

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Ersatz Ethnography

This issue of JASHM presents critical commentaries about uses of the term 'ethnography' and is dedicated to improving the condition of fieldwork in dance studies and dance education. It continues a JASHM tradition of presenting extended discussion on a special topic, of relevance not only to the anthropology of human movement but to wider intellectual debates (e.g., Vol. 3(2) on objectivity and Vol. 8(1) on theory and reflexivity). The essays raise important questions about the consequences of reducing 'ethnography' or 'ethnographic method' to one of a set of labels for doing qualitative research, a situation that seems especially prevalent in Education. When ethnography is conceived of as a 'method' and thus nothing more than a formula or recipe for doing fieldwork, problems arise.

Despite numerous theoretical and methodological developments, the discipline of anthropology could be said to distinguish itself through its commitment to two principles that coalesce around the term 'ethnography.' In the context of long-term field research, the first principle involves the perennial problems of classifications and categories. Ethnography assumes that the appropriate way to classify and define any aspect of another culture is according to *indigenous* categories, even if the anthropologist is working within his or her own language and culture. Second, ethnography requires a commitment to the adequacy of explanations, the researcher having arrived with preconceptions derived from a sociocultural anthropological framework for interpreting what is taking place. This necessarily involves tailoring research questions and answers to anthropological theories. In other words, 'ethnography' is not a method that can be separated from theoretical questions of interest to the discipline and thus requires training in anthropology. It is the marked absence of these principles in some current uses of the term 'ethnography' that frames our discussion here.

It would be a mistake to interpret this issue as nothing more than disciplinary boundary maintenance, although we are certainly guided by a professional commitment to the discipline of anthropology. Our point is that the principles of anthropological thinking define the method, not the other way around. We seek to assist readers in clarifying the traditional meaning of the term within the parent discipline, and to stress that training in anthropological theories and methods plus the rite of passage of long-term field research are necessary components of traditional ethnographic research.

It would also be a misconception to assume that ethnography, as a 'method' has somehow remained constant while anthropological *theory* changes. Nothing could be further from the truth. Methods change in response to theoretical developments and *vice versa* in an ongoing dialogical relationship between the two. For example, challenges to anthropology's claims to authority that emerged in the 1980's (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986, Clifford 1988, Geertz 1988, Fox 1991) created an epistemological crisis with lasting consequences for the discipline. As a result, new understandings of objectivity, reflexivity and relativism were

brought to bear on the complex interpretive process of doing ethnography and writing ethnographic works.

We also invite readers to compare and contrast uses of the term 'ethnography' outside of anthropology with the way in which the term 'culture' was co-opted by the interdisciplinary arena of Cultural Studies during the 1980s and 90s. Some anthropologists initially saw this as an appropriation and threat to their discipline. The earlier British form of Cultural Studies (1970s) was grounded in the social histories of E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams plus a concern for social and political developments in the contemporary world (e.g., the works of Paul Willis and Stuart Hall). More recent American versions have been largely focused on analyses of media or "public culture" maintaining a primarily textual focus rather than an ethnographic orientation. Ironically, perhaps, Cultural Studies adopted this key anthropological term just as anthropology itself was (once again) questioning the utility of the classic concept of 'culture', given new theoretical attention to globalization, transnational processes, border studies, and diasporic communities (see Abu-Lughod 1999, Freilich 1989, Ortner 1999).

'Ersatz' seems to be an appropriate word to describe the kind of ethnography discussed in this issue because it means 'substitute' or 'imitation', especially of inferior quality. The word seems markedly appropriate as a companion to the 'blitzkrieg' ethnography, described by Ray Rist in his essay (pages 349-352). Both words are borrowed from German, having entered the English lexicon during the Second World War. Rist describes "blitzkrieg ethnography" as follows:

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" (Rist 1980, page 351, this issue - italics added).

A community survey is but one example of ersatz ethnography. Others can be found in the kind of research to which Howe and Eisenhart refer when they examine two examples of what might better be called 'educational ethnography' (pages 366-8). In the first case, they tell us that Roman (1989) learned something of "ethnographic methods" in a class taught by an anthropologist of education. She attempted to apply this to a field study of punk rockers, but during the course of fieldwork she rejected what she had been taught. Apparently her feminist materialist approach overrode her commitment to what she had learned about anthropological ethnography. The result was that she changed her research design, dropping all pretence of being an ethnographer. For example, she began to teach the young women in the group how to alter their lives. Nevertheless, she still called her work "feminist materialist ethnography." The question is why retain the term 'ethnography'?

The *Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus* distinguishes ethnography (the scientific description of the races and cultures of humankind) from ethnology (the comparative study of human peoples). Since neither apply to Roman's

research, it would have been more accurate to entitle her work "A Feminist Materialist Report (or portrayal, representation, description, record, account or narrative) of Punk Rockers."

Howe and Eisenhart tell us that "some have questioned whether Roman's work is truly ethnographic, arguing that her (finished) methodology was not recognizable as traditional ethnography, even though her study was about the culture of a small group. Although Howe and Eisenhart say they understand what provoked the question, they never deal with it from an anthropologist's point of view, although they do recognize that there is a problem.

The second example Howe and Eisenhart describe involves a dissertation by Naff Cain entitled "The Impact of Prescriptive Planning Models on Preservice English Teachers' Thought and on the Classroom Environments They Create: An Ethnographic Study." The first part of the title prior to the colon accurately describes what the dissertation is about, so, again one is led to ask, why bring ethnography into it? We also learn that two years later Naff Cain's paper was called "Using Low Inference Data to Create Ethnographic Vignettes," rather than the more accurate, "Using Low Inference Data to create Educational (or Instructional) Vignettes." About this second example, Howe and Eisenhart ask,

Is Naff Cain's study truly an ethnography? Perhaps not. However, it doesn't seem as though answering that question in one way or another is, or should be, *crucial for education* (italics added).

