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ABSTRACT

Questions and issues surrounding ethnographic research in educational settings are discussed from the viewpoint of the research manager responsible for directing large-scale research projects. The parts of an ethnographic study include: (1) conceptualizing the research project and determining if ethnographic methods are called for: (2) recruiting and training ethnographers (i.e., field workers): (3) negotiating ethnographers' presence on-site: (4) maintaining communication and coordination between the ethnographer, site personnel, and researcher: (5) developing formats for data recording and processing: (6) determining strategies to reduce the volume of data so that meaning and richness are not lost: and (7) interpreting and relating the qualitative data effectively. Ethnography is a very important research methodology, but it is no easy out for those who would like to avoid specifying research questions and research designs in advance. Even when well thought out and well managed, ethnographic studies can be complex, frustrating, and expensive. (RL)

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ETHNOGRAPHERS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA, AN ICEBERG OF THE FIRST ORDER FOR THE RESEARCH MANAGER

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The anthropological field method is available to educational researchers. It is, on the one hand, too infrequently used and, on the other too often badly used. (Lutz and Ramsey, 1974)

The use of ethnography in educational research is definitely on the upswing, and it appears to be a major trend for educational researchers in the late 1970's. It would be nice to think that all of this increased interest in qualitative research methodologies indicates a need to develop richer descriptions of research contexts and the desire to develop new hypotheses which can subsequently be put to the "empirical test." Unfortunately, there is some indication that the movement toward increased use of qualitative methodologies may simply be an attempt to flow with perceived trends, or a strategy to avoid OMB forms clearance.

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With the interest and increased use of ethnographic procedures, there is reason to believe that many of the new qualitative research attempts will reflect overly simplistic approaches to answering research questions and a naivete about the complexities of doing this type of research. Perhaps this could be avoided if education research managers, the people in charge of directing large-scale research projects, were aware from the outset of the problems and responsibilities involved in conducting ethnographic research.

All of the questions and issues surrounding ethnographic research cannot be addressed in this brief paper. However, a sampling of the conceptual issues and practical realities of doing ethnographic research can be used to question the overly simplistic views that appear to be held by many policy makers, researchers, and practitioners about the design and ease of doing ethnographic research. In this paper, a series of questions will be raised and illustrations will be drawn from research studies conducted at the Texas R&D Center for Teacher Education and elsewhere. This paper is not meant to be heard as a yell that the "sky is falling," but it is an attempt to sound an alert about the complexities and subtleties of doing ethnographic research in educational settings.

The use of ethnographic research has an extensive, well-documented history in anthropology. The popular view of the model is that of the lone anthropologist who becomes a field worker in some remote society or culture, a la Malinowsk . The anthropologist as observer, as ethnographer, moves in among the "aliens" and observes and documents all aspects of the culture and its interworkings. From the extensive field notes the anthropologist attempts to develop an understanding of how the social system under observation is actually structured. This popularized approach of the anthropologist does not fit, in all instances, anthropology or educational research and development.

In education, one obvious difference is that schools are not alien social systems to most educational researchers. This does not mean that these researchers necessarily understand much about schools and schooling; only that they are not apt to be as detached in their perspectives as the anthropologist observing a foreign culture. Further, in many educational studies, especially in the area of research and evaluation, the qualitative research methodology is not being applied by a lone researcher who is submerged full-time in the culture. Rather, ethnographic methodologies are being applied in team evaluation studies and in programmatic research that entail the use of large staffs in many different roles and activities.

The problems faced by the research manager are many and the initial appeal of ethnography can quickly become lost in the morass created by attempting to set up an ethnographic study. Defining research questions, recruiting ethnographers, gaining access to schools, maintaining ethnographers at the field sites, and processing and analyzing data are all things which must be dealt with. This is not at all to suggest that ethnography is not an important, stimulating and powerful methodology, but it has become clear to me that it is an iceberg of the first order.

