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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic methods have been proposed as one alternative to research based heavily on statistics and experimental design. Ethnography essentially means "a way of systematically learning reality from the point of view of the participant." Four features distinguish ethnographic research from other research methods: (1) the research is considered as an instrument of the research: (2) research is guided by an inductive, serendipitous, holistic perspective of the research problem and process; (3) research methods are designed to be used "in situ," that is, in the natural setting in which the human behavior of interest to the researcher is occurring; and (4) the results of ethnographic research often lack the capacity to startle their consumers because these results frequently take on a commonplace character and tone. Ethnographic methods might provide a fruitful alternative to common research methodology for studying problems of the education/work connection, such as studies of job skill acquisition and adaptability, employer preferences in hiring youth, youth employability problems, reasons for student enrollment in vocational education, and effects of vocational education on youth's ability to acquire and progress in jobs. The ethnographic approach should not become just a fad, however. Many approaches to research problems will be needed to create the knowledge we need to improve the transition of youth from school to work. (KC)

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS FOR EXPLORING THE EDUCATION/WORK NEXUS

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American Vocational Association

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Ethnographic Methods for Exploring the Education/Work Nexus

> Man is the measure of all things; of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not.
>
> --Protagoras

A story, true or not, circulated among my graduate student cronies at the University of Minnesota about an explanation of discriminant analysis by a particular professor of statistics. The professor described--at length, and with mathematical lemma, matrix algebra, and computer printouts--how the gender of ducks could be predicted using various habits and feather characteristics of the ducks. He even provided an empirical example showing the gender of a certain set of ducks estimated with 67 percent accuracy using discriminant analysis methods. Finally, an obviously agitated agriculture student popped out of his seat. "Professor," he said, "I don't think you're going about this right. You don't need computers and you sure don't need discriminant analysis to tell whether a duck's a boy or a girl. Why, at home we just turn 'em upside down."

What we know cannot be separated fr. now we know it. For instance, to assert that participation in vocational home economics is beneficial for adolescents begs questions about how this is known. Historical, normative, political, survey research, anecdotal, or experimental analyses of this assertion might yield different results. Different analysts using the same general approach might arrive at different conclusions. And, varying conceptions of vocational home economics, the domain of its benefits, and its social function certainly would color the results of any methodology used. But, these differences are not causes for despair, for knowing is decidedly, and thankfully, a human act. No convenient operations research algorithm exists to synthesize differences in results from various approaches to research problems. Nor is such a simple-minded deus ex machina likely to appear. Individuality, and the joy and beauty it creates at times, will continue to creep into all aspects of research problems. As the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, exclaimed in his Pied Beauty, "Glory be to God for dappled things"!

The pendulum of respectability, however, swings quickly and with a wide arc over research methods. A ground swell of reaction has appeared recently against normal social science research methods. Bronfenbrenner (Note 1), for

instance, characterized contemporary research in developmental psychology as, "the science of strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults" (pp. 1-2). And, Cazden (1975) considered most behavioral research to be "contrived encounters," devoid of natural content and significance. Moreover, many reviewers have reacted against a tendency to use "quantification as camouflage" (Andreski, 1972, Ch. 10) by rejecting statistical approaches to research problems as embodying errors in misplaced precision. These reactions bring to mind the visit of the great mathematician Euler to the court of Catherine II of Russia during which the existence of God was argued. Euler asked for a blackboard, upon which he expanded a polynomial and followed with, "therefore, God exists." His argument was accepted because no one was willing to confess their ignorance of his mathematics.

Ethnographic methods have been sported about as one alternative to research based heavily on statistical and experimental design artillery. In its root sense, ethnography means a "picture of people" (Wolcott, 1975), or, as stated simply by Erickson (1979), "a way of systematically learning reality from the point of view of the participant" (p. 2). The remainder of this essay contains a brief description of distinguishing features of ethnographic approaches to research problems, along with a discussion of education and work connections that could be illuminated through ethnographic methods. Hymes (1977), Patton (1980), and Wilson (1977) provided useful reviews of ethnographic techniques for educational research. Bibliographies of ethnography in educational research are found in Boruch (1978), Burnett, Gordon, and Gormley (1974), Kaplan, Galbreath, and Vargas (1980), Lindquist (1971), Rosentiel (1977), Smith (1978, p. 324), and Wolcott (1972).

