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A Dialogical Approach to the Problem of Field-Site Typicality

THE TYPICALITY OF NEIGHBORHOODS studied by anthropologists is a key methodological issue for those who deal with complex, differentiated urban systems. This article describes a video-stimulated, multivocal solution to the problem of ethnographic field-site typicality. As an example of this approach, the article reveals how the reactions of audiences in six Japanese cities to a video ethnography of a day in a Kyoto preschool worked to produce awareness of regional, class, and ideological differences in Japanese society. [ethnography, videotape, Japan, preschool]

ANTHROPOLOGISTS generally conduct fieldwork in only one location at a time (for example, in one school, in one neighborhood, in one city, in one culture). But we mean for our ethnographies to have wider implications. Why would I spend a year studying one Kyoto day-care center if I did not believe that what I would learn there would teach me something larger, something typical of Japanese culture? Why would anyone want to read an ethnographic study of one Japanese preschool, unless he or she believed it was representative of other Japanese preschools and of other Japanese institutions?

The typicality, or representativeness, of the neighborhoods studied is a key methodological issue for those anthropologists who deal with complex, differentiated urban systems. But the words *typical* and *representative* are tricky, for they lead us into unfamiliar and perhaps even hostile territory: the domain of behavioral science. A painful personal example involves a book that I wrote with David Wu and Dana Davidson, called *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States* (1989). The method and style of this book is ethnographic: for each culture, it gives as thick a description as possible of one preschool. But what is viewed as appropriate and desirable practice in ethnography may look to a behavioral scientist like sampling error or overgeneralization from a single-case study. Thus, a prominent nonanthropologist wrote the following in his review of the book:

This volume has the familiar advantages and drawbacks encountered when case studies are used to represent the character of large, heterogeneous groups. . . . As the authors recognize, no single school (in this instance, no one

class within a school) can represent countries as large and diverse as these three. [Hess 1990:306]

All criticisms hurt, but this one particularly so, because our study gave a great deal of attention (at least by ethnographic standards) to the problems of typicality and representativeness. This article describes the research method David Wu, Dana Davidson, and I used in our study and gives examples of how this multivocal ethnographic approach worked to produce awareness of regional, class, and ideological differences in Japanese views of preschools. It then concludes with some thoughts about whether typicality and representativeness are issues with which anthropologists should be struggling.

A Multivocal, Dialogical Method

The study began with a search for a research method that would give preschool children, teachers, administrators, and parents a chance to tell us the meaning of what goes on in their schools. The method devised uses videotaped narratives of "typical days" in preschools as a starting point for discussion, as first voices in a multilayered, multivocal, dialogically structured text (Tobin 1989; Tobin and Davidson 1991). The larger study was a comparison of preschools in Japan, China, and the United States, but here I will only focus on Japan.

We began by videotaping a full day at Komatsudani, a *hoikuen* (day-care center) in Kyoto, and then edited the eight hours of videotape into a 20-minute "mini-ethnography." Since the videotape was intended not as data but rather as a "first voice" in a dialogue, in editing we looked for scenes that held the potential to stimulate discussion and highlight disagreements about the mission of preschools. Thus, in addition to scenes showing daily routines of arrival, attendance, lunch, workbook exercises, and departure, "A Day at Komatsudani" also includes scenes of children disrupting lessons, fighting, and tattling.

Next, we returned to Kyoto and showed the 20-minute edited version of the tape to the staff and children of Komatsudani. As the teachers and directors watched the videotape, we asked them to explain to us what they saw. One of our questions was, "Does this look like a typical day at your school? If not, why not?" We also asked such questions as "Is that how you usually handle disputes?" and "Why didn't you intervene in that fight?" Insider's explanations—from teachers' and administrators' discussions of the visual ethnographies shot in their classrooms—are the second voice in our study.

