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ETHNOGRAPHY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry

1 Ethnographic Methods in Contemporary Perspective

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Although still emerging from the thrall of positivism, social inquiry has for some time been undergoing a profound and searching reexamination of its purpose and its methods. Canonical prescriptions about the proper way of making science are increasingly being challenged, and a more catholic perspective on the quest for knowledge and understanding is gaining wider acceptance. The honorific status accorded particular research methods—the laboratory experiment, the large-sample survey—has less influence on working social scientists than before, and there is a growing commitment to methodological pluralism and more frequent reliance on the convergence of findings from multiple and diverse research procedures. This openness of the postpositivist climate in the final decades of the twentieth century has presented the social disciplines with the opportunity to think anew about what it is they are really after and how best to achieve those objectives.

Such salutary changes in orientation toward the making of science can be traced to several sources. One is the work in the history of science (for example, Kuhn 1962; Hanson 1958) that shattered long-held notions about how advances in knowledge were in fact produced. It is quite clear now that positivist reconstructions of scientific advance were highly idealized, based largely on deductions from the outcomes or end products of research rather than reflecting the actual process of inquiry that yielded those outcomes. A second source is the newer analyses in the philosophy of science that revealed the untenability of earlier thinking about the definition of concepts and the nature of confirmation and disconfirmation (Kaplan 1964; Polanyi 1964). These two sources of influence are, however, external to the social sciences themselves. The third source, from within the social disciplines, was widespread dissatisfaction with scientific ac-

complishment; that dissatisfaction was—and is—responsible for much of the changing climate of postpositive social science.

Most of the social science disciplines have experienced the eruption of internal "crises" over the past several decades: agonizing self-appraisals about the impoverished state of scientific accomplishment; worries about the shallowness or surface quality of the usual findings; and apprehension about the failure of research findings to cumulate or tell a story that has coherence, broad applicability, and permanence (Ring 1967; Blalock 1984). These various disciplinary crises appear to have several themes in common. To many in the disciplines, social scientific knowledge seems to have had only limited relevance for understanding societal problems, whether those involve social behavior such as school learning and interpersonal violence, or community and institutional conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and racial segregation. Another common theme—of particular concern in psychology—has been the *a*contextual character of research findings, the fact that the accumulated body of knowledge tends not to be situated, not to be conceptually and empirically connected to the properties and texture of the social settings in which it was obtained. A third theme reflecting discontent in the social sciences is the failure to accommodate human subjectivity in inquiry and to attend to the role of meaning in behavior, in development, and in social life. There has been a tendency to ignore subjectivity or to leave matters of the inner life to the humanities.

Fourth, there is frustration over the inability to recover persons—to retrieve their individuality—from the matrix of relationships that continue to be established among variables of scientific interest (see Elliott Mishler's essay in this volume). The absence of a person focus, and the continued emphasis on relations among variables, has yielded a body of knowledge in which persons in all of their complexity—actors managing the uncertainties and vicissitudes of daily life—are difficult to discern. In this regard, Abbott has admonished us that "our normal methods . . . attribute causality to the variables . . . rather than to agents; variables do things, not social actors" (1992:428). Finally, there is widely shared concern about the tenuous purchase of contemporary social/behavioral science on the dynamics and the course of individual, institutional, and societal change. The obvious difficulties of carrying out longitudinal research are, of course, recognized, but there are more subtle and recondite factors at work here—the surprising paucity of conceptualizations that are truly developmental; the inattention to long-unit notions like "career" that can help to capture the time-extended organization of lives; and the seemingly ingrained preference for large-sample research over detailed studies of development in individual cases in particular settings.

Despite a continuing sense of crisis, the openness of the postpositivist era, the compelling logic of methodological pluralism, and the troubled sense that established approaches to social inquiry have yielded a less than bountiful harvest have all created a new context in which there is keen interest in shifting the orientation and enlarging the armamentarium of social research.

The Turn to Qualitative Methods

That interest has been most evident, perhaps, in the renewed attention to ethnographic or qualitative approaches (the terms are interchangeable as used here) in contemporary studies of social behavior and development. Although long-established in the tool kit of emic anthropology, symbolic interactionist and social constructionist sociology, and phenomenological psychology, ethnographic or qualitative methods have generally been given only limited respect, and they have never been able to attain the scientific status accorded the so-called objective or quantitative methods. Although acknowledged for their usefulness in the exploratory or preliminary phases of an investigation, that is, in the "context of discovery," they have been viewed with great skepticism when employed to establish valid, generalizable knowledge, that is, when used in the "context of justification." This marginalization of qualitative methods in the social science enterprise is precisely what has been changing in the postpositivist climate of epistemological openness and methodological pluralism.

