

Ethnography in Educational Research: The Dynamics of Diffusion

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Anthropologists have a long tradition of studying the diffusion of cultural innovations (Boaz, 1896/1940; Driver, 1961; Hallowell, 1948; Kroeber, 1931, 1952; Morgan, 1877; Sapir, 1916/1949; Spindler, 1955; Spindler & Goldschmidt, 1952; L. Spindler, 1962; Tylor, 1879). Diffusion occurs during the interaction of two sociocultural systems as in times of war or during trade.

Similarly, the recent interaction of ethnographic and quantitative research methodologies results in an inevitable diffusion of techniques, methods, and values. By viewing these two disciplines as "sociocultural systems" we gain an excellent opportunity to study the dynamics of diffusion between the two fields. Of particular interest is the diffusion of ethnographic techniques, which are among the most visible traits currently being transmitted.

Ethnography and Educational Evaluation

Ethnography has become a popular buzz word in education. A number of scholars have observed that researchers with little or no background in anthropology claim to be doing ethnography. In one study, labeled "An ethnographic

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study of . . . ,” observers were on site at only one point in time for 5 days. In a national study purporting to be ethnographic, once-a-week, on-site observations were made for 4 months. The methods employed, the researchers’ backgrounds, and the data collected and reported in the study were sociological rather than anthropological.

The problem stems largely from the pursuit of scholastic fads. Denenberg (1969) refers to scholastic faddists as *Zeitgeist*-Shysters.

They do their research on topics that are scientifically hot and in. They are in the *Zeitgeist*. What happens when the *Zeitgeist* changes? These people change their research to conform. As a chameleon changes colors with a shift in the environment so do these researchers change their goals. They lust after research fame and fortune.

Since *Zeitgeists* often do not last for more than a few years, the work these people publish is exceedingly superficial. They touch the surface of an important problem but rarely study it in depth. They leave in their wake large numbers of papers that add confusion and little else to the field. The signal-to-noise-ratio of their publications ranges from 0.0 to 0.2. Because of the obvious spuriousness of their approach to science, I call these individuals *Zeitgeist*-Shysters. (p. 50)

The result is a proliferation of poorly conducted research or non-science. This type of activity contributes little to the reputation and credibility of ethnography in

particular and less to educational research in general.

Abuses accompany any flurry of interest in novel approaches to research. These abuses, however, have raised the ire of many educational anthropologists. One of the leading figures in this debate (Wolcott, 1980a) charges that

much of what goes on today as educational ethnography is either out and out program evaluation, or, at best, lopsided (and undisciplined) documentation. (p. 39)

In response, many researchers have complained of unjust or harsh criticism. They have received much of the "spillover" of the vituperative criticism initially directed at the *Zeitgeists*. Moreover, they suggest that many anthropologists have become self-righteous purists. Few educational researchers are aware that they are standing in the middle of a battleground, caught in the crossfire between educational policy decisionmakers on the one hand, and university-based anthropologists of education on the other. They are chastised for using novel techniques inappropriately and are labeled statistical relics or outmoded number crunchers if they do not use the new techniques. These researchers are trying to improve their capabilities by augmenting their research arsenal. Their only transgression is that they have mislabeled their efforts. Rather than conducting ethnographies, they are simply using ethnographic techniques. Moreover, the entire argument

over terminology is seen by many individuals as a purely academic affair that gets in the way of getting the job done. Although poorly conducted research requires an honest critique, this process of scholarly criticism has alienated many conscientious individuals rather than serving its intended purpose: sensitizing educators to methodological issues of concern to anthropologists.

A Step Toward the Future

Constructive criticism is needed. Educational researchers will continue to use ethnographic and other qualitative techniques in the future. Guidance and close individual critiques are required rather than rhetoric and posturing. Anthropologists who criticize are obligated to specify their objections and offer constructive suggestions rather than omnibus condemnations.

Similarly, educational researchers must respect the anthropologist's obligation to see that his or her field is not misrepresented. The use of the term ethnography for any form of qualitative research is a misnomer. Ethnography is a methodological approach with specific procedures, techniques, and methods of analysis. The adoption of random elements of this method without attention to the whole results in the loss of many built-in safeguards of reliability and validity in data collection and analysis.

These difficulties can be considered a result of a faulty or partial transmission of traits from one sociocultural system to another. This is not a new phenomenon. In general, traits rather than entire complexes of sociocultural systems are diffused at a given time. In this instance, only the ethnographic techniques have been transmitted. The values, the most important elements of the anthropological culture system, have been left behind: phenomenology, holism, nonjudgmental orientation, and contextualization. Phenomenology requires that investigators be guided by the insider's viewpoint, the emic perspective. The concept of holism commands our attention

to the larger picture and to the interrelated nature of the minute to the whole cultural system. A nonjudgmental orientation prevents the social scientist from making some of the more obvious value judgments in research. Biases are made explicit to mitigate their unintended effects on research. Contextualization demands that we place the data in its own environment so as to provide a more accurate representation.

In addition, anthropology's scientifically substantive concerns with patterns of culture and social organization have been neglected. Ethnographers are guided by these concerns, which in turn lead to the use of such appropriate techniques as participant observation, key informant interviewing, and so on.

Educators are using anthropological tools without understanding anthropology's cosmology. (See McCutcheon, 1981, regarding the role of interpretation in qualitative inquiry.) Much of the current debate will subside when the values and cosmology underlying ethnographic techniques are understood, accepted, and used to guide ethnographic research.

To turn to more substantive issues or at least more substantive arguments about existing issues, one might, for example, ask whether it is the techniques or the cultural interpretation that makes a study ethnographic. Geertz (1973) contends that doing ethnography "is not a matter of methods":

What defines it [doing ethnography] is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description" . . . consider, he says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken

for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. (p. 6)

For Geertz, doing ethnography is a matter of cultural interpretation. Many ethnographic classics have been produced by individuals with little formal training in ethnography. Their work was ethnographic because they were able to make sense out of the data from a cultural perspective (Geertz, 1973). Wolcott (1980b) also emphasizes the role of cultural interpretation as compared with methodology when describing ethnography:

One could do a participant-observer study from now till doomsday and never come up with a sliver of ethnography . . . We are fast losing sight of the fact that the essential ethnographic contribution is interpretative rather than methodological. (pp. 57, 59)

I argue, however, that both ethnographic techniques and a cultural perspective are needed. A cultural perspective is substantially weakened if the data are collected haphazardly. Similarly, the data, however carefully collected, are unlikely to be ethnographic if analyzed from a purely nomothetic perspective.

Moreover, there are more productive issues that transcend these academic distinctions and contradistinctions. Ethnography is in the process of being diffused into education. The questions of how qualitative and quantitative techniques are currently being used in evaluation and how they can be used more effectively together are of pressing concern to academics and practitioners alike. In addition, the question arises of how the new merger of ethnographic and psychometric orientations can be made relevant to policy concerns. It is time to turn to dynamic rather than static issues regarding these methodological orientations.

Diffusion of Traits and Whole Trait Complexes

Single traits or sets of traits are often diffused rather than the whole trait complex in the process of acculturation or diffusion, as discussed earlier. Whole trait complexes like "real" ethnography—using ethnographic methods and a cultural interpretation—can be diffused in a manner that meets the concerns of applied educational research. A brief review of how traits like ethnographic techniques, and whole trait complexes such as ethnography have been diffused in educational research provides an insight into this process of adaptation.

The earliest examples of qualitative methods in evaluation research appeared in the late 1960s (cf. Glaser, 1969; Mech, 1969). The "contract ethnographer" literature has grown since that time. Presently the literature includes discussions of conceptual frameworks, techniques, the role of the ethnographer in evaluation, and procedural suggestions (Brenner, Marsh, & Brenner, 1978; Britan, 1977, 1978; Burns, 1975, 1978; Campbell, 1974; Clinton, 1975, 1976; Colfer, 1976; Coward, 1976; Everhart, 1975; Fetterman, 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1982; Firestone, 1975; Fitzsimmons, 1975; Hall, 1978; Hamilton et al., 1977; Hord, 1978; Mulhauser, 1975; Patton, 1980; Sobel, 1976; Tikunoff & Ward, 1977). This surge of interest in qualitative methodology has been the result of a significant disillusionment with quantitative methods. This disillusionment also has extended to the use of the experimental design, the cornerstone of quantitative methodology in educational evaluation (Cronbach et al., 1980; Scriven, 1978; C. Weiss, 1974; R. Weiss & Rein, 1972, among others). In fact, governmental agencies, most notably the National Institute of Education (NIE), have funded several qualitative evaluation studies over the past 5 years in response to the problems from the application of experimental design to natural social settings. These studies have generally included ethnographic fieldwork as one component of the evaluation. The ethnographic

component has ranged from comprehensive studies of large-scale, federal demonstration projects to more limited ministudies.

