

## How to Look Like an Anthropologist Without Really Being One\*

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My comments here were originally prepared for presentation before an audience of educational researchers. In the past decade educators have shown increasing interest in ethnographic research but an alarming tendency to regard ethnography as just another synonym for descriptive (or even "non-quantitative") research.

Among readers of *Practicing Anthropology* I realize that I am now addressing an audience that includes a higher proportion of professional anthropologists and a far smaller proportion of people whose careers even occasionally put them in contact with educators. Nevertheless, I have limited my scope here to the special field of anthropology and education, for that is the area in which the diffusion of ethnography – in two important senses of that term – is of most concern to me. Anthropologists working in other settings assure me that interest in descriptive approaches is rather widespread in other areas of applied social research as well. There, too, it has been accompanied by a diffusion of ethnography similar to what I have observed among educational researchers.

For "looking like an anthropologist," I have in mind something other than Alfred Kroeber being photographed next to Ishi or members of the Leakey family appearing in *National Geographic*. I am thinking about the *pose* of the cultural anthropologist when engaged in ethnographic research and doing fieldwork.

One could be swept away writing a parody advising novices how to achieve this fieldworker pose. My title, "How to look like an anthropologist without really being one," seems to beg for such a script. I have resisted the temptation to be facetious. Instead of a parody, I will begin by proposing several essential ingredients of the fieldwork pose. The list serves as a starting point for addressing the purpose of these comments: to help explain (and perhaps even to help reestablish) the differences between what I consider to be an authentic ethnographic approach and a more broadly based descriptive approach.

Without ignoring the important fact that each field setting poses its own peculiar circumstances and limitations, let me suggest how easy it is to look like an anthropologist. First, you arrive in person on the scene where you expect to conduct your work. (There's nothing special about that: meter readers, house painters, youth workers, firemen, teachers, do it every day.)

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Second, you self-consciously (and, these days, explicitly) establish yourself as the research instrument, a role you typically punctuate with appropriate note taking, augmented perhaps with camera or tape recorder. (Nothing special about that: real estate sales persons, reporters and news photographer, police or insurance investigators, appraisers and estimators, do it all the time.)

Third, you announce that you intend to be on hand for an inordinately long time – even if that means only one full day, as it sometimes has in educational research – that you are inordinately interested in everything. Nothing is to be regarded as trivial that is not trivial to the host or hosts. (Note that we expect similar commitment and an initial period of total immersion from newcomers in many occupations; hospitals and schools have their interns; law offices and many trades have apprenticeships; freshmen have Orientation Week; inductees into the armed forces have the golden opportunity of the intense experience called basic training.)

Fourth, you make conscious, even conspicuous use of multiple sources and multiple research techniques: observing in varied settings, using questionnaires or structured interviews, holding casual conversation, making film and tape recordings (But so do the CIA, bill collectors, family service agencies, detectives, university search committees, customs and immigrations officers, even some sociologists.)

Fifth, you wear heavily – but willingly – a yoke of ethical and professional obligations; to confidentiality, to objectivity, to fairness and accuracy, to the best traditions of scientific inquiry coupled with the utmost concern for humanity. (I assume that psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, investigative journalists, parole officers, and morticians observe similar tenets.)

Sixth, you recognize a commitment to do something with the information being gathered. Your presence serves some larger purpose than a visit. Though your behavior as a guest at the time of your fieldwork may be exemplary, your intent goes beyond simply making other people aware of what a tolerant, sympathetic, and interested person you are. Since you are obliged to present a report stating your findings, you take the opportunity to explain the kind of report you are making, perhaps even exaggerating a bit on the potential social significance of your work if the end result is not obvious to your respondents. (The census or opinion poll taker, the inventory-control officer, the reporter, the accident investigator, or high school students who have conducted interviews for a class project also need to complete their reports. And they, too, have to be able to give – and recognize – reasonable explanations of why they “need” certain information.)

