

This article was downloaded by:[Tobin, Joseph]
On: 5 February 2008
Access Details: [subscription number 790428290]
Publisher: Taylor & Francis
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713760008>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 1990

To cite this Article: Tobin, Joseph and Davidson, Dana (1990) 'The ethics of polyvocal ethnography: empowering vs. textualizing children and teachers', International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 3:3, 271 - 283

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/0951839900030305

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0951839900030305>

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The ethics of polyvocal ethnography: empowering vs. textualizing children and teachers

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Polyvocal approaches allow researchers and informants to interact on a more equal footing and informants' voices to be heard in the final text. But research methods intended to empower informants also can be a source of unanticipated authorial power – the power to confront informants with unsolicited self-reflections and to textualize people's lives and words. The authors reflect on those ethical dilemmas in this article.

A polyvocal ethnographic research method

Several years ago we began a study that eventually became a book, *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States* (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). From the outset we struggled to find a way around what we saw as a troubling research tradition: in most cross-cultural educational research, Westerners study non-Westerners, whites study nonwhites, scholars study practitioners, and men study women and children. In our search for a method that would allow us at least to address, if not to reverse, these imbalances of power and authority, we developed a polyvocal ethnographic research strategy designed to empower teachers to speak directly in our text.

At the core of our method is the use of videotapes to stimulate a polyvocal discourse. We use videotaped narratives of "typical days" in preschools as starting-points for discussion, as first voices in a dialogically structured text. It is a "Rashomonian telling and retelling of the same videotaped events from different perspectives, an ongoing dialogue between insiders and outsiders, between practitioners and researchers, and between people of three different cultures" (Tobin, 1989, p. 176).

The first voice we introduce in our study is visual ethnography, videotaped portraits of days in preschools in three countries. These visual ethnographies show scenes of arrival, free play, structured group activities, lunch, and departure. We then edited the eight to ten hours of videotape taken in each country into three 20-minute "visual mini-ethnographies." Since we use our videotapes not as data but as a first voice in a dialogue, in our editing we looked for scenes that had the potential to stimulate discussion and highlight disagreements about the mission of preschools and the nature of children. In each of our tapes there is at least one scene showing conflict or tension between children, between a teacher and a parent, or between a child and a teacher. Next, we returned to our field sites and showed the tapes to the staff and children of the preschools. As the classroom teachers and the school directors watched

the videotape, we asked them to explain what they saw. These insider explanations – the reactions of teachers, administrators, and children to the visual ethnographies shot in their classrooms – are the second voice in our study.

We explored the degree to which the preschools are typical by showing the videotapes to preschool parents, staff, and education specialists in five or more sites in each country. For example, we showed our videotape of St. Timothy's Children's Center in Honolulu to audiences in Nashville, State College (Pennsylvania), Los Angeles, and Chicago. The reactions of these audiences provide the third voice in our study, the voice of outsiders to St. Timothy's Center but insiders to American society. As they discussed how our primary research site is like and unlike other American preschools, these voices brought out regional, social class, and ideological differences in American preschool philosophy and practice.

The final step in our research was to show our videotapes to foreign audiences. This step produced the fourth voice in our text, the reactions of American, Japanese, and Chinese audiences to the videotapes they watched of each other's preschools. Here, we asked our informants to play the role of ethnographer by analyzing each others' schools. These "outsider judgments" (LeVine, 1966) inevitably reflect an intermingling of the culture being described and the culture doing the describing. Thus, for example, a Japanese teacher's statements about an American preschool have something to teach us about both Japanese and American beliefs and values.

Assembled into a manuscript, these steps produce a multivoiced dialectic of interpretation, evaluation, and critique. Each of these voices, each textual layer, reacts to earlier texts without entirely replacing, subsuming, or negating them.

This research approach was designed to empower informants by replacing traditional ethnographic authority with polyvocality, and to decenter the text from its authors by shifting the power of reflexivity from the metadiscourse of the ethnographer to the understandings of preschool children, teachers, and administrators. This method proved to be effective, producing insights into the meanings of preschool in China, Japan, and the United States. But, despite (or perhaps, ironically, because of) our attempts to write a text that would empower teachers, our work raises troubling ethical issues, some anticipated as well as unanticipated. Issues emerged relating to the videotaping as well as the writing of the study. These issues are unique to our comparative approach as well as common to all qualitative research.

