Educational Ethnography: How, Why, and For Whom?

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5 minutes: Instructions / 15 minutes: Questions #1-3 / 15 minutes: Question #4

1. Individually, read text A.
2. In groups of 4-5, share your responses to the following questions. *Have someone in the group take notes on the responses to each question.*
    a. Immediately after reading the text, what is the first thing you want to discuss? This is a gut reaction; for example, if you read this text and were commenting on it on a blog, what would you say?
    b. What do you know after reading the text that you didn't know before?
3. Repeat for Texts B and C.

Text A: Church setting

Immediate response	What do you know after reading the text that you didn't know before?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Text B: Jewish senior setting

Immediate response	What do you know after reading the text that you didn't know before?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Text C: Jewish day school setting

Immediate response	What do you know after reading the text that you didn't know before?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

4. After completing #1-3 above, review your group's responses.
    a. What do you notice about the "immediate responses" to the different texts?
        i. Perspective – Did you/your group consistently respond from one perspective, such as researcher, Jew, policy maker, parent, or educator? Did the perspective vary noticeably from one text to the next?
        ii. Relationship to subject – Did your personal connection to (or distance from) the research subject seem to affect the type of responses your group offered?
    b. What do you notice about the responses to what you feel you know after reading the text?
        i. What types of knowledge did people report gaining? (for example: knowledge about a particular individual or institution, knowledge about the researcher, general knowledge about a religious group, general knowledge about human beings, knowledge about one's own biases)
        ii. Are there any interesting patterns in the type of knowledge that people reported? For example, reflecting on your own responses, did the style of the writing affect your answers? Your closeness to the research subject?

Text A: Church setting

Excerpt from pp. 53-55 of Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life *(1999), Penny Edgell Becker (Cambridge University Press).*

It was a huge sanctuary, with gray, heavy stonework, dark wood, and a vaulted ceiling, with seating for about 500 on the main floor plus a large balcony. At one time, several hundred people attended services each Sunday morning. Now there were just over a hundred people in the sanctuary, which was typical for a Sunday service. Many of them were older, but there were also younger couples, some with children.

The small congregation was spread out through the first twenty pews. Taking a seat at the back edge of where the people were, I had one-half of a twenty-foot pew to myself. Nobody sat by me or spoke to me as the service began. About fifteen minutes into the service, the time came for the passing of the peace, a ritual that is performed in many churches, Protestant and Catholic, every Sunday. It involves turning to the people seated close by and exchanging some form of greeting, usually “Peace” or “Peace be with you.” In some congregations it is accomplished in a few moments, with no other activity, but in others the ritual also includes a handshake, an embrace, or walking to people seated in other parts of the sanctuary and greeting them, lasting several minutes in the most gregarious gatherings. In this church, people turned to one another in their pews, saying, “Peace.” The couple in the other half of my pew, about fifteen feet to my right, looked at me and smiled. I smiled back. No one came over to speak to me, and I did not initiate contact.

At the end of the service, I was a bit surprised that the pastor did not stand at the doors of the sanctuary to greet people on their way out, a common end-of-service ritual in many churches and standard practice in other Methodist churches I have attended over the years. Most of the people left quickly, by the main and side doors, hurrying to their cars in the chilly fall weather. The usher who had greeted me was still at the back of the sanctuary, so I asked him how to find the fellowship hall. The bulletin had said that the coffee time would be held there.

He pointed out the adjoining fellowship hall, a cavernous room decorated with banners made with felt, the kind we used to make in Sunday School and bible school classes when I was growing up in a Methodist church in Ohio: rainbows and Jesus as the Shepherd leading chunky white felt sheep. The pastor was standing at the entranceway to the fellowship hall ;since I had

not yet made an appointment to talk with him about my research, I introduced myself simply as a visitor. He shook my hand, said, “Welcome!”, and pointed out the information table over to the side that had brochures and flyers about the congregation’s various committees, programs, and mission activities.

There were perhaps thirty-five people standing scattered around the big room, some alone but most in small groups, drinking coffee in paper cups. To one side were two tables covered in white butcher-block paper, which had two big silver-colored coffee urns and store-bought cookies on paper plates. No one spoke to me, so I introduced myself to several people, including a young woman in her late twenties standing at the information table.

…I asked several people questions after the service, questions that I had found in the past were usually a good way to get people talking about their congregation. “How long have you been coming to this church? What do you like about it? Do you live in Oak Park?” …[P]eople would smile and answer politely, but they did not volunteer too much information; apart from asking if I lived nearby, they did not evince much curiosity about me. At the coffee hour…, people told me that, if I really wanted to know about the church, I should talk to the pastor.

Text B: Jewish senior setting

Excerpt from pp. 14-16 of Number Our Days (1978), Barbara Myerhoff (New York: Simon & Schuster).

I followed the crowd inside and sat at the back of the warm, noisy room redolent with odors of fish and chicken soup, wondering how to introduce myself. It was decided for me. A woman sat down next to me who I soon learned was Basha. In a leisurely fashion, she appraised me. Uncomfortable, I smiled and said hello.

"You are not hungry?" she asked.

"No, thank you, I'm not," I answered.

"So, what brings you here?"

"I'm from the University of Southern California. I'm looking for a place to study how older Jews live in the city."

At the word *university*, she moved closer and nodded approvingly. "Are you Jewish?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Are you married?" she persisted.