Cultural anthropologists “doing fieldwork” by engaging in everyday activities of the kind I have mentioned may feel self-conscious, not only about

relying on such commonplace techniques for gathering information, but also about the possibility of being mistaken for somebody in any one of the numerous other roles of information gatherers. During my own introduction to fieldwork, for example, I was greatly distressed to be accused of being both spy and cop. I have subsequently come to realize how those accusations served as a sort of "Red Badge of Courage," allowing me to take my place among veteran fieldworkers.

In the sense of "looking like an anthropologist" by doing what ethnographers do in the conduct of their fieldwork, the three key ingredients for creating an anthropological pose are: *the self as research instrument, a multiplicity of fieldwork techniques, and an adequate period of time to come to know the setting thoroughly.*

The fact that there is nothing outwardly distinguishing about this pose can create problems for anyone wanting to look like an anthropologist, including anthropologists themselves. If so renowned an anthropologist as Margaret Mead found it necessary to include cape and walking stick, small wonder that less well-known anthropologists often signal their professional identity through the conspicuous display of native dress abroad or turquoise jewelry at home. But neither shawls on the women nor the characteristic "field beards" on the men can guarantee the image of the researcher-scholar they wish to create. In the long run, fieldworkers depend on words and labels to convey messages about how they perceive themselves and how they would like others to perceive them. When cultural anthropologists are conducting descriptive research on how some identifiable group of humans believe and behave, they are engaging in the basic work of their discipline. Both the process of doing it and the completed account they expect to render are known as ethnography.

Even without the romantic appeal of the exotic tropical island or jungle village, a certain fascination with the image of the anthropologist at work "in the field" and a growing recognition for the value (at least up to a point) of descriptive research have been evident in the applied social sciences in recent years. Among educational researchers one is hard pressed to think of a term that achieved any greater notoriety during the 1970s than the term ethnography. But today the purposes which ethnography was originally intended to serve, and the commitments one traditionally made in laying claim either to conducting an ethnographic inquiry or to writing an ethnographic account, remain in danger of being lost or crushed by that overly enthusiastic educator embrace.

Perhaps too much like a knight in shining armor, my purpose here is to try to "rescue" the term ethnography. If it is not already too late, I want to keep ethnography from becoming confused with and even lost among a group of related terms and purposes that are gaining popularity among

educational researchers and other applied researchers as well. I want to set ethnography apart from a host of terms with which it is often confused, terms such as on-site research, naturalistic research, participant-observation, qualitative observation, case study, or field study.

Even as I set out to rescue the term ethnography and to reserve it forevermore for referring only to one particular type of descriptive work, I applaud the spirit that has nurtured a considerable interest in "descriptive" or "qualitative" or even, if you must, "alternative" approaches to research. In terms of the narrow psychometric orientation that has long dominated educational research, a so-called "ethnographic approach" combining (1) the self as instrument, (2) multiple techniques and (3) ample time, continues to offer needed antidote to educator preoccupation with pigeons and probabilities and a tendency to ignore problems unless they are quantifiable. When I offer my seminar on Ethnographic Method in Educational Research each fall, when I am invited to speak on the topic of ethnography in education, and when I prepared a talk on "ethnographic method" for the series of taped lectures on alternative Research Methodologies recently released by the American Educational Research Association, the ideas of the self as instrument, the multiplicity of techniques, and adequate time for fieldwork (and the subsequent write-up) are the ideas I stress.

Researchers often seem glad to hear the encouraging message I bring. What better way to keep in touch with reality than by conducting research in real settings? What better way to achieve validity than by using multiple sources and multiple field techniques? What meanings more powerful than those assigned by the actors in any particular cultural science? What questions more fundamental than how things are and how they got that way? What instrument more powerful than a human being for understanding other humans?

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 explication 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 (or their "interpretations," if one prefers Clifford Geertz's more modest phrase). "Multiplicity of techniques" and "length of time in the field" dissolve as satisfactory criteria in the face of the basic question: "How adequate are our explanations of what is going on?" And, to push anthropological interpretations and explanations to their very limits, how good are they for helping interpret data other than those from which they were originally derived?

