The Australian Journal of
INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

GROUNDED THEORY or GROUNDED DATA?: the PRODUCTION of POWER and KNOWLEDGE in ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

NEIL HARRISON

School of Education, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, 2351, Australia

Abstract

This paper concerns my own reflections on ethnographic research with Indigenous students studying at university. I began the research by using the methodology of interpretive ethnography to discover what constitutes success for Indigenous students studying at university. But after some unflattering critiques of my initial interpretation of the data, I returned to the drawing board to reflect on the methods that I had used to organise and structure the data in my interpretation. This led me to the critical ethnographers who helped me to look back on my initial positioning to see things that I could not see before. The paper consists of critical reflections on how power and knowledge are produced through the ethnographer's methodology to suggest that knowledge is not just found in the field or in the data but is also negotiated and produced through the relation between the participant and ethnographer. It is this relation that governs how the data are collected and what the ethnographer can find.

Introduction: Starting Off as a Traditional Ethnographer

Soon after I started teaching Aboriginal students in a remote school in the Northern Territory, I began to recognise the enormity of the task ahead of me. A colleague and I would spend countless hours discussing the problems that we were experiencing in our classrooms and trying to agree on what could work with our students. This search for a successful method continued for many years in primary, secondary and university contexts before I decided to undertake ethnographic research of my own to find out about the experiences of learning and teaching of Indigenous students. Since I was already working with Indigenous students who were studying at university, this seemed like the logical place to conduct my research. With the imprimatur of Aboriginal lecturers at the university and the students themselves, I conducted a series of extended interviews over nine months with nine Indigenous students who were studying for their degrees at university (see Harrison, 2002). Through the framework of interpretive ethnography (for example, Malin, 1989; Wiersma, 1991), I interviewed participants with whom I had worked professionally and had known for at least 18 months to find out what produced success for them at university.

Once the data had been collected, I wrote a preliminary interpretation for participants and friends to read. To my dismay at the time, most were critical of what I had written because they felt that while the interpretation pathologised the home life of the participants, it privileged their life at university. Education was constituted in the interpretation as an antidote to failure in their home lives. Some readers suggested that to interpret the move from home to university as a progressive one could be read as presenting the participants and readers with a choice between Aboriginality and assimilation. The interpretation implied that Indigenous students would have to assimilate in order to succeed at university. But it was not so much the content of what I had written that offended readers as the way that I had written it. This paper is therefore concerned with some of the unconscious effects of ethnographic writing.

Their critical responses to my first interpretation took me back to the data to look again at what the participants were telling me. It was only then that I began to recognise what some of the Indigenous

students had been telling me throughout the interviews, namely that I needed to take great care with how I interpreted the data. They knew from their histories and from their studies at university how Indigenous people have been constituted historically in unequal power relations both inside and outside the classroom (Harrison, 2002). They had recognised long before me that the way I would come to interpret the data would govern the ways in which they themselves would come to be seen by others, including teachers and students in the classroom. This insight emphasised to me that I needed to take greater responsibility for the ways in which I would represent the participants for others in my writing. But it also sent me back to the drawing board to reflect on the methodology I was using to organise and structure the data and write my interpretation. What follows then are my critical reflections on a traditional interpretive methodology that I initially adopted to interpret the data. I suggest that while the participants themselves brought me to reflect on my initial position as a traditional ethnographer, it was my move to that of a critical ethnographer, and therefore to another methodological framework, that allowed me to see things that I could not see before.

