

Cultural Portraits for Beginning Ethnographers

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Abstract

This article shares two ethnographic examples constructed at different points in my own growth as a researcher. They have assisted my students in understanding major issues in narrative data presentation. Both examples tell a cultural story. Each exemplifies the issues of purpose, potential, and strategy. One is grounded in participant observation and its setting is rural America. The other draws upon interviews and document analysis for which the setting is a small Hungarian city in the post-Soviet transitional era.

Introduction

Insightful narratives about social and organizational culture pepper the 'traditions' (Creswell, 1998) of qualitative methodology. This work focuses specifically on ethnographic purposes, potentials, and strategies for the novice researcher. It provides an initial perspective of narrative considerations in presenting cultural portraits for the student who is just starting to grasp foundational lessons in this field from individuals such as Spradley (1979), VanManen (1998), Spindler & Spindler (1992), Wolcott (1990, 1995), Clifford (1998), Geertz (1988), Loftland (1995), LeCompte (1993), Peshkin (1993) and Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997). With continued exposure and practice, students develop their own qualitative confidence and competence in both consuming and creating cultural portraits. Some eventually take their analysis beyond its descriptive capacity to creating insights intended to inform decision making and evaluate policy formulation in the tradition of Lincoln (1998, 1999) and Guba (1989). But in the initial stages of the learning process, it is a matter of getting a basic feel for this type of inquiry and its application of conceptual constructs and terminology in a manner that distinguishes useful research narratives from interesting journalism.

Research regarding adult learning points to the importance of models of outcome projects (Lemme, 2002). This article shares two particular examples intended to expose novice researchers to a narrative presentation of cultural data. One is grounded strategically in participant observation and its setting is rural America. The other draws upon a combination of interviews and document analysis to tell the story of a turning point event in a small Hungarian city during the cultural transition from Soviet rule.

Considering purpose, potential, and strategy

These examples are preceded by a consideration of purpose, potential and strategy. These issues are germane to both examples and pose essential questions that beginning ethnographers need to keep in mind. What purpose gives an ethnographic work its particular way of knowing more about individuals and their social culture? What is the potential of ethnographic information to be interpreted as informative messages for the consumer of such analysis? What strategies yield useful data for informative analysis and an interesting narrative?

Ethnography is purposed to foster understanding, cultural understanding specifically. Ethnographers gather data with the intent of cultural sense-making, from tribal hierarchies to corporate reporting structures. Its anthropological grounding in understanding, however, has been a barrier to its acceptance and application in educational arenas. In teacher training programs in the 1970s, and 1980s "to understand" was an elusive incalculable term to be avoided in designing, in implementing, and in evaluating academic intents. It simply did not fit the

measurement criteria of an era in which teaching was seen as the constant and learning as the variable. In the 1990s, however, understanding came to be valued as a central component in studies of educational and social change. And in today's accountability era, in which educators need to extend their analysis of quantitative outcomes data, there is new appreciation for the how and the why type of questions ethnographers commonly address.

A second consideration relates to the potential contribution of narrative reporting. As the environments in which we learn and work grow simultaneously more diverse yet more interdependent, it becomes increasingly important that we represent the perceptions of different stakeholders in any cultural setting. Ethnographic techniques seek to not only reveal such perceptions but to uncover social conflicts and/or organizational obstacles. Today's post-structuralist, post-experimental, post-modernist era, the analysis of research findings often considers the transformational potential of ethnographic data (Denzin and Guba, 2003). Lincoln and Denzin (2002) draw our attention to this new 'landscape' of ethnographic inquiry in which the traditional paradigms and strategies previously identified with one particular discipline now combine strategies once seen particular to psychological, sociological or anthropological domains. Cultural analysis, for example, is no longer the exclusive domain of anthropological tradition. Its useful potential is increasingly recognized in business management programs and in leadership training for enhanced organizational interaction.

Strategic terminology such as naturalistic research, constructivist design, interpretative biography, historiography, phenomenology or interactive inquiry are labels and that give insight into knowing whether researchers' strategies for data gathering are grounded in anthropology, sociology, psychology or history. But the basic data collection strategies of ethnographic research (observation, interviewing and use of documents) are shared across traditions enabling the researcher to choose the best "fit" of guiding theories and conceptual frameworks to assist analysis and to expand interpretative capacities.

For students who have experienced learning another language, most recall the point where they knew what was being said, but were not yet articulate enough to structure their own commentary. So it is, too, with continued exposure to cultural narratives. Once students define a research problem and find a methodology that fits that problem and its specific research questions, the capacity to effectively articulate this new language of design, data and analysis can be improved by immersion in the works of those who speak a common language. Students fine tune their strategic competence and their confidence by following the trail from one ethnographic work to other like minds referenced in that work. But what about that final stage when with data in hand we are faced with what Harry Wolcott (1990) calls writing it up? The next section now shares how purpose, potential and strategic considerations are woven into a simple write up. Although each model differs in cultural setting, both draw attention to the importance of portraying the cultural roles and rules in each context.

Deerhunters, a Cultural Portrait in Rural America

The cultural scene I describe involves my extended family group in the recurrent social setting of an annual Thanksgiving gathering. All group members have chosen to remain in the small central Pennsylvania town of approximately 800 people in which I grew up. I remained oblivious to many of this culture's group rules and roles until twenty years ago when a research course in ethnography made me alert to certain conditioned responses.

Much of the cultural information one must know in order to feel comfortable in this setting centers around deer hunting. For as long as I can remember, the smell of gun oil quickly replaced the smell of turkey on Thanksgiving afternoon; and as evening approached, groups formed to drive around the countryside in trucks and 'spot' deer. Spotters without exception are male, and using the spotlight is an earned role. The females stay behind at the home of the relative who hosted Thanksgiving dinner. They inevitably discuss gruesome hunting accidents known to all, and without fail make the ritualistic statement about unloaded guns always being the ones that kill. Important parts of the shared cognitive information among males is the strategic location of each member's 'tree stand', and the planning of who will drive the animals into each hunter's territory in the following days.

Four years ago the location of this cultural scene moved from my parents' home to the wooded location of a recently constructed log cabin owned by an older cousin. The physical environment of the new location more obviously reflects the importance of deer hunting. A large area of the deck of the home is taken up by an outdoor double sink and a long built-in table, for processing purposes. Two sets of binoculars are located within easy reach on two different window ledges inside the house. Ridicule of various members of the group, both male and female, is an accepted part of human interaction in this cultural scene. This year's challenge was to lie in a recently installed hammock in the cabin loft. It was made known to each person as he or she arrived who had and who had not been able to navigate the task, the taunts suggesting that the newcomer would in all probability fall into the unsuccessful category.

Three age groups are represented (10-20, 30-50, and 50-70). There is no great variance in the standards of living present in represented households, nor is there great variety in the way earnings are spent. Male members take at least three days away from work during hunting season. The education of youth through elementary and secondary school is often discussed only in terms of procedures, requirements, and participation by children and adults in school functions, with emphasis on "getting through". Three male children who have recently graduated from high school work at minimum wage tasks and continue to live with their parents. The teens in the group adopt alternate names for both themselves and common objects. Rick wishes to be called "Hoss," and cars and trucks are both referred to as "vehicles," the word pronounced with added emphasis on the first syllable.

The activities in which the members of this cultural scene engage are primarily determined by gender, and an obvious distinction can be observed in those who serve food (the women) and those who are served (the men) on this particular holiday. I have no recollection of the significance of reflective thanks or the gathering together of family ever being central to this cultural scene. Most members visit and eat with each other at least once a week, and the focal point of this holiday cultural scene is simply the preparation for "the Hunt."

An Enabling New Structure for Communication in One Emerging Democracy

Changing social landscape is often portrayed through cogent human stories. One such story was repeated to me six times during my research into educational change in post-Soviet Hungary. Although it did not link to the curricular research questions that guided my intended work, it was a significant story recounted with different intensity by each of six individuals; and it was clearly a social marker which all found worthy of conversation as they reflected on their changing society in the early 1990s. Two of the six persons showed me newspaper clippings they had saved about this event, one

having created a 'scrapbook' type collection purposed as his history book for his young daughter.

The event was labeled as 'Three Days of Bread and Milk' by all. But its significance was variously perceived as an element in a new market economy and a hallmark of a new communications capacity. At the core of the presented data was a national taxicab strike resulting from drivers' dissatisfaction over Hungary's shock therapy economic policy. Hungarian officials radically increased gasoline prices after having firmly promised not to do so to the dismay of the Hungarian people, especially the cab drivers who were so directly affected by the price increase. Citizens experienced the first major disillusionment with the new political freedom, and it resulted in a significant drop in the confidence level the populace placed in newly elected officials. Political disillusionment, however, did not appear to be the force that was reshaping their insiders' reflections on their changing society. Instead it was the new use of cab drivers' access to the network of their two-way cab radios, enabling them to quickly organize against the price increase. This capacity to communicate was something revolutionary to the Hungarian citizen who came of age in the Soviet era and who stood in line to use pay phones outside apartment complexes never wired with land lines.

For three days the cab drivers blockaded all entrances to the southern city of Pecs. The city was at a standstill with all deliveries halted. Each time this story was told to me, it was surprisingly similar in its essentials, as one interviewee after another spoke with enthusiasm about the significance of the strike. Some had high praise for the drivers' collective determination, while others criticized their audacity. But each person spoke with a kind of reverence about the awesome power made possible by the simple ability to quickly and effectively communicate with each other. During my work in Hungary in the transitional period immediately before and after 1990, I was dismayed by both the paucity and the ineptness of the existing technical communication network, centering around an inaccessibility to telephones. Educators who assisted in my research had central telephones in departmental university offices, but not in their individual offices, and certainly not in their homes. Rather, they took public transportation or drove to each other's homes or work sites, or met at the train station in order to communicate with each other. Less than eight percent of my informants after the political transitions of 1989 had home telephones. A short wait for official approval of a telephone request under the former communist system was eight years, and the requests of educators were commonly denied on grounds that their work did not -require a telephone. Public housing under the Soviet system never acknowledged the need for individual telephones and so did not prepare the numerous apartment complexes for that capability. In the immediate post-Soviet period, although obtaining a telephone was no longer difficult politically, it resulted in the central staircases of apartment complexes becoming entangled with a growing number of wires before the large scale movement to cellular technology.

One particularly effective lens through which to view changing societal terrain is the use of epiphanies, those insights of sudden significance through which individuals reshape both their personal outlook and their social ideology (Denzin, 1997). Denzin argues that these epiphanies, or turning-point moments in individual perceptions, have the power to transform political and economic ideologies and to inform an analysis of social change. The cultural mind shift motivated by the case of bread and milk illustrates both a societal fracture point in an historic era and a transformative point in the cultural mentality of individuals.

Conclusion

When I began examining the dimensions of qualitative research two decades ago, I felt that I was treading water while others were showing off their breast stroke. In retrospect I realize that most of my peers were also treading. The treading water metaphor, nonetheless, is a good one^J---- particularly for students at the beginning of a thesis or dissertation process, a process in which treading eases numbing tiredness and restores energy and momentum. I am fortunate that my own graduate training at the University of Pittsburgh enabled me to study directly with a user friendly ethnographic mentor, Dr. John Singleton and a demanding cultural researcher, Dr.

Rolland Paulston. I am fortunate too that my dissertation destination necessitated a qualitative route. My research background was descriptive statistics; but it was not a choice that fit an inquiry into post-communist educational change. The use of quantifiable archival data would have been void of validity in an environment where educators commonly misrepresented achievement in order to legitimize their system and retain their positions. And seeking to gather data through use of a Likert ranked survey would have been presumptuous for a population who had no prior opportunity to make choices between yes and no. Terms like strongly agree or mildly disagree were neither comprehensible nor useful. Ultimately the confident researcher walks through a variety of experiences through which he or she develops an overall sense of conceptual framing for gathering and analyzing narrative data. For the novice, however, often a simple model of a finished product can serve as a useful catalyst in the process constructing cultural portraits.

The models presented in this article reflect two very different cultural landscapes. Both illustrate, however, how data gathered through observation, interviews or documents assists the reader in formulating new psychological and sociological understandings of cultures that differ from his or her own experiences. Both illustrate as well how the researcher's attention to purpose, potential and strategy can yield a product that is interdisciplinary and useful to those who are skilled producers of qualitative findings and those who merely benefit from new insights as consumers of those findings.

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