We next showed the Komatsudani videotape to audiences of preschool parents and staff in Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Tokyo, and Chiba. In all, we showed it to nearly 300 Japanese informants in six sites. Each time we screened the videotape we asked our informants to write down their reactions, and then we held a group discussion, which we also videotaped. The written and oral reactions of these audiences to our videotape provide the third voice in our study—the voice of outsiders to Komatsudani but insiders to Japanese culture.

It is this step (discovering a third voice) in our study that was designed to directly address the problem of typicality. As Japanese teachers, parents, and administrators discussed how our primary research site was like and unlike other Japanese preschools, their voices brought out regional, social-class, and ideological differences in Japanese preschool philosophy and practice.

The final step in our research was to show our Japanese audiences the videotapes we had made of preschools in China and the United States. This step produced the fourth voice in our text—the voice of the Japanese as outside observers of other cultures. Here, we asked our informants to play the role of ethnographer by analyzing other cultures' schools. This step also addressed the question of typicality, because it gave us the chance to hear Japanese talk about what they perceived to be important differences between what is typical of their culture's preschools and of preschools in China and the United States.

Is Komatsudani a Typical Japanese Preschool?

Komatsudani is housed in a Buddhist temple on a hillside in Kyoto. The school's principal, Mr. Yoshizawa, is the temple's priest. At the time we taped, Komatsudani had 120 children, ranging in age from six months to six years old. Komatsudani's curriculum, student-teacher ratios, holiday schedule, and so forth are set by the National Ministry of Health (*Koseishō*). Komatsudani receives subsidies from the federal, prefectural, and municipal governments. Low-income parents enrolling their children at Komatsudani receive tuition assistance from the local ward office. The children attending Komatsudani come from families with a wide range of occupations and incomes.

In other words, we chose Komatsudani because we believed it to be in many ways typical of Japanese day-care centers. But rather than assert Komatsudani's typicality (and ask our readers to accept this claim as an act of faith) or attempt to prove statistically that Komatsudani is typical, our approach was to let teachers, administrators, and parents from Komatsudani and other Japanese preschools explain how they perceived Komatsudani to be typical or atypical.

Some of our informants liked Komatsudani. Some were critical of the school. But all of our Japanese informants found Komatsudani, if not exemplary or typical, at least familiar. When Japanese audiences watched our tapes of preschools in China and the United States they saw many things they found exotic, strange, even bizarre. By contrast, even Japanese informants who found Komatsudani unattractive or unusual were able to make sense of what they saw in our videotape by locating Komatsudani within one of several culturally familiar discourses. The following sections exemplify how our Japanese informants referred implicitly or explicitly to social class, ideology, region, and history to locate Komatsudani in Japanese society.

Class

Japan is supposedly a homogeneously middle-class society. However, there is substantial lifestyle and status variation among those with similar middle-range family-income levels. With annual incomes of approximately \$35,000, for example, there are two- and three- as well as one-income households, and blue-collar as well as white-collar wage earners. Japanese preschools reflect differences in lifestyle, tastes, values, and social status between these various Japanese middle-income groups.

There are basically two kinds of Japanese preschools: *yōchien*, which is usually translated into English as "kindergarten," and *hoikuen*, which is usually

translated as “nursery school.” But these translations are misleading. In aim, style, and function, *yōchien* are more closely equivalent to American nursery schools and *hoikuen* to American day-care centers. In Japan, as in the United States, nursery schools (which have historically functioned to provide early play and educational experiences to the children of the higher classes) serve different class interests than day-care centers (which have historically been to provide child care and compensatory socialization to children of the lower classes). Thus, in Japan, *yōchien* are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (*Mombushō*), while *hoikuen* are administered by the Ministry of Health and Welfare (*Koseishō*).

Approximately two-thirds of Japanese four-year-olds attend *yōchien*, while the other one-third attends *hoikuen*, but with increasing numbers of mothers of young children working full-time, demand for the full-day care offered by the *hoikuen* is growing. *Hoikuen* are open six days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. *Yōchien*, in contrast, generally are open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. four days a week, and from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Children of full-time working mothers are much more likely to attend *hoikuen*, while children whose mothers do not work outside the home or who work less than full-time are likely to attend *yōchien*.