When I started my research as a traditional (interpretive) ethnographer, I thought I could find out what was in the mind of the participant. I assumed that I could discover what Indigenous students at university think and know and pass this onto the reader. Traditional ethnographic theorists like Bochner and Ellis (1996), LeCompte and Preissle (1993), Malin (1989, 2000), Van Maanen (1988) and Wiersma (1991) led me to believe that a scientific method would give me access to the insider's perspective and that I would be able to "tell it like it is". But the insight that I had gained from the students about my own writing led me to the work of critical ethnographers who were advocating the need for analysis of the methods used by the researcher to produce knowledge and power in ethnographic writing. This paper discusses some of the methods used by ethnographers to position themselves as an authority in ethnographic writing, and I thus emphasise the work of the ethnographer after he or she leaves the field. In particular, I analyse the ways in which the ethnographer's methodology governs how the researcher looks and what he or she can find in cross-cultural research. This analysis is undertaken in the context of my own ethnographic research where I reflect on my move from the position of a traditional to a critical ethnographer. I conclude with some suggestions as to how an ethnographer can talk and write outside the traditional discourses of culture, race and gender.

Traditional Ethnographic Methodology

Dobbert (1982), an interpretive ethnographer, alerts us to the fact that the categories are already established in anthropological discourses. These categories are found in past research, reviewed in the literature, and applied to the data being analysed in the current study. The "new" data are lumped into "old" categories which have been constituted in the literature review as a norm for Indigenous people. The data are categorised according to norms that have been taken from past research and these norms function as an interpretative structure for the data insofar as they allow the ethnographer to read and interpret the meaning of what is said by the participant. What is said by Indigenous participants, for example is interpreted through ethnographic categories that are established long before either the participant or the ethnographer arrives on the scene. Here the data are assimilated to a Western structure where the ethnographer's methodology makes what is said by Indigenous people familiar to the Western reader.

Meaning and power continue to be added to the data when the ethnographer embeds the quotes in his or her own "thick descriptions" (Clifford, 1986). These descriptions are often so extensive that the meaning of the quote is overwhelmed by the ethnographer's writing and the reader is able to understand the quote only through what is said by the ethnographer rather than through the words of the participant. The ethnographer then makes the strange familiar through his or her descriptions and the data therefore become meaningful only though the words of the ethnographer (Clifford, 1988). The respondent is displaced by the ethnographer insofar as he or she becomes the one best able to explain what is happening in the respondent's life. The ethnographer makes the strange familiar but in doing so he or she positions him or herself as the one best able to interpret the participant's history and experience, and subsequently to interpret the "strange" behaviour of the participants for others. The participants lose their voice to the ethnographer who becomes the speaker and authority for the knowledge gained.

Knowledge and power are produced through the ethnographer's methods of organising and interpreting the data through a metaphorical structure where the participant's position is inevitably displaced by that of the ethnographer. The methodology shows the researcher where to look in the field, what questions to ask and how to make data meaningful to the reader. The methodology is not just a means to an end - it produces the knowledge. The data are organised, structured and interpreted through the ethnographer's methodology. Furthermore, the data are grounded in the ethnographer's methodology before he or she enters the field. The participants are usually selected by the ethnographer according to the pre-established aims of the research. The ethnographer chooses the topic, who can speak, what they speak about and how they talk. Through the methodology, the ethnographer controls the content as well as how it is produced. The methodology shows the researcher how to select the participants, and this in turn governs what he or she will find.

Traditional ethnographers like Wiersma (1991) have aimed to produce holistic research. They have searched for the best position from which to look and the most plausible interpretation for their research but in doing so they have been blinded by their own gaze. Rather than searching for the best interpretation, holistic research could be incorporating all the different positions so that students at university are not just learning to look from one place but are familiar with all the different positions and discourses in ethnography and the ways in which power and authority are produced through our ways of looking, talking and writing.

However, ethnographers such as Bloom (1998), Britzman (1998), Clifford (1986, 1988), Lather (1991), Rosaldo (1993), St Pierre and Pillow (2000) and Tierney (2002) are critical of the traditional ethnographic method because they insist that a researcher does not have access to the respondent's mind. He or she only has access to what is said, that is, to the data that are collected in the field and sanitised through the transcription. Critical ethnographers also note that the data are constituted as a mutual production so that the interpretation is seen as coming from the ethnographer as well as the respondent (Clifford, 1988). It is impossible "to tell it as it is" because knowledge is always grounded in the people who tell the story - the ethnographic interpretation comes from the ethnographer's methodology rather than from the data, an interpretation which is therefore presented by the critical ethnographers as grounded in theory (methodology) rather than being grounded in the data.

