

Doing fieldwork as storytelling and relationship building

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Doing Fieldwork as Storytelling and Relationship Building

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As a graduate student in Education, I embarked on a two-year ethnographic journey at Heritage High School, an urban high school in the midwestern part of the U.S. I was interested in urban education reform and was glad to find a group of teachers engaged in a grassroots reform initiative. During the first six months I listened to the teachers talking about the terrible teaching and learning conditions at Heritage High. Achievement scores, as measured by the California Achievement Tests, showed approximately 75% of Heritage students scoring below the national norm in reading, and approximately 82% scoring below the national norm in mathematics. Typically, only about 16% of the 600 entering freshmen were graduating in four years. It was within this context that I began observing the eight teachers who formed themselves into an interdisciplinary, school-within-a-school team in order to address students' lack of achievement.

In this paper, I will not discuss the particulars about reform initiatives in a troubled urban school, however. Instead, I would like to share some reflections I learned from doing fieldwork in that setting. I will particularly write about two main issues. First, I will discuss the issues that arise as one tries to tell stories of another's life. The ethnographer's dilemma of whether and how to represent someone else's reality will be addressed. Second, I will discuss my use of Noddings' (1984, 1986) ethic of care in navigating through the multiple truths one encounters as ethnographic storytellers. Finally, I will illustrate the attitudes, posture and roles I assumed while doing fieldwork that led to equitable relationships with the teachers at Heritage High. This, I believe, had a great impact on the quality of my research. I learned that doing fieldwork is essentially storytelling and relationship building with those we intend to study. Meaningful, authentic stories can only come out of meaningful, authentic relationships. I will conclude with a brief discussion on teaching implications.

Doing fieldwork as storytelling: Ethnographers as storytellers

Storytelling is not a simple matter because stories are historically situated, politically mediated, and are never morally neutral. Stories are historically situated because every story is embedded in a particular context that changes over time. It is politically mediated because there are always issues of power involved when one person, the storyteller, represents the reality of another. And stories are never morally neutral because they can and do inform human conduct. Based on his work with the Kikuyu in East Africa, Peter Marris (1990) likens stories to proverbs. The Kikuyus frequently use proverbs in public debates. Like proverbs, stories can contradict each other without being untrue. For example, "Too many cooks spoil the broth" and "Many hands make light work" both represent common, useful knowledge. So, the criteria for goodness of stories is not whether a story is true but whether it is "useful to the present possibilities of action" (Marris, 1990, p. 83). I believe that it is important to keep this in mind while we are in the field. Unlike

journalistic investigation, we are not in the field to find the one "true" story to tell; but to develop stories that are useful for action. As we develop these stories, then, we need to continually ask ourselves to whom these stories will be useful and for what purposes. Or in Wolcott's (1994) words, stories "transcend factual data and cautious analyses and begin to probe into what is to be made of them" (p. 36). In this sense, stories are not too tightly bound to descriptions, but they are not free to float without regard to the facts either. This brings us to the question of the trustworthiness of stories.

If stories can contradict each other without being untrue, then how can we trust stories? The legal courts and medical hospitals cannot afford to operate on the basis of multiple truths. One is either guilty or innocent, sick or healthy, sane or insane. Grounded in the modernist tradition, Western law and medicine tend to have faith in the value and possibility of telling the one real true story. Marris' work with the Kikuyu teaches him otherwise. The Kikuyus test the truth of a story by judging its relevance to the present situation. This test of relevance consists of two key questions: [1] whether the present situation resembles the situation that is being held up as a model and [2] whether the interpretation is useful to the possibilities of action.

