Educational Ethnography Past, Present, and Future: Ideas to Think With

by Margaret Eisenhart

This paper addresses an issue that constantly plagues all social science research: How should we adjust our conceptual orientations and methodological priorities to take into account apparently changing human experiences and priorities? I take up this issue in the form of three "muddles," or confusing situations, that confront me as an ethnographer trying to work in today's contentious educational research atmosphere. In my case, the three muddles concern the meaning of "culture;" the enthusiasm (or not) for ethnography; and the researcher's responsibility to those she writes about and hopes to help. First, I describe each muddle. Then I try to "tidy them up," at least enough to give some direction to my future work. I find that some familiar ideas about culture, ethnography, and researcher responsibility are still very useful, but they should be thought about in new ways in light of present circumstances.

[There are images that evoke] connections in the world today that make [those images] useful to think with.

–Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections*

What are the images that are useful for researchers to "think with" in the contemporary world? Will the images we have relied on for years work, or do we need new ones? Must the new ones be completely new, or should they conserve some aspects of the old? In this article, I take up these questions with reference to my experiences as an educational anthropologist and ethnographer. No discussion of my experience with these matters can proceed without first making mention of "culture."

The concept of culture is one image that has been fundamental to theories and research in social science for many years. Yet like other fundamental concepts, its meaning has changed across time and varied with the contexts of its use. In anthropology, the discipline that has depended most on culture, its meanings have been contested from the beginning (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952); the same is true in the sub-field of educational anthropology (Spindler, 1955). Increasingly, this is the case in educational research too, where culture may mean one thing to bilingual educators, another thing to educational anthropologists, and something else to ethnic scholars or cognitive psychologists (e.g., Eisenhart, 2001). When culture is used as an idea "to think with," this variety is provocative and can move research forward.

Educational Researcher, Vol. 30. No. 8, pp. 16–27

But when culture is used in a research design, its meaning must be clear so it can inform the research methods that will be employed. Curiously, although there has been much written about the various meanings of culture, there have been relatively few discussions of how research methods should or could vary accordingly.[1] I wondered: If understandings of culture are varied or changing and ethnography is the methodology for studying culture, why hadn't there been more discussion of corresponding variations or changes in method? This question led me to the issues I describe below.

Let me start by saying that I don't think ready answers are at hand. Many of the people whose work I have relied on for years are either defending conventional methods or no longer collecting data (see also Fine & Weis, 1998b). I think young scholars have some compelling critiques of conventional methods but little in the way of new methods or fresh insights on methods to offer. At the same time, some funding agencies, confused by the proliferation of qualitative methods and debates surrounding them, are poised to deny ethnographic research proposals—along with other forms of qualitative research—on the grounds that the methods are not "reliable and rigorous." And legislation to require that all federally funded educational research projects include randomized field trials has recently been under consideration in Congress. It seems clear that ethnographers should be thinking carefully about methods. But as I considered all this, I realized that whenever I tried to think about new methods of ethnography, I found myself in a muddle.

Muddles

The term "muddle" is famous in anthropology thanks to Gregory Bateson. He used it to introduce the dilemmas of formulating a systems approach to learning in his 1972 book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. The book begins with this exchange between Bateson and his young daughter, Mary Catherine, who asks: "Daddy, why do things get in a muddle?"

Bateson: "What do you mean? Things? Muddle?"

M.C.: "Well, people spend a lot of time tidying things, but they never seem to spend time muddling them. Things just seem to get in a muddle by themselves. And then people have to tidy them up again."

Later, Mary Catherine asks again: "Why do things get the way I say isn't tidy?" Her father says: "because there are more ways which you call "untidy" than there are ways which you call "tidy" (pp. 3–4).

Muddle 1: The Trouble With Culture

As I began to think about ethnographic research, some muddles of ethnography's recent past kept coming to mind. First, there's the muddle created by what might be called "the troubling of culture"[2] as I understood "culture" in the late 1970s—a troubling associated with both the conditions of postmodernity (the economic and social conditions of late 20th century capitalism) and postmodernist ideas about truth, knowledge, values, and ethics.[3]

In the late 1970s, the human rights oriented projects of equality and opportunity, as David Lyon (1994) calls them, had finally produced a U.S. civil rights movement of consequence. New computer and telecommunication technologies were beginning to spread beyond the designers and experts to the rest of society. More conservative political leaders were elected in powerful countries, and together with their economic partners, they began to assemble what has come to be called "post-Fordist" economic priorities. (See Lyon, 1994, for an extended discussion of these issues.)

In simple terms, Fordist economic priorities can be captured by the imagery of Henry Ford's automobile factory—productivity, specialization, standardization, management-by-objective, and accountability—all of which became common features of everyday life, including schooling, during the first half of the 20th century. Post-Fordist economic priorities are captured by different images—flexible and mobile, information based, technologically dependent, and consumer-oriented—which have become more common during the second half of the century. There was no clean break between the two; the legacy of Fordism remains and is in tension with increasing post-Fordism.

These changing conditions around the world have been associated with new patterns of migration, wealth, work, and leisure. In schools, we see some corresponding changes: from teachers directing and ordering students to teachers facilitating and encouraging them; from students memorizing to students constructing; and from an emphasis on one way of knowing or doing (or one right answer) to many.

Community life also has changed. Shirley Brice Heath comments on this in her 1996 Epilogue to *Ways With Words*, when she talks about the 1990's circumstances of the Trackton and Roadville families she first studied in the1970s. Heath writes:

> Fieldwork such as that behind *Ways with Words* [1983] has [become] impossible. Present day households and communities of children and youth lack the easily described boundaries of their parents. . . . In many of these households, weeks go by when no two members of a household eat at the same time, share any chore, or plan work together. . . . Youngest children are in daycare centers. School-aged children go inside friends' houses to watch television or play video games; they crowd into the vans of community youth athletic leagues and move from sport to sport by season. . . . Older youth . . . race to their cars . . . and head for fast-food restaurants or malls. . . . On they go, they listen to car radios or wear headphones and throb to the muffled beat of their compact discs or cassettes. (pp. 370–372)

Changes like these not only make conventional fieldwork difficult, they also make thinking about culture difficult. Where do we look for culture in situations like this? How do we think about it or study it?