Japanese reactions to our tape of Komatsudani suggest that the same sort of class-conscious meanings that distinguish nursery schools from day-care centers in American society distinguish *yōchien* from *hoikuen* in Japan. Komatsudani, a *hoikuen* (day-care center) looked to us much like a *yōchien* (nursery school) in teaching style, curriculum, and children’s play. But to *yōchien* administrators, teachers, and parents who saw our videotape, there were clear and important differences. The discussions we held of our videotapes at *hoikuen* and *yōchien* showed that there are important class distinctions between the two types of schools. These distinctions can be readily discerned from the way staff of the two kinds of preschools talk about their programs.

When asked to compare their program to that of a *yōchien*, *hoikuen* staff often betray a sense of inferiority in their eagerness to minimize the differences between the two kinds of schools. For example, a Tokyo *hoikuen* administrator said:

I think that these days *hoikuen* and *yōchien* are really just about the same. Perhaps once there was more of a difference, but over the years we’ve gradually grown more and more alike. These days what we do, our curriculum, and what *yōchien* do—well, there’s really not much difference between us, is there?

Conversely, a sense of superiority and even smug condescension is apparent in *yōchien* teachers’ and especially administrators’ suggestions that what they do in their preschools cannot be compared to what is done in a *hoikuen*. When asked to compare her school to Komatsudani, an Osaka *yōchien* assistant principal said:

I think one really can’t compare the two because they are so basically different in educational approach and goals and history. I’ve never actually been inside a *hoikuen* in any official capacity, so I can’t really answer definitively, but I would have to say from watching your film and from what I’ve read and heard that

yōchien and *hoikuen* are really two very different kinds of organizations. I think if you look into the history of the two and into their administration and regulations you'll be able to better understand the nature of these differences I am referring to.

I do not want to exaggerate the salience of class in Japanese society by overstating *yōchien* and *hoikuen* differences in reacting to our videotape. Most *yōchien* parents and staff liked what they saw in the tape of Komatsudani and found the program there familiar. However, in the comments of those *yōchien* parents and staff who were critical of Komatsudani there is the unmistakable "aroma" of class distinction: "The children at Komatsudani are very wild"; "Their play is quite rough"; "The school is rather dark, dingy"; "Something about it is a bit depressing"; "Hoikuen are intended to serve a different sort of child than *yōchien*."

Most Americans who see "A Day at Komatsudani" are surprised—surprised to see the children not wearing cute uniforms, surprised to see so little explicit academic emphasis in a culture known for its academic success, surprised by the exuberance and wildness of the children's play in a society thought of as ordered and overcontrolled. I suspect that one reason Americans are unprepared for a school like Komatsudani—one reason Komatsudani may look atypical to American viewers—is that American knowledge of modern Japan has come disproportionately from studies of the Japanese upper-middle class. In general, ethnographic and sociological studies of modern urban Japan have focused more on the college-educated, white-collar, *sarariiman* ("salary-man") families who send their children to *yōchien* than on the two-income, blue-collar families who send their children to *hoikuen*. When a Japanese parent tells us that Komatsudani does not look like her son's *yōchien*, but that it looks like a typical *hoikuen*, she is alerting us to the ongoing salience of class in contemporary Japan.

Region

The most important regional difference in Japan is clearly that between city and country. Since all of the sites where we showed our Komatsudani videotape were urban or suburban, this article, unfortunately, cannot comment on what rural Japanese would say about Komatsudani (though it would be interesting to show "A Day at Komatsudani" to audiences in Hokkaido, Shikoku, Tohoku, or rural Kyushu and listen to their reactions). Where regional differences emerged in our study, they were generally associated with either economic and ethnic differences between urban neighborhoods, or with perceived differences in taste and lifestyle between Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo.