We anticipated that teachers and children would appreciate the chance to see themselves on videotape, but at least one child in our study was embarrassed in front of his classmates when we screened our videotape of his school. We intended to reduce the cultural hegemony of Westerners over the non-West, but at least one Japanese administrator was left feeling that though the words were hers, the choice of topics and focus was unfamiliar. We intended our work to empower, but it left at least one teacher feeling powerless.

We present these concerns not in apology for ethically questionable work (for all research is ethically questionable), or to disarm potential critics by anticipating their responses. We do so because we believe that innovative research methods are strengthened by ongoing reflection and reanalysis. The ethical questions raised by our work and by related qualitative investigations are not problems to be solved by right thinking, well meaning researchers. Rather, they are tensions inherent in the research enterprise, in the ongoing negotiation of meaning between scholar and practitioner, and between insider and outsider.

Teachers' vulnerability and informed consent

On the days we videotaped at Komatsudani Hoikuen (daycare center) in Kyoto, the most out of control of the many children we encountered was 4-year-old Hiroki. Here is how we described Komatsudani's after-lunch free-play period:

Soon several of the children, with the conspicuous exception of Hiroki, ran down the steps to retrieve the fallen cards. This proved to be a losing battle as Hiroki continued to rain cards down upon them. It was now that Hiroki (purposely) stepped on Satoshi's hand, which made him cry. . . . Fukui-sensei (Hiroki's teacher) returned to the balcony where, faced with the sight of Hiroki and another boy involved in a fight (which consisted mostly of the other boy's being pushed down and climbed on by Hiroki), she said neutrally, "Are you still fighting?" Then she added, a minute later, in the same neutral tone, "Why are you fighting, anyway?" and told everyone still on the balcony "Hurry up and clean up." . . . Hiroki was by now disrupting the card clean-up by rolling on the cards and putting them in his mouth. (Tobin *et al.*, 1989, p. 21)

When we returned to Komatsudani with our edited videotape, we were most interested in Fukui's reactions to these scenes showing her doing little to stem Hiroki's misbehavior. In our book we describe Fukui's nondefensive explanations of her non-intervention strategy and the endorsements this approach received from Fukui's supervisors, Higashino and Yoshizawa. We suggest that these explanations are representative of a Japanese approach to child socialization in which peer reactions are viewed as being the most efficacious tool for promoting appropriate behavior (see Lewis, 1984).

Because Fukui, her supervisors, and the parents of the children at Komatsudani generally agreed on how children's misbehavior should be handled, some potential ethical problems from our method did not surface in our research in Japan. But what if Higashino and Yoshizawa had been critical of the way Fukui dealt with Hiroki's misbehavior as shown in our tape? What if Satoshi's parents, after seeing our tape, had been upset with Komatsudani's staff for failing to protect their child from a bully?

Teachers participating in research are vulnerable. In a study in which a teacher's work is videotaped and shown to parents and supervisors, his or her participation may place his or her job in jeopardy. Principal Yoshizawa and Assistant Principal Higashino agreed to have their school participate in our study. But did Fukui, the classroom teacher, have the freedom to decline? As researchers, should we have been content with obtaining consent only from Komatsudani's directors?

Before judging these options, we need to consider the alternatives. We initiated our contact with Komatsudani by describing our study to Yoshizawa and Higashino. When we returned to the school, they said we could videotape in Fukui-sensei's classroom. Did Yoshizawa ask Fukui or tell her that her classroom would be the focus of our study? Would it have been appropriate for us to tell Yoshizawa that we needed Fukui's consent? To do so might have suggested that we questioned Yoshizawa's authority to speak for the interests of the teachers in his employ. Japan is a culture where individual rights, including the right not to be studied, are less culturally proscribed than in the United States. The lives of subordinates, including preschool teachers, are entrusted to their superiors much more than in our culture. In a culture where a teacher's superior may be asked to find her a suitable husband, should the superior not be trusted to protect her interests when volunteering her participation in a research project? We

found ourselves torn between the need to follow our own culture's professional ethics and the fear that in doing so we would be ethnocentrically imposing our ethical standards and practices on others.