As these social changes have grown in scope during the 1980s and 90s, so too have the cultural and intellectual phenomena referred to as "postmodernism"—the debates about knowledge and truth that have characterized the so-called "culture wars" on college campuses, in the popular media, and in political campaigns. "Culture," as I knew it in the late 70s, has been one of the casualties of this war; it has been diminished if not destroyed. In my first research study, which focused on school desegregation in the southern U.S. beginning in 1975, I tended to think in terms of "black culture," "white culture," and "school culture" (Clement, Eisenhart, & Harding, 1979). In *Ways With Words* (1996), Shirley Brice Heath presents the "culture" of two communities, Trackton and Roadville, in contrast to the "culture" of the school attended by the two communities' children. She argued that differences in the way each cultural group socialized children led to communicative and academic difficulties for Roadville and Trackton children when they went to school.

Although the view of culture as a relatively enduring, coherent and bounded 'way of living' was prevalent in anthropology and public discourse at that time, some anthropologists of education had already realized its limitations, especially in situations of group contact, such as schools (e.g., Eddy, 1967; Henry, 1963; Leacock, 1969). Fred Erickson (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Erickson & Shultz, 1982) pointed to the permeable boundaries, or the "partial boundedness," of culture. In a partially bounded situation, "there are distinct *focuses* of appropriate attention. . . . Yet, though these attentional focuses influence what is noticed and left unnoticed . . . , the constraints on focus of attention are never absolute" (Erickson & Shultz, 1982, p. 14). Other influences, introduced by regular interaction across groups and the mass media, produced mixed cultural forms, and these "improvisations" (Erickson & Shultz, 1982, p. 5) sometimes overrode the influence of traditional norms and expectations. Cultural artifacts and tools could be moved back and forth across group boundaries by individual actors as a matter of choice. Ray McDermott (McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1979), John Ogbu (1974, 1978), and the sociologist Hugh Mehan (Mehan,1979; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986) also made clear that political and economic factors, as well as culture, were sources of conflict between students and teachers in school.

Since then, postmodernist ideas from philosophy, feminism, literary criticism, ethnic studies, and cultural studies have driven the point home in anthropology. If postmodernism has taught anthropologists anything definitive, it is that we can no longer conceive of social groups of people with a culture that is clearly bounded and determined, internally coherent, and uniformly meaningful. Consequently we are on shaky ground if we continue to use this concept of culture as a basis for distinguishing home culture from school culture or for making school instruction and curriculum more culturally compatible or more multicultural. The challenge now is how to grasp, both conceptually and methodologically, the meaningful worlds that are produced in conditions like those Heath described.

Some postmodernists have suggested that the intellectual project surrounding culture is in such disarray that we should abandon it entirely (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1991). I disagree, for reasons I will discuss below. Here, I want to suggest that uncertainty about the status and meaning of culture has contributed to the

limited discussion of change to ethnographic methods. At least I think this was the case for me: thinking that anthropologists were in a muddle about the meaning of culture, thinking that we might even abandon it, why worry about updating ethnography?[4] Didn't we have to figure out first what to do with culture before we could think about ethnography?

I have faced these issues directly in one of my current research projects. The project is an effort to design and study an after-school program for urban, middle school girls in a low-income neighborhood. The community organizer who invited me and my colleague, Leslie Edwards, to create the program, wanted technology and science skills to figure prominently in it. From his perspective (and that of other adults in the community), it is very important for the girls to learn skills and competencies that will benefit them economically and intellectually in the future. He did not think the schools were reaching these girls.

Because the girls were already somewhat alienated from school, he did not think (and neither did we) that they would respond well to school-like activities. In theory, we decided to try a community-based approach that would build on the girls' culture, including their youth culture.

But where or what is the "culture" of these girls? What meanings do they make of their worlds? What kinds of things are important to them and why? How can we find this out? How can we use what we learn to design some kind of meaningful curriculum in technology and science, two things that at least on the surface don't appear to be meaningful in the girls' worlds?

All the girls we are working with are growing up in what Fine and Weis call "the unknown city," a community made up of poor and working urban residents monolithically portrayed as "the *reason* for the rise in urban crime, as embodying the *necessity* for welfare reform, and of sitting at the *heart* of moral decline" but in fact exhibiting a wide range of behaviors and attitudes (1998b, p. 1). The girls we know do live in the midst of violence, welfare and decline. Yet, we know them as bright, inquisitive, irreverent, and playful, as well as sometimes bad. The influences on them and their responses are many and varied. Some of the girls have parents who are attentive and concerned; others have lost their parents to crime, drugs, or guns. Some live in nice homes; others live in state-run group homes; several have lived on the street for a while. Some are connected to community resources; others are not. Some want to do well in school; others don't care. None was actually doing well in school when we met them.

What they know and care about is often strange to Leslie and me. Bored by talk of school, they want to talk about boys, clothes, and appearance. What they mean by "attractive", and generally agree about, is quite different from what I mean. They have lots to say about media stars, television programs, sports figures, and video games that I have never heard of. They know almost nothing about going to college, yet all say they want to go, graduate, and get a good job afterwards.

Since we started this work two years ago, I have struggled with the question, How should we *think about* the "culture/s" of these girls? What do we need to know in order to better understand their lives? What should we investigate about their lives in order to design a program for them? Neither conventional ideas about culture nor postmodernist critiques provided much help in answering these questions. Without a clear sense of culture, how could I know what research methods I needed?

Muddle 2: The Enthusiasm (or Not) for Ethnography

A second muddle has been created by the rising tide of enthusiasm for ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research in educational research. Even though confusion exists about the meaning of culture, many educational researchers have embraced ethnographic methods. Even among scholars in cultural studies, feminist studies, ethnic studies, and literacy criticism who have contributed so much to undermining older ideas of culture, many rely on ethnographic methods (Tedlock, 2000).

In the early 1980s when I first attended the meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), only a few papers based on ethnographic or qualitative research were presented there. Now, more than half of AERA research papers are based on some form of qualitative research, and researchers who conduct experiments and quantitative analyses complain that they can't get their papers accepted.

When I arrived 14 years ago at my own School of Education, only five or six of nearly 100 Ph.D. students were using qualitative designs for their dissertation research. Now, only about 10 of our 70 Ph.D. students are using quantitative designs, and some faculty complain that they can't get students interested in quantitative studies any more.

When discussing some of the ideas in this paper with one of my colleagues, an assessment expert, I wondered aloud how to characterize ethnography's recent history in educational research. She looked at me incredulously and said, with an edge of irritation, "That should be easy. Ethnography has won!" She was, of course, referring to the battle for first-methodology position in educational research. From her perspective as a psychologically oriented measurement specialist, there is no question that ethnography and other forms of qualitative research have proliferated and even come to dominate many areas of educational research.

Although the interest in ethnography is certainly good news for those of us whose jobs depend on it, my worry is that the way we teach and write about ethnographic methods may encourage the use of methods that are no longer adequate for addressing aspects of culture that are important to contemporary life. Standard ethnographic methods include participant observation, face-to-face interviewing, researcher reflection/journaling, and analysis of archival records (Denzin, 1978; Eisenhart, 1988; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Spradley, 1979, 1980). These methods are the ones described in most research methods books intended for educational researchers (e.g., Wolcott, 1997; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). They are the mainstays of ethnographic methods, and they depend fundamentally on first-hand, personal involvement in the lives of people who are being studied. Ordinarily, one researcher works alone to collect the data, analyze the results, and write up the findings. Analysis of the data focuses on the identification of regular patterns of action and talk that characterize a group of people (Spradley, 1979, 1980; Wolcott, 1999). Such studies are necessarily limited by the researcher's ability to participate in various settings, the amount of time the researcher can devote and the researcher's areas of special interest and expertise.

Increasingly, collaborative teams are being used to broaden the scope of work to, for example, include more settings and provide different perspectives. Audio-taping, video-taping, and computer software analysis programs also extend the reach of the researcher-as-instrument. Yet, important aspects of contemporary life—struggles within groups, movements of people across time and space, internet communications, extralocal networks, consumerism, and the mass media—can be addressed only superficially even with these additional methods. How can we conscientiously encourage more ethnography, even use it as a standard bearer for good qualitative research in education, if its methods do not fit the conditions of life and experiences we are trying to understand?

This muddle is further complicated by the fact that ethnography has not "won" everywhere. I continue to receive letters from colleagues around the country who complain about dissertation chairs and hiring and tenure decisions that go against ethnographic researchers because their methodology is not considered valuable or "scientific." In some places a backlash against its popularity is occurring. Some programs within the National Science Foundation (NSF) recently adopted a requirement that educational research projects be "reliable and rigorous," criteria that many quantitative researchers believe ethnographies cannot meet. Pending Congressional legislation (e.g., the Castle bill) suggests that the federal government may not be far behind. Reactions like these can be seen as a response to the range of varied methods that are now categorized as "qualitative research" in education. Although ethnography is only one of these, and arguably the best theorized, the negative perception that ethnography is loosely designed, opportunistically conducted, magically analyzed, and notoriously unreliable persists in some quarters. Although there are many excuses for this (e.g., the threat to an existing academic elite, some anthropologists' position that ethnography cannot or should not be systematized, and poorly conducted ethnographies), there are no good reasons for ethnography to be judged negatively or to be carried out poorly. There are now numerous articles and books that explain ethnographic methods in great detail, including the ways in which they meet standards of validity, rigor, and reliability (e.g., Agar, 1996; Bernard, 1988, 1998; Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). There also are many published examples of insights about education that have been gained because ethnographic work has been done. For example, our present understandings of how language use, peer group dynamics, and school social organization influence the meaning of school work and affect school achievement have been immeasurably enhanced by the work of ethnographers.

Thus, I find myself caught between the evidence that conventional ethnographic methods are a valuable addition to educational research and the recognition that they may not be adequate for some of the things that educational anthropologists and others currently need to know.

Muddle 3: Whither Ethnographers' Responsibilities to Others?

The third and final muddle I want to discuss concerns ethnographers' responsibilities when writing about the lives of others and taking actions on their behalf. Ethnographers have long recognized the potential danger to others when the intimate details of their lives are revealed in ethnographic accounts (e.g., Deyhle, Hess, & LeCompte, 1992). They also have long recognized the promise of detailed ethnographic accounts to contribute to deeper understandings of human life. The tension between protecting those studied and reporting details in ways that compel deeper understanding has been a persistent one. The tension is exacerbated when multiple and diverse perspectives (or "voices") must be represented. What if, in protecting some participants, the writer exposes or privileges others? What if revealing one voice implicates or disparages others? What if an understanding of one perspective depends on revealing its relationship to another that should be protected?

Concerns such as these have led in two directions: to more collaborative models of the relationship between researcher and other participants (e.g., LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, & Singer, 1999) and to various experiments in writing (so-called "textualist strategies") designed to better represent multiple voices, including the author's (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Within anthropology, and beyond, these issues probably have been the most hotly debated topics in ethnographic methodology of the past decade. These issues are far from resolved, and the onus is now on collaborative teams and experimental writing strategies to somehow produce accurate, balanced, insightful, and respectful ethnographic accounts.