The first criterion refers to "rightness of fit" (Goodman, 1978, p. 132) or "coherence" (Eisner, 1991, p. 53). Both Goodman and Eisner assert that asking whether a story or a proverb is true is asking the wrong question. Instead we need to ask whether there is a "rightness of fit" between the world being represented and the representation, or the story, regardless of whether the story is indeed *literally* true. Literal truth or seeing things the way they really are, is never possible. To see things the way they really are means to have an exact correspondence between our views of reality and reality itself. According to Eisner (1991), this is not possible because to have such correspondence, "we would need to know two things. We would need to know reality, as well as our views of it. But if we knew reality as it really is, we would not need to have a view of it. Conversely, since we cannot have knowledge of reality as it is, we cannot know if our view corresponds to it" (p. 45). In other words, immaculate description is not possible because there is no such thing as immaculate perception. Immaculate perception is not possible because, as Eisner (1991) puts it plainly, "The eye is not only part of the brain, it is part of tradition" (p. 46). To reject the possibility of immaculate perception does not imply the acceptance of solipsism, or the notion that there is nothing beyond the self that is knowable and verifiable. Rather, it simply means that "whatever we come to know about the world will be known through our experience. Our experience in turn is mediated by prior experience. Our prior experience is shaped by culture, by language, by our needs, and by all of the ideas, practices, and events that make us human" (Eisner, 1991, p. 47). As we collect data from the field in preparation to represent someone else's social reality, we need to be constantly aware of our own histories coloring the reality we try to represent. As storytellers, ethnographers braid the knower and the known, the subjective and the objective worlds and construct tales of the field. This recognition of the constructivist and transactive nature of our knowledge, in my mind, points toward *the humble position of the storyteller, not the arbitrariness of stories.*

Multiple truths and the ethic of care

To illustrate Eisner's point above, let me share how I learned the ambivalence of truth early on in my own childhood. As a child raised in the eclectic religious and cultural traditions of Indonesia, I was exposed to animism, pagan rituals, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and Hinduism all rolled-up into one without distinct boundaries. My ethnic Chinese heritage, Dutch-raised mother, Javanese-Chinese father, Protestant upbringing, a decade of Zen Buddhist martial arts training, Protestant and Catholic schools, and Islamic nannies and friends all played a role in the development of my belief in multiple truths.

One story that I can recall vividly even some thirty years later captures this teaching about the meaning of truths in my childhood. I was only eight years old when I heard the story of good and evil told by Tjokorda Alit, a Balinese friend of the family. He was a man in his thirties at the time and like most Balinese Tjok Alit was a Hindu. I was running around in the dark trying to catch fireflies one night when he called me to the dirt porch overlooking the steep banks of the Campuhan River. There was no electricity in that part of Bali at the time. In the dark of the night, Tjok Alit said, "Let me tell you the story of good and evil," he began. I moved up closer to him so that I would not miss a word. I had been a faithful Sunday school student at the time and knew a few things about good-and-evil stories like the stories of Adam, Eve and the snake and the story of "Kain dan Habil" or Cain and Abel. But I knew I was going to hear something different this time because I knew that Tjok Alit did not go to a church like mine or read a Bible like mine.

Here is how I remember the story. Tjok Alit began: "Barong is one of the good gods. Rangda is one of the bad gods. Rangda is very powerful. She has a messy pile of long white hair, bulging eyes, long and sharp fingernails, white curved fangs on the sides of her big mouth that look more like elephant tusks than teeth and a long tongue that dangles to her waist between her red-and-black-striped dangling teats. On this tongue, there are little round mirrors that can blow fire when she is angry. One night Rangda came into Barong's room. He was reading the good book when she came in. It is a big, thick book that tells the people what is good and what is evil. He had the good book open at about the middle when she came into the room. As good and bad gods always do, the two of them fought. They fought hard. Rangda was almost defeated by Barong and this made her very angry. In her anger, she blew red-hot flames from the mirrors on her tongue and burnt half of the Hindu good book. The whole left side of the opened book turned into ashes." "So," Tjok Alit concluded his story, "from then on, we can never know the absolute "truth" because we only have the right half of the good book. We have some ideas of what might be true, but we can never be absolutely sure." After growing up with stories like this one, it was not difficult for me to accept Eisner's rejection of immaculate perception.

