

Ethno-graphies: an introduction¹

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'Literacy' is a remarkable term. While seeming to refer to simple individual possession of the complementary mental technologies of reading and writing, literacy is not only difficult to define in individuals and delimit within societies, but is also charged with emotional and political meaning. It was not long ago that newspapers and scholars referred to whole societies as 'illiterate and uncivilized' as a single referent, and 'illiterate' is still a term which carries a negative connotation.

Defining literacy as an *individual* phenomenon was once thought to be simple: it simply entailed testing for reading and writing skills. Or, as is generally done by international and national organizations for statistical and methodological expediency, literacy may be inferred from school attendance: those with four years of formal public schooling are assumed to be literate. We now know that such assumptions are misleading, if not often incorrect. When considered as a cultural phenomenon, literacy is even less easily defined, since its functions, meaning, transmission, and even identity may vary from one sociocultural group to the next.

The present issue on 'Literacy and ethnicity' is intended to add to our knowledge about the cultural context of literacy and literacies in different societies. The issue is, in a sense, an attempt to meet the challenge posed by Goody's (1968) *Literacy in Traditional Societies* of considering literacy as more than simply a 'mental technology'. While Goody's book dealt with literacy primarily in Third World societies and in historical perspective, the present papers cover a range of contemporary cultural contexts in both Third World and Western societies, demonstrating both commonalities and divergencies in the cultural beliefs about and functions of literacies in society, and particularly in multiethnic and multilingual societies which make up the majority of the nations of the world.

The term 'ethno-graphies' is intended to define a territory of study that is bounded by societal uses of graphic symbol systems (handwriting or print) on one side, and by ethnolinguistic considerations on the other. While pedagogies for, and individual acquisition of, symbolic decoding and coding (i.e., reading

and writing) have been the subject of intense inquiry at least since Huey (1909 [1968]), the study of ethno-graphies is much more recent. Some inquiry in this area has been couched in terms of the contrast between literate mind and literate society and their respective antitheses. Thus, Goody (1973), Havelock (1974), Olson (1981), and Scribner and Cole (1981) have investigated the general effects of literacy on human societies and human mentality. Others have focused on the presumed social and economic consequences of literacy (e.g., Clanchy 1979; Graff 1979; Lerner 1958).

The present volume is primarily, and not surprisingly, devoted to ethnography as a method as well as ethno-graphy as a subject. In order to consider how literacy is understood by persons in other societies, an ethnographic approach would seem to be required. Numbers of literates and normative cognitive skills of school-attending children tell little about how different individuals and groups view literacy among themselves and others. In multiethnic and multilingual societies, we find a complex patterning of literates, partial literates and nonliterates across languages, ethnic groups, and social classes. Consideration of such ethnolinguistic variation in literacy is the principal task of each of the authors of this volume.

Some future directions

It may also be useful to consider at this time some future directions of research in the domain of literacy. The papers in the present volume, as well as other research currently in progress, clearly demonstrate the importance of the cultural/ethnic context in perceptions and functions of literacy in a number of diverse societies. We can expect additions to this corpus which will allow much more precision in the study of, and policy planning for, literacy. Given the great variability in multilingual/multiethnic contexts and the important changes brought about by increasