

Blitzkrieg Ethnography: On the Transformation of a Method into a Movement*

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In retrospect, it seems rather inevitable. What had been a quiet and perhaps peripheral aspect of educational research has moved rapidly to center stage. Ethnographic research on American education has heretofore been the activity of a small band of researchers, overwhelmingly trained in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. But at present, it is finding widespread application among researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. And with this newfound popularity has come the mutation of both its epistemological underpinnings and its methodological applications.

The Rush to Ethnography

If, within the framework of the history of sciences, an investigation were undertaken of the present situation, the investigators might well conclude that the rising interest in ethnographic research is a logical conclusion to the current state of affairs in quantitative research. As Thomas Kuhn has so persuasively argued, every research paradigm has its parameters. The reaction of increasing numbers of researchers to the limitations of quantitative methods suggests that this method has now approached its outer boundaries. Indeed, the advances of late have been a matter of increased sophistication in the software so dear to those who are fond of this approach. But as to the basic theoretical development of the method, it appears to have come to an end. For those who are dissatisfied with the dominant paradigm and who are increasingly finding its limitations outweighing its benefits, the search is on to locate alternative approaches. The task is to break out of the conceptual *cul-de-sac* of quantitative methods.

If the loss of intellectual excitement and further growth is the push away from quantitative methods, a major pull toward qualitative research has to be the Federal government's change within the past five years in funding strategies. As those within the Federal system are hounded by increased concerns with accountability and the effective "targeting" of resources, the pressure has mounted to turn to those approaches that provide a "close in" and "hands on" approach. The goal of employing more field methods by the federal-funding sources appears as an effort to answer the question "what is really going on out there?"

As "steady state" funding becomes a reality, the task is now one of choosing among alternative and competing social/educational programs. The demand is for an evaluative strategy allowing for assessment of impact at the local level. Couple this incentive for qualitative research with the fact that there is a variety of personal and institutional incentives in American educational research to follow the bucks, and one finds the level of interest in the research community rising in direct proportion (This may be one of the few nondisputable correlations in education).

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At present, many, who for reasons of either rejecting the quantitative paradigm or for seeking federal support, are rushing to term their work "ethnographic." Any field experience, however short and of whatever form, is suddenly being formalized as "qualitative data collection." Ethnography is becoming a mantle to legitimate much work that is shoddy, poorly conducted, and ill conceived. And when such work is questioned, the response is to turn to the terminology for defense. The study is a projection of the reality that was "real" to the participants; the descriptions are elaborations of "grounded theory;" and in the end, it is inappropriate for an outsider to challenge what, in the final result, was a phenomenological and very personal experience. The logic of the method becomes inverted. Rather than make the uncommon and unknown comprehensible, the defense becomes one of privatizing what ought to have been open to scrutiny.

The Transformation of Ethnography

C. Wright Mills, more than twenty years ago, castigated those whom he termed "abstract empiricists." These were the researchers who had a research method and then went about searching for problems. While the object of Mills's attack was the survey research group at Columbia University, the point is applicable anytime researchers elevate the method above the problem. The goal, stated Mills, was not the veneration of the method, but the clear and crisp articulation of the problem. Once the issue was understood, then appropriate methods were selected for the analysis of that same issue.

What has happened to quantitative methods over the past twenty years is now on the verge of being repeated within qualitative studies. The ethnographic method is in vogue. Ironically, the more "in" the method, the less it resembles an available research tool and the more it takes on the characteristics of a movement. Ethnography as a movement is generating its spokespersons, its own language, its "hard" and "soft" side, its internal debates over the boundaries of what is or is not acceptable, and its own medium for publications. Indeed, it is nicely following the path previously taken by quantitative methods.

Ethnography is no longer what it was. The increased attention has had an impact upon those *who* employ it, upon the rationale of *when* to employ it, and upon the guidelines of *how* to employ it.

The term "ethnographer" is now being used to describe researchers who neither studied nor were trained in the method. The traditional "rite of passage" – a prolonged field study – has now been bypassed by many if not a majority of those who claim to identify with this approach. Furthermore, recent advocates also seem less likely to be cultural critics or to identify themselves as somewhat marginal to the social system. It had been one of the hallmarks of the ethnographer that sufficient distance was maintained from one's cultural setting in order to study it with "suspended judgement." Many who are now using the method are far from marginal – either to the educational profession or to the society. The result is that ethnographic research is now frequently done without an emphasis on values or on exploring the underlying cultural framework of the organization in question. Description has come to be an end in itself.