Tjok Alit's story taught me that we can never be absolutely sure of the one ultimate "truth." As truth is decentered through our rejection of immaculate perception and objective truths, we create a void at the center that needs to be addressed. In other words, if there are no objective truths, we have no basis upon which to evaluate the rightness of our actions. I found Noddings' (1984, 1986) Ethic of Care useful in resolving this dilemma between absolute truths and total relativism.

As argued above, when representing others' social realities, we can never be absolutely sure of the objectivity of the stories we tell. However, I believe that stories that are told in good faith contain truths worth telling. According to Noddings (1986), "We are in good faith when we know to what or to whom we are faithful, when we have reflected on the reasons and emotions involved in our faithfulness, and when we are committed to fresh affirmation of faithfulness at ever finer and truer levels" (p. 496). In other words, fidelity, according to Noddings (1986), "is not seen as faithfulness to duty or principle but as a direct response to individuals with whom one is in relation . . . Thus fidelity is attached to particular persons and particular relations, and it remains so attached" (p. 497). So, a story from the field that is told in good faith can promote the welfare of the people whose story is being told and enhance the quality of the relationship between them and the storyteller.

Let us now turn to the issue of biased reporting. Noddings (1986) poses the following example as a plausible case to discuss this point. She raised the question: "What are we supposed to do, they ask, if we go into a classroom to study, say, questioning patterns, and find out in the course of things that a teacher is downright incompetent? Should we be "faithful" to the teacher's trust and conceal our evaluation?" (p. 508).

Noddings suggests that we divide the second question into two parts: (1) should we be faithful to the teacher? and (2) should we conceal our evaluation? She maintains that we can be faithful to the teacher without concealing our evaluation through a genuine dialogue. Within a context of collegial caring we can, for example, engage the teacher to interpret her own behavior that we have labeled incompetent. In the final report we could include both the teacher's and our own interpretations, with the teacher's consent. In cases where the dilemma is less central to the story, Glesne and Peshkin (1991) recommend that we consider excluding or rephrasing these "troublesome bits" (p. 117) rather than betraying the teachers' trust. I agree with these suggestions. However, it seems to me that a study constructed on the basis of an ethics of care is less likely to run into such dilemmas. A caring researcher would not simply go into a classroom to study a certain topic of interest without having the teacher help define the topic at the outset. Such practice would mean objectifying the subject, an act that is inconsistent with the ethic of care. Instead, a caring researcher would go into the classroom and collaboratively with the teacher decide the topic of study. Once this is decided jointly, negative or unflattering evaluations can be presented to the teacher and seen as areas that need attention, reflection and discussion. When constructed in this manner, to be faithful to the teacher's trust is not to conceal our evaluation.

Without a strictly predefined focus, but in the spirit I have just outlined, I began my search for stories at Heritage High. After listening to teachers' stories for the first six months, I decided that my topic of study would be teaming in an urban high school. I did not begin this research process with a particular interest in teaming. But, since the teachers whose stories I hoped to tell distinguished themselves from the rest of the school by forming an interdisciplinary team, I decided that the topic of my study would be teaming in an urban school. Constructed in this manner, my research was subordinated to their agenda and I became one of their instruments for fulfilling their goals. I will elaborate further on this point in the next section.

As mentioned earlier, Marris applies two criteria to evaluate stories. I have discussed above the first criterion of the rightness of fit between the world being represented and the representation, or the story. The second criterion asks whether the story is useful to the present possibilities of action. Wilson (1979) in his discussion on usefulness of case studies refines Marris' question by asking, "Useful to whom and for what purposes?" (p. 448). Interpreting this question from an ethics of care perspective, my choice of what story to tell must be guided by its potential usefulness to the people at Heritage High. Of course, I personally benefited from telling the Heritage High story as I was doing it partially to fulfil my doctoral requirement. But what was more important, I wanted to tell this story in such a way that it was useful for the teachers and students at Heritage High. If the story I spin becomes useful to others in similar situations, that would be a bonus. Within this context of storytelling, I played various roles while doing fieldwork at Heritage High. Let us now turn to these roles.

