



Field Placement as an Ethnographic Opportunity

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Abstract

This essay argues that social work field curricula should encourage students to view their placement settings as sites of culture and should adapt tools and insights from anthropology to improve the educational value of the field experience. Students in the field occupy an insider-outsider role in their placement sites that fosters a distinctive and valuable point of view. Unfortunately, many resulting experiences and insights are not adequately processed in assigned reflective writing and supervision contexts. Anthropologists record their field impressions in ethnographic field notes, which subsequently become data for reflective and analytic processing, a method that can be usefully adapted to social work education.

Field Placement as an Ethnographic Opportunity

This essay was inspired by the frustration I experienced early in my first-year field placement at an elementary school. Perhaps because I came to social work from a career in organizational change management consulting and scholarship, I arrived at my placement site distinctly aware of the value of my newcomer (and outsider) perspective. Each day, as I walked through the parking lot or lobby, stopped by the staff room or nurse's office, or visited a classroom, the front office, the library, or gym, I noticed evidence of local culture. Every time I crossed the path of a student or teacher, the custodian, a member of the PTA, or a special education aid, I saw a member of that culture. And whenever I heard the daily greeting on the intercom, read a weekly newsletter from the administration, saw a plate of treats set out in the teachers' lounge, sat through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, watched children lining up to come in from recess, or noticed a child cooling down in the "Specialist Room," I knew I was encountering more evidence of culture. I also knew that my outsider stance made these observations mysterious and perplexing in a useful way and that time would likely transform me and strip me of this perspective as I became assimilated into the school culture, rendering such moments ordinary and even invisible. In addition, I knew that almost no question was too stupid. People in the school community didn't expect me to know what anything meant, how anything worked, how to get anything done, or how anything had gotten to be the way it was. This meant that they were patient with my questions and tolerated my being a fly on the wall.

I knew that anthropologists in the field treasure this stance and record their observations in ethnographic notes to preserve a record of them. I also knew that recording and processing such notes in reflective writing, in supervision, and in the social work classroom would enhance my learning and practice. I expected that if I had the time and encouragement to do this kind of work, it would enhance my “differential use of self” (DeWane, 2006), and that both my “micro” clinical work and future systemic interventions would likely be better-informed and have more authority and social impact.

The Didactic Theory of the Process Recording

Social work students are asked to make detailed observations at their field sites, which are typically documented in process recordings and case formulation. Field supervision is significantly structured around the production and review of these recordings, which center on the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of the student as well as those of the clients with whom she works in a structured, supervised environment (Fox & Gutheil, 2000; Graybeal & Ruff, 1995). The implicit pedagogical theory is that if the student can cultivate skills of observation, memory for detail, humility, and openness to feedback, as well as habits of disciplined descriptive writing, she will be able to access transformative supervision and act based upon her reflections. Though the focus of process recordings is self-transformation, it may be difficult for the student to use process recordings as a space for critical thinking about the programmatic, agency, or institutional context, or the actual and possible roles of the social worker in the setting and society.

I wished that my practice and field curricula encouraged a more anthropologically-informed kind of data gathering, discussed the relevant methods and ethical considerations, and validated ethnographic writing as an optional approach to processing field experience. Accordingly, I would argue that social work educators should incorporate ethnographic writing assignments and options into the curriculum. I would even argue that such writing should precede process recording assignments at the start of the field placement year, when trainees bring the freshest possible perspective to the setting, and should complement process recording towards the mid- and end-points of the placement as well. In contrast to Thornton and Garrett’s (1995) call for ethnographic research by social work students to enhance their cultural sensitivity, I am calling for the use of the ethnographic method as a strategy for enhancing process reflection, to encourage and validate critical thinking about the placement site and the student’s role in it.

Valuing the Outsider Perspective

Encouraging this shift in the field education curriculum would acknowledge that students enter placement sites with a valuable outsider perspective on “local frames of awareness” (Geertz, 1983) that should inform learning goals and critical dialogue with educators and fellow students. It would also acknowledge gradual shifts in this stance as students transform: developing cultural competency, assimilating, resisting assimilation, or being precluded from doing so. Finally, it would suggest

a disciplinary commitment to learning as social participation (Wenger, 1998), acknowledging that student perspectives on their placement sites could have value at local, meso, and macro levels, and that this value begins to accrue while the student is at the very start of his or her placement, before he or she has learned how to be an insider. I have been even more struck at my second-year placement in an outpatient psychiatry department at how valuable my curious outsider perspective has been to making sense of, and conceptualizing systemic change in, an urban healthcare network in the throes of institutional change.

Definitions and Useful Sources

Anthropologists are “reflective practitioners” (Schön, 1983) who take themselves seriously as a subject in the field, a stance that social work educators also try to cultivate in students to encourage the skillful “differential use of self” (DeWane, 2006). Ethnography is the reflective writing of anthropology, the social-scientific discipline that takes the study of culture as its central focus. Culture is a slippery concept; one definition that nicely reflects the centrality of cognition to culture says that culture “refers to the knowledge members (‘natives’) of a given group are thought more or less to share; knowledge [...] that is said to inform, embed, shape, and account for [members’] routine and not-so-routine activities” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 3). It may be worth noting that, from the perspective of a social work student, both agency staff and clients are “members” of placement site culture. Culture is reflected in “language, concepts, categories, practices, rules, beliefs” and also in artifacts like texts, art, tools, and buildings (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 13).

Unlike in many other disciplines of practice and inquiry, anthropologists may go into the field without a clear problem to be solved or a narrow research question. An anthropologist would be respected for asking, simply, “What matters to people here and how do they go about doing things?” The core method of anthropology is “close observation” of sites and enactments of culture, ever alert to their possible meanings (Van Maanen, 1990, pp. 68-69). General methods for gathering relevant information include watching behavior, listening to talk, interviewing members, reading texts produced or found on site, and participating in local activities.

Anthropologists are encouraged to critically examine how they are situated in and affect their field sites, what informs their roles and points of view, and how these factors are subject to change. They record their observations in ethnographic field notes, an historically idiosyncratic form that reflects the style and needs of the individual fieldworker (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Field notes may collect snippets of dialogue, records of observed behavior, and anecdotes that seem potent with cultural meaning, or catalogue evidence of artifacts. These notes are later analyzed to detect or “induce” what members of the culture think and believe. Such analytic reflections are rendered in written ethnographies, which are meant to translate cultural meanings, making them intelligible to an outside reader (usually another anthropologist). Ethnographic writing, a “practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of others,” could

be an important adjunct to process recording (Van Maanen, 2011, p. ix).

Author's Note:

Social work educators could provoke interesting discussion of these issues by assigning a few pages of the posthumously published diary of anthropological giant Bronislaw Malinowski, which reveals him to have been anything but the idealized "fieldworker, perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopolitanism" (Geertz, 1983, pp. 55-58). Other texts that might inspire and help educators to take up this charge include the chapter on field notes in Bernard (1994, pp. 180-207); the chapter on "doing" qualitative work and especially the section on logs and analytic memos in Ely (1991, pp. 69-82); *Field Research* (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973); and *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Emerson et al., 1995).

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