One of the comprehensive studies conducted was the Experimental Schools Program Evaluation (Burns, 1976; Clinton, 1975; Colfer, 1976; Everhart, 1976; Fitzsimmons, 1975; Herriott, 1979a, 1979b). The Experimental Schools Program was a federally funded effort to introduce innovation and change in several school districts throughout the country. The interdisciplinary evaluation used descriptive case studies and traditional survey and psychometric instruments to understand the process of educational change. Abt Associates conducted a portion of the evaluation (Project Rural). In one of their studies they selected an ethnographer to reside in the school district for 3 to 5 years, while the remainder of the team stayed at the firm. In another study, the fieldworker combined efforts with others on the research team at the school site. The study represents the best approximation of a conventional ethnographic approach to research in evaluation. The study was primarily summative in value and the studies produced sizeable ethnographic case studies of the program. One of the drawbacks with this kind of approach, however, is that it is more time consuming than the traditional evaluation procedures and rarely produces reports for policy or administrative decisionmaking in a timely fashion.

The Field Studies in Urban Desegregated Schools Program is another large-scale federal study (see Cassell, 1978; Riffel et al., 1976). However, this study more closely resembled basic research rather than evaluation research and as such is less relevant to the process of ethnographic adaptation to evaluation. There also have been other large-scale evaluation projects outside the field of education that have employed an ethnographic approach such as a recent study of a HUD housing allowance program (Chambers, 1977).

NIE also funded the Far West

Laboratory's study of teacher effectiveness, Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study (BTES). The aim of the research was to identify effective teacher behavior and classroom qualities that contributed to achievement in mathematics and reading. The qualitative product of the study was entitled: *An Ethnographic Study of the Forty Classrooms of the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study Known Sample* (1975). The study provided useful data that was used "to better ensure that beginning teachers receive training in areas that have been empirically demonstrated to affect student learning." The greatest single drawback to the credibility of the findings in this study was that observers were on site for only 1 week. This example represents a partial transmission of anthropological traits.

The Department of Labor funded the Youthwork National Policy Study of Exemplary In-School Demonstration Projects. This large-scale study used the case study approach to address various prespecified policy questions regarding the transition of youth from school to work. The study produced a series of intern reports and professional papers. The results of interviews conducted and questions administered in 40 sites were reported in *Education and Employment Training: The Views of Youth* (Rist et al., 1979). Interviews conducted and questions administered in 36 projects were reported in *Targeting on In-School Youth: Four Strategies for Coordinating Education and Employment Training* (Rist et al., 1980a). Both of these reports were based on an average of once-a-week, on-site observations. In the latter report site visits were made over a period of 4 months. The final report of this study provided a useful analysis of interinstitutional linkages between education and employment training organizations (Rist et al., 1980b).

Smaller scale evaluations such as the study of an urban alternative school used ethnographers to conduct the research (Wilson, 1977). These studies have been primarily formative in nature. Their most significant contribution has

been their ability to provide feedback to those in programs.

NIE's Experience-Based Career Exploration Program provided an opportunity to explore the utility of ethnographic ministudies. Part-time fieldworkers were selected to conduct short-term fieldwork (approximately 100 hours). A brief report of 20–25 pages was produced by the fieldworkers. The report identified subtle features of program operations, for example, informal education in the learning center (Alvarez & Hishiki, 1974). This approach represents the small-scale or mini application of ethnographic techniques to educational evaluation.

The Career Intern Program (CIP) study represents one of the earliest substantive attempts to apply ethnographic techniques and anthropological insights to a large-scale project within a time frame established to accommodate a more traditional educational evaluation. Ideally, more time and additional ethnographers would have been available for a study of this type. While it must be acknowledged that there are many drawbacks in reducing time normally required to conduct extensive fieldwork, the study suggests what can be done ethnographically within an extremely limited time frame.