But these issues are only one horn of the dilemma. Competing ethical issues arise when a goal of the research is to bring about positive change. The desire to make things better for teachers and learners has always been important to many educational anthropologists (e.g., Schensul et al., 1999; Spindler, 1955). As long as the ethnographic writer's focus was on recurrent, broad patterns in the lives and actions of a group, and as long as the writer's political commitments were clear, recommendations about change were possible (though sometimes problematic) based on the patterns and the implications of one's commitments. But as soon as multiple and often competing voices must be represented within a group, the situation becomes more complicated. How should divergent voices be handled when decisions have to be made? Whose needs or desires should have most weight when resources are limited? What should one do when needs or desires are contradictory? Is it appropriate to intervene without consensus and on what grounds? Deep appreciation of variety and multiple perspectives within groups (not to mention uncertainty about the appropriateness of a researcher's commitments) makes decisions about change or intervention even more difficult than they have been.

This dilemma was exemplified for me during a panel discussion I attended at Colorado College two years ago (Colorado Springs, CO; February 5, 1999).[5] The panelists were feminist poststructuralist biologist Donna Haraway, pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty, and cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder. They were discussing the possibilities and limitations of communitarianism. Each panelist spoke for 10 minutes, followed by questions and some debate. Rorty and Shweder went first and second. By different arguments, both arrived at the position that intervention in the affairs of others could be justified on the basis of some agreed-upon principles of justice and fairness.

Then Haraway spoke. Her arguments are hard for me to capture in a few lines, but one audience member summed them up as illustrating "a profound allergy to truth claims" on any level. In her remarks, Haraway described her current research project: an ethnography of the world of purebred dog breeding. She explained that she was interested in examining ideas about genetic engineering and reproductive technologies without the complicated overlay of human racial categories. As in her previous work, she hoped, and I quote here from *Primate Visions,* that "such always oblique and sometimes perverse focusing would facilitate revisionings of fundamental, persistent western narratives about difference" (1989, p. 377).

The changes she hoped for were shifts in naming, thinking, and discourse practices in consequential fields of meaning for industrial and post-industrial people. When asked by an audience member, "If you discover that the genetic manipulation of dogs by humans endangers individual dogs and the breed; then what do you do?" she replied, "I think about it." Admitting no already agreed upon moral truths, Haraway was left with competing claims to consider and the desire to keep meaning in play. This is, of course, a central feature of the postmodern/poststructural project (for a helpful review see St. Pierre, 2001).

Ethnographers of education usually have wanted to do more with our knowledge than "think about it." Historically, ethnographies of education have had practical and political significance. Ethnographic research showing discontinuities between home and school cultures, for example, provided direction for instructional and curricular changes designed to improve minority children's success in schools (see, for example, the articles collected in Jacob & Jordan, 1993). We justified interventions based on this research as a contribution to the liberal project of equal educational opportunity, which most of us did not question in the 1970s. Postmodernists like Haraway challenge us to question accepted truths like this, or at least to consider that other desirable possibilities are conceivable.

Although I am intellectually intrigued by the possibilities Haraway suggests, I think that I have a responsibility as an anthropologist, a teacher, and a person to speak and act sometimes, in the moment, on behalf of the girls who are participating in my research, for example. I am not comfortable, as other applied anthropologists are not (e.g., Agar,1996), with what St. Pierre (2001, quoting Patti Lather) refers to as the "rigorous confusion" of postmodernist research outcomes when the lives of young people seem to be at stake. Perhaps this is misguided activism or liberal guilt, but I can't help feeling that I have some responsibility to speak about what I think would be best in circumstances about which I have some special knowledge.

In their epilogue to *The Unknown City*, Fine and Weis (1998b) take up some of the same issues and more (see also Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). They grapple with questions such as how to present "hot" information about groups like the poor and unwed mothers when the political Right is so likely to use the information against those groups, and how to write or take actions that respect the resources of the poor yet do not obscure the risks and difficulties they face. Fine and Weis conclude that "There are lots of academics writing about these things, but few are really grappling with trying to meld *writing about* and *working with*" others who are different from ourselves (p. 277, emphasis in original).

In light of the kind of challenges to ethnographers' work illustrated by these three muddles, it is not surprising that relatively little attention has been given to new methods for collecting and analyzing ethnographic data. Too many other things about the ethnographer's perspective, role, and responsibilities need attention first. Certainly, these untidy things have rattled my sense of competence and contribution as an educational anthropologist and an educational ethnographer, but I am not completely disarmed. As Mary Catherine Bateson said, "people [can] tidy up," even if only temporarily.

Tidying Up

Tidying Up "Culture"

Culture, though troubled, is not easy to abandon. Surely it continues to be of practical importance that people act and make sense of their worlds through cultural idioms—intellectual and ideological forms (including those of identity)—that are produced and circulated in particular social contexts. Surely it continues to be the case that educational researchers who ignore what teachers, students, and parents think and feel about themselves and others will be unlikely to have any significant positive impact on schools or education. Though untidy, culture is still useful. I agree with Sherry Ortner:

> However much we now recognize that cultures are riddled with inequality, differential understanding, and differential advantage . . . , nonetheless they remain for the people who live within them sources of value, meaning, and ways of understanding—and resisting—the world. . . . [Thus the] ethnography of meaningful cultural worlds is [still] a significant enterprise. (1991, p. 187)

A way forward, a way to tidy up, requires ways of thinking about culture that make it a more robust "way of seeing" (Wolcott, 1999) the contemporary phenomena that affect the intellectual and ideological resources of people and groups.[6] Put another way, the issue is, What views of culture can guide the ethnography of postmodernity, the ethnography of groups and sites of permeable boundaries, multiple influences, dispersed networks, and improvised responses?

One proposed way to think about culture nowadays is to focus on "cultural productions." Cultural productions have been defined by Paul Willis as "discourses, meanings, materials, practices, and group processes [used] to explore, understand, and creatively occupy particular positions in sets of general material possibilities" (1981, p. 59). Willis used this concept to demonstrate how young people in subordinated groups drew on multiple sources of influence to fashion their own responses to the conditions they experienced. Many others built on Willis' idea (see Eisenhart, 2001; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996). Aurolyn Luykx (1996), for example, studied a Bolivian (Aymaran) normal school. As the teacher candidates from various rural areas came together for instruction in preparing to become teachers, they appropriated the national discourse of professional teacher development. In so doing, they began to differentiate themselves from their rural relatives and friends. Yet the teacher education students also maintained discourses from their rural homes, to which they would eventually return as teachers. By careful investigation of

these competing discourses, how the teacher education students used and manipulated them, and their connections to larger structural forms, for example, the rural poverty of Bolivia's indigenous population and the economic allure of professional teaching, Luykx revealed the contested terrain of culture and its mixed messages for these students becoming teachers:

> Part of [the teachers'] socialization involved coming to grips with the fact that the achievement of professional status would distance them from their ethnic and class origins, while simultaneously requiring them to live and work among those from whom they had differentiated themselves. . . . As future teachers, they would be called upon to disseminate a worldview opposed to the one they were encouraged to identify with as Aymaras. The only choice [they found] legitimate was to maintain these two ideological loyalties simultaneously, despite their cultural and historical incompatibilities. (p. 246)

Another new way to think about culture is illustrated in Jan Nespor's very interesting educational ethnography, *Tangled Up in School* (1997). Nespor views culture in terms of "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Tapia, & Whitmore, 1993) made available in networks of activities and associations that intersect in particular times and spaces. Schools are one point of intersection; families, peer groups, and popular media are some of the others. Individuals move in and out of these time/space intersections and draw strategically on the resources (funds of knowledge) of them. For example, in discussing one of the fifth graders (Earl) in the elementary school he studied, Nespor writes:

> Earl's computer use was at the intersection of a family network (he was learning with his mother, who was talking computer classes), a friendship network [with one of his friends, Duane], and various commercial networks (the games and software he bought). Everyday life is made from such articulations. In this case the three networks blended together to create a heterogeneous fund of knowledge that connected Earl and his friends to distant and unknown groups of kids (who would also be fashioning identities in interaction with games and computers) and shaped their relationships to one another in the immediate environment. (p. 171)

This approach to culture enables Nespor to examine the simultaneous existence of multiple (and sometimes competing) cultural resources in a single situation and the temporally and spatially dispersed networks that provide them.

The approach also allows him to explore the improvisational work of individuals and groups as they take up or manipulate cultural resources. In talking specifically about the fund of knowledge offered by popular culture, Nespor writes,

> Popular culture passes out bus tickets for identities. In using them kids move in and out of networks or funds of knowledge organized by video games, comic books, baseball cards, forms of music. (p. 184)

Presumably this is the case for other networks as well: family, school, work, friends may also "pass out bus tickets for identities" that individuals use to move in and out of networks of association and knowledge. (For a similar approach to culture and identity in a secondary school, see Yon, 2000.)

Another approach is illustrated in the work of Carol Greenhouse (1996), an anthropologist of law. Greenhouse examines culture in the form of "collective representations," the public symbols that are used in legal proceedings, including the U.S. Congressional hearings on the nominations of Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Exploring how representations of time figure into discourses about "justice," "politics," "diversity," and "equality" that occurred during and around the hearings, she illustrates how contradictory meanings of these terms are circulated, manipulated, negotiated, and acted upon by participants in the hearings, the media, and the public (see especially Chapter 6). Struggles over various meanings and the exercise of power via these struggles took place among individuals in Congress, federal agencies, newspapers, talk shows, living rooms, bars, and so forth. As incongruities and incommensurabilities in the meanings of the terms are introduced, contested, and glossed in various interactional settings, contradictory and unstable meanings come to have material effects in public institutions (e.g., the law, government agencies, national histories, political associations) as well as in personal behavior. In this way, Greenhouse's work offers a way to think about "culture" as taking form in "the constantly elusive borders between order and disorder" (p. xii), specifically as these borders are manifested in the complex relationship between local meanings (improvised representations) and translocal (patterned, regulated) social processes (p. 235). Using the concept of "pastiche," George Marcus describes a similar approach in his study of contemporary elite power groups:

> What I found is . . . the notion of dynasty as a cultural figure disseminated among diverse contexts such as lawyers', stockbrokers', journalists', and therapists' offices. The ideal or idea of dynasty exists across all of these settings and settles in as a cultural object of variable intensity and longevity, but it is not stable nor the characteristic of a particular rooted community. Spatially uprooted, mobile cultural phenomena like "dynasty," then are what [anthropology] needs to explore to fully conceptualize new ways of thinking about contemporary conditions. Old concepts [kinship, ritual, social relations] are conserved but in ways that are unexpected in the [traditional] frame of . . . culture rooted in the idea of community and communality. (1998, p. 54)

These examples give me some ways to think about "culture" in my work with the middle school girls.[7] I can conceive of culture less in terms of the girls' backgrounds or what they have previously been exposed to as science or technology. I can conceive of it more in terms of the public symbols (or bus tickets for identities)—perhaps in the images of hip hop stars; the sense of style and fashion; the desire for money and status; the ideas of sex, motherhood, and getting a job; the identities of "black," "ghetto," "girl," and "kid"—that dominate the girls' talk and shape their representations of themselves and others. I must find ways to follow these symbols as they course through the girls' lives and are taken up by them. I also must look at the public symbols community adults, as well as I and my university colleagues, use to refer to ourselves, the girls, and the program we are developing for them. In each case, I must try to figure out what the important symbols are, how they are used, how they are being experienced, where they come from, what other phenomena they are connected to, and what they imply. I must try to figure out how they are being contested and negotiated in the context of our program and in other parts of our lives. In short, to understand

the relevant "culture" of these girls, I will have to learn how various public symbols are "settling in" among them, community members, and ourselves.