"Yes."

"You got children?"

"Yes, two boys, four and eight," I answered.

"Are you teaching them to be Jews?"

"I'm trying."

"So what do you want with us here?" asked Basha.

"Well, I want to understand your life, find out what it's like to be older and Jewish, what makes Jews different from other older people, if anything. I'm an anthropologist and we usually study people's cultures and societies. I think I would like to learn about this culture."

"And what will you do for us?" she asked me.

"I could teach a class in something people here are interested in – how older people live in other places, perhaps."

"Are you qualified to do this?" Basha shot me a suspicious glance.

"I have a Ph.D. and have taught in the university for a number of years, so I suppose I am qualified."

"You are a professor then? A little bit of a thing like you?"

To my relief, she chuckled amiably. Perhaps I had passed my first rite of entrance into the group. "Faegl, Faegl, come here!" Basha shouted to a friend across the room. Faegl picked her way neatly over to where we were sitting. She was wiry and slight as Basha was heavy and grand. "Faegl, sit down Faegl, this here is – What did you say your name was? Barbara? This is Barbara. She is a professor and wants to study us. What do you think of that?"

"Why not? I wouldn't object. She could learn a lot. Are you Jewish?" Faegl wasted no time. She moved over to sit next to me and began her interrogation.

"So you are an anthropologist. Then you study people's origins, yes? Tell me, is it true that human beings began in Africa once upon a time?"

"Many scholars think so," I answered.

"Now a lot of people don't think it's right that we took away from them the country just because we were stronger, yes?"

"Yes." I was growing wary, sensing entrapment.

Faegl continued systematically. “So this business about putting all the Arabs out of Israel because we said we had our origins there, maybe that’s not right either? It is not so simple, is it?”

“No, no. Certainly it is not simple,” I answered.

“So Bashaleh, what do you say now?” Faegl asked her. “She’s a professor and she says maybe it’s not right. Like I told you, even from the Arabs we can’t take away the land.”

Basha looked at me closely while Faegl waited.

“You don’t’ believe in *Eretz Yisroel*?”[1] she asked me. “You are some kind of anti-Semite?”

Faegl rescued me. “Basha! You think everyone who isn’t a Zionist is an anti-Semite? Shame on you. You used to be an internationalist. You used to have beliefs.”

Their argument had grown loud enough to attract attention. Abe, the director, came over to see what was going on…

[1] The land of Israel; the Promised Land.

Text C: Jewish day school setting

Excerpt from Educating for Continuity: An Ethnography of Multilingual Language Practices in Jewish Day School Education (2008), Sharon Avni.

However, not all of the students shared a concern about the imputed authenticity of praying in Hebrew. Sitting one day outside of the classroom, sharing a bag of potato chips, I mentioned to Ethan that I had noticed that he seemed to really enjoy the afternoon prayer service that day. I brought this up with him because usually Ethan was the first student to finish his prayers, sit down, and wait (usually impatiently) for the other students to finish. It was usually at these moments, when Ethan was scanning the room that our eyes would find each other. Being the mischievous and playful boy that he was, Ethan would try to get me to laugh by making silly faces (mostly because I was the only other person in the room also looking around watching the students pray). However, during the prayers that day, Ethan was one of the last to complete his prayers and was still deeply immersed in the prayer book while the other students were already taking out their lunches.

When I questioned him about this, he furtively looked over his shoulder, leaned over as if to confide in me, and said that unlike most of the days, he had chosen that day to say the prayers in English. Feeling the need to explain, he divulged that sometimes he said his prayers in English because he felt that he was still "saying the same thing," and that sometimes he prayed in Hebrew and then said the prayers in English, either looking at the translation or making up the rest. In response to my question about how he felt about learning Hebrew, he echoed Matt's comment that learning Hebrew lacked a utilitarian purpose. The way he saw it, "there's no need to spend six years learning Hebrew when you can spend those years learning to cure a disease." Clearly, to Ethan, the authenticity of the act did not resided solely in the language, but in the personal meaning he attributed to it. Matt, likewise, echoed this sentiment when he wrote in his reflection on the class trip to Israel, "but for obvious reasons whenever I go to Israel I always get a spiritual boost which can last me for as long as I let it. I feel I really felt this boost when we visited to the Western Wall (Kotel) and everybody just went up and said their prayers. This touched me because we weren't asked to say the same Hebrew prayers we say every day and don't understand, but our (sic) own English prayers. This made the experience all the more meaningful."

This ambiguity surrounding the tradition of praying in Hebrew was further addressed several weeks later during a homeroom session when the Judaic studies teacher, Amy, brought up the question of why fixed prayer (*keva*) was important in Judaism. Initially, the conversation oscillated between opinions that focused on the necessity of all Jews to say the same words and contrary opinions that highlighted the freewill that each person is endowed with. When one of the students questioned if the rabbis living hundreds of years ago knew or could understand what contemporary Jews wanted to request from or share with God, Matt raised the question of whether the inability of the majority of modern-day Jews to understand or learn what these prayers meant in English also affected their individual connection with the divine. Almost instantaneously, the students abandoned the teacher's original question and began to debate the place of Hebrew in Jewish prayer. Unstopped by signs of disagreement, Matt asked why it was necessary to pray in Hebrew when God presumably knew all languages.