Journal of Child and Youth Care Work

THE ETHNOGRAPHER AS YOUTH'S APPRENTICE

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ABSTRACT: Youth care professionals have a vested interest in understanding how young people construct meanings and responses to the world around them. Like anthropologists who try to understand life as "others" experience it, youth workers who allow themselves to enter youth's world of everyday practice and sense-making increase their chances of acquiring a valid understanding of youth's own perspectives. In this essay the point is made that youth care professionals, like anthropologists, must recognize their own professional blinders, and the fears and anxieties associated with experiencing the adolescent's (the "native's") point of view.

"The youngsters had heard that suburb-bound commuters, from behind the tinted train windows, would shoot at them for trespassing on the tracks....Some of the commuters had heard similar rumors about neighborhood children and worried that, like the cardboard lions in a carnival shooting gallery, they might be the target of talented snipers....For both the boys and the commuters, the unknown was the enemy." (from *There Are No Children Here*, p.7).

INTRODUCTION

Adults at times confront the world of teenagers much like Columbus must have first experienced the New World: as a place which very little prior experience and knowledge had prepared him to understand. Or worse still, they may understand teenagers in ways that shore up the logic of their own lives, just as the British buoyed themselves by believing that the Hawaiians worshipped and idolized the British explorer, Captain Cook, as a god (Obeyesekere, 1992). Although the generation gap between adults and young people has been a topic of concern for decades in this country, little seems to have changed and the "gap" remains. Some believe that understanding and communication across the generations has indeed steadily deteriorated (for example, see Ianni, 1989; Chira, 1994).

Since the success of their work depends on it, a primary aim of child and youth care professionals is, of course, to reduce this "gap." This paper further supports that aim, and offers a model from anthropology that prescribes an "ethnographic" approach to reducing the gap, and for understanding the "other" in general. Child and youth care professionals are already "youth ethnographers" in the sense that they self-consciously strive to listen and comprehend the youth perspective. This paper reinforces the value of such practices, and advocates ethnography as a way to truly

understand the meanings and conditions of young people's lives, and how young people form their points of view in context. At the same time it raises some subtle challenges that I think can confound the efforts of youth care professionals (and others) who would hope to transcend the perceptual "filters" imposed by their own professional practices, and to experience (and of course, to understand) the world more-or-less as youth experience and interpret it.

How we understand.

As adults we often understand young people through the cultural models we constructed as adolescents, and perhaps through some of the core values we arrived at *in our own youth* (Fine & Mechling, 1993). The anthropologist, as most modern practitioners of the trade now understand, is faced with the very same problems of observer bias, which is both person-specific and culture-specific.

Like Columbus, youth care workers have a lot of vested interest in understanding the "new world" (that adolescents create and respond to). For many adults however, perhaps because so much is at stake, communication across the generations becomes a one-way affair with ever greater pressures on youth to see things from the "adult" point of view. Most adults feel little pressure to understand things from youth's perspective. Youth care professionals indeed recognize how important it is to see the world through young people's eyes, but it is especially important to recognize that youth's subjectivity is not entirely intrapersonal, and is not wholly specific to a single individual's thoughts or imagery. On the contrary, youth's subjectivity is in many respects shared, and reflects a combination of both objective conditions and collective, as well as individual interpretations. Meanings that derive from a person's unique biography may nevertheless have been discussed and negotiated with others, especially peers, and so fashioned to adhere to a local culture of youth.

What is important to try to understand?

Ethnographers don't merely talk with their subjects, they also try to walk in their shoes. The aim is not merely to discover what young people know, but also to experience and perhaps even gain similar (though of course not identical) sensibilities as these are shaped through experience in particular life circumstances. We must be willing to understand youth from inside their world, on their turf, and in the context of their own everyday life patterns. Most importantly, *we must understand how they perceive and imagine the community they see themselves as joining.* What, we might ask, does the community represent to them, keeping in mind that they construct the meaning of community from their perspective as members of local families, as potential workers in local businesses, and as persons who want to be needed by the community, and challenged within it to grow and be productive. We must come to know the world around them as they know

it, and understand *what is it about their environment that lures, or fails to lure, their hopes, desires and expectations for a life worth living.* Young people, as Erik Erikson realized, seek an "ideological promise" in the historical moment, and respond to that promise by imagining themselves as persons who are instrumental in its fulfillment.

The ethnographer's aim should be to understand what is actually at stake for young people in the lives they are instrumental in creating, and in the values they fashion for themselves. As Charles Taylor (1989) has written, to be a self is to take a stand in relation to some perceived "good." What "goods" are assumed *by young people* to be realizable outcomes of their actions, conditions, and identities? How, we might also ask, do young people perceive the balance between "goods" that adult institutions hold out for them, such as career success, and other "goods" that their peer, and local communities may affirm, such as motherhood, age-group solidarity or respect on the streets? What is the meaning to young people of activities that involve "risk" (such as pregnancy, or fighting) and how do they balance their own meanings and values with the exhortations and implications they derive from official messages in the larger society? What, *from their own perspective*, do young people stand to lose by making some "goods" more important than others (for example, street status versus school knowledge)? What do they stand to lose by not doing so?