Tidying Up Ethnography

A clearer focus for culture gives better definition to the ethnographic methods that are needed for a particular study. And ethnographic studies guided by contemporary views of culture are becoming more common. Examples have been published in recent issues of both the *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* and the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies of Education* (see, for example, Fisherkeller, 1997, on how young people work out their identities in terms of TV characters; Mirón & Lauria, 1998, on how student struggles are organized around contested racial categories and identities; Fine & Weis, 1998a, on how young people make different meanings of "crime" and "violence" depending on their positions in social and economic hierarchies; Orellana & Thorne, 1998, on the way time scheduling—in this case, for year-round schooling—establishes both rhythm and discord in families' lives; and Cardinale, Carnoy, & Stein, 1999, on how the meanings of bilingual education vary by context and perspective both within and across language-minority communities).[8] Writing about such new approaches, Michael Burawoy explains that

> locales still exist but they are connected to each other through symbolic tokens (money), experts (doctors, lawyers, accountants), as well as by new technologies (language, radio, television, and the Internet). Through them everyday life is disembedded, lifted out of the local and attached directly to the global. (2000, p. 3)

If we are going to trace relationships that stretch out across time and space; and if we are going to analyze activities and cultural forms that are taken up locally but formed or controlled elsewhere, we would seem to need some new ways of doing ethnography, or at least some different methodological priorities. Field sites of the past, such as a single school, may be a place to start. But from there, researchers will be pushed by theoretical and social currents to trace cultural forms "upward" and "outward" so as to consider how they are manifested and produced in networks of larger social systems (Burawoy et al., 2000; Nespor, 1994, 1997). Ethnographers also are likely to be pushed "downward" and "inward" to see how cultural forms become part of individual subjectivities or imaginations (Burawoy, et al., 2000; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). The search will be for connections, parallels and contrasts across seemingly disparate sites, diverse groups of people, different units of analysis, and different levels of complexity (Eisenhart & Finkel, 1998; Marcus, 1998). Put another way, ethnographies will have to include ways of exploring the connections among sites that together make up arenas of social practice, such as among the households, schools, extracurricular activities, personal relationships, TV shows, video games, and transportation networks that connect up or intersect to form the contemporary contexts of youth activity that Heath refers to (above) and I am experiencing in my work with the middle-school girls.

One important methodological issue in studies of these phenomena is finding ways to track the movement, instantiations, and effects of symbolic and material forms in various places. In most of the studies cited above, those guided by contemporary views of culture, the researchers relied heavily on individual and focus group interviews and spent much less time on participant observation than in traditional ethnographic research. This is not surprising because, at first glance, conventional ethnography's reliance on first-hand participant observation would not seem to make it a promising method for investigating wide-ranging, mobile phenomena (Ortner, 2000). Rooted in understandings of culture that bind it to a specific place and time, conventional ethnography is not known for its scope or its mobility. However, as Burawoy and his colleagues (2000) illustrate, ethnographers can move from place to place, beginning in one locale (e.g., a software company, a breast cancer organization, a group of immigrant nurses) and then traveling to others that have connections to the first. Sheba George (2000), for example, conducted participant observation of East Indian nurses who had moved to the U.S. in search of better jobs. Later, she traveled to India to find the nurses' kin and investigate immigration from the perspective of the sending community. Sean Ó Riain (2000) began an ethnographic study of immigrant Irish software developers in California, and then, after many of them returned to Ireland, Ó Riain followed them there and conducted participant observation in a transnational software corporation in Ireland. George Marcus (1995, 1998) calls this type of work "multi-sited ethnography." He defines it as an ethnography

> designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography. (1995, p. 105)

These ethnographers continue the tradition of "living" the immediate experiences of those they study, but they have to travel to do so. In traveling as well as dwelling like their "subjects," these ethnographers directly experienced some of the forces of globalization and the connections across boundaries that affected those "subjects" (Burawoy et al., 2000).

A second methodological issue in studies of contemporary cultural phenomena is how to investigate the connections among sites, especially the links between the local and translocal. In the studies described in Burawoy et al. (2000), the researchers mapped the various links that they experienced as participant observers and then explored them further with the help of historical, demographic, economic, and linguistic methods of data collection and analysis (see also Ortner, 1991). This approach suggests that ethnographers will need to become familiar with methods of data collection and analysis beyond ethnography, or from working in collaboration with researchers in other fields.

A related methodological issue is how to investigate "context" in ethnographic research. In conventional ethnographies, including many school ethnographies, there was a tendency to view the immediate context (e.g., a school, a classroom) as if it were almost completely determined by the unidirectional influence of wider, outside forces (e.g., community norms, school district politics, federal regulations, etc.). In *Eskimo School on the Andreafsky* (1979), for example, Judith Kleinfeld represented school and context in concentric circles. The school (St. Mary's Eskimo High School) was at the center; various aspects of the community

(Alaska and the Eskimo) and the wider society (the U.S., Canada, the Catholic church) were drawn to encircle the school and intended to represent the constraining influence of wider forces (the *external* context) on the school. Inside the school were the students, the teachers, the principal, the curriculum, and so forth that together made up the *internal* context of school. Many school ethnographies had sections devoted to each type of context and gave the impression that the internal context was a fairly stable adaptation to the external forces impinging on it.