Komatsudani's parents and staff, as well as a few other informants who know Kyoto very well, were aware that Komatsudani's catchment area included some very poor, ethnically diverse neighborhoods near Kyoto station. Several informants thus attributed some unusual features of Komatsudani's program to what they know about the unusually varied population it serves. For example, one Komatsudani parent used her knowledge of Komatsudani's demographics to explain to us the unusually wild behavior of Hiroki, a four-year-old boy who plays a prominent role in our videotape: "Hiroki has an unusually tough life. He

lives with his father and grandmother over in the public housing by the station." When asked if she were suggesting that Hiroki's family were *buraku-min* (descendants of social outcasts), this woman replied:

No, I'm not saying that. I wouldn't know such a thing. That neighborhood by the station has since a very long time ago been a place where all sorts of people have lived, but my grandparents live near the station, also, and what does that mean? All I'm saying is that there are a lot of poorer families with difficult circumstances that have their children at Komatsudani and one needs to keep that in mind to understand the place.

The other sort of regional explanations that were stimulated by watching our videotape have to do with popular notions of differences among Japanese cities. Thus, for example, Mr. Ogino, a preschool administrator in Osaka, suggested that we had made a mistake in doing our study in Kyoto:

Ogino: You know, Kyoto is a very, very, special Japanese city. It's really quite unlike anyplace else in Japan.

Tobin: You mean because it has so many temples and tourists and. . . .

Ogino: Well of course that, too, but I mean there is a Kyoto style of doing things and of talking about things that would be very hard for you to pick up as a foreigner but which I can easily recognize. Kyoto-ites are like other Japanese people, but more so. They have a kind of exaggerated version of Japanese character. I'm warning you, I suppose, that people in Kyoto can be very tricky. Things in Kyoto are not always what they seem to be.

Agreeing that Kyoto is an atypical Japanese city, but for different reasons, a professor of early childhood education in Tokyo also warned that "You should know that Kyoto is an unusually left-leaning city. The teacher's union is unusually strong there, still, compared to other cities."

Finally, several of our informants suggested to us that our choice of a preschool in the Kansai (Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe) region of the country might prejudice our findings. Thus, for example, at a screening in Chiba, a group of mothers from the parent-teacher association (PTA) agreed with one teacher's comment that Komatsudani, a Kansai *hoikuen*, might be very different than *hoikuen* in Kanto (the Tokyo region). When I asked the group to explain the nature of this difference, no one offered an explanation. Finally, the president of the PTA, feeling obliged to tell me something, said, "It's difficult to say, exactly. It's a hard thing to put into so many words, but there is a different feel, isn't there?" The rest of the PTA members nodded in agreement, and one member offered the following comments:

They do many things a bit differently in Kansai. They speak a bit differently. Their food is flavored a bit differently. So we shouldn't be surprised to see that their childhood education is also a bit different, should we?

When I returned to Tokyo and asked Mr. Yoshizawa what he thought about this suggestion of a difference between early childhood education in Kanto and Kansai, he said:

Well, I couldn't really say for certain what they were getting at, but perhaps what they were referring to is that there is more educational pressure in general, in life in Tokyo. Maybe we seem a little behind them in some ways and maybe that's not altogether bad. I expect at a Tokyo *yōchien* you'd find a lot more *kyoiku* *mamas* than you would around here. But I'm afraid that we are catching up fast.

The *kyoiku mama*, a common figure in Japanese popular culture, is the equivalent of the American "backstage" or Yuppie mother who ruthlessly drives her child to succeed. *Kyoiku mamas*, who are generally nonworking wives of white-collar "salary-men," dedicate their lives to their children's educational careers. Interestingly, although none of the approximately 150 Japanese mothers to whom we spoke identified herself as a *kyoiku mama*, most feel that *kyoiku mamas* are very common in contemporary Japan.