The reintroduction of ethnographic approaches into mainstream social science has been stimulated especially by the sense that such methods speak directly to many of the central themes in the crises with which the social disciplines have been struggling. Ethnographers do, after all, concern themselves with extensive, naturalistic description of settings and contexts, with interpreting the meaning of social behavior and interaction, with understanding the perspective of the actor, the subjectivity of the Other, and with being able to narrate a coherent "story" of social life in which it is persons who have agency and who adapt and change with time and circumstances. Each of these aspects of qualitative inquiry can be seen as responsive to one or another of the felt shortcomings of mainstream research, and it is probably that fact which accounts for much of the recent renewal of interest in ethnography.

The Quantitative-Qualitative Antinomy

The terms *ethnography* and *qualitative method* refer to a congeries of approaches and research procedures rather than to any singular, self-

contained, unique method. Their coherence—whether participant observation, unstructured interview, informal survey, case study, or the hermeneutic analysis of text—derives from a common concern with the interpretation of meaning and with understanding the point of view of the Other. Qualitative and quantitative methods are often cast as an irreconcilable antinomy, with each the polar opposite of the other, but such a contrast is inherently misleading. It is not only how data are collected but how they are used—for example, counted versus interpreted—that determines whether a study is more qualitative or more quantitative. And, of course, qualitative data lend themselves to being quantified, and quantitative data can be interpreted. As Hammersley concluded in *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* "the distinction between qualitative and quantitative is of limited use and, indeed, carries some danger" (1992:159). A similar conclusion, phrased somewhat differently, is reached by Weisner (this volume): "all studies have an 'ethnographic' component embedded in them, even if ethnography was not done."

Insofar as no sharp distinction can be drawn between ethnographic approaches and those more conventionally relied upon in formal investigations, the a priori restriction of qualitative method only to the "context of discovery" would seem difficult to defend. The role that ethnography can play in the "context of justification," though still relatively less explored, could well be an important instrumentality for advancing the frontiers of social knowledge, and *joint* reliance on qualitative and quantitative procedures, producing kinds of information that are complementary and converging, can now be seen as a powerful strategy for enriching the understanding of social life.

Ethnography and Epistemology

Notwithstanding the postpositivist welcoming of methodological pluralism and current recognition of the inferential compatibility of qualitative and quantitative data, the epistemological status of ethnography continues to be challenged. On one front it remains beleaguered by the legacy of positivism, especially by its traditional concerns about validity and objectivity. On another front it is under siege by the postmodernists for not carrying its intrinsic reliance on subjectivity to the logical extreme, namely, the denial of empirical reality. Reflecting on these sorts of epistemological challenges, as well as on the moral and political questions now being raised about contemporary ethnographic work, Geertz has expressed alarm that "the very right to write . . . ethnography seems at risk" (1988:133); "its goals, its relevance, its motives, and its procedures all are questioned" (139).

In the essays that follow in this section, and indeed in the others throughout this volume, the critical epistemological issues are dealt with both directly and indirectly. The combination of logical argument in some of those essays, and the demonstrably rich ethnographic yield in others, makes it clear that epistemology no longer provides a secure haven for critics of qualitative work. The consensus that emerges, instead, is that qualitative and quantitative methods of social inquiry, though often asking different kinds of questions, share a common epistemological foundation and a common philosophy of science.

One of the epistemological tensions surrounding ethnographic work has had to do with presuppositions about an empirical world, conventional science assuming its existence and postmodernists insisting that the constructionist perspective of ethnography permits only skepticism and doubt (see chapter 6, by Norman Denzin, in this volume). It is interesting in this regard to reexamine a foundational work in sociological ethnography, namely, Blumer's classical exegesis on symbolic interactionism, in which he is explicit that "an empirical science presupposes the existence of an empirical world" (1969:21). The same position for cultural anthropology has been expressed—in perhaps a more literary style—by Geertz: "Whatever else ethnography may be . . . it is above all a rendering of the actual, a vitality phrased" (1988:143). Hammersley's methodological exploration of ethnography also accepts "the idea that research investigates independent, knowable phenomena" (1992:52), and Campbell (chapter 7 in this volume) decries the efforts of those "ontological nihilists" in postmodern scholarship to "deny to language any degree of competent reference to a nonlinguistic world." In this volume, only Denzin seems willing to consider postmodern doubt about an empirical world seriously. An earlier exchange about this very issue between Denzin and Plummer, another postmodern interactionist, is instructive. In the end, Plummer finds himself unwilling to go as far as Denzin: "I cannot leave the empirical world" (1990:159) is his almost plaintive conclusion.