Consent, always a critical ethical concern, is complex in cross-cultural educational research. Who can consent legitimately for an institution to be studied? In the end we handled consent differently in each culture. At Komatsudani, we followed Japanese custom by accepting the legitimacy of Yoshizawa to speak for his staff and children. We then worked to form a personal relationship with Fukui that would enable her to let us know of any hesitations she had about participating in the research.

Protecting informants is a higher-stakes issue in China than in Japan or the United States. When we began our research in China in 1985, the prevailing political climate was one of liberalization and openness. The horrors of the cultural revolution behind them, scholars and government officials were eager to help us with our research. Some preschool administrators felt secure enough to let us tape typical (in contrast to staged) events in their schools. Then came the Spring of 1989 and suddenly people who had helped us four years earlier were endangered by having participated in our study.

Aware of these dangers in the liberal days when we began our research, we were careful to protect our informants. In China, from the start, we stressed not informed consent but confidentiality, carefully disguising not only children's and teachers' names, but also the name and location of the school. We did not do so in Japan and the United States.

In the United States, where teachers and children are vulnerable and individual rights are paramount, we made sure that we had the consent of teachers and parents as well as administrators. Even working in our own culture, informed consent turned out to be elusive and complex. Before we studied St. Timothy's, we approached another Honolulu preschool. After obtaining consent from the board of directors, we visited the school and during a staff meeting described the project to the director and teachers. The two teachers whose class we proposed to tape at first demurred, one saying she was camera-shy but then agreeing when encouraged to do so by her supervisor. We returned the next day and videotaped and were pleased with the results. But when we returned to show an edited version of the tape to the teachers and administrators, we were disappointed by the lack of spontaneity and frankness in the discussion. At the end of this session, the teacher we had taped walked with us to our car and she apologized. She explained that she was worried about continuing with the research, not because she lacked trust in us, but because she feared her supervisor and board of directors. After hearing these concerns, we decided reluctantly that we had better choose another American preschool where the teachers were more sure of administrative and parental support.

Holding a mirror up to a misbehaving child

After discussing the videotape with Fukui, Yoshizawa, and Higashino, we asked them what they thought about showing it to the children in Fukui's Peach Class. Principal Yoshizawa readily agreed. While the children watched the videotape shot in their classroom nine months earlier, we videotaped their reactions.

Lacking the passive viewing conventions of adults, these young children were entranced by the tape, interacting with the recorded narrative in unanticipated ways that suggested that for them the tape held an immediacy that adults cannot readily

comprehend. When the teacher in the video tells the children to stand up for morning exercise, our audience of 4-year-olds dutifully rose and went through the calisthenics with their video instructor. When the videotaped version of Fukui asked for the daily attendance monitor to go around the room counting children, the screening-day's daily monitor joined her videotaped counterpart in a head-counting duet. When Hiroki made his first appearance in the tape, disrupting the workbook exercise, the "real" Hiroki jumped up, raised both hands in the air, and danced around in front of the monitor singing, "Boku desu. Mite!" ("It's me. Look!"). The other children reacted by shouting for Hiroki to sit down so they could see. When the videotaped version of Hiroki started pummeling Satoshi, the children laughed and called out to the effect, "that's Hiroki all right." The "real" Hiroki again jumped up in front of the screen, this time singing a silly song. Again, the children shouted him down. Back in his seat, Hiroki watched the scene of him interfering with the flash card clean-up, and then, theatrically, covered first his eyes and then his ears with his hands. Suddenly, Hiroki jumped up, and calling to Satoshi to join him, ran out of the room to the playground.

Clearly, ethical questions abound here. At St. Timothy's we were careful to avoid videotaping children whose parents had not signed a release form the school had distributed at the beginning of the year. Should we have sent similar forms home in Japan where such a procedure is not common practice? Had we known then what we know now of the power of videotape as a reflexive tool with young children, should we have shown the tape at all to the Peach Class? In qualitative research that emphasizes reflexivity, consent and confidentiality are only the beginnings of ethical issues to be addressed. A fundamental ethical precept of research is "to do no harm." Was Hiroki harmed by our research? In a cross-cultural study such as ours, this question is very hard to answer. We must consider which culture's ethical standards and child socialization practices should serve as our ethical touchstones.

We are uncomfortable with exposing a 4-year-old, no matter how egregious his or her behavior, to the ridicule of classmates or to the defamiliarizing shock of self-scrutiny produced by watching himself or herself on videotape. Thus, had we to do it again, we probably would decide not to show the tape to the Peach Class. On the other hand, respect for Komatsudani's staff, coupled with an awareness of the limits of our understanding of Japanese culture, made us inclined to trust Yoshizawa's judgment over our own about what would help or harm Hiroki.

Because the self-scrutiny and peer ridicule to which we exposed Hiroki with our videotape are inconsistent with our own cultural notions of child socialization, we can say, in retrospect, that we were wrong to show the tape to the Peach Class. At the same time, because at the core of our project is the value of cultural respect, we are disinclined to second-guess Yoshizawa's decision to let Hiroki watch the tape.

Less in excuse than in acknowledgment of the realities and ethical ambiguities of cross-cultural research, we suggest that as double outsiders, as foreigners in Japan as well as researchers in a child-care setting, we were not primarily responsible for the well-being of Hiroki and his classmates. Nor should we have been. The (to us) ethically questionable practice of holding a mirror up to Hiroki turned out to be consistent with Komatsudani's approach to child socialization. Our presence and, even more so, our videotaping, created a heightened reflexivity that facilitated the development of the kind of self- and other-awareness that Komatsudani seeks to cultivate in children.

This introduces the issue of "*quid pro quo*" as a reality as well as a goal of research. Teachers and administrators consent to be part of research projects because they perceive they have something to gain. In anthropological as well as in school-based

research, a major incentive for participating is the chance to be exposed to new questions and perspectives and thereby gain new understanding of taken-for-granted beliefs and practices. It is stimulating and flattering to be studied. By agreeing to participate in our study, in addition to the satisfaction and excitement of being studied by foreign investigators and the chance to learn about two other cultures, the staff of Komatsudani found a way to weave our reflexive research design into their on-going process of helping a child understand the effects of his or her behavior on others.

Verisimilitude, surveillance, and voyeurism

Videotaping opens up powerful new possibilities for qualitative educational research. Some of these have the potential to empower children and teachers. Some are less benign in intent or outcome. In practice, all uses of videotape in educational research present troubling ethical problems. The choice by a researcher to videotape children and teachers must be made with an awareness of the larger contemporary American sociocultural context in which video is connected intricately not only to verisimilitude and manipulation by television and Madison Avenue, but also with surveillance and sexism.

We warn viewers not to view our tapes as unmediated pictures of reality. But we have learned through scores of screenings in three countries that our tapes carry a seductive verisimilitude. Despite our warnings, American audiences viewing the Komatsudani tape are left with the impression that they have seen the reality of a day in a Japanese preschool or, worse, that through our tape they have encountered a small but representative piece of Japanese culture. For viewers who accept its conventions, video is a seductive and powerful medium that artfully approximates reality. This is an ethical issue for us, for it undermines our goal of divesting interpretive authority in our research. Perhaps in addition to our earnest but in the end ineffectual disclaimers, an insert should run across the top of our videotape: *Warning: Watching this tape may give you an exaggerated sense of the ethnographer's authority and a distorted sense of the culture depicted.*

In an age of electronic eavesdropping (licit as well as illicit), videotaping inevitably carries with it an unsavory whiff of videotapping, of intrusion, surveillance, and expanding technologies of social control. To be taped is to be observed impersonally and mechanically and thus objectified. To be given the chance to see oneself on tape either can be empowering (as we intended) or depersonalizing, an invitation to participate in one's own surveillance, correction, and control. As social scientists we not only study people like Hiroki and Fukui; we also change them. Contemporary social science's ravenous appetite to see in and through people, our insatiable "panopticism" (Foucault, 1978) produces in the objects of our gaze a self-awareness and self-consciousness that inevitably changes notions of who they are and how they should behave. Videotaping focuses, magnifies, distorts, and prolongs this effect.