Ideology

Asking Japanese audiences what they thought of Komatsudani as depicted in our tape introduced us to an intense ideological and pedagogical battle. Preschools like Komatsudani, which self-consciously and deliberately cultivate traditional Japanese values, are praised in some Japanese circles and criticized in others. This difference of opinion is a reflection of a highly charged ideological debate about Japanese versus Western values, as well as of a more subtle ambivalence in the hearts of all Japanese about how best to balance the old and the new—how to be modern while retaining the core of Japanese character and identity (Kelly 1986; Bestor 1989).

In contemporary Japan this ambivalence is often played out in heated disagreements about the educational system. Defenders of the current system tend to align themselves with conservatism, and are accused by their critics of being associated with right-wing politics and with the kind of militarism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, and authoritarian groupism that led Japan into World War II. Supporters of educational reform and internationalism generally align themselves with liberalism and the Left, while in the eyes of their critics they are associated with the kind of softheaded, weak, feminine individualism that Japanese conservatives believe has led Western Europe and, more recently, the United States into economic and moral decline.

Preschool teachers, who are by and large resolutely nonideological and pragmatic in approach, tended to find Komatsudani unexceptional. Administrators, on the other hand, often reacted very strongly to our videotape, either praising or condemning Komatsudani for its Japaneseness. The most harsh and adamant critics were administrators who were often the founders or children of founders of Christian and other Western-style preschools. Although only 1 percent of Japanese are Christian, approximately 6 percent of Japanese children attend Christian preschools, and the voices of Japanese Christians provide a significant source of social critique in contemporary Japan. For example, several Christian administrators were disturbed by what they felt to be the group-dominated ethos of Komatsudani, and by the *laissez-faire* reaction of the staff to Hiroki's fighting with other children. The principal of a Hiroshima *hoikuen* commented:

I would hate to think Americans will see this film and think this is what Japanese are like. Certainly there are schools in Japan, maybe even many schools, maybe even most schools in Japan that are like the school you've shown us here. But there are other, much better Japanese schools you could have chosen that would have given Americans a much more positive image of Japanese education.

A head teacher added:

This school, by ignoring children's individual needs and personalities and emphasizing only doing things in groups, is an example of what's wrong with Japanese education and with Japanese society. This is the kind of approach that leads to fascism and blind following of leaders. There is no place in this kind of school for the soul and for individual self-expression.

Some of our Japanese informants contrasted Komatsudani with Saint Timothy's, the American preschool in our study:

We handle fighting and discipline in our school much more like the American school in your film than like the Japanese school in the film you showed us. If there is a fight between two children in our school, we quickly separate the children and tell them that fighting is wrong, that it doesn't settle anything, and encourage them to apologize and settle their problems without violence.

Confused to find Japanese teachers and administrators seeming to prefer an American preschool to one of their own, we asked our informants to explain. Did they not see the importance of the social identity and the Japanese values of groupism and perseverance stressed at Japanese preschools like Komatsudani? Nagami Kengo, the director of a chain of Christian *yōchien* and *hoikuen* in Hiroshima, responded:

Of course, as Japanese, we think these values you mention are extremely important. We would not be Japanese without them. But as Christian educators we believe that children in Japan need more of a balance between these traditional Japanese values and other values, such as individuality, self-confidence, a sense of right and wrong, and a knowledge of the teachings of Jesus. Living in Japan, Japanese children get the groupism, the obligation, and all the rest without us teaching it to them. We think preschools like ours are the only chance these children will have to become creative individuals before they get into the public school system. That is the battle we are fighting here. Japan doesn't need more groupism. That's why in our schools here in Hiroshima we emphasize the need for developing what you are calling Western or Christian values. It's a matter of giving to children that which they do not have and thus need.

Although Japanese Christians are a small minority, the concerns they raised with our videotape of Komatsudani are a piece of a larger debate in Japan between voices of tradition and reform.

History

To explicate and evaluate what they believed to be unusual or problematic aspects of Komatsudani's program, many of our informants turned to historical

explanations. These informants attempted to make sense of Komatsudani by locating it in historical time, for example, by contrasting how children used to be raised in Japan with the current realities of Japanese childhood. This mode of explanation was generally introduced with characteristic temporal phrases, such as *mukashi* (long ago), *genzai* (in the contemporary period), *saikin* (currently), or *kono goro* (these days).