Distinguishing Features

Four features distinguish ethnographic from other research methods: (a) the researcher is considered as an instrument of the research; (b) research is guided by an inductive, serendipitous, holistic perspective of the research problem and process; (c) research methods are designed to be used in situ, that is, in the natural setting in which the human behavior of interest to the researcher is occuring; and (d) the results of ethnographic research often lack the capacity to startle their consumers because these results frequently take on a commonplace character and tone.

Researcher as Instrument

Much of the body of research on education and work has attempted to mimic physical science models. Use of experimental methods, quantification of social

facts, reduction of these facts to statements of lawful relationship through statistical methods, and a cool, objective separation of the researcher from the research problem characterize this mimicry. Ethnography, in contrast, grew from the phenomenology movement which asserts that, "the social scientist cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which the subjects interpret their thoughts, feelirgs, and actions" (Wilson, 1977, p. 249). One consequence of this belief is that ethnographers seek to develop "empathetic [sic] understanding of reality as seen by subjects" (Rist, 1977, p. 42) by total immersion in the research setting. For Erickson (1977), this immersion requires "hanging around and watching people carefully and asking them why they do what they do, sometimes asking them in the midst of their doing" (p. 58).

The use of the researcher as an instrument of research is the sine qua non of ethnographic research methods. At times, this requires that the researcher live or work in the research setting. One by-product is that the researcher probably will develop friends and enemies in the research setting as a natural consequence of the process of building rapport with research subjects. Perhaps such personal involvement would not be necessary if what Pelto (1970) called "etic", rather than "emic", information were sought. By "etic" Pelto meant standardized measures of phenomena such as "annual income from wages and salaries". However, "emic" information, such as "the meanings of money for status and well-being in this social group", must be considered from a functional point of view of actors in everyday life. Of course, involvement in the research setting gives rise to a host of ethical concerns, considered by Cassell (1980), and can lead to emotionally distressing choices for the researcher (Wacaster & Firestone, 1978).

Obviously, particular tastes and skills must be present in a good ethnographer. According to Wolcott (1975), ethnographers must be sympathetic, skeptical, objective, and inordinately curious, and must possess physical stamina and emotional stability combined with personal flexibility. Some of these tastes and skills can be acquired. Johnson and Gardner (1979) described and evaluated positively a prototypical program for selecting and training classroom ethnographers Peshkin (1968) has described methods for the ethnographer to use trained observers in field work. Nevertheless, the quality of the knowledge produced through ethnographic field work must depend undeniably on the chancy fit between the researcher and the subjects of research.

"The Truth is the Whole"

The notion that "the truth is the whole"--to use an expression of the philosopher Hegel--distinguishes ethnographic from other methods for research. Rather than relying on one or two indicators of phenomena in a research setting, the ethnographer may assemble any sense data that are produced. These may include artifacts, rumors, non-verbal behavior, pictures, and perhaps even formal psychological or sociological assessments. This notion also forces the researcher to see the interconnectedness of things. For instance, an ethnographer studying religion will become involved quickly in economics, kinship structure, mythology, and ethics. Legal structure cannot be separated from conceptions of family, friendship, and property. All aspects of culture are so tightly bound into a mass of social string that pulling one loose end is bound to have an effect on the others.

Accordingly, ethnographic work uses inductive rather than deductive processes to apprehend the truth in a research setting (see Kimball, 1955, for an exposition). Also, as might be expected, the serendipitous effects of observing in the right place at the right time can produce large, discrete leaps in understanding of the human behavior studied. For instance, one big classroom fight might tell the ethnographer more about social status among youths being studied than 100 days of careful recordings of verbal interactions. As described by Foster (1969), the ethnographer is asking constantly, "What is going on here?" rather than the quantitative social scientist's question, "What can I demonstrate about the relationship in this situation of certain variables I have conceptually abstracted and for which I have developed precise instruments of measurement?" (p. 60).

In Situ Research Methods

Ethnographic methods are designed to be applied by a researcher present in the research setting to capture relevant ethnographic data. Specific techniques for participant observation and in-depth interviewing in field work were detailed in Bruyn (1963), Donovan (1975), Nelson (1977), Ponland (1972), and Schumacher (1979). Erickson (1977) presented a useful general taxonomy of ethnographic research methods that assists in the organization and understanding of specific techniques that could be used.