Secondly, the advent of ethnography's popularity has meant that the rationale for employing it has changed. Whereas the classical approach was one of spending considerable time in the field, learning the nuances and "deep meanings" of the system, we now find "hit and run" forays into the field being termed "ethnography." The view is that rapport, familiarity, trust, and insight can all be manufactured instantaneously. It was in all seriousness that an educational researcher recently told me he had perfected a new form of ethnography: "blitzkrieg ethnography." That there was a fundamental contradiction between the two terms was lost on him. Not accepting the domain and underlying assumptions that have heretofore guided the method has essentially left him free to improvise and relabel a community survey as a new form of ethnography. In addition, we have also recently been introduced to, among others, "contract ethnography," "survey ethnography," "process ethnography," "evaluation ethnography," and "reflexive ethnography."

Finally there is the matter of how to employ the method. The traditional assumption was that a single individual (sometimes a couple) would go to the field site, become enmeshed in the life of that site, and only after a long and involved period of time, begin to formulate a framework for the analysis. Theory was "grounded" in experience. Recently, there are several examples in which the number of ethnographers has not been one or two, but upwards of sixty working on a single study. The conventional single site case study has been complemented by a multisite approach frequently used in policy analysis and program evaluation. Furthermore, the idea of going into the field and allowing the issues and problems to emerge from extensive time on site has also given way to the preformulation of research problems, to the specifying of precise activities that are to be observed, and to the analytic framework within which the study is to be conducted. And all of this is prior to the first site visit. The end result is a structured and predetermined approach to data collection and analysis.

It should be emphasized that, heretical as these developments may seem to the traditionally trained ethnographer, there is much that should be encouraged. Suddenly, qualitative research is able to inform public policy on a broad range of issues, a task it was exceedingly difficult to do from the limited perspective of the lone researcher at the single site. Combining detailed analysis with the generalized ability available from multiple sites is an important advance and one those in [the] policy arena have been quick to capitalize upon. Another significant development is that many who are now working with qualitative methods are formally trained with an emphasis upon quantitative methods; thus, they are in a unique position to effect a rapprochement between the two methods. This advance, too, is already evident in the policy studies currently being commissioned by any number of federal agencies.

Postscript: Ethnography in Late Morning

The present trends provoke a mixed reaction. On the one hand, I am dismayed by much current work which is superficial and trite. This is also reflected in the facile treatment of the terminology and the ease with which the

term is bantered around. Ethnography is a movement with an open admissions policy. Self-declaration of affiliation appears all that is necessary for membership.

On the other hand, the fact that there is an increased interest and attention paid to ethnography is heartening. It is a methodological approach that predates the recent rush to quantification by so many in the American educational research community. While long known to a few, the scarce numbers and resources have meant that the method has remained undeveloped as a broadly applicable strategy for educational research. The recent interest has, almost overnight, begun to demonstrate new and exciting ways in which the method can be applied to some of the most pressing of our educational problems in education. The development has been so extensive and rapid in these past few years that the model of the solitary observer at the single site for years on end now stands as only one of multiple approaches available. The paradigm is being tested, its applicability is being expanded, and the end is not in sight. It is the late morning of ethnography.

Having said this, I need to stress that the interest in ethnography will "peak out." Perhaps those of us trained in this methodology should even encourage this descent from the heights. As the number of persons presently employing this method continues to grow, as the application continues to spread, and as the issues multiply that are defined as amenable to ethnographic investigation, disenchantment is inevitable. The lack of systematic training of many, the undercutting of the rationale for the use of the method, and the poor quality of many reports will all begin to take their toll. Those who were along for the ride will soon depart, and if the funding moves elsewhere, they will go even more quickly. People will decide that ethnography is not "the" answer and will begin to seek alternatives elsewhere. The time between late morning and early afternoon can be very short.

No matter how soon the "peaking" of its popularity, ethnography will never again be the same. The boundaries of the method have been expanded, new techniques have been worked out, and new audiences have been gained for the perspective it offers. While the traditional ethnographer working at a single site is not likely to disappear, there will be more and more team research. Ethnographers will be working with one another as well as joining multimethod investigations. The use of ethnography is now, more than ever, institutionalized as a viable tool for the research community.

The central theme of this piece has been straightforward: there have been costs as well as benefits from the increased popularity of ethnography. Just as educational research has accrued some heavy costs from an over-reliance on quantitative methods when they were inappropriate and unable to answer the questions at hand, so also qualitative research faces growing costs. The more the reliance on the method as an end in itself, the less it is a meaningful research tool. In the final analysis, the issue is one of utility, not morality. It is proper to be suspicious of those in any movement who say they have the answer – especially before one has asked the question.