It is important to realize that what is at stake for any given group of young people will depend on the particular social, economic and even political conditions that define their communities, and opportunities, as these are interpreted by them. Their frame of reference is shaped by the uses and meanings they feel they can make of local life chances, relationships, opportunities, and technologies, and not by what others, often from outside their perceived community, try to get them to feel they *should* make of these. What counts as achievement, boredom, suffering, satisfaction, or learning in their lives is then determined by this frame of reference.

Although adulthood may be the inevitable outcome of youth practice, adults create few rituals for young people that adequately prepare them to define their commitments, responsibilities and roles in the community. Apart from the implicit enculturation to adult reality that is supposed to accompany the acquisition of school-based knowledge, including the knowledge and values associated with extra-curricular activities such as sports, young people are woefully underexposed to the demands of "personhood" in a wide range of domains making up the adult community. However, this does not mean that "coming of age" rituals don't exist. Frequently such rituals are constructed by and for youth, rather than by adults. Ethnographers who set out to discover what some of these "grassroots" initiation rituals are may find themselves less surprised by what young people have become.

Young people must learn a great deal on their own, often among themselves, both in school and out, about the diverse strands of adult reality

that exist in their community and beyond. How they understand and interpret the world not only *describes* their "reality," but also *prescribes* it (Holland & Quinn, 1987; D'Andrade, 1992). That is to say, beliefs and interpretations of reality have "directive," or "motivational" force. If we fail to understand what young people learn on their own, how can we understand the part these everyday meanings play in shaping their aspirations and realities? We shouldn't be satisfied simply to understand whether or not young people have learned what we wanted them to learn in settings where our instruction was explicit and intentional. Rushing to evaluate youth's acquisition of explicitly transmitted knowledge and values risks missing what young people actually want, know and *do with* their understandings in the life and community that surrounds them.

An important objective of a youth ethnography is usually to understand how the identities and values of young people are products of the contexts in which they produce the meanings and purposes of their existence. We could take a lesson in this regard from medical anthropologists who have communicated a similar message to health professionals. For example, as Kleinman (1988) points out, the reduction by psychiatrists and health professionals of complex social and environmental effects on human health and disease simply to "stressors" and "supports" overlooks: a) the systematic interrelationships between stressors and supports; b) the fact that yesterday's supports may be today's stressors; and c) the fact that stress and support vary with social class (the lower the class, the greater the stress and the less the support). The fact that "within a local social system supports and stressors are tightly bound to each other through relationships and ... in the historical context of relationships with family members, friends, and supervisors and subordinates at work, events are given personal meaning and the social significance they bring to the person is modulated or even transformed," needs not only to be acknowledged, but also thoroughly explored ethnographically. (Kleinman, 1988: 65).

Like stressors and supports in the health field, conceptions of adolescent "storm and stress," or any other presumably generalizable problems or experiences of youth, should be understood in the context of local life worlds. It is impossible to describe the meaning and order of adolescent lives without first analyzing the structures and forces that impact young people's lives everyday, and that shape their changing perceptions of life chances and the means available for their attainment (including influences that derive from a particular family setting, but certainly not confined only to these).

Some have argued that youth identity serves as an "imaginary solution" to the contradictions and inconsistencies young people perceive in the world around them (Brake, 1985), and serves as a symbolic response to those contradictions. To the extent that this is true, we may think of the cultures of youth as a set of meanings and values that help young people resolve conflicting truths and competing versions of reality that permeate modern culture. Participation in gangs, for example, offers frameworks

that help resolve, symbolically at least, problems of joblessness and alienation by creating alternative opportunities for acquiring respect (Anderson, 1990; Bourgois, 1995), fraternal solidarity, (Shaw, 1991), and family (Vigil, 1988). Cultural frameworks — a prime object of anthropological inquiry into the subjective life of a certain group of people — do not act merely as perceptual "filters," but also situate young people in the community (by shaping a sense of place) and hold out an "ideological promise" for adulthood, and for the future in general.

Why ethnography is so important (and difficult).

To see the world as young people see it can be a disturbing experience. Youth are often acutely aware of inconsistencies between empirical facts and ideological fictions, between their own experience and the popular myths of their society, and between the local life chances in their community and the distant promises of attainment, wealth, and prestige. Like other adults, child and youth care professionals may resist recalling their own adolescence, or even confronting certain youth. One risk may be that a confrontation with adolescence can induce a realization that the contradictions between myth and reality have never truly been eliminated, and in fact still remain.