In his preface to *Islam Observed* (University of Chicago Press, 1971) Clifford Geertz makes important observations about both the origins and the ultimate uses of anthropological interpretations:

Like all scientific propositions, anthropological interpretations must be tested against the material they are designed to interpret: it is not their origins that recommends them (p. viii)... The validity of both my empirical conclusions and my theoretical premises rests, in the end, on how effective they are in so making sense out of data from which they were neither derived nor for which they were originally designed (p. viii).

When introducing graduate students to ethnographic research, my immediate objective is still to have them learn how to look like anthropologists. Among students only recently introduced to the tyranny of number magic, a fleeting glimpse of a "soft and fuzzy" approach invariably sends some of them scurrying back to venerated formulas that can do such things as contradict observed frequencies with expected ones. For other students, renewed faith in their own powers of observation is lesson aplenty; they go forth resolved not to ignore the responses of their own good senses.

A few of the more daring – joined, I suspect, by some of the statistically awed – seriously consider the possibility of taking roles as "observers" or "participant observers" in the scenes that are of research interest to them. Of this group of "semi-converts" to descriptive research I extract but one promise; that although they avail themselves freely of several or many of the fieldwork techniques used by ethnographers, they will never, never claim to be doing ethnography as long as their basis for that claim derives only from their use of fieldwork techniques. *One could do a participant-observer study from now till doomsday and never come up with a sliver of ethnography* [italics added]. As a participant-observer one ought, indeed, to come up with the stuff out of which ethnography is made but that is not much of a claim when ethnography is made of such everyday stuff.

My intent in belaboring the fact that ethnographic techniques are necessary but not sufficient for producing ethnographic results is by no means an effort to keep other researchers from using them. Quite the contrary, I warmly endorse and actively support the prevailing mood that encourages educational and other researchers to employ alternative methods and a variety of techniques. I insist only on a clear distinction between borrowing the research tools so readily available and producing the results of those who ordinarily use them professionally. In my hands, the scalpel of the most skilled heart surgeon is, after all, only a dangerous knife.

A few students planning careers in educational research are willing to make a serious commitment to the ethnographic endeavor, something like Zorba the Greek's notion of "the full catastrophe." They want to become ethnographers. They declare their intention not only to use ethnographic tools in their research but to produce accounts that are ethnographic. The necessary next step for them is easy to identify but complex to achieve: they must learn to *think* like anthropologists rather than simply to *look* like them.

I cannot fully map that journey. Though I might appear to be saved from the task by the space limitations of a brief article, the real reason is that I doubt that I have completed the journey myself. But I think I can point to the most critical element in coming to think like an ethnographer.

The fact is, ethnographers are not the empty-headed observers that researchers of other persuasions sometimes take them to be. They have preconceptions that insist some facts are more important than others. They not only have foreshadowed notions, they have preconceived ideas as well. Call those preconceived ideas "conceptual frameworks" if you need a euphemism, but I doubt if any harm is done describing them candidly as *prior commitments*. Examining the notion of observer bias in his own field of ethology (and borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche) the insightful "birdwatcher", C. G. Beer, refers to the doctrine of empty-headed or "pure" observation as the "doctrine of immaculate perception:"

There is a view of science that sees the bird watcher's kind of activity as the necessary first step in any field of scientific endeavor. According to Lorenz, "It is an inviolable law of inductive natural science that it has to begin with pure observation, totally devoid of any preconceived theory and even working hypothesis." This view has come under attack from philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, who have argued that preconceived theories or working hypotheses must always be involved in scientific observation to enable the scientist to decide what is to count as a fact of relevance to his investigation. I myself have been a critic of this "doctrine of immaculate perception." Each year my students hear why, for both logical and practical reason, there can be no such thing as pure observation, even for a bird watcher (*Minnesota Symposia in Child Psychology* 7:49, University of Minnesota Press, 1973).

Beer rejects "pure" observation for ethology; ethnographers must reject it as well. Those who call themselves ethnographers or lay claim to "doing

ethnography" are neither engaged in immaculate perception nor free to "do their own thing." Ethnographers are, in fact, duty bound to look at the world through a cultural frame of reference. Their prior commitment is to culture. Their task is not to investigate whether or not culture is already there in the scenes they observe, but to put it there. Their responsibility is to impose a cultural framework for interpreting what is taking place.