They point out that the study received critical acclaim among educators and educational researchers (page 368), but the critical acclaim begs the issue of classifying the work as something it is not. Wolcott puts the matter this way:

Unfortunately, in the enthusiasm for adding 'ethnography' to an already ample set of labels for qualitative approaches, educational researchers are in danger of losing sight of what the term has meant, who has used it, and the special features of 'ethnography' that distinguish it from other terms either equally distinguishable (e.g. Zelditch's useful explanation of the term "field study" in "Some Methodological Problems of Field Studies," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 67, pp. 566-576) or comfortably broad (e.g. case study, naturalistic research). Today one hears ethnography suggested as an adjective describing a special kind of educational evaluation, and even as the label for a research broadside where investigators insist they haven't a clue about what they are going to be looking "for" or "at." Whatever ethnography is, a considerable number of educational researchers today claim to be ready and able to do it.

Our evangelical efforts in anthropology and education to extol the virtues of descriptive research in general and ethnographic research in particular have, I am afraid, produced evangelical results. We have been converting people who *look* like anthropologists but who do not *think* like them.

After prattling on for years about ethnographic methods, I have finally realized that, by and large, anthropologists are not, never have been, and never will be preoccupied with method *per se*. For them, the test lies in the adequacy of their explanations ... (Wolcott page 356).

Of the four authors included in this issue, only Wolcott is an anthropologist. Rist, when he wrote this essay was the Director of Youthwork National Policy Study at Cornell University (he is now a Senior Evaluation Officer at the World Bank), but we may presume some anthropological training somewhere along the way, because he is acutely aware that

Ethnography is no longer what it was. . . . 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. (Rist, page 350)

However, when all is said and done, Rist says, "In the final analysis, the issue is one of utility, not morality" (Rist, page 352).¹

Of the two authors of the 'Prolegomenon', we understand that Eisenhart had anthropological training, but the essay was written largely for the purpose of clarifying the problem of standards for qualitative and quantitative research in the field of education. It does not, therefore, adequately address the problem of educators who appropriate the idea of 'ethnography' from sociocultural anthropology. One wished for the positive suggestion that educators might call their versions of ethnography 'educational ethnography' to distinguish it from the parent term.

On the other hand, there are some statements that Howe and Eisenhart make that are unexceptionable: 1. "We worry that in their eagerness to embrace qualitative methods, many educational researchers do not provide adequate and clear justifications for their methods, findings, or conclusions" (page 361) and 2. "In this paper we argue that framing the issue of standards in terms of quantitative-qualitative debate is misguided" (page 361). There are similar sentences in Rist's essay, but in the end, these authors do not satisfactorily address the issue of classifications and categories.

Having said that, readers will find an essay by Adrienne Kaepler who, after making the valuable point that anthropology should be separated from sociology, says,

Now, some thirty years later ... not only anthropologists 'go to the field' to learn about their chosen subject. If one adds that although all anthropologists do fieldwork, all fieldwork is not anthropological, we run the risk of incurring MacRae's further dictum that anthropologists (like other tribes made up of warring moieties) 'unite before any outside threat and are appropriately savage to intruders or threatening groups' (Kaepler, page 377, this issue, citing MacRae 1969: 562).

Because Kaepler is an anthropologist -- specifically, an anthropologist of the dance and human movement studies -- she represents the aforementioned professional commitment that guided the formation of this issue -- improving the condition of 'ethnography' in the fields of dance and dance education. Moreover, after introducing her subject, Kaepler turns to the kind of discussion that overtly (or covertly) informs all modern social and cultural anthropological ethnographies: the problem of classifications and categories. In other words, she turns to the contemporary preoccupation with *language(s)*, observing that

Traditionally, in many societies there was no category comparable to the Western concept [of 'dance'] -- although in many languages it has now been introduced. Most anthropologists interested in human movement do not focus on 'dance' but enlarge their purview to encompass a variety of structured movement systems, including, but not

¹ In a recent conversation (February 10, 2001), I asked Rist what he meant. He said he wanted to shift the emphasis from "good" or "bad" ethnography (a moral issue) to the question of how useful "quick and dirty" information gathering can be to anyone for any reason.

limited to, movements associated with religious and secular ritual, ceremony, entertainment, martial arts, sign languages, sports and play. What these systems share is that they result from creative processes that manipulate (i.e. handle with skill) human bodies in time and space. . . . We usually understand the construction of categories used in our own culture and language, but often inappropriately apply our categories to 'others'. . . . *A more appropriate way to classify and define movement systems is according to indigenous categories* -- concepts that can best be discovered through extended fieldwork (Kaeppler, page 377, this issue - italics added).

The italicized sentence above is a point that Rist, Howe and Eisenhart (even Wolcott), fail to make, for, anthropologically speaking, all real ethnography presumes that the appropriate way to classify and define any aspect of another culture (not just its movement systems) is "according to indigenous categories," even if the anthropologist is working in his or her own culture. This certainly cannot be accomplished by blitzkrieg ethnography, nor by the examples of ersatz ethnography discussed in Howe and Eisenhart's essay.

This issue of *JASHM* concludes with a review by Drid Williams of a recent book, *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry*, edited by Sondra Horton Fraleigh and Penelope Hanstein (1999). We trust that (in the words of Kaeppler's description, citing MacRae) critical discussion of some contributors to this volume will not be interpreted as merely those of a "warring moiety" against a "threatening group," but rather as contributing further food for thought regarding the question of ethnographers who "look like anthropologists, but do not think like them" (Wolcott, page 356).

The Editors

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