In a society which is sexist as well as intrusive, researchers also must consider the link between educational videography and other "graphies," including pornography. For researchers (who usually are men) to choose to videotape teachers (who usually are women) and children in a society in which women and children frequently are the objects of undesired sexual interest is a research decision that cannot be made innocently. In a society in which X-rated videotapes have replaced film as the favored medium of pornography, whenever a man looks at a woman through a video camera's lens, the advantages of videotape as a research tool should be weighed against the

potential of introducing a (heightened) sense of voyeurism and exploitation to the research relationship.

Textualizing and contextualizing a teacher

We chose St. Timothy's as our "typical" American preschool mainly because we found its director and teachers to be likeable and well trained and unusually self-reflective and even eloquent in their explications of what they are about. St. Timothy's is precisely the kind of program we have chosen for our own children. We found the staff's beliefs about children to be very like our own.

Videotaping, screening tapes, and interviewing parents and staff all went very well at St. Timothy's. We wove the staff's explanations of the videotapes and St. Timothy's orientation booklet for parents into a chapter we believed captured St. Timothy's routines and reflected the staff's beliefs and values. We put these practices, beliefs, and values into context by bringing in Chinese and Japanese reactions to our videotape of St. Timothy's and by contrasting St. Timothy's with other American child-care programs.

A few weeks after the page-proofs for our book arrived from the publisher, we sent a copy to the staff at St. Timothy's. We had not promised them that they would be given the chance to edit/censor our text, but in describing our method and approach we had stressed from the start that our goal was to present their views in their words, to let them speak for themselves. We were very disturbed when we received a call one evening from one of the teachers telling us that she was unhappy with how she and St. Timothy's came across in our book. On the phone, Cheryl gave us a sense of the kind of passages that most troubled her. She was worried that we would find her complaints to be trivial, and she stressed how strongly she felt about having the record set straight. We told Cheryl that we needed to hear more about these feelings, and we set up a meeting with her and her new director, Coleen.

As the day of the meeting approached, we found ourselves feeling guilty and ashamed for having failed to warn Cheryl of reactions that, in retrospect, we could see had been inevitable, and for knowing that even if we could at that late date "stop the presses," we still were not willing to turn over authorial control, the right to censor our text. We were ashamed because, by our own definition of the rationale of our polyvocal method, if Cheryl felt victimized rather than empowered by the way we used her words in our text, we had failed.

Our meeting was frank, emotional, and productive. Cheryl told us that it was not one thing we said about her, or quoted her as saying, so much as it was the whole effect, which she described as depersonalizing.

Those are my words, but they don't show what I meant. You've taken my words and my actions and chopped them up and put them together in ways that will give people the wrong idea of what I'm like. The teacher in your book is me but it's not me. When I saw the videotape, it looked pretty much okay to me, but now that I see the whole thing in print . . .

Although inclined to defend our text, we found ourselves agreeing with many of Coleen and Cheryl's complaints and suggested changes, and wishing we had showed them a draft of the manuscript earlier in the process. We apologized and said we would do what we could to address the concerns they had raised without promising to give up

control over the text. We said that, although we sympathized with Cheryl's feelings of not recognizing herself in our text, we still felt that our book communicates our respect for her skill and commitment as a teacher and our sympathy for the economic and other strains under which she and her fellow American preschool teachers must work.

In the end we reached both an agreement and an understanding. After consulting with our publisher, we promised to make changes in the second edition of the book. After going page by page through the manuscript, the number of changes Cheryl and Coleen thought were crucial turned out to be small – but not trivial. The most significant of the changes were a few words Cheryl feared would give readers the wrong sense of her approach to dealing with a difficult child. Cheryl worried that, especially when read alongside Fukui's nonintervention with Hiroki, she would come across in our text as strict or punitive.

Now, a year later, we are still struggling to understand the origins of Cheryl's unhappiness with our text. Clearly, Cheryl's discomfort is related to the "tape-recorder effect," the sense of depersonalization most of us experience when we hear ourselves on tape. The availability of videotape as an inexpensive research tool means that informants now can experience the sensation of looking as well as sounding unlike themselves.