Anthropologist Ward Goodenough's perspective has helped me to stop looking for culture "on the ground" or "in the minds of informants" and to realize that explicit culture, at the level where it can be stated, footnoted and argued about, is a construct of the ethnographer. We all know how to behave appropriately in a multitude of microcultural settings within our own society, but only an ethnographer would torment herself or himself trying to make explicit the myriad rules and customs that members of a particular social group practice but cannot state. As Goodenough describes it:

In anthropological practice, the culture of any society is made up of the concepts, beliefs, and principles of action and organization that an ethnographer has found could be attributed successfully to the members of that society in the context of his dealings with them (*Multiculturalism as the Normal Human Experience, Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 8: 4-7).

What each ethnographer selects as the best sources of data upon which to build an interpretation (e.g. spoken words, informant explanations, observed action); whether to highlight concepts of beliefs or principles of action when one cannot do everything at once; how to accommodate current theoretical predilections; what purposes and audiences a particular study is to serve – including even ethnography as a means of doing evaluation – all tend to give a disheveled look to the ethnographic enterprise. But genuine ethnography is always embedded in and ultimately concerned with cultural interpretation! When you make that singular purpose your own, then you are thinking like an anthropologist, and regardless of how incomplete you know (or later come to realize) your final account is, you have a right – and, for the sake of professional critique, perhaps an obligation – to label it as ethnography. In these times when educational and other applied researchers seem especially receptive to alternative ways of looking, but still need to be convinced that descriptive research can be rigorous as well as relevant, I would like to see us restrict our use of the label ethnography to those efforts that reflect a genuine ethnographic intent. When in doubt, do not apply the label; the work will not be diminished merely because of modesty or caution.

And if ethnographic purity is retained, what does that get us? For me, the answer lies in the understanding of human behavior that can only be achieved from the cultural perspective. To stay close to the field of education, that perspective serves to remind us that our fellow professionals – and we researchers ourselves – are culture-bearing humans. The special language of education research (of 'pophams', 'scrivens', 'cronbachs', 'summative

evaluation' and 'the NIE'), the particular days of the week on which it is customarily used, the very problems identified as suitable, and the ways individuals use research in order to acquire personal power and status, all give evidence of a set of mutually understood, tacitly approved ways of behaving that signify "culture at work." A pan-human need to make sense of the world in which we live is epitomized in researchers' commitments to research: they try harder in order to make more sense than anyone else.

The new use of 'ethnography' as an evaluative tool in education (and in program evaluation more generally) is ample evidence that human groups adapt external elements to their own needs for 'making sense' rather than worry about the ways those elements were originally intended for use. Ethnography, a descriptive and calculatedly nonjudgemental approach, has recently been pressed into service to help educators make sense out of one of their most pervasive problems: judging their own effectiveness. (I have developed this topic more fully in a paper titled 'Mirrors, Models, and Monitors: Educator Adaptations of the Ethnographic Innovation' prepared for G. Spindler's forthcoming [book] *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling*.)

Specific ethnographic techniques are freely available to any researcher who wants to approach a problem or setting descriptively. It is the essential anthropological concern for cultural context that distinguishes ethnographic method from fieldwork techniques and makes genuine ethnography distinct from other "on-site-observer" approaches. And when cultural interpretation is the goal, the ethnographer must be *thinking like an anthropologist, not just looking like one* [italics added].

The qualities that make ethnographic studies ethnographic are worth cherishing, just as the very question of what it is that makes them ethnographic is worth our continual agonizing about among ourselves. I am not suggesting that other researchers and applied social scientists purge the term 'ethnography' from their professional vocabularies, but I do urge them to restrict its use to inquiries in which cultural interpretation is paramount. We are fast losing sight of the fact that the essential ethnographic contribution is interpretative rather than methodological. I think it is not yet too late to reinvest ethnography with its unique property – the commitment to cultural interpretation. Otherwise it is doomed to dissolve into a sea of synonyms for descriptive research.