Many of the methods of the traditional ethnographer have come to be seen as complicit in maintaining control and authority over Indigenous people (McConaghy, 2000; Nakata, 1995, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). These methods help the ethnographer in invisible ways to establish his or her authority over the people being studied. For example, the ethnographer's gaze has been traditionally used to observe, describe, measure and compare participants and judge them against a scientific standard. The ethnographer continues to exercise conscious and unconscious authority and discipline over Indigenous people under the auspices of doing "accurate", scientific research. But in speaking for Indigenous people, these ethnographers substitute their voice for those they hope to represent, thereby perpetuating a historical relation where non-Indigenous people maintain the authority (Harrison, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

The Production of Power and Authority in Ethnography

When I started off as a traditional ethnographer, I assumed that I could know what the participants think and know, and that I could also represent their voices for my readers. I thought that I could tell others about what I had found. However, I was positioning the university and myself as the ones best able to emancipate Indigenous participants from a past life of failure in education. Following the reflections on my initial interpretation (see above), I discovered that the problem is not one of liberating Indigenous students from an oppressive educational system but to liberate myself from a methodology which told me where and how to look, and what to say and write.

While the ethnographer is usually separated from the self in a scientific interpretation, there is evidence of his or her "hidden" presence (Harding, 1991; Lather, 1991). Before I entered the field I chose a methodology. I made choices about who could speak, when, and how. I produced questions to help me collect interview data, to guide my literature search, and to show me what to look for in the interpretation. In the writing up, I recognised that I had to make choices in talking about some things rather than others. My interpretation positioned me with the power and authority to interpret and judge others. The choice of methodology, the questions, the topic, and the ways in which relations with respondents, other ethnographers and other readers are constituted and managed in the interpretation all provide evidence of a writer who is telling a story about him or herself as much as it is about others.

As a traditional ethnographer, I constituted myself as the source of knowledge. I was caught inside a methodological structure used by previous ethnographers to say what had already been said before. My words seemed to come from others as I summarised and quoted past ethnographies to talk about a new situation. Van Maanen (1988) claims that most ethnographies rebottle old wine in new bottles so that in educational research each new project extends the work that has preceded it. For example, in Indigenous research, most studies begin by investigating the reasons for Aboriginal student failure at school, and they conclude with the hope that things will improve. Researchers in Indigenous education in Australia often rely on the same traditional method which has the effect of producing results that have already been found before. The continued use of the same methodology by so many researchers has meant that nothing much has changed in Indigenous education over the past 30 years (Abdullah & Stringer, 1997; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Keeffe, 1992).

In making the shift to critical ethnography, I was able to recognise the impossibility of occupying the position of a participant through a set of methods which seemed fated to assimilate his or her knowledge to an ontological position which was adopted prior to my entry into the field. Rather than providing privileged access to the participant's structuring knowledge, a scientific method precluded me from occupying any position other than my own. My claims to be able tell others about what I had found were legitimised through the way in which the data were interpreted. While I thought that I was discovering the insider's point of view, I was not only presenting difference as accessible for others to understand, but assimilating difference by making those who are different the same. I was, in fact, looking into a

mirror while I was interviewing the participants. While I undertook research to reflect on my own methods of teaching, and to improve my own classroom practice, I was initially accepting the traditional ethnographer's methods without critique. I was accepting an epistemology that depended on the separation of knowledge and the ways of producing it. A traditional ethnographic method ensured that I could see only what had already been found before.