In *Tangled Up in School*, Nespor takes a very different approach to context:

> *School ethnography* is a familiar genre, but what I do with it in this book is a little unusual. Instead of treating the school as a container filled with teacher cultures, student subgroups, classroom instruction, and administrative micropolitics, I look at one school . . . as an intersection in social space, a knot in a web of practices that stretch into complex systems beginning and ending outside the school. Instead of looking at educational settings . . . as having clear boundaries and identifiable contents, I look at them as extensive in space and time, fluid in form and content; as intersections of multiple networks shaping cities, communities, schools, pedagogies, and teacher and student practices. . . . I want to give school its due, but not on its own terms—to treat it not as the focus of study but as a point of entry . . . to the study of economic, cultural, and political relations shaping curriculum, teaching and kids' experiences. (1997, p. xiii)

To grasp the meaning of Thurber Elementary from Nespor's book depends on holding an ephemeral image of how various networks of influence—some small and local, others very far-reaching; some relatively enduring, others very fluid; some looming large at one point in time, then almost vanishing later—come together, how they "work" in relationship to each other, to form a complex, dynamic and sometimes contradictory context at a particular place and time. The school is not represented as a microcosm adapted to a particular society; nor is it seen as a separate or coherent entity to be compared to home or community. Rather, it is shown to be "tangled up" with them in numerous overlapping ways. The purpose of Nespor's ethnography is not to examine or critique the fit between school and its context but to provoke richer, deeper understandings of the contexts that form a school, to make us "think about" school in new ways.

Another methodological issue is the need for new ways of portraying diversity and conflict. Conventional ethnography is not known for its attention to divisions, struggles or inconsistencies within groups. In conventional ethnography the analytic focus is on identifying what is patterned (Wolcott, 1999) or typical (Erickson, 1979, 1986). The goal of holistic description is to organize and represent coherently the typical experiences of a group. Often the patterns of a group are further pared down so that they can be contrasted effectively with those of another group. Often too, exotic examples or sensational stories are used to represent the experiences of a whole group (Fine et al., 2000). Inevitably the search for patterns, typical instances, coherence, and good stories leads ethnographers to overlook or ignore contested, ambiguous, or inconsistent data.

Now more ethnographers are taking internal tensions and inconsistencies seriously. In their book about urban life in two northeastern U.S. cities, Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (1998b) felt compelled to present their ethnographic data in two different ways: one set of chapters focuses on the shared experiences of the poor and working-class in the two cities (Jersey City and Buffalo); another set of chapters examines the different experiences of ethnic-gender groups (e.g., African-American men and white men) regardless of city. The authors describe this work as an attempt to "script a story in which we float a semifictional portrait of each [city's poor and working-class], layered over with an analytic matrix of differences 'within.' For our analysis . . . we delicately move between coherence and difference, fixed boundaries and porous borders, neighborhoods of shared values and homes of contentious interpretation" (p. 267). The result is not a coherent picture or story of class, ethnic, or gender groups, but a collage of their similarities and differences. (For an earlier example see Erickson & Shultz, 1982.)

Joseph Tobin and his colleagues (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) achieved a similar effect by reporting the results of showing videotapes of preschool classrooms in China, Japan, and the U.S. to audiences in each country. Audience members, both within and across groups, tended to see different things in the tapes, sometimes approving and sometimes disapproving of the conditions they observed in their own and the other preschools. Tobin et al. present this variety in their book and are able to link it, in some cases, to broad cultural themes in the three countries.

Other researchers have suggested collecting personal narratives as a means of investigating and portraying diverse viewpoints (Riessman, 1993; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). By focusing on the nuances of speech, the local context of its production, the order of presenting story elements, and the connections made to broad social discourses in collected narratives, these researchers are able to reveal some of the intersections of cultural, social, and political influences in individual lives.

Others have turned away from a focus on individual people (in the style of "key informants") in order to concentrate more on the tools of communication and interrelationship mediated by translocal phenomena such as television programs, romance novels, time schedules, collective reminiscences, and internet technologies that bring individuals into contact with each other across time and space. These tools or mediators of relationships are sometimes more prominent than such elements as tradition, geography, environment, and in some cases, face-to-face interactions, as the organizational forms that link people together.

To be sure, participant observation and ethnographic interviewing remain at the methodological core of all the studies described above. To be involved directly in the activities of people still seems to be the best method we have for learning about the meaning of things to the people we hope to understand. Only by watching carefully what people do and say, following their example, and slowly becoming a part of their groups, activities, conversations, and connections do we stand some chance of grasping what is meaningful to them. Conventional ethnography, it turns out, is still a good methodological choice in many situations.

But interest in permeable boundaries, multiple influences, dispersed networks, connections across multi-leveled and multi-layered sites, and improvised responses means that ethnographers should be exploring ways to expand their reach beyond traditional methods. We must be alert to possibilities for travel

across sites and groups, to methods of data collection and analysis from other disciplines, to new ways of learning about and representing diversity as well as commonality, and to ways of exploring connections within and across sites.[9] In our enthusiasm for ethnography as a research tool in education, we must pay attention not only to its traditional strengths but also to the challenges it faces as a means of accessing contemporary educational situations of interest, and we must be ready to include new methods that promise to fill some of the holes left by the old.

Tidying Up Ethnographers' Responsibility

Finally, how should we think about our ethical responsibilities to those we write about and on whose behalf we wish to take constructive action?

When Haraway responded to the potential danger in dog breeding by saying "I think about it," she was signaling a particularly postmodernist approach to the question of intervention. Her approach requires appreciating "the tension of holding incompatible perspectives together because both or all are necessary and true" and because none exists in isolation from the others (1985, p. 65). The potential in holding this tension is that it might allow us to grasp something unimaginable or invisible before, something in the contingency of everyday experience that extends the possibilities for all involved (Strathern, 1991).