Doing fieldwork as relationship building

In addition to setting up the research topic based on the teachers' needs, I also assumed various roles that I believe help illustrate my "faithfulness" to the teachers at Heritage. These roles contributed to the development of equitable relationships with these teachers. The description of these roles was drawn from my personal journal and fieldnotes. I need to emphasize here that these roles were the roles that I played in my particular situation. I expect others to assume different roles in their own particular situations. Below, I will describe the five types of roles that I assumed during my two years in the field: (1) "go-fer," (2) student teacher, (3) mirror, (4) bridge, and (5) documenter (Henke, Lokon, Carlson, & Kreuzmann, 1998).

As a "Go-fer"

Until I began going to Heritage High School, American inner-city high schools were places that I only read about or watched in movies. I had never set foot in an inner-city high school. I had been an early childhood and corporate educator up to that point and had had no experience at all in American high schools. My own K-12 education was completed in Indonesia. Initially, I went out of curiosity. I had no plans whatsoever to conduct my dissertation research at Heritage High. A professor of mine had told me about a grassroots discussion group of Heritage teachers who were interested in change. The discussion group met after school on Fridays at a nearby coffee shop and he invited me to come along. I agreed.

After attending a couple of Friday afternoons, one of the teachers asked me what role I saw myself taking in these discussions. I replied, "I am just a grad student; I have no expert knowledge on any of these issues but if you want me to find some things out for you, like books or journal articles, I certainly will do that." They took up my offer. After they collectively decided on the topics they wanted to discuss, I looked for relevant materials.

As the opening of the school year approached, the need for journal articles diminished. The teachers needed me to help them move books, desks, and other supplies into another building. They had decided to reclaim a wing abandoned by budget cuts in cosmetology and auto-mechanics. My tasks then shifted to arranging

furniture, hanging posters, and sweeping floors. When school was in session, my tasks shifted again to tutoring students, emptying waste baskets, making copies, distributing papers, providing students with school supplies, delivering assignments to students in the detention room, and other duties. I enjoyed my role as a go-fer because I saw myself as someone who had more time and access to libraries, someone who could take care of miscellaneous tasks on a moment's notice (since I was not tied to a classroom), and a novice who wanted to learn about urban education; thus, the go-fer role made sense to me. This role stayed with me during the rest of my fieldwork while new roles emerged.

Let me add a note here. My willingness to be a go-fer is perhaps due in part to my earlier highly positive experience as part of a team of corporate educators in Japan. For four years I taught with a group of Japanese and Americans various courses to help "internationalize" the entire Japanese personnel of a multinational corporation in central Japan. They were shifting from the mindset of shipping products out to the global market to genuinely internationalizing the entire operation, including their personnel. Each of us in the international training department had our own courses to teach but we did not teach these courses all at the same time. Whenever we were not teaching our own courses, we assisted others who were. Many of the courses were also team-taught, especially in cases where there was a wide language gap between the Japanese students and some of the non-Japanese instructors. Status hierarchy notwithstanding, we helped each other make copies, pour tea, run errands, make phone calls, and so on. In the end, all the work that needed to be done got done, seemingly without anyone keeping count of who had done what part of the work.

As a Student Teacher

The students at Heritage showed interest in me right away and asked me what I was doing there. I had not come up with a quick enough response when a student said, "Are you a student teacher?" "Yes," I quickly replied, and not wanting to be deceitful, I added, "I am learning how to make schools better for kids." This explanation was accepted and led to a deluge of ideas to improve schools from the students' perspectives. As a student teacher, I was given an opportunity to teach about Indonesia in the combined English and Social Studies class at the beginning of the year. I volunteered to teach this lesson because it fit in the curriculum at that time, and I thought sharing with them something about my home country would enable them to get to know me better. Also, I thought this meant lightening the teachers' teaching load for at least that one day. Over a year later, I learned about an additional benefit from having done this when one of the teachers in the team wrote to me:

"When you taught a class-that was bonding. It felt like you realised how hard it was. [It] made the relationship more reciprocal" (Letter, 10/16/1996).