Obviously, this ongoing ontological debate is unlikely to be resolved in any final way, and postmodern scholarship in the sciences and humanities remains a forceful presence in discourse about social reality (see Denzin's essay in this volume). Nevertheless, it seems clear from the essays in this volume that ethnography, notwithstanding its interactionist perspective and its commitment to social constructionism, remains closely allied to quantitative method, both having their epistemological feet set firmly in an empirical world.

The ethnographic insistence on grasping the perspective of the actor, on seeing the world as it appears to someone else, on understanding the subjectivity of the Other, has been another source of epistemological ten-

sion, this time challenged from the positivist rather than the postmodern flank. Shweder's notion of a "true ethnography" does, indeed, call for it "to represent the qualia of 'otherness,' of other 'minds,' of other 'ways of life.' It aims to make insiders intelligible to outsiders" (chapter 2 in this volume). Beyond positivism's resistance to subjectivity in general there is a special reluctance about claims that the subjectivity of the observer can reach and represent the subjectivity of the Other. How is it possible to know other minds?

In one sense, the knowing of other minds can be seen as a particular aspect of the larger ethnographic enterprise of coming to know the social world. That enterprise rests, as we have seen, on inherently subjective, interpretive practices of social and personal construction. But the problematics of knowing and representing other minds have generated additional and special assumptions about the commonality of human nature. Campbell (in this volume) calls attention in this regard to Quine's "principle of charity" (1960), the assumption that the Other is in many ways like ourselves. Similarly Shweder (chapter 2 in this volume) argues for assuming a "universal original multiplicity" underlying a potential for unity among human beings. That assumption undergirds the process of "mind reading" that is so critical in Shweder's vision of a true ethnography: "the construction of an account about what it is like to be a differently situated, differently motivated human being." The knowing of other minds, then, becomes feasible not only as part of the larger constructionist effort but resting also on the additional assumption that other minds are like our own in imaginative capability, an assumption that permits inquiry to proceed beyond the otherwise impenetrable barrier of solipsism.

Related to both of these issues—the existence of an empirical world and the knowability of other minds—is yet a third problematic issue, the place of "validity" in ethnographic representation. In quantitative approaches in mainstream social science, validity has always been an issue of central concern, but the charge is often made that there is no way to establish the validity or the truth value of scientific claims or observations in qualitative work.

Here again it is instructive to consult Blumer's exposition of the methodological position of symbolic interactionism to see how central the concern for validity actually has been. For Blumer, empirical validation comes from direct "examination of the empirical social world"; "the merit of naturalistic study [ethnography] is that it respects and stays close to the empirical domain" (1969:32, 46; see also Becker's essay in this volume). In this perspective, validity is safeguarded by procedures for close, careful, accurate, and extensive observation, procedures that can yield a coherent, credible, and internally consistent account. This is a somewhat different

perspective on validity from the traditional discourse about "interobserver agreement" and "correlation with external criteria," but it is consonant with the implications of more recent notions such as "construct validity" that emphasize conceptual embeddedness, and with current emphases on the "plausibility" and "credibility" of scientific accounts (Hammersley 1992), on their "ring of authenticity" (Shweder, chapter 2), and on "validation as the social discourse through which trustworthiness is established" (Mishler 1990:420).

The very complexity of the validity notion in contemporary inquiry precludes any simplistic resolution that would apply across the various investigative procedures and diversity of circumstances of social research. What does seem clear, however, is that validity remains an essential and inescapable concern for qualitative study and that the interpretive products of ethnographic inquiry are, like any other scientific products, subject to appraisal for validity. Even the hermeneutic turn does not automatically permit evasion of such appraisal; Campbell's call for "a validity-seeking hermeneutics" (1986:109) is a noteworthy caution about just this obligation.

Ethnography and the Larger Enterprise of Social Science

The foregoing considerations and the essays in this volume provide strong endorsement for an ecumenical orientation to social inquiry—a stance that embraces a diversity of research methods. Fundamental epistemological differences between qualitative and quantitative methods no longer seem compelling, and there is a growing sense that, used together, they can be mutually enriching while providing alternative ways of converging on the same set of inferences. In addition, ethnographic approaches speak directly to much of the discontent with mainstream, quantitative accomplishment.