The problem also is related to, but is more profound than, the issues of informed consent and confidentiality. We should have done a better job of preparing Cheryl and the other teachers in our study for what we now see to be the inevitable feeling of being unable to make the story their own, the feeling of being *textualized*. But short of telling interviewees that you might distort their words and misrepresent their actions in your text, the perils of textualization are difficult to convey to informants. We offered to use pseudonyms for Cheryl (who was almost called Karen) and for St. Timothy's (which was almost called St. James). We gave the choice to St. Timothy's staff because they had the most to lose (in confidentiality) and to gain (in recognition and publicity). In the end, they chose to use their school's and their own real names. But even if we had used pseudonyms, we could not thereby have solved the ethical problem of textualizing Cheryl and her fellow teachers. As Cheryl told us, "even if you don't use my name, those are still my words and my actions that you're giving the wrong feeling to." The central ethical question is not about consent or confidentiality, but about our right to textualize Cheryl, to turn her life as she knows it into a text that is not her own.

We believe the discomfort that Cheryl and other American informants experience as they read *Preschool in Three Cultures* is the result of being, not just textualized, but also contextualized. Having chosen a method drawn largely from anthropology, from the start we found it easier to picture the shape and tone of the narratives we would write about Komatsudani and Dong-feng than of what we would write about St. Timothy's. We saw the central rhetorical task of our project as making, for American readers, the exotic (China and Japan) familiar, and the familiar (the United States) exotic. Writing with an American readership in mind, our aim was to expose taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie American early childhood education. In our zeal to show that what goes on in an American preschool is no more natural or culture-free than what goes on in China and Japan, we failed to anticipate the sense of defamiliarization this approach would produce in our American informants.

Reading our page-proofs, Cheryl encountered herself not just as a character in a text, but as an informant in an ethnography. Because our chapter on St. Timothy's follows chapters on Japan and China, Cheryl's actions read as examples of culturally patterned American behavior. Because the genre of our book is comparative

ethnography, Cheryl's words read less as the working of a unique personality than as an American cultural discourse. In an ethnography, a teacher's pedagogical theories become a belief system; a well-thought-out approach to classroom management becomes a folkway. Like Marxist and psychoanalytic writings, ethnography defamiliarizes its subjects by suggesting that they do not fully understand or appreciate the significance, the larger contexts, of their thoughts and behavior.

Our comparative method put Cheryl into the unfamiliar, uncomfortable role of being the subject of an ethnography. To experience oneself as an ethnographic subject (even as an empowered, vocal subject) is to be made into the anthropological "other," a person whose behaviors and world views are seen not as natural, individual, and intentional, but as cultural, which is to say, as exotic and arbitrary.

Polyvocality as illusion and reality

In promising our informants a share of authorial privilege, we made an offer that proved to be too good for them to refuse and for us to deliver. Five years ago, when we told the staffs of Komatsudani, Dong-feng, and St. Timothy's that they would be not subjects of investigation, but rather informants whose perspectives and explanations would be privileged in our final text, we meant it. Now, the project complete, we still feel that polyvocal approaches have the advantage of letting researchers and informants interact on a more equal footing and of letting informants' voices come through in the final text. But we have come to realize that in our enthusiasm and naïveté, we failed to prepare informants for the feelings of being textualized and contextualized that we now believe to be inevitable in polyvocal research. We also are concerned that the promise of polyvocality may encourage informants to reveal more than they ordinarily might do to more obviously authoritarian researchers.

Our experience has led us to a more complex and ambivalent understanding of polyvocality than we had when we began our project. We have come to see polyvocality in ethnographic research simultaneously as the illusion and reality of shared interpretive authority between researcher and informant.

In our more cynical moments, we find ourselves agreeing with Steven Tyler that no work is polyvocal, for even quoting of informants is a form of monological authorial control.

Dialogue rendered as text . . . is no longer dialogue, but a text masquerading as a dialogue, a mere monologue about a dialogue since the informant's appearances in the dialogue are at best mediated through the ethnographer's dominant authorial role. While it is laudable to include the native, his position is not thereby improved, for his words are still only instruments of the ethnographer's will. . . . These then are not dialogues, but sophistic texts like those pretenses at dialogue perpetrated by Plato. (quoted in Marcus & Cushman, 1982, p. 44)