Looking from Different Places

When I undertook my training in ethnographic methodology at university, I thought there was only one position for the ethnographer. It was only when I started my research that I was introduced to the work of critical ethnographers and I recognised then that ethnographic methodology has a history. It consists of multiple positions that have been constituted through the historical and political twists and turns of the discipline. But while ethnographic theories are motivated by differences, the ethnographers themselves are positioned through the theory to look and write from a single, fixed position. The multiplicities and differences are covered over or excluded as the ethnographer is expected to produce a coherent and unified interpretation. The ethnographer along with each participant in the research is positioned with just one way of looking and knowing through the scientific methods employed to do the research. As readers we can see the ethnographer from all angles, while he or she usually sees only from one.

Using different methodologies helped me as a researcher to revise my position and to see what I could not see before. Looking from a second place allowed me to reflect on the methodology I first used to interpret the data. I could do this because my "new" position was based on a different set of assumptions which therefore allowed me to ask different questions and to think differently. For example, what do I do about participants who produce themselves as the kind of person they would like to be, for me as the ethnographer? How do they want me as the interviewer to "see" them? And how do they want to be seen? (Bloom, 1998).

Ethnographies usually start with one major question that inevitability drives the research outcomes (Christie, 1994). This could be avoided by asking a series of different questions throughout the research which then takes the writing in different directions. Seeking questions from the participants also helps to structure the research outside what the ethnographer wants and plans at the beginning of the research so knowledge is produced through a negotiated relation rather than only through the ethnographer's own questions and methods (Bloom, 1998). Thus the problem for ethnography is not one of producing better research to represent more accurately what is going on but changing the ways in which knowledge is produced through our talking and writing in scientific research. It is not a question of producing the most plausible interpretation but one of finding ways of talking about others outside the tired-out discourse of race, culture and gender. And we can do this by thinking and writing about the ways in which ethnographic knowledge is produced through a relation rather than assuming that it is found in the mind of the individual.

Ethnographic Knowledge as Produced Rather than Found

When I first studied the data as a traditional ethnographer, I used them as a tool for my research. They were presented to support my initial interpretation and to answer my research questions. I positioned myself as a gatekeeper of Indigenous knowledge and in so doing I repeated what many other researchers have done before (see Abdullah & Stringer, 1997). I read the body of data only in terms of the methods I used to help me interpret it. The position of the participants was pre-empted by my ethnographic methodology before I entered the field just as learning is usually governed by the teacher's methodology in the classroom.

As a traditional ethnographer, I refused to see myself in the data. I put a methodological barrier between myself and the participants to show that I did not influence what they said in the field. For example, I indented and italicised the quotations from participants in my initial interpretation to differentiate the participants from myself (see Clifford, 1986). I did the same with the theorists. But I refused to look for the links or common ground between us, and I refused to negotiate a position which was mutual to us both. I assumed that we were separated by our respective cultures and positions in the research scene. They were Indigenous and I was White. There was little attempt on my behalf to interact with the participants outside what was permitted by the methodology.

Once I began to reflect on my relation to the participants, I recognised the links between us. We both undertook the interviews assuming, before we started, that we could communicate. We were linked through a prior relation. As an ethnographer, I selected participants who had the knowledge I was looking for, and the participants granted me the interviews. They got their authority to know and to speak from me as the ethnographer while I got my authority to interpret the data from them. We each got our respective positions from the other before the interviews began. As in any good cross-cultural ethnography, this relation is renegotiated through what both the participants and ethnographer do in what they say in the interviews, that is, ethnographic knowledge is not just found in the field or in the data but is also negotiated and produced through the relation between the participant and ethnographer.