As a Mirror

Later on that year, I was more open about taking fieldnotes in the teachers' meeting room. Seeing me busily writing these fieldnotes, one of the teachers asked me why I was writing everything down. I gave her the short and long answers. The short answer was that I needed the notes to write my dissertation, but the longer

answer was better explained by the metaphor of a mirror. I saw myself as the teachers' mirror, imperfectly reflecting back images of their own experiences as they tried to make changes at Heritage High. By that point, I felt I was close enough to the people at Heritage High to be an insider while simultaneously distant enough to be an outsider. It seemed to me that such a position could serve as a useful reflective point for the teachers who were most of the time too deeply engaged with the present to quietly reflect on their practice. My hunch about this role was confirmed when at the end of the school year, a teacher in the team voluntarily wrote me the following remarks:

I appreciated all the intelligent reflection you bounced back at me during our frequent conversations, especially since most of the time I was rambling on (and on and on) and it was kind of you to help transform my prattling into something that made coherent sense and that I could think and act upon in real ways. Besides being a great friend you have served as an invaluable point of reflection, creativity and hope. (Letters, 6/19/1996, 6/22/1996)

As a Bridge

Another role that I consciously adopted during this time was that of a bridge between Heritage High and my university. In order to create simultaneous renewal (Goodlad, 1994) in urban schools and in the education department at my university, a partnership was established between Heritage High School and the university. The purpose of the partnership was to facilitate change in both institutions. Heritage would theoretically benefit from ideas and resources from the university while the university would benefit from having a real urban school site with real needs. However, at that time, it seemed to me that our partnership existed only on paper. In practice, there was not much communication between the two institutions. With both my frequent trips to Heritage and my affiliation with the university, I felt that I somewhat knew the needs and resources of the two institutions. To increase communication between the two schools, I began talking about Heritage at the university whenever I could, in classes, with faculty members and classmates; I passed on information on grant opportunities from the university to Heritage and helped write some of them; I sought financial and institutional support from various offices at the university so that the teachers could do certain things that otherwise would be difficult for them to do. One example of such support was having the university sponsor reflection days for the teachers. During these reflection days, substitute teachers were hired at the university's expense. This enabled Heritage teachers to meet during the school day to reflect and discuss the changes they made so far and future changes they planned to make. Another example was the field trips that were planned for students from Heritage and my university to visit one another. As shown in excerpts from notes that I received from the teachers below, they recognized this role:

You've worked so hard for our students-and in building that *critical bridge* between secondary and higher education- that will benefit us all. (Emphasis original, letter, 3/1996)

And another teacher wrote:

Your presence has helped to open and bring new opportunities to our students. (Letter, 6/22/1996)

As a Documenter

By the end of the two-year period, I had done over 500 hours of participant observation, many hours of interviews and had written copious notes for my dissertation work. Throughout the process, I was constantly worried that I was taking more than I was giving back. The give-and-take balance was difficult to gauge or maintain. It seemed to me that it was helpful to be constantly aware of this imbalance. Near the end of my fieldwork, when I had collected a large volume of data and felt most certain that I had failed in maintaining this balance, I was surprised by the following remark from one teacher:

Your research made (me at least) almost feel like our work was even more important-like a documentary was being made. Our work was elevated because someone thought it was important to study. (Letter, 10/16/1996)

Perhaps it is useful to remember that even as we take from the field and feel indebted to it, the human side of the information gathering process and the stories we spin from it may actually nourish the field, thus redressing the give-and-take balance.