Erickson (1977) described three levels of ethnographic methods:

1. textual analysis of ethnographic reports. The researcher enters the research setting with no preconceived biases about what to expect. Experience

and information are soaked through methodological sponges of field notes, documents, elicited texts, demography, unstructured interviews, and the like. Then, after long and careful observation, key incidents are described in terms functionally relevant to research subjects, and these incidents are placed in relation to a larger social context of the culture observed. A classic example of this method was demonstrated in Whyte's (1955) Street Corner Society in which the operation of Italian street gangs was documented.

2. ethnographic monitoring. Proponents of this general method recognize that people enter research studies with a notion of what is important to investigate. There may be specific theories or hunches that are followed; or, there may be previous research experience which would be foolish to ignore. So, rather, than pretending that nothing is known about the research situation, research begins by examining particular factors. For example, the quality of teacher/student interactions may be the sole focus at the beginning of research on classroom achievement because of notions that communication difficulties in this context resulted in lowered levels of achievement for some students. The research may change direction after additional evidence is accumulated; however, the most probable aspect of the situation is examined first.

3. studies grounded in cognitive theory of culture and social competence. Goodenough (1971) defined culture as a system of "standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting" (p. 41). Emphasis is not on behavior, but on knowledge necessary to produce behavior. The structure of a culture, then, is inferred from what the members of the culture consider to comprise social competence. A latent factor such as social competence is not something that you merely ask people about; rather, social competence must be inferred from social performance. In their social performance, people construct and test "emic" models of the world and, in turn, are socialized into the culture by others constantly. In their social performance, people show the existence of cultural norms and boundries through their uses of unwritten rules of behavior (or, exceptions to them) which form the basic datum of the ethnographer's analysis. Ethnographers with this methodological point of view do their work by watching people and asking them what they are doing and why they are doing it. Special attention is paid to language by ethnographers of this persuasion because language, for these ethnographers, holds the symbolic content that defines culture (see Frakes, 1968).

"The temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data," remarked Sherlock Holmes to Inspector MacDonald in The Valley of Fear, "is the bane of our profession." Good ethnography relies on the quality of fallible, albeit trained, people who observe, record, and, then, synthesize evidence at hand (Feinberg, 1977; Miles, 1979), often with inadequate time allowed for the synthesis (Tikunoff, Berliner, & Rist, 1975). Unfortunately, these are skills few people have mastered, or, if possessed, can maintain without persistent practice. And, without constant diligence, people easily can fool themselves into seeing only what they want to see. Remember the celebrated horse, Clever Hans, who, until his owner's non-verbal cues were discovered, was thought to be capable of amazing feats of intelligence, including a comprehensive knowledge of written German (Pfungst, 1911)? Ethnography seems to be among the most human of the social sciences; consequently, ethnographers have developed ways to examine the fallibility of their phenomenological impressions. Papers by Becker (1953), Dean and Whyte (1958), McGoodwin (1978), and Orenstein (1971) provide excellent introductions to the literature on the reliability and validity of ethnographic data.

Science of the Commonplace

For part of a year, I worked as a consultant for a Washington-based group that provided technical assistance for CETA prime sponsors. This group had let a contract for an ethnographic study of problems in implementing youth training programs within local government structures. High hopes were expressed for the possibility that the study would yield a fresh, insightful, and even radical look at CETA problems. For many, though, the study failed to live up to its expectations. Intermediate reports from the project told us things like: staff turnover kept many CETA programs from actually being implemented; or, many staff members were not prepared adequately to manage a big dollar training program. "For stuff like this," many people said, "we paid money?"

Apparently, this is a common reaction among consumers of ethnographic research findings. Karabel and Halsey (1977, p. 55) asserted that, even though the ethnographic approach is novel, its results often are banal. Heyman (1980) retorted that, yes, ethnographic research findings frequently do seem stale and vulgar, but, for the greater part, the atoms of evidence in an ethnographic study are common behaviors from regular human experience. In light of this, we should be made wary, indeed, by conclusions from ethnographic research that startle, that violate our common sense, that seem to go beyond logic.

What is the value added by ethnographic methods, then? These methods add a certain rigor to our summaries from personal experience by certifying the replicability, generality, and cultural importance of this experience.

Potential Applications

Described briefly in this section are some sticky research problems related to the education/work connection for which ethnographic methods might provide a fruitful alternative to common research methodology. The problems listed do not include all possible problems for which these methods might yield interesting results. Instead, this listing merely is meant to illustrate the applicability of ethnographic methods to research in education and work.