Conclusions such as these—if widely shared—could have reverberating implications for the larger social science enterprise, not just for the design of research efforts but also for the scientific "culture" in which those efforts are embedded. Values that are now attached to methods might more appropriately be connected to the significance of the questions asked or the topics addressed. Graduate training in the methodology of research might try to encompass qualitative in addition to quantitative approaches so that every cohort of graduate students would not first have to exorcise the legacy of positivism before discovering for itself the advantages of methodological pluralism. A more pervasive legitimation of ethnographic approaches in both training and application might entail other changes as well, for example, changes in the norms and regulatory processes that

influence the making of science—the kind of evaluative criteria employed by journal editors and by research review panels. And the scientific societies and journals that now celebrate honorific methods in their very titles—*Journal of Experimental Whatever*—might seek labels or titles that focus on substantive issues and topical concerns instead.

Changing a culture—even that of a field of science—is notoriously difficult. Yet it seems that that is precisely what is called for if there is indeed to be a "deep incorporation" (see Weisner's essay in this volume) of qualitative approaches in the study of social behavior and human development. Happily, the essays in this volume suggest that change is well underway in the culture of social inquiry.

The Essays in This Section

The essays in this section speak for themselves—with vigor, with logic, with wisdom, and with commitment. All deal, in one way or another, with the critical epistemological issues in the ethnographic enterprise. Since two of the essays, Denzin's and Campbell's, were prepared as commentaries on the other chapters, only brief, additional comment is warranted here.

Richard Shweder's far-reaching effort to characterize "true ethnography," presented as the keynote address at the conference, ranges from how we know other minds, to what the concept of "culture" entails, to whether there are plural prescriptive norms for development (that is, whether developmental outcomes are differentially valued in different social and historical contexts).

Elaborating the position that a true ethnography is a "mind read," Shweder argues forcefully that other minds are, indeed, accessible, and that the meanings of social action can be comprehended and represented. In mind reading, a process of interpretation is applied to what someone says and does, and mental state concepts are invoked to model what that Other "has in mind." This interpretive process is, of course, fundamental to all ethnographic inquiry, and its application to knowing other minds engages cultural psychology in the larger constructionist enterprise.

True ethnography views culture as analytically separate from behavior; theoretically important, such a perspective provides for a problematic relation between the two, thereby conserving culture as an explanatory resource in accounting for variation in behavior and development. For Shweder, culture is a conceptual model of the preferences and constraints that characterize a "moral community," one whose members are each other's reference group. This gives culture a "local" character that enables it to play a proximal explanatory role in relation to the patterns of ordinary

social life. Its local character also implies that, for any complex society, it will be more useful to entertain multiple cultures than to seek one that is overarching and sovereign.

Most provocative, perhaps, is Shweder's exploration of the relation of culture to human development. In raising the issue of plural *prescriptive* norms for development, he is proposing that desired developmental outcomes may be context dependent, variable, or different—depending on time, setting, and circumstance—rather than autochthonous or inherent. Some developmentalists may not find this easy to accommodate, while social contextualists will most likely welcome it. Among the latter, Dannefer has emphasized "the irreducibly social dynamics of individual development" and pointed to "the pervasive impact of social structure as an organizer of development" (1984:106).

Overall, Shweder's vision of true ethnography will have to be reckoned with by future scholars venturing to represent "what it is like to be a differently situated . . . human being."

Howard Becker (chapter 3 in this volume) rejects any fundamental epistemological difference between qualitative and quantitative research. Indeed, he is impatient about the fact that "the issue does not go away . . . this continuing inability to settle the question." In "further thoughts" at the end of his chapter, he suggests that it is the status differential between the quantitative research community and the qualitative research community that sustains the ongoing tension—a reflection of the politics of science rather than of any difference in philosophy of science.

Seeing epistemology in its prescriptive mode as a negative discipline, Becker is more concerned with empirical practice, with the relation between what is actually done in research and the compellingness of the inferences it yields. This "practical epistemology" is, in fact, entirely consonant with the emphasis of recent work in the sociology and history of science.

Qualitative work, according to Becker, does differ from quantitative work in other ways—in being more interested in specific cases than aggregate relationships, in more accurately grasping the point of view of the actor, in yielding more contextually situated understanding, and in providing fuller—"thicker," "broader"—description of the phenomena of interest. His contrast serves as a critique of quantitative or "objective" methods and illuminates some of their limitations in achieving the shared goals of social inquiry. The typical social survey, for example, necessitates and thereby imposes costly simplification on the complexity of the world of everyday life and social action.

In dealing with the validity issue as a matter of "credibility" based on the accuracy, precision, and breadth of the data gathered, Becker joins

with the other authors in this section. This interpretation of validity is in the Blumerian tradition and is a reaffirmation of the centrality of validity concerns in qualitative research.