The Career Intern Program: A Whole Trait Complex

The CIP study, similar to the studies discussed above, demonstrates how ethnography can be diffused into applied educational research, in this case as a whole trait complex. The CIP study focused on an alternative high school program for dropouts and potential dropouts. It was selected for study because it represents one of the few exemplary programs for disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged minority youth.

The CIP study consists of four sites, three located in major urban centers—(pseudonyms) New Borough, Plymouth, Oceanside—and a fourth in a small city, Farmington (32,000 population). These sites were organized according to a model developed in Philadelphia by Opportunities Industrializa-

tion Centers of America, Inc. (OIC/A), founders of an international skills development organization. OIC/A contracted Gibboney Associates, a social science research organization, to evaluate the prototype. Gibboney's (1977) positive results were corroborated by the Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP), and the program was declared eligible for funding and dissemination. CIP was funded by the Department of Labor; its dissemination was carried out by OIC/A and monitored by NIE. NIE in turn selected RMC Research Corporation, an educational research organization, to evaluate the four CIP sites. The following discussion is based on information derived from the ethnographic component of the RMC evaluation.

As an important social and educational experiment, the CIP is salient to many kinds of audiences. Policymakers have been interested in the program as a viable response to serious labor market problems: high school dropout rates and youth unemployment. Social reformers, however, have viewed the program as a vehicle to redress historically based social inequities and promote upward social mobility for minority groups. The program is also of interest to academicians and researchers because it provides an opportunity to explore the processes of socialization, cultural transmission, and equal educational opportunity in the United States.

The study was subdivided into four tasks: (a) implementation, (b) outcomes, (c) interrelationships, and (d) comparison with similar programs. The ethnographic component of the study task focused on the interrelationships and causal linkages between implementation and outcomes. Ethnographic data collection instruments, methods, procedures and perspectives were employed. The task also relied heavily on information gathered through nomothetic methods and perspectives. Traditional techniques such as participant observation, non-participant observation, use of key informants, triangulation, structured and semistructured, and informal interviews, were used to

elicit data from the emic or "insider's" perspective. Two-week site visits were made to each site every 3 months for a period of 3 years. In addition, regular contact was maintained by telephone, correspondence, and special visits. The study attempted to be nonjudgmental, holistic, and contextual in perspective. A tape recorder and camera were invaluable in collecting and documenting the data. (See Fetterman, 1980 for details regarding the methodology of the study.) In practice, data collection and reporting activities overlapped for each segment of the study.

The study offered a model for ethnographic evaluations, attempting to apply traditional ethnographic techniques to educational evaluation within the constraints imposed by contract research. The most significant contributions the ethnographic component of the study made to educational evaluation included providing a context to interpret meaningfully the data, demythologizing the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy, and producing programmatic and policy recommendations (Fetterman, 1981d).

The study provided a description of the program's neighborhoods to illuminate the program's physical context. A description of the inner city where pimping, prostitution, murder, and theft are common occurrences provides an insight into the influences shaping many urban youth and challenging any educational program. In addition, program attendance statistics were provided with reference to an attendance baseline. For example, a 70 percent attendance figure gains significance when compared with that former dropout's zero attendance baseline figure.

The investigation also attempted to break down the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy by reporting both types of program outcomes. The outcomes included descriptions of attitudinal change and improved self-presentation skills as well as formal quantifiable measures of program success and stability, for example, attendance, turnover, graduation, and placement statistics.

Finally, the study provided programmatic and policy recommendations. For example, the study recommended that the use of the experimental design be abandoned in evaluations of social welfare programs when the no-cause baseline required cannot be established and when empty slots exist in the program. One of the most important problems in the quantitative component of the evaluation was the application of the treatment-control experimental design to a population of dropouts and potential dropouts. The use of this design was methodologically unsound. Assigning students to the control group created a negative treatment, and high attrition rates invalidated the assumption of random equivalence between groups (Fetterman, 1982).