A problem, ironically, for all of us is that part of growing up and becoming an adult is settling on a view of reality, an identity, that permits one to smooth over many of the contradictions, inconsistencies, perfidies, and confusions that are inevitable in a complex, pluralistic society. Young people may be better able than adults to tolerate inconsistencies between their own experience and the "official" ideological promise of their society because, as long as they are not significant actors in the economy and community, they do not have to publicly support the foundational "myths" of personal success and maturity that provide the moral premises of mainstream institutional life. For persons in adult roles, the stakes are much higher and too great a tolerance for contradictory premises may undermine one's sense of purpose, and effectiveness, in adulthood. Yet in order to truly enter into the *experiences* of youth, an ethnographer may have to tolerate a sense of the indeterminacy, conflict, and confusion about the outside world and its multiple messages.

Afraid, perhaps, to confront the fact that their models of (and for) reality may be, as (Shweder, 1984) says, "nonrational," some adult professionals who interact with youth may prefer to approach the more subjective side of adolescent life exclusively through moral or scientific models that attempt to explain their behavior and attitudes in the most parsimonious fashion. The danger is that by reducing patterns of behavior and thought to the smallest possible number of contributing factors, we tend to treat as "noise" the local meanings and cultural realities that mediate most of the activities of youth. Young people listen to this "noise" every day of their lives, and it is not surprising that it makes such a lasting impression on them.

Young people are given to incessantly checking the received wisdom of others against their own personal experience. I think it is safe to say that a fair amount of their personal meanings, knowledge and understanding is a product of this process. This is all the more reason to try, ethnographically, to observe and experience this *process* of "reality construction" as young people actually live it, and do it.

Doing "youth ethnography"

The routine particulars of kids' lives are not always easy to follow, but it is these particulars that shape their world view. Finding time to get to know young people on their own terms, without trying to control or change them, can be invaluable. Youth ethnography may be thought of as an apprenticeship in youth's culturally constructed world(s). Like the apprentice, the ethnographer must be willing to try to attain habits of heart, mind, and body that are similar to those that motivate and guide the practices of young people, and that shape their sensibilities about life, the future, relationships, etc. Youth ethnographers may also think of their study as focused on youth's own apprenticeship to adult forms of knowledge and participation in the world, and on how young people's practices are organized and informed in anticipation of participation in some aspect of the adult community.

The strategies and principles of good ethnography are far too complex and numerous to list here. Others, like the contributors to a recently edited volume by Van Maanen (1995), have already discussed these at some length (see also Burawoy, 1991; Fetterman, 1989; Holy, 1984). The "process" of ethnography is mainly about building relationships and gaining acceptance in a group. We have all had practice doing this in our lives and even though we will probably have to learn new norms of relationship in the particular adolescent group that we choose to know more about, this process need not be significantly more mystical than forming relationships and establishing a place in any social group. The interpretive part of ethnography — how to "read" the culture of the group — is another matter. There are countless ethnographies written by anthropologists on the culture of this or that group, but the ones written about youthful lives may be most valuable to youth care professionals (see for example Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; MacLeod, 1987; Eckert, 1989).

Perhaps the most subtle challenge is, as I've already alluded, our own powerful need to sustain social identities, thoughts and modes of action that reinforce our own "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and our own effective participation in a culturally constructed (professional) adult world. These orientations can have a way of blocking or inhibiting our ability to participate in young people's experiences and practices. The possible fear of reliving adolescent awareness of fundamental contradictions in experience, and our need to reduce phenomena to a finite number of underlying causes or explanations, are further potential hindrances.

Ethnography can be built into any program of intervention. In addition to these

I would also add the fact that coming of age for many, although not all American youth means rejecting parental values and viewpoints in order to "discover" one's own values and arrive at one's own definitions of reality, independent of one's parents. Since this cultural imperative immediately sets the stage for a gap in sensibilities between the generations, and establishes a formidable age barrier, there is all the more reason to include an ethnographic component as an essential part of a broader program of intervention with any youth group. A full-blown ethnographic research project is not necessary. Ethnography may be as simple, and subtle as "active listening" with individuals whose understandings are more-or-less inarticulable, in part because they are truly "embedded" in the lives they lead. More is usually necessary, however.

Participation in the lives and practices of a select group of young people provides invaluable insights. Merely listening to youth as they reflect on their experience cannot offer the same kinds of understandings. Merely participating in youth's thought processes is not enough. For young people, as for the rest of us, a great deal of tacit understanding derives from regular practice, and may not even be self-conscious. Contradictions that may already have been "resolved" symbolically in youth's own interpretive schemas often cannot be so well masked in practice.