Teaching implications

In 1972 Spradley and McCurdy published their groundbreaking ethnographic fieldwork guide for undergraduates, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*. Since then a number of other guides for sending undergraduate students into the field have appeared. These successors include Edgerton and Langness's (1974) *Methods and Styles in the Study of Culture*, Spradley's (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*, Kottak's (1982) *Researching American Culture*, Fetterman's (1989) *Ethnography Step by Step*, Crane and Angrosino's (1992) *Field Projects in Anthropology: A Student Handbook*, and a more recent publication by Kutsche (1998) entitled *Field Ethnography: A Manual for Doing Cultural Anthropology*. This is by no means a complete list, but one can be sure that each of these books has a section on the ethics of doing fieldwork. In one way or another, each author attempts to address the first principle in the Statement on Ethics issued by the American Anthropological Association: "In research, anthropologists' paramount responsibility is to those they study. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. Anthropologists must do everything in their power to protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honour the dignity and privacy of those studied." (www.aaanet.org, 2 March 2000). In this statement it is clear that we ought to place our informants' interests before all other considerations. This principle was mentioned in all of the above books. Upon closer reading, however, it is not clear how we are supposed to *teach* our students this basic principle beyond the necessary polite etiquette and the maintenance of informants' anonymity. These handbooks do include brief statements about the relationship between the ethnographer and the informants such as "The local people are the ethnographer's teachers about their society" (Crane & Angrosino, 1992, p. 6); Or "You are a guest on the scene. You have no rights vis-à-vis the informants' rights" (Kutsche, 1998, p. 8). Beyond these general statements, it is unclear how we are to teach students the humble posture needed in building equitable relationships with informants. Kutsche attempts to be more specific in his handbook by including

a description of a threat that he issues to his students concerning this ethical principle: "To make sure my students understood how important these principles are, I warn them that violation of either principle will result in failing the course and the case being sent to the college's honor council" (p. 8). Though I would not consider this to be an effective teaching strategy, at least he attempts to explain *how* he addresses this issue in his classroom. The other sources simply make the general statement without suggesting how one might go about teaching it. As we send students out to do field work, we often are more preoccupied with their ability to get the information they need than with a sense of responsibility to contribute to the informants' world. Our discussions on unobtrusive strategies tend to be motivated by the self-serving purpose of successfully collecting detailed information from the field. This tendency violates the basic tenets of the ethics of care discussed earlier.

The lesson I learned from reflecting on my own fieldwork is that there is a need to do a two-step process if we are to adopt this approach. First we need to decenter "truth." Students need to realize that not everything is permissible, but that immaculate perception is not possible. I was fortunate enough to be raised with stories of multiple truths so that this realization came easy for me. But those students who grew up with a narrower sense of truth need to somehow broaden their horizon and accept the fact that they are not out in the field to discover the fundamental truth about the particular group being studied. Secondly, once truth is decentered, we need to help students develop an alternative set of guidelines if they are to avoid falling into solipsism. On what basis should students inquire, listen and retell the stories from the field? Noddings' ethic of care, or relational ethics, is one possible alternative that I have adopted in my own fieldwork. It seemed to work well in developing equitable relationships with the teachers and students and helped me tell, in good faith, some part of the truth of their lives as teachers at Heritage High.

The question that remains for me is how could we bring the above process into our classrooms. We need to teach students so that they could go into the field prepared not only to be polite, respectful and unobtrusive, but also to humbly serve the local interest in discovering truths most useful, given the possibilities for local action.

In this paper I have shared some of my reflections on my own fieldwork. It is by no means a model that I would like to set as a standard, but it is one field experience that seemed to yield useful stories based on equitable relationships. If we are to adopt the approach of doing fieldwork as storytelling and relationship building, we need to reflect on our own histories and beliefs to find ways to guide students through the process of recognizing multiple truths and developing alternative ethical foundations to guide one's actions.

We cannot have our students tell bias-free stories, but if we could help them build equitable relationships, perhaps we could help them tell "true" stories in good faith. A storyteller I greatly admire, Robert Coles (1989), tells of the advice his mentor gave him when he was a young psychiatrist making his own path in this complex world of stories, "Remember, what you are hearing [from your client or informant] is to some considerable extent a function of you, hearing . . . [A]s active listeners we give shape to what we hear, make over their stories into something of our own. . . . Their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we

take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (p. 15, 19, 30).

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