When making a decision or proposing an educational intervention under these conditions, ethnographers will rarely, if ever, be in leadership positions. Instead, we will have to participate, along with others, with one perspective or voice among many. We will have to be clear about our own agendas and commitments. We will have to speak what we know and believe in, but we will also have to listen, deliberate, negotiate, and compromise around the knowledge and beliefs of others who are involved. Perhaps needs identified out of everyday experience, such as for adequate nutrition, medical care, or educational opportunity, should be the basis for intervention. Perhaps agreed-upon principles, such as justice or equality, should be the basis. Perhaps some combination of the two or some others. Specific plans for change will have to emerge from local deliberation and collaboration around the various possibilities.

In an article on ethics in educational research, Ken Howe and Michele Moses (1999) make a related argument. They propose that educational researchers should contribute their knowledge and methods to *working out how* various participants, with multiple and diverse perspectives, may take part in "negotiating the moral-political ends" of research projects. In a similar vein, Tom Schwandt has called for "*actively* debating and exchanging points of view with our informants . . . placing our ideas on a par with theirs, testing them not against predetermined standards of rationality but against the immediate exigencies of life" (1994, p. 132, emphasis in original).

Adopting the position that decisions about interventions depend on working with multiple participant perspectives or placing participants' ideas on a par with researchers' inevitably leads to an uncomfortable question: What should researchers do when they disagree with other participants? Quoting Charles Taylor, Howe has recently suggested that a way to begin is first to establish what policies or practices are "unconscionable on premises which both sides accept, and cannot but accept" (1998, p.15). Some examples might be policies or practices that make school unsafe for some students or that prevent parents from having some say in their children's education. From this beginning, specific goals and means of achieving them could be developed and implemented.

The success of this type of deliberation and intervention would seem to depend on some form of "procedural justice" that everyone recognizes, can agree to (in the service of some larger, collective goal which all agree is desirable), and respects. In other words, a crucial step in developing interventions must be *to expect and find ways to resolve* conflicts resulting from competing knowledge claims and moral positions. (See Christians, 2000, for a more extended discussion). Only after some resolution is achieved, even temporarily, will it be possible to proceed with the more technical aspects of innovation, improvement, and change.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me go back to where I started. I began by talking about three muddles in my thinking about anthropology and ethnography. Then, I tried to tidy them up some for immediate use. Of course, I was only partly successful. I'm sure you have your own muddles; some may be similar to mine, some different. I presented these muddles as if they were peculiar to this moment in my career and in our field. But in fact, they are muddles that anthropologists have always been getting themselves into and out of.

We have always been trying, with limited success, to understand some aspects of a form of life—call it "culture," "meaning," "cultural forms," or "public symbols"—that belongs to others. We have always been trying to convince others that we can learn something important by doing what we call "ethnography." We have always been giving our ideas, views, and images up for debate and scrutiny in an attempt to encourage others to take an interest in the people, places, and things that interest us (Geertz, 1995).

What's different now is that everyday life, including life in schools, seems to be faster paced, more diverse, more complicated, more entangled than before. The kinds of personal and social relationships, exchanges, and networks we participate in seem to be taking new forms, tying together otherwise disparate people, and demanding some new ways of thinking about what to research and how to do it. We need ethnography to help us grasp these new forms, but we must also be ready to extend or go beyond its conventional methods to meet the challenges these forms (or new ways of looking at them) present.

NOTES

Versions of this paper were presented at the Ethnography in Education Forum, Philadelphia, PA, March, 1999; the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, CA, November, 2000; and at Clemson University, Clemson, SC, March, 2001. Many thanks to Leslie Edwards, Joe Harding, the students in my Ethnographic Methods course, the students in my doctoral discussion group, my faculty colleagues, and the *ER* reviewers for their comments on this paper.

[1] Two exceptions are discussions about the researcher's role (relationships with participants, reflexivity) and about how to write about (or "represent") the experiences of others. I will say a bit more about these issues later.

[2] Patti Lather suggested this phrase to me.

[3] It should be underscored here that I am telling this tale in light of my own experience as an educational anthropologist. Because I began

my career in the mid-1970s, my story starts there. Clearly, though, the changing conditions I refer to began before that.

[4] It should be noted here that Erickson, McDermott, and Mehan made extensive use of video- and audio-taping to address the methodological implications of partial boundedness. By combining the fine-grained analysis of face-to-face talk and action made possible by this technology with more conventional ethnographic methods, they developed "microethnography" (Erickson & Shultz, 1982) or "constitutive ethnography" (Mehan, 1979). This methodological innovation was and continues to be an important development, yet good audio- and video-recordings require a bounded field setting, for example, a classroom or a meeting, with only a few participants at a time. The kind of "mixed" setting that Heath (1996) refers to cannot easily be captured even with these methods.

[5] An earlier version of this section appeared in Eisenhart (1999).

[6] For his part, Wolcott does not think that ethnography can (or should) overcome its roots as the study of microcultures (1999, p. 253). I disagree for reasons that I hope will become apparent below.

[7] In what follows, I mean to suggest one approach to my study that follows from the ideas about culture that I have just discussed. I do not mean to suggest that this approach is the only or necessarily the best one.

[8] As far as I know, studies informed by such views of culture have not appeared in the *American Educational Research Journal*. See also Delamont, Coffey, and Atkinson (2000) on the point that mainstream educational research has been little affected by recent debates about social science concepts and methods.

[9] I cannot take up here the crucial question of what we really mean by connections, networks or relationships. What, exactly, are our images of linkage? Are they like narratives, friendships, exchanges? Are they like control, history, language, family resemblances? Are they all of the above? What would these various models of linkage imply for our methods of research? (See also Schensul, LeCompte, Trotter, Cromley, & Singer, 1999.) This is an area that I think deserves a lot more attention in the future.

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Manuscript received February 21, 2001
Final revision received July 10, 2001
Accepted August 21, 2001