- The Iceberg Cometh -

The tip of the ethnographic iceberg is the promise of great richness and diversity in data without apparent need for excessive methodological rigor. The hidden seven-eighths of the iceberg include challenges that are in some ways more difficult to resolve than the parallel problems with quantitative methodologies. This is particularly true since the ethnographic literature, although replete with conceptualizations and hopes for ethnography's potential

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contributions to educational research, has afforded little in the way of methodological aids for the nitty-gritty task of creating, maintaining and interpreting an ethnographic study. Accomplishing this is the burden of the research manager. As will be outlined in the sections that follow, the research manager is responsible for completing or monitoring the many parts of an ethnographic study:

a. conceptualizing the research project and determining if ethnographic methods are called for;

b. recruiting and training ethnographers (i.e., field workers);

c. negotiating ethnographers being on-site;

d. maintaining communication and coordination between the ethnographer, site personnel and researcher;

e. developing formats for data recording and processing;

f. determining strategies to reduce the volume of data so that meaning and richness are not lost; and

g. interpreting and relating the qualitative data in meaningful ways.

By revealing and discussing these below-the-surface problems and tasks, all of which I have personally dealt with in the role of research manager, I hope to lift some of the fog surrounding the iceberg of ethnography in educational research. By doing so perhaps I can prevent some hapless research manager from developing that sinking feeling that s/he is the captain of a research project named the Titanic.

When is Ethnography Needed?

When is it desirable and indeed necessary to use an ethnographic methodology? Contrary to popular opinion, doing qualitative research does not at all relieve the research manager from the responsibility of having to specify research questions in advance. As a matter of fact, it is probably more pressing for the qualitative research manager to have clearly in mind what the research questions are than it is for the quantitative researcher. Unfortunately, with ethnography, it is all too easy to avoid determining exactly what the research study is about and to ship ethnographers off to the field to collect all sorts of data. This is not to say that the research questions must be highly focused and convergent, since, if they are, quantitative research approaches are probably more appropriate. As Lofland (1971) has pointed out, qualitative and quantitative research designs are to answer different types of questions. With the best possible statement of the questions before the study begins, the data collection activities can have the clearest focus possible. Developing clear questions not only improves the quality and relevance of the ethnographic work, it also helps in addressing other issues related to ethnographer selection and training.

Recruiting and Training Ethnographers

Estes and Herriott (1973) have suggested guidelines and rules to assist research managers in recruiting and training ethnographers. One of the interesting approaches they have used is to have prospective ethnographers critique a draft of the paper that describes the ethnographer's role. They have also had field site personnel involved in the final selection process, as have we at the University of Texas R&D Center. The following are some additional points that we have learned from our experiences with ethnography.

Who Makes a Good Ethnographer?

A large set of descriptors of the good ethnographer could be developed. The following are some of the key characteristics that we have found to be useful: the person must be able to tolerate ambiguity; be neat; be able to work on his or her own responsibly, and must be seen by others as trustworthy. They must also be personally committed, self-disciplined, sensitive to themselves and to others, mature, and consistent (i.e., be able to say the same thing to different people). And they must be able to maintain confidentialities. A naturally outgoing effervescent person is probably not desirable since everyone at the field site will want to become friends with them. Conversely, a wallflower may not be appropriate since they may not be accepted even as an observer. Hord (1978) has surveyed participants in three field sites about their perceptions of the ethnographer. Her paper provides further characteristics as do Estes and Herriott (1973).

Hiring experienced versus experienced ethnographers is another key decision. It does not appear that past ethnographic experience is a key determinant of success. Experienced ethnographers may be difficult to find: the work is wearing and not everyone wants to do it more than once. However, experienced ethnographers do bring additional insights and perspectives to the role and can be of great assistance to the research manager as well as to inexperienced ethnographers. On the other hand, experienced ethnographers may also bring predispositions about what data should be collected. Thus, they may need more training to be able to focus on obtaining the kinds of data that are needed in a particular study.

Regardless of what the research manager may think or have in mind, once ethnographers are in the field they are on their own. The ethnographer has to be a self-starter, self-disciplined, and have a sixth sense for what data the research study needs. The ethnographers select what to report, set their own schedules and determine what data will be collected. No matter the extent of training and guidelines, in the end it is in the hands of those in the field to deliver the goods and to deliver them in a form that is usable.

The Ethnographer's Concerns

There is potential for conflict between the research manager's expectations and the realities of the role in the field as perceived and experienced by the field personnel. In a team effort, the ethnographer is not autonomous in the sense that the lone anthropologist is. In the large educational research project, the ethnographer is responsible for collecting data and delivering it back to the research manager. Agendas and feelings may not always be in harmony. As Fuller found for student teachers (1969) and as has been demonstrated for teachers involved in adopting an innovation (Hall and Rutherford, 1976), ethnographers move through a series of "concerns" about their role. For the research manager this means a constantly changing set of questions, anxieties and problems to address. For the ethnographer it means new stresses (Zigarmi and Zigarmi, 1978). Wax's description of her concerns and actions as she moved into field work for the first time provide a rich illustration of what the research manager can anticipate (1971). The stresses are real and it is the job of the research manager to support the ethnographer and assist in the resolution of the various concerns as they arise.