Participation in youth's activities, as an accepted member of the group (even if one's membership is premised on her/his 'outsider' status) is essential. Frequent visits to sites where young people "hang out" can yield a wealth of knowledge as long as one shows up as an apprentice willing to absorb knowledge, rather than as an expert hoping to impart it. If visiting a child at home, parents must of course first be made to understand the basic premises of the ethnographer's "learning strategy."

Making one's schedule as loose as possible to match the time orientation of youth is important. Having a lot of time, and not having many ideas about how to fill it is the inverse of most youth professionals' lifestyles, but boredom is a reality for many young people and a source of some of their most burdensome problems and frustrations. When participating with adolescents in their "routine" activities, it helps to allow for a space of time to be with them when one has virtually nothing else to do. Spontaneous jaunts to places one never would have gone on one's own can be very valuable and insightful. Letting one's mode of participation be determined largely by the youth themselves (without compromising one's own integrity, of course), and letting one's identity, to a certain extent too, be shaped by one's "placement" in the particular organization of their lives and practices, are key to a successful "youth ethnography."

It is important to have, and to show that one has, benign intentions. Young people have to be able to size up the ethnographer's motives and be able to judge them as entirely non threatening. Actions that we customarily perceive to

be helping, they may perceive to be harmful. Young people at the very least must be able to conclude (even if not entirely consciously) that the ethnographer's presence and participation will not result in unwanted outcomes, will not threaten their sense of privacy, or recklessly confound their moral perspectives.

Sometimes ethnographers have to explicitly resist the temptation to do just that — to confront their subjects' moral worldviews. However, to do so would undermine the ethnographer's need to proactively shape the grounds on which young people are able to understand him/her and identify his/her motives. Ethnographers may need to actively foster conditions that enable young people to draw the conclusion, based on their developing relationship with the ethnographer, that the latter's "professional" aims are secondary in importance to the more immediate goals of relationship, communication, and shared understanding.

The ethnographer should expect to be treated as a novice, or apprentice, in a community of experts. However, unlike a real apprentice, the ethnographer is not expected to stay forever, to "join the community" as a full-blown member. It is important to say up front, therefore, how much time one might be prepared to spend with a group of young people, and when one might be able to come back again. How the time is spent can be left more-or-less entirely up to them. Ethnography with youth shouldn't be cast as a one time only event. To apprentice genuinely to their world, to have a somewhat regular and consistent "identity" in their reference group, even if one's identity reflects a position on the margins of the social group, a presence that is regular and consistent for a period of time (two weeks, a month, six months, a year) is essential.

A distinct loss of power for the youth professional is inevitable. It would seem that the ethnographer's identity as an educated adult-professional might preclude her being treated as a novice, ready and willing to follow and learn from her teenage mentors. But power differences are not social facts. As anthropologists are apt to point out, power is constructed and deconstructed socially to suit the aims of parties to particular circumstances. This insight can be translated into practice when doing ethnography with youth by downplaying externally derived power and status differences to the point that they become (nearly) insignificant within the context of youth's interactions with each other, and with the ethnographer. In the youth community, the adult's professional status as an ethnographer or youth care worker, may have little significance anyway. Clearly the standards of prestige in youth's world are often radically different from those operating in mainstream adult culture.

The ethnographer learns this quickly when, as a result of failing to live up to youth's expectations, she is made to appear the fool. Ethnographers can even be banished from the world(s) of youth, their interest shunned, their overtures denied. Perhaps the assumption of a vast power difference

between adult youth workers and youth is itself a construction of the adult world to justify actions designed to change the latter. The powerful do not typically need to consult the powerless to determine if they want, or feel, a need to be changed in the manner prescribed.

We may always be disposed to see in the thoughts and practices of "others" what we need to see to complete our own vision and construction of the world. Anthropologists in the last decade or two have confronted the likelihood that their interpretations of others were, at least in part, projections of their own needs and desires rather than objective "translations" of the other's world. Psychoanalysts have long understood this problem, and youth service professionals have as well. However, it is one thing to understand the point in principle and quite another to deconstruct one's own suppositions and desires in order to really comprehend the worlds young people create and inhabit. Still, where the body goes, the mind usually follows. This is one source of ethnography's power to undermine this countertransference-like phenomenon that no doubt is to some degree unavoidable. By "walking the walk and talking the talk" as much as possible, ethnographers learn from *their own* experiences and changing sensibilities as they become more and more habituated to conditions "in the field." As their senses slowly adjust, as their emotions respond to circumstances they regularly encounter in the activities of youth, and their expectations become sensitized to the opportunity structures that make up youth's environment, ethnographers begin to know young people in part by reflecting on what they themselves have come to know, and become, in the field. This sensory adjustment leading to knowledge, gained through regular participation in the everyday practices of a particular group of youth, will no doubt enhance the adult practices youth care professionals will inevitably return to at the end of the day.

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