Critics of Komatsudani suggested to us that Komatsudani is not representative of contemporary Japanese preschool practice because it is old-fashioned. A professor of child development at a Tokyo college of education commented:

That *hoikuen* [Komatsudani] is characteristic of an approach to early childhood education common in Japan going back to the period before the war, and even earlier. When I was a child—and that was a long time ago, I can tell you—I attended a *hoikuen* that I imagine would have looked very much like the one here in your film. These days, you can certainly still find such programs, but these days the mainstream of Japanese early child education is going in a somewhat different, more progressive direction.

Several teachers and administrators who watched our tapes found Komatsudani's practice of letting older children play freely with toddlers atypical of preschools they know, but understandable and defensible given their concerns about change in the Japanese family. Several of our informants mentioned, nostalgically, that mixed-age play has grown all too rare in contemporary Japan.

Saito [a *hoikuen* teacher in Hiroshima]: I think that's very interesting, that the bigger and smaller children have the chance to play together like that.

Tobin: What about here, in your *hoikuen*?

Saito: No, we don't have much contact between the babies and toddlers and the children in the older classes, except on some special days. It's not because we in any way are against this kind of contact. It's mostly because of the way our building is arranged, I suppose, with the nursery in a separate wing. But I can imagine how good it must be for the older children to get a chance to take care of the little ones. That's rare these days in Japan, isn't it? Families have recently grown so small. In the old days, children had so many siblings to play with. But now, getting the chance to play with someone older or younger has grown rare, hasn't it?

Principal Yoshizawa of Komatsudani was among those who explicitly contrasted the barrenness of contemporary Japanese family and neighborhood life with a much more favorably evaluated, nostalgically remembered past: "Children's lives have become so narrow. Most of our children live in apartments, with just their parents, who tend to overindulge them and make things too easy for them." Yoshizawa gave a similar explanation of why he brought the children to a muddy field one morning for their daily exercise:

These days many children don't know how to be children. Especially *hoikuen* children like ours, who are in school all day, everyday. They grow up not having the opportunity in play in the mud if we don't arrange for them to get it here with us.

Several Japanese parents told us that they have placed their children in preschools like Komatsudani because they fear their children are in danger of missing out on the spontaneous interactions with other children they recall experiencing when they were growing up in larger families, surrounded by a friendly sea of cousins, family friends, and neighbors. For example, a preschool parent in a suburb of Tokyo told us:

When I was a little girl I was outside all day. As soon as I woke up, I would be outside, playing with my friends until dark. But it is not like that these days. At least not here, in Chiba. I don't know my neighbors that well. People move in and out so much and we live so high up, we only really meet people who share this stairwell.

Japan is currently in the midst of a *nostarujii* boom (nostalgia boom), a cultural discourse found in advertising, tourism, and political campaigns in which an idealized, sentimentalized version of the Japanese past is offered as an attractive alternative to the modernized, Westernized present (Kelly 1986; Ivy 1988; Robertson 1988). The significance of these nostalgic Japanese responses to our videotape is not that life for Japanese children is, in fact, emotionally and socially barren compared to the past, but rather that, whether or not Japanese early childhood has changed radically for the worse, Japanese perceive it to be so, and act accordingly. Our informants' use of historical tropes to comment on our videotape, "A Day at Komatsudani," says less about the Japanese past than about anxieties and politics of the present.