For example, as ethnographers join a project they have high "self concerns." They question whether or not they can do the job and exactly what the role will entail. They are concerned about how their salary will be determined, whether the field site personnel will accept them, whether they will be living on-site or commuting, and whether they are full-time or part-time. There are also initial concerns about how much back-up the research manager will provide.

As their jobs get fully underway the ethnographers shift their concerns to "task" issues. The logistics and management of data collection activities, the time and energy demands, the format of data reporting and time lags all become important. As these concerns are being dealt with it is important that the research manager keep in mind the whole project (i.e., the forest, not the trees) and be consistent in clarifying the basics and supporting the ethnographer.

As the task concerns become resolved ethnographers will need less feedback that tells them they are doing an appropriate job, and they are less concerned about the acceptability of the data they are turning in. Up to that time, however, it is important for the research manager to provide the ethnographers with support and feedback on the quality and extent of their data collection activities. The research manager needs to be especially attuned to the personal stress that the ethnographer experiences in the first several months in the field setting and should not unnecessarily increase their personal concerns.

Placing and Keeping the Ethnographer On-Site

Explaining the ethnographic research study to field site personnel and securing their permission for ethnographers to be on-site to observe is another key step. The negotiation may proceed differently depending on the intensity of the observation. Whether it is part-time or full-time, and whether it is focused at lower levels of the organization or the policy level can make a difference.

At the beginning there will be constant questions from site personnel about why the data are being collected. These questions must be answered in ways that will be credible to field site personnel, consistent from person to person, and yet not be over-ambitious in promising what the data will provide for feedback during and at the end of the study. Frequently field site personnel have the image that researchers can use their mysterious analyses to provide profound answers to their questions. This is especially true when field site personnel imagine the research staff to have nothing to do but analyze the data from their site. A disappointment for the researcher is not being able to deliver at the quality level and rate that practitioners expect.

In extended longitudinal studies, misunderstandings arise from time to time over the ethnographer's role, over what data are to be fed back, or how information is communicated and to whom. There is a tight rope that the ethnographer and the research manager are constantly walking, along with the field site personnel. If these issues are not resolved as they develop, suspicion can grow and the ethnographer's role can be jeopardized.

As discomfort grows, questions are raised about the limits and boundaries of the ethnographic work and the meaningfulness of the data that are being collected. There is increasing pressure for feedback of data. In some instances, it can appear that no matter what data is fed back, (without violating confidences) suspicion and frustration continue to grow among site personnel that other things are being withheld. Field-site personnel may appear to feel that something more than what they are told is being done with all of the data. Interestingly, the research manager can have perceptions of field site personnel suspicion, but Hord (1978) suggests that field site personnel do not necessarily feel that way. It appears that the research manager does not always have the whole picture either.

When first describing the role of the ethnographer to site personnel it is important to emphasize that there probably will not be much data feedback for a long time and that most of the data will not be interpreted until the study is over. Field site personnel, of course, would like a more immediate pay-off and if possible their interests should be addressed. However, sample feedback may not be viewed as satisfactory and can further raise frustration. Further, the issue of confidentiality of data must be attended to when negotiating data collection and feedback.

Co-optation--A Major Issue

The research manager faces challenges beyond the uncertainties of the ethnographer taking on a new role in a new setting and attempting to establish credibility. One of the first and most interesting pressures at the field site is the activity on the part of field site personnel to co-opt the ethnographer. These initiatives are not malicious nor are they uncomplimentary to the research project or to the ethnographer. Generally, field site personnel see the ethnographer as a very able professional and want to use that person's talents (Hord, 1978). Educational personnel are particularly good at using every possible resource. At one of our field sites, for example, the ethnographer was a very able staff developer. Exploration was immediately initiated with the research manager about the ethnographer conducting a series of training sessions for field site staff. At another field site, the ethnographer was interested in acquiring a position at the site and field site personnel were also interested in pursuing this possibility. In both instances, the ethnographers had conflicting feelings between personal interests and job responsibilities. Field site personnel were complicating the matter by increasing the pressure to involve the ethnographers in ways that would bias their roles as observers.