Elliot Mishler undertakes a rather heroic task—to recover the "missing persons" in so much of mainstream social research. Scholars in both sociology (for example, Abbott 1992) and psychology (Magnusson and Bergman 1988) have again reminded us that inferences drawn from aggregate data may not apply to all—or even to any—of the individuals making up the aggregate, and that individual variability in such aggregate data, instead of being dealt with, is usually dismissed as error. Arguing "the incommensurability of group and individual analyses," Mishler (chapter 4 in this volume) proposes an alternative paradigm to the nomothetic, population-based model that dominates contemporary research, namely, case-based research in which individual cases—persons, cultures, organizations, or institutions– are the units of study and analysis.

The compatibility of a case-based orientation to research with the ethnographic tradition in social inquiry is apparent. It is an approach that lends itself to Blumer's "close observation," or, as Mishler notes, "that privileges the accumulation of details," and it obviously enhances the accommodation and representation of context. However, the key commonality, according to Mishler, lies in the shared concern for *cases* as the unit of analysis rather than in any common preference for qualitative over quantitative methods. Indeed, a contribution of the chapter is the exploration of quantitative approaches to the patterns and structures that emerge in case-based analyses.

The person-centered rather than variable-centered thrust of Mishler's chapter reflects his theoretical preoccupation with the concept of agency, and his essay is an attempt to restore agency to persons, an objective that is, of course, central in current developmental science. The application of case-based analysis to narratives about "careers" illustrates the role of agency in long-term developmental change. Mishler's conclusion that "case-based analytic methods are now on the agenda in the human sciences" portends a scientific future in which "missing persons" may well be easier to find.

In a penetrating exploration about the nature and locus of disability, R. P. McDermott and Hervé Varenne (chapter 5 in this volume) grapple with epistemological issues involving the social construction of reality, the meaning and signification of action, and the contribution of context to understanding the course and outcome of development. Relying exclusively on case study—the deaf on Martha's Vineyard; a learning disabled child named Adam; and illiterate adults among pest exterminators in New York City—they argue that the social (and political) construction of dis-

ability, the way a "difference is noticed, identified, and made consequential," is more influential than the disability itself.

The place of "culture" in these case studies is central. Indeed, in explicating their perspective on culture *as* disability, disability is located in the culture rather than the person: cultures "actively organize ways for persons to be disabled." In their view, persons are "acquired" by already framed, cultural notions of disability. This treatment of culture as a construction analytically separate from behavior is consonant with that in Shweder's true ethnography, and the close, detailed, contextually embedded observation such case studies permit reinforces Becker's and Mishler's calls for case-based study and analysis. The complex role of culture in shaping the course and setting the outcomes of development is also apparent in these exemplars. As the authors conclude, "in organizing a science of development, it may be necessary to begin with the recognition that life in any culture gives us much to fall short of."

The essays by Norman Denzin and Donald Campbell were invited as commentaries on the other chapters, and they fulfill that charge brilliantly. Unable to attend the conference, Denzin prepared his discussion on the basis of early drafts of the various papers. He provides an intensely interesting and challenging postmodernist or post-structuralist perspective on the ethnographic project, one much more radical than that of any of the other contributors. Despite his ontological differences with the other authors, however, Denzin sees researchers as "bricoleurs" and qualitative work as "bricolage," yet another way of urging the methodological pluralism about which a growing consensus has already been noted. His ultimate interest in "cultural studies"—critical analyses of cultural representations of everyday experience in film, sports, music, and so on—as an approach to studying youth development in high-risk settings does promise to enhance the bricolage by delineating further the quiddities of experience in everyday life settings.

Campbell's essay creates a valuable dialectic with Denzin's. As noted earlier, Campbell remains committed to efforts to improve the competence of scientific belief, and he rejects what he labels "ontological nihilism," the denial in post-structuralism of the possibility of valid reference to an independent reality. Acknowledging the "worldview embeddedness of all observations" and the social construction of social reality, he argues nevertheless for a science in which validity remains a guiding objective to be pursued even if never likely to be fully achieved. The obstacles to the latter that he singles out for discussion—methodological cultural relativism and the failure of communication—have important ramifications for the process of trying to understand other cultures and other minds.

Campbell urges us to learn from successful exemplars in our efforts to

extend ethnographic methodology, and he refers specifically to the substantive chapters that appear later on in this volume. With that positive appraisal of what lies ahead, we can turn to the essays in this section to see, in detail, what their authors have to tell us about the epistemology of ethnographic research.

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