In our book we make earnest claims to negotiate ethnographic authority and to produce a polyvocal text; yet our authorial control over the final text was never in doubt. We chose the countries, the schools, and the foci of research, thus in crucial ways anticipating and delimiting the stories to be told. We aimed the camera. Again, but only in retrospect, we see how our choice of what to focus on itself was determined and culture bound. We were

mirroring American preschool teachers' thinking about how best to allocate their time and energy in the classroom. When the American members of our team (Tobin and Davidson) were in control of the camera, we unconsciously tended to focus on misbehaving, aggressive, verbal children (such as Hiroki). When the Chinese members of our team (David and Wei-lan Wu) were taping and editing, the footage tended to be more of large groups and less of individual children. (Tobin *et al.*, 1989, p. 7)

Higashino, critical of our choices of what to shoot and what to emphasize in our editing, chided us for having so many shots of Hiroki. Clearly, if the staff of Komatsudani had aimed the camera or edited the tapes, there would have been much less Hiroki footage. But our method was designed to produce and then to address such distortions. When we held our screenings with informants, we asked them to tell us in what ways they felt our tape misrepresented the reality of their programs. Higashino, Fukui, and the other teachers and administrators in our study had the option of disagreeing with our stories and offering their own. They exercised this option frequently and eloquently, producing the most powerful passages in our book.

The problem here is more profound and harder to correct than our culture-bound focus on one misbehaving, photogenic child. Komatsudani's staff was not given the option of not being asked about Hiroki and his giftedness. They did not have the option to seize control of our narrative, to speak through our book to readers in their unmediated voices. By turning to informants for meanings and privileging their explanations in our text, we told stories about preschool in each culture which are different and hopefully more interesting than those told by investigators using traditional methods. Nonetheless, although told largely in Japanese children's, parents', and preschool administrators' words, our "emic" narrative remains, at its core, an American story.

Radical solutions to ethnographic authority

If informed consent is problematic and losing narrative control of one's story is inevitable in polyvocal research, how then are we to proceed? An alternative is that we should not proceed at all. To paraphrase Edward Said's 1987 address to the American Anthropological Association, "We, the ethnographic Other, are not saying to you 'Do ethnography in less orientaling, less hegemonic, more innovative ways.' We are saying 'Stop' " (Said, 1987, 1989).

If we decline Said's challenge to cease and desist (as, inevitably, we will decline), how then can we conduct ethically defensible studies in other cultures as well as in our own? At first glance, offering informants the chance not only to be quoted in one's text, but to be coauthors empowered to edit and censor the final text, seems to offer a solution. But deeper reflection leads us to view such radical ethnographic experiments partly as an illusion (a dream of truly shared, democratic authorship) and partly as a loss of desirable dialogical tension.

Letting the informant hold the pen or camera at some point in the research/writing process addresses but does not satisfactorily answer the problem. If narrative authority somehow could be shared equally, the resulting text would risk being dull and lifeless, like a jointly issued political communique, or muddled, like a movie scripted by a series of screen-writers. A work coauthored by researcher and informants suggests a move

away from the virtues of a discordant, polyvocal text in which different voices contest meanings to a choral text in which many voices are orchestrated to sing as one.

A more radical alternative would be for the ethnographer to step aside altogether. Then, in the space created by the absence of ethnography, there would be room for "auto-ethnography," for attention to natives' (or teachers' and children's) accounts of their lives. But this approach would be less an alternative to the researcher's authority than an invitation to turn native's stories into ethnographic data. If natives (or teachers) write about themselves in accord with our outsiders' discursive conventions, we will have succeeded only in getting them to do our dirty work, to "orientalize," exoticize, objectify, and otherwise textualize themselves. If they write or film outside our scholarly conventions, what they produce by definition is not ethnography, but "ethno-ethnography," stories which, being unable to speak (to us at least) for themselves, become data waiting to be coded, interpreted, deconstructed, and repackaged by researchers.

Contesting subjects and resisting readers

In writing this essay, do we run the risk of again disempowering and textualizing our informants? In attempting to present our informants' sense of having been misrepresented in our book, we again presume to speak for them. By writing about our informants as our victims, we represent them as passive and powerless. While as researchers we must be sensitive to the dangers of coercing and seducing informants, we must also respect, and not second-guess, our informants' power and right to enter into consensual agreements, including agreements to be studied.