The attempt to co-opt observers starts at the very beginning. Somehow the research manager and the ethnographer must strive for independence,

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responding to the field site personnel in non-committal but polite ways. Some compromising may be necessary to facilitate continuation of the study.

Ethnographers' bias may result from the extended stay at the field site. It appears that the more enmeshed in the internal dynamics of the site the ethnographer becomes, the less objective the observation becomes. Everhart (1977) has illustrated this movement from "stranger" to "friend." It appears that "objectivity" and the number of data sources regularly probed tend to decrease over extended data collection periods. This converging is often justified by the ethnographer by saying that they had greater interests in that area or they felt that they would lose their credibility if they did not join a group. It is interesting to note that at the outset most researchers stipulate that the ethnographer should not become aligned with one group. Whether or not it is acceptable to converge on one or more subgroups ultimately depends on the research questions that have been established for the study.

Maintaining Communication and Coordination

Once they are on site, ethnographers cannot be simply left on their own and buttressed only by an occasional memo from the research manager. There is a constant need for communication. As Herriot (1977) and Wax (1971) and others have described, the ethnographer's world is a lonely one. The research manager must keep in touch to make sure that the data being collected are on target and any problems that develop are attended to immediately.

It is also important to bring ethnographers "in from the cold," periodically to give them a chance to regain their perspective and to interact without having to be concerned about covering all the bases and maintaining the confidentiality of their data. Ethnographers should have time to reflect on what they are doing, to check ideas and analyses, and to clarify their tasks.

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This also provides the research manager with an opportunity to be brought up to date about what is happening in the field setting and to help further shape data collection activities.

Formats for Data Recording and Processing

As noted earlier, it is important that the data collection activities be as focused as possible. That is, the study objectives should be stated as clearly as possible. Not only will this result in a more manageable data set but it should also help reduce ambiguity about data collection for the ethnographer. If the research objectives are clear, then the format for data collection and the procedures for data transmittal can be outlined more readily.

One example of a data recording format is for the ethnographer to develop field notes that are written out in longhand, compiled in a set of file folders and photo-copied for transmittal to the research office and subsequent analyses. This procedure is being used by the participant-observers in our longitudinal study of change process interventions. In this study, participant-observers and on-site researchers are being employed to collect ethnographic data on "interventions" that occur during the process of implementing an educational innovation. In the course of their work the participant-observers document in longhand phone calls and other brief interactions as they occur and then send copies of these notes to the research center.

A more formalized and systematic data recording procedure is being used by the on-site researchers. In this study, the on-site researchers (full-time ethnographers) take notes on "interventions" that they observe or that they find out about through interviews or from reviewing written communiques. They later dictate their notes onto audio tape cassettes and send these to the

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research center where they are transcribed and placed in a series of notebooks. These notebooks are referred to as "protocols." The protocols are reviewed by the research staff and the ethnographers as data analysis proceeds.

Having ethnographers dictate their notes causes a delay in processing that would not occur were they sending in their raw field notes. However, dictation does become a second round of data reduction (the original note taking being the first), and makes the notes clearer and better organized for future analysis. However, the delay requires that the protocols be read as soon as they are available so that happenings at the field sites and problems with the data that may need immediate attention can be identified.

Maintaining Confidentiality

Confidentiality of data must be maintained; field notes cannot be left where they could be read, nor should any information be shared without authorization. Ethnographers and other research staff must maintain the confidentiality of all sources and notes for the duration of the study. What happens to the field notes and protocols after completion of the study is still another question.

An ethnographer may often feel tremendous pressures or responsibility to share information. Rules must be developed to determine who may see data, when and in what format. The research project should establish such policies *at the beginning* of the project, although often the setting of this policy has low priority in the midst of the start-up logistical issues. However, the project will not progress far before the issue arises. A set of initial policies about access to data will avert later frustration.

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Meaningful Data Reduction

An ethnographic study produces an enormous pile of data and there does not seem to be any clear or simple way to dig out from under the avalanche. Every effort needs to be taken to keep the data collection and the data stack at a manageable level.

Clear research questions may make it possible for the ethnographers, during data collection, to provide a first round of data reduction by being selective about what they document. Not everything that is observed can be or should be documented. Having the research questions clear should encourage the ethnographer to focus on the key facts or incidents that need to be described and reported. The first round of data reduction can save an enormous amount of time later. For example, we have the ethnographers in our longitudinal intervention study focusing on descriptions of interventions, their causes and effects. We know that other related data are not always being recorded, but we are getting data on the subject matter of primary interest first.