Skill Acquisition

What means of skill acquisition is most effective and efficient? For whom? Are skills best learned on the job so that firm-specific behaviors can be used? Or, is formal schooling the best route to development of job competencies? These questions have been debated heatedly, with little research evidence to feed the fire. McLaughlin's (1979) anthropological study of the acquisition of mechanic's skills in Ghana stands as an example of how ethnographic data could enrich our understanding of the answers to these questions.

Skill Adaptability

Many analysts have taken the high inter-occupational mobility of American workers (see Sommers & Eck, 1977) to mean that there is high adaptability of skills among many occupations. Bolstering this view is evidence from economic analyses showing elasticity of substitution among labor inputs to production (Bowles, 1969; Dougherty, 1971; Parnes, 1968). What aspects of various jobs are adaptable to what other jobs? How do workers and their employers facilitate these adaptations? Does adaptability of skills depend upon the skill level of occupations as the evidence from the demographic and economic analyses might suggest? Ethnographic analysis of these questions would aid in the design of education for adaptability of skills among occupations.

Employer Preferences

Just what do employers want in young workers? Technical skills? Positive work attitudes? The ability to read, write, or cipher? Most frequently, these questions are answered by administering questionnaires to employers. A well-known fact in occupational research is that employers' actual practices frequently are at odds with what they say they do. Ethnographic analyses of skill requirements for entry-level work would aid in the understanding of the nature of employers' needs.

Employability Problems

A wide variety of opinion and empirical data exists on barriers to youth employment. For example, some demographers see youth population trends dominating youth employment trends. Some educators point to attitudinal, technical, and basic skills deficits as roots of youth employability problems. Some economists resort to explanations based in market failures or imbalances such as restrictive minimum wages or imperfect information about labor markets among employers and youths. The majority of this evidence has been accumulated from longitudinal surveys, censuses, and other indirect analyses of youth labor markets. Would an ethnographic study of youths conducting a job search help to reveal the role of many of these factors in youth employability? Would an ethnographic study of youth in occupations and industries dominated by youth (McDonalds? Dairy Queen?) reveal the nature of some of the job turnover problems experienced by youth?

Goals of Training

Most people consider vocational education conducted at the public expense as education for work. They expect, therefore, to be rewarded for their investment with high job placement rates in occupations related to students' training. However, in a free society, vocational program completers can choose to work, and, if they work, can accept any job offer they choose. Perhaps there are some students who enroll in vocational education purely for consumptive reasons--that is, they enroll for immediate pleasure that enrollment provides, or for future non-market benefits from enrollment. For instance, how many teenagers enroll in specific vocational programs of study because their friends do? How many students enroll in cosmetology who have no intention of selling these skills on the labor market, but, instead, will use these skills for their own, friends', and families' benefits? The intentions of these students is of paramount importance in understanding raw job placement statistics. Ethnographic methods are suited uniquely to the study of these motives, intentions, and plans.

Effects of Education for Work

Most of the studies of the effects of participating in vocational education reviewed by Mertens, McElwain, Garcia, and Whitmore (1980) can best be classified as status or associational studies. These are studies in which variables are not, or cannot be, manipulated to allow the effects of their systematic, planned variation to be observed on some dependent variables. Causal

interpretations cannot be drawn from such studies. Mail surveys of former vocational students are typical of these types of status and associational studies. The inability to detect vocational education as the cause of labor market behavior in these studies makes them shallow in policy content. Ethnographic studies of former students in actual jobs might help to uncover the contribution of vocational education to productivity.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this paper has been to provide a sketch of the distinguishing features and potential applications of ethnographic methods to research on the connection between education and work. These qualitative methods could complement research efforts based on quantification and experimentation. As with the choice of guns when hunting elephants or squirrels, the appropriate research method must be chosen to fit the problem considered. Some methods are better for some types of problems. Ethnographic methods are an underused portion of the arsenal for research in education and work.

A mention of ethnographic methods is considered de rigueur by many people now that these methods have begun to receive greater attention than in the past. After reading several regression equations I had calculated concerning youth unemployment, a student droned with Dietrich-like nasality, "I mean, you can't really mean. . .like. . .you know. . .those numbers, for kids, can you. . .you know?" Well, yes, I can, you know. Many approaches to research problems will be needed to create the knowledge we need to improve youth transition to work--that is, adulthood and responsibility. The ethnographic approach should be examined beyond its faddish attractiveness.

Reference Note

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