For example, the data are produced in ethnography through a negotiated relation insofar as I cannot remain outside what is said in the field while I am talking and participating in the interviews. The

participants ensure my inclusion by answering my questions and giving me what I want. Although the participants and I are linked through the fantasy of a prior relation at the beginning of the research, the data are produced in the field through a discourse of negotiation where the participants position themselves for me as the ethnographer. The data represent a negotiated relation and are different to what either the participant or the ethnographer think and intend. They are constituted through the difference between the participant and ethnographer and so they always have a double meaning. To provide just one meaning, even if it is the most plausible one in the eye of the ethnographer, is to exclude the other voices inevitably woven into the data. These multiple voices are usually hidden within the unified story of a cross-cultural ethnography. However, as ethnographers we could be negotiating the different positions into a "whole" story to ensure all voices and not just those selected by the ethnographer are recognised in ethnographic writing. It is the ways in which this relation between the participants and ethnographer is negotiated during the research that governs what can be said in the field, and what the ethnographer can find. Further, through the negotiation of this relation, knowledge can be produced outside those categories of race, culture and gender that constitute the bread and butter of traditional ethnographies.

Conclusion

If the aim of ethnography and education generally is to see things from another perspective and to be able to present this perspective for others to read and understand, then the ethnographer's aim could be to decipher how we can negotiate the different positions into a "whole" story to ensure the voices of each and all are recognised and represented. This does not mean incorporating other positions into our own nor defending it against the criticism of others. This would perpetuate the power relations that give a voice to some and not to others. Rather, we could look for an inclusive interpretation of the data which allows all the different voices to speak rather than one that is produced as the best or most plausible alternative.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the students who participated in this research and to Dr Michael Christie and Dr Merridy Malin for their assistance and support.

References

Abdullah, J., & Stringer, E. (1997). *Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous learning, Indigenous research*. Perth: Curtain Indigenous Research Centre.

Bloom, L. R. (1998). *Under the sign of hope: Feminist methodology and narrative interpretation*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (1996). *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Britzman D. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects*. Albany: University of New York Press.

Christie, M. (1994). Grounded and ex-centric knowledges: Exploring Aboriginal alternatives to Western thinking. In J. Edwards (Ed), *Thinking: International interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 24-34). Highett: Hawker Brownlow.

Clifford, J. (1986). On ethnographic allegory. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (pp. 98-121). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Dobbert, M. L. (1982). *Ethnographic research: Theory and application for modern schools and societies*. New York: Praeger.

Harrison, N. (2002). *An adventure of insight in ethnography and pedagogy: Learning/teaching relationships and the production of knowledge in the cross-cultural classroom*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Northern Territory University, Darwin.

Harding, S (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge?: Thinking from women's lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Hickling-Hudson, A., & Ahlquist, R. (2003). Contesting the curriculum in the schooling of Indigenous children in Australia and the United States: From eurocentrism to culturally powerful pedagogies. *Comparative Education Review*, *47*(1), 64-89.

Keeffe, K. (1992). *From the centre to the city: Aboriginal education, culture and power*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.

LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. London: Academic Press.

Malin, M. (1989). *Invisibility in success, visibility in transgression for the Aboriginal child in the urban classroom: Case studies at home and at school in Adelaide*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Minnesota.

Malin, M. (2000). An undebated conundrum in the ethics of classroom research: The conflicting rights of researcher, teacher and student within an agenda of reform. *Critical Pedagogy Networker: A Publication on Critical Social issues in Education*, *13*(1), 1-10.

McConaghy, C. (2000). *Rethinking Indigenous education: Culturalism, colonialism and the politics of knowing*. Flaxton, QLD: Post Pressed.

Nakata, M. (1995). Culture in education: A political strategy for us or for them. *Ngoonjook: A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, *11*, 40-61.

Nakata, M. (1997). History, cultural diversity & English language teaching. *Ngoonjook: A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, *12*, 54-75.

Rosaldo, R. (1993). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

St Pierre, E. A., & Pillow, W. S. (2000). *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructuralist theory and methods in education*. New York: Routledge.

Tierney, W. G. (2002). Get real: Representing reality. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *15*(4), 385-398.

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wiersma, W. (1991). *Research methods in education: An introduction* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

About the author

Neil Harrison has taught in Indigenous education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels since 1978. He started his teaching career in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory and has since worked in a range of contexts. He completed his doctorate in Indigenous education at Northern Territory University in 2002 and is now lecturing in the School of Education at the University of New England.