There is a similar dynamic of grandiosity and condescension implicit in our apologetic concern that our informants only *seemed* to speak in our text. Although researchers wield god-like authority in the narrative worlds they create, ethnographies nevertheless are necessarily polyvocal and collaborative, containing many people's voices and reflecting many people's truths.

As James Clifford (1983) suggests, ethnographers attempt to control informants' voices by imposing a monological first-, or more frequently, third-person omniscient narrative voice onto their work. To contain and control the inherent polyvocality of their text, ethnographers draw on a familiar set of rhetorical conventions (Clifford, 1983; Marcus & Cushman, 1982), including starting their text with an "I was made a blood-brother" opening chapter and paraphrasing rather than quoting informants. Yet, traces of polyvocality always come through, resisting authorial control. Paraphrasing informants ("Fukui stressed that children need group experience"), disembodied voices ("One informant told me..."), and lumping individuals' perspectives into a collective cultural consensus ("The Balinese believe...") obscure, but cannot eliminate, the inherent polyvocality, complexity, heterogeneity, and "otherness" of ethnographic texts. In Marc Manganaro's (1989) phrase, "however much the ethnographic authoritarian tries to contain them," informants' voices "bleed out into the margins of the page" (p. 110). The natives (and teachers) are not so easily silenced. Our authorial intentions and maneuvers simultaneously made possible and failed to prevent Cheryl, Fukui, and our other informants from speaking by and for themselves in our book.

Skeptical of the claims of radical ethnographic approaches, including our own, we now see our method's salvation less in the empowerment of informants than in the

creativity and resistance of readers. As Roland Barthes (1977) points out, the meaning of a text lies less in its origins than in its destination. Thus we argue that readers provide the fifth voice, the fifth level of interpretation in our text. We have suggested here that informants in even the most methodologically radical of ethnographies are powerless to avoid textualization. But readers are free to resist, to contribute their own readings, and thereby to be empowered. As James Clifford (1983) suggests, readers "may also read against the grain of the text's dominant voice, seeking out other, half-hidden authorities" (p. 141). To be clear about it, this freedom of readers is not something authors can confer or withhold. Readers will resist our intentions and contend our meanings whether we tell them to or not.

The only way that ethnographers can maintain control over their texts is by assuring that readers most likely to contest their authority will not read their work. This is accomplished primarily by publishing texts that are jargon-laden, dense, and dull. As Mary Louise Pratt (1986) writes,

For a lay person such as myself, the main evidence of a problem is the simple fact that ethnographic writing tends to be surprisingly boring. How, one asks, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? (p. 33)

By writing in a language – "ethnographese" – that their informants cannot or will not read, ethnographers limit their audience, excluding the people most capable of disagreeing with their interpretations and thereby contesting their authority.

Talad Asad (1986) reminds us that "in order for criticism to be responsible, it must always be addressed to someone who can contest" (p. 156). Choices of using ethnographese versus more accessible language and of publishing in academic journals rather than more widely read publications should be considered fundamental ethical and methodological issues. These "stylistic" choices should be in the foreground from the start, for a hovering awareness from day one of a research project of one's informants and their colleagues as potential readers functions as a kind of conscience, constraining our temptation to launch into flights of descriptive and interpretive fancy.

We began our research with the goal of empowering informants, and for reasons we now believe to be inevitable we fell short. But we also began with the goal of producing a text that would be accessible to preschool teachers, administrators, parents, and policy-makers, and here we hope we are succeeding. As scholars eager to be taken seriously by our peers, as we wrote we intermittently lapsed into jargon, academic posturing, and arcane methodological and theoretical hair-splitting. However, with an eye on teachers as readers and with the help of our editor, Gladys Topkis, we cut out of our book much of this insider discourse.

By writing in a style that does not preclude preschool teachers as readers, we have sought to open a dialogue between scholars and practitioners, creating a forum where the hegemonic authority of scholars to say what things mean can be contested. As characters in our book, teachers are textualized. But as (resisting) readers, teachers are empowered. Uncomfortable with the authority we wielded over our informants, it is comforting to know that readers contest our interpretations. As they read, they compose alternative texts, in their minds reworking, recasting, retelling our stories of Hiroki, Cheryl, and the other children and teachers we have textualized.

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