Further data reduction is normally done by staff members who read through all the protocols and attempt to develop categories, trends and hypotheses from the data. One data reduction approach that has been used in the intervention study is to describe each intervention on a 3 X 5 card. The members of the staff then attempt to develop classification schemes by sorting the cards.

Our first encounter with having to keep the data in an ethnographic study down to a reasonable level was in developing a validity study of our Levels of Use interview (Loucks, Newlove and Hall, 1975). This is a focused interview procedure designed to determine where a teacher stands on an eight-point dimension referred to as Levels of Use of the Innovation (Hall, Loucks,

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Rutherford and Newlove, 1975). We wanted to check different teachers' Levels of Use by ethnographic methods and then compare our findings with the results of Levels of Use interviews. To keep down the amount of data, we trained our ethnographers in the concept of Levels of Use and had them organize their original data collection around Levels of Use indicators. Further data reduction was accomplished by rating the protocols according to the Levels of Use dimensions.

Interpreting Ethnographic Data

Collection of ethnographic data is only half the picture. Analysis and interpretation take an inordinate amount of time. Several basic questions about the interpretation and analysis of ethnographic data can and should be raised. For this discussion the focus will be on the objectivity of the data and the conclusions drawn from them.

Objectivity

Where is the check on observer bias? All too often it appears that the qualitative researchers' facile use of words obscures the fact that the observations were made, recorded, analyzed and reported by a solitary person.

The concern here is not so much with the accuracy of the observations reported, but rather with the reasoning behind the *selection* of data to be reported and the *interpretation* that is built into the reporting. Observers can be trained to reliably report observations and checks can be made. However, in qualitative studies it appears that the extreme emphasis on "going native," becoming "submerged in the culture," becoming a "friend" along with being a lone observer increases the possibility of reporting a very idiosyncractic view. The ethnographer is probably convinced that their view is both objective and valid, yet it may not be congruent with the perceptions of a second observer. For example, in one of our studies the on-site researcher consistently reported that the change effort was likely to die at the end of the project. Another research staff member reported a great deal of momentum and indications of continuation. The question here is not, "Who is right?" The question is, <u>how</u> do you differentiate between reasonable descriptions of observed fact and unintentional addition of interpretation?

There is a great deal of judgement involved in the selection of information and the style of reporting it. What the ethnographer selects to report and how they report it can greatly alter the analyst's perceptions. As has been documented over and over in the literature, ethnographers change their perspective as they more fully understand a system. As their perceptions change so do their data collection styles. At which level of understanding can it be assumed that a certain data set was collected and, how should interpretations and conclusions be adjusted?

<u>Overly Ambitious Conclusions</u>

All too often it appears that qualitative researchers make conclusions that are overly ambitious. Most frequently there is generalizing to a large population based on data from a small sample. However, there also appears to be a problem of drawing conclusions and not allowing for the possibility of alternative interpretations. With the large array of data that is collected in an ethnographic study, it is quite easy to infer a casual relationship between two variables when alternative explanations are just as likely. All too often these alternatives are not presented. The consequence is that the less aware consumers of the ethnographic study take as fact the conclusions of the case study of one teacher or one school and apply them universally.

Some Concluding Comments

Ethnography is probably the hottest methodology in educational research today. Researchers, practitioners and funding agencies are all highly interested in it and instant attention can be received just by reporting that you have an ethnographic study underway. And, let's face it. Ethnography has class. A study does not use observers writing down observations about teachers and kids in schools. Rather, it entails doing "fieldwork" with "ethnographers" taking "field notes" on "aliens" in a "naturalistic setting." The product is not an observation record but a set of "narratives" or "protocols" based on "rich" descriptions and collection of "artifacts" (e.g., a teacher's lesson plans). There is, of course, nothing wrong with using the method and professional lexicon of the anthropologist when they are appropriate for the research questions. To use them, though, simply because they are in vogue, is pure foolishness.

Ethnography is a very important research methodology, but it is no easy out for those who would like to avoid specifying research questions and research designs in advance. Even when well thought out and well managed, ethnographic studies can be complex, frustrating, and expensive. Any research manager desiring to undertake one should be aware that he is sailing in dangerous waters.

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