Ethnographic fieldwork helped identify systematic differences between the treatment and control group—differences traced to differential treatment (knowledge of inclusion or exclusion from the program). Basically, the “non-treatment” condition produced a social organization and a cultural meaning that negatively affected the participants. The rejection from the program was not “the absence of x but a phenomenon in its own right—a y or z .” According to a colleague, “Here anthropology’s concern with social arrangements and cultural meanings informs our understanding of these real-life settings, and shows the control group condition to be ecologically invalid.” On-site observations also documented recruitment difficulties linked to the use of this design. For example, recruitment efforts were dampened when the candidates were informed that their chances of entering the program depended on 5 hours of testing and a lottery. Ethnographic research also provided the reasons for the continued use of this design, despite site and evaluator protests throughout the study.

The impetus to employ randomized experimental designs and to apply pressures to meet numerical goals, preestablished schedules, and inflexible deadlines stems from the federal bureaucratic climate. Governmental agencies

feel they must make the strongest case possible before Congress, on whom they depend for future funds. Since controlled randomized experiments are generally accepted as providing the most credible evidence, it follows naturally that they will be selected regardless of their suitability for the task at hand.

This approach is highly visible in governmental circles today as evidenced by a major document produced by Boruch and Cordray (1980): *An Appraisal of Educational Program Evaluations: Federal, State, and Local Agencies*. Boruch and Cordray, in their executive summary for Congress, recommend that

the higher quality evaluation designs, especially randomized experiments, be authorized explicitly in law for testing new programs, new variations on existing programs, and new program components.

Once again this approach is recommended regardless of the study problem (see Cronbach et al., 1980; Fetterman, 1982; Tallmadge, 1979).

Fieldwork, with its close attention to the details of program implementation, can identify causal features and causal linkages that may be overlooked or misattributed on the basis of correlational analysis of survey data or predetermined observational category systems. This study, following those discussed earlier, demonstrates why researchers need not always employ a randomized experimental design to plausibly demonstrate the probability of causation.

The CIP study represents an important shift in emphasis from the urban educational anthropology research of the previous decade because it focuses on school success for minority youth rather than school failure. It differs from the traditional ethnography of schooling in incorporating findings from a multidisciplinary evaluation effort. The research concerns not a single school, but an entire demonstration project in several sites. The analyses examine: classrooms, program compo-

nents, community environments, local and national affiliates, governmental agencies, and evaluators. The study differs also in its multidimensional emphasis, discussing federal involvement, evaluation design, and the role of reinforcing world views. It represents both an opportunity for and a test of ethnography in its emerging role in educational evaluation.

The study develops an analytical model to explain the programmatic model developed by the CIP. The analytical model holds that educators can treat students particularistically while teaching them skills required to succeed when evaluated by universal criteria of achievement. In analyzing the way educational differences are related to social stratification, the study challenges the traditional assumption of horizontal social mobility by demonstrating how an alternative school can socialize economically disadvantaged youth for vertical (upward) mobility.

The application of ethnographic techniques to educational evaluation remains a new endeavor. The attempt to adapt traditional anthropological techniques to intensive, short-term studies poses many challenges. Thus, each successful application constitutes a significant contribution to the development and refinement of this new methodological approach.

Conclusion

Good data is required to “play the causation-identification game.” The most appropriate use of ethnography is to borrow the whole trait complex, not a few traits. Securing good data, however, requires the whole trait complex of ethnography and the whole trait complex of traditional evaluation research: “to show broad patterns across a set of sites across time.”

Ethnography has been misunderstood and misused in educational research. The misuse of ethnographic techniques, however, is due as much to overzealousness and faddishness as it is to the anthropological tradition of ritualizing methodology. Ethnography is not a panacea. It is one useful

methodological tool, among others, used in addressing educational problems. The exploration and development of new frontiers requires adaptations, alterations, and innovations. This does not imply that significant compromises be made in the rigor required to conduct truly ethnographic research. A strict constructionist perspective may strangle a young enterprising new venture, and too liberal a stance is certain to transform a novel tool into another fad in educational research. The traditional anthropological techniques, concepts, and values that have guided the anthropological endeavor thus far still represents the most useful guide to approaching the future. The artful shaping of this adaptation process will contribute to the enrichment and refinement of the fields of anthropology and education.

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