way as to minimize the effects of the research process and of the attitudes of the researcher. Here, ethnography was usually distanced from any concern with practical improvement or social intervention, and therefore adopted a nonjudgmental or appreciative orientation (Matza, 1969). However, in the mid-twentieth century there developed forms of applied anthropology that treated ethnography as a basis for interventions designed to improve the lives of the people being studied. Later, some ethnographers adopted Marxist or other critical perspectives in which the phenomena studied were to be located within a political perspective that generated evaluations and recommendations for social change. At the same time, the impact of post-structuralism and postmodernism has challenged reliance upon political positions involving meta-narratives, notably but not exclusively Marxism, in favor of subordinating ethnographic work to local struggles, with one of the tasks being to liberate those repressed forms of knowledge that have been banished to the margins of conventional society. These developments have also raised doubts about, but in practice also sometimes reinforced, the idea that at least part of the ethnographic task is to give voice to those treated as low status or marginalized within particular societies and communities: for example, students or parents from minority ethnic groups.

Closely associated with some of these developments have been pressures to do ethnographic work *with* people rather than *on* them, along the lines of various participatory forms of inquiry or action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2006). In some cases this has built on a commitment to advocacy by anthropologists, and on the notion of indigenous ethnography; while, elsewhere, it also derived from feminist and other approaches to research ethics which have challenged what is seen as the hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched in conventional forms of ethnography and other kinds of social research. However, there is a tension here not only with the commitment of older forms of ethnography to appreciation and understanding but also between subordinating research to participants' orientations and using it as a means of raising their consciousness in order to generate desirable social change. Within the field of education, there has been considerable work drawing on ethnographic methods that has been aimed at working with practitioners, or enabling the latter to do research themselves, notably under the banner of educational action research, but some of it also involving a critical orientation (e.g., see Gitlin *et al.*, 1989).

A final, related, trend worth mentioning is increasing pressure to recognize the extent to which, and ways in which, all research, including ethnography, plays a political role in the world. To some degree this began long ago with criticism of how anthropology was implicated in Western imperialism. In more recent times, the concern with the politics of ethnography has become much broader, reflecting the influence of new social movements of various kinds, and wider socio-political circumstances. For some commentators, the whole enterprise of research is political through and through, in the sense that it cannot but involve reliance on value assumptions, and these cannot but reflect the identity, commitments, and social location of the researcher as a person. This runs against earlier forms of ethnography where research was treated as concerned simply with producing objective scientific knowledge about diverse communities and cultures, an orientation that is now regarded by many, though not all, ethnographers as simply an ideological disguise for political interests that serve the status quo.

Some Further Developments

As noted earlier, ethnography refers not just to a process of inquiry but also to a particular type of product: to the sort of account generated by ethnographic research. Prior to the early 1980s, the task of writing up ethnographies was given relatively little attention in the methodological literature. Most of the focus was on problems surrounding data collection and analysis. However, in the past three decades there has been considerable interest in this topic, not just from a practical point of view but also in terms of analyzing how ethnographic accounts represent or effectively constitute the social contexts and people investigated. Epistemological, political, and ethical concerns are intermingled in what has come to be seen as a crisis of representation (see Hammersley, 2008).

Developments in technology have also had an important impact on ethnographic work. In the second half of the twentieth century, the availability of increasingly portable audio- and video-recorders meant that fieldnotes came to play a subordinate role in much ethnography. Furthermore, the use of video-recording has built on earlier developments in visual ethnography that employed photographs and film. These technologies may have encouraged the spread of an increasingly micro-focused concern with the details of what is said and done on particular occasions.

Advances in computer technology, and in software for processing qualitative data, are another important area of development, one where there is disagreement about whether the technology serves or distorts ethnographic practice. What seems clear, though, is that digitization of data, and the increased capacity of computers to handle multimedia material, will open up considerable opportunities for ethnographers, as well as no doubt also raising new problems, or old problems in new forms. Closely related here is the development of the internet, and the opportunities that this provides not just as a source of information but also for the investigation of virtual communities.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a significant feature of the changing environments in which ethnographers seek to carry out their work. Both anthropologists and sociologists have encountered increasing barriers in gaining access to settings in many societies, and this includes those relevant to education. These stem from a variety of factors, among which are managerialist forms of regulation within both privately owned and publicly funded organizations, and increasing commercialization. A related external factor is increasing ethical regulation, the ethical codes on which this is based often assuming a model of research that is at odds with both the theory and the practice of ethnography (Lincoln and Tierney, 2004).

The rise of the notion of evidence-based policymaking and practice, and associated demands that educational research be reformed to provide more effective evidence about what works, has become a significant feature of the environment in which ethnographic inquiry is now carried out, in many countries. What is involved here is not just a push toward more applied kinds of work but also the imposition of distinctive research criteria. Even where randomized controlled trials are not treated as the gold standard, the methodological orientation associated with the evidence-based practice movement in education is at odds with ethnography in some key respects, for example, in demanding closely specified initial research designs. Of related significance here is increasing strategic management of research and modes of research training within universities, which are also sometimes informed by a similar methodological model.

In conclusion, then, term ‘ethnography’ now refers to a range of flourishing approaches within educational research and social science. Much is shared among these approaches, but there are also some significant differences and tensions, as well as important challenges.

See also: Action Research in Education; Classroom Ethnography; Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis; Participant Observation.

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