Culture

As noted, we also showed our Japanese audiences our videotapes of days at Chinese and American preschools. Where "A Day at Komatsudani" brought out discussion of differences within Japanese society, "A Day at Dong-Feng" and "A Day at St. Timothy" stimulated discussions of Japanese shared cultural values. Japanese discussions of our Chinese and American videotapes were characterized by a sense of cultural agreement. While our Japanese informants disagreed about how much emphasis should be placed on group life versus individuality in the preschool curriculum, nearly all of the 300 Japanese who watched our tapes agreed that the American preschool gave too little emphasis to promoting group skills. Our Komatsudani videotape also stimulated lively debates about the ideal student-teacher ratio for preschool classes, with many Japanese arguing that 28 four-year-olds is too many for one teacher. However, nearly all of the Japanese preschool staff and parents we spoke with agreed that the ratio of 8 children per adult they saw in our tape of Saint Timothy's was too small to facilitate children's social development. Many Japanese criticized Komatsudani's staff for letting Hiroki get away with being such a bully. But most members of our Japanese audience agreed with each other that the Chinese approach to behavior management was far too severe and authoritarian, and the American approach too emotionally heavy and intrusive.

Thus, Komatsudani became a typical or representative Japanese preschool in the eyes of our Japanese informants when the context of our questioning switched from intracultural variation to cross-cultural comparison. When we

asked Japanese to discuss the typicality of a particular Japanese preschool, they replied like sociologists—pointing out the importance of social-structural variables, including class, region, and political and religious beliefs. But when we asked these same informants to discuss other culture's preschools, they replied like anthropologists—emphasizing their own cultural homogeneity.

Conclusion

By showing a 20-minute videotape of one Japanese preschool to diverse audiences of Japanese informants and soliciting their reactions, we shifted the power and responsibility to evaluate our field site's typicality or representativeness from us, the outside ethnographers, to Japanese insiders. The Japanese audiences who saw the videotape "A Day at Komatsudani" explained what they found most and least familiar and most and least attractive about Komatsudani by locating the school within specific class, regional, ideological, and historical contexts.

A virtue of this approach is that it offers a shift from behavioral science's concern with typicality and representativeness to ethnography's interest in meaning-making. The word *typical* assumes there is an ideal typical or modal Japanese preschool against which the preschool we happened to study can be evaluated. A Japanese preschool can be judged to be typical if it falls within an acceptable margin of error from this ideal-typical model. I would suggest that the real issue for readers and writers of ethnographies is not the typicality or representativeness of our primary field sites but rather the coherence of our narratives. Typicality and representativeness are positivistic concepts, putatively measurable characteristics of people, events, or institutions. Coherence, in contrast, is a characteristic of a narrative about people, events, or institutions. The question that should interest and concern us is not, Is Komatsudani a typical Japanese preschool? but rather, How can we relate what we know about Komatsudani to what we know about other Japanese preschools and, more generally, to what we know about Japanese culture?

We expect ethnographies to be coherent on several levels. We expect internal coherence, that is, events described on one page of our ethnographies should be consistent with events described on other pages. We also expect ethnographies to be intertextually coherent (Kristeva 1969; Fish 1980). Thus we are disturbed if one account of a Japanese preschool seems inconsistent with other ethnographers' accounts of other Japanese preschools (e.g., see Lewis 1984, Hendry 1986, and Peak 1991). We even expect an ethnography of a Japanese preschool to be consistent with other ethnographies of Japan. If my ethnography of Komatsudani seems inconsistent with, for example, Rohlen's (1974) ethnography of a Japanese bank, we feel that something is amiss. In *Preschool in Three Cultures* my colleagues and I turned to Japanese preschool parents, teachers, and administrators to provide not only coherent accounts of their own preschools, but also coherent explanations of why the Japanese preschool we chose to study is like and unlike other Japanese preschools and other Japanese cultural institutions. The thrust of our dialogical, multivocal approach was to give informants the opportunity, power, and responsibility to decide if our ethnography was consistent with their experience of their own culture. We asked

our informants—Japanese preschool parents and staff—not to say if we were right or wrong, but rather to share their explanations of why we found what we did. Thus, when a Japanese preschool administrator explained to us why, in her opinion, our choice of field site was a poor one, she helped us take the first step toward contextualizing our fieldwork, and thus toward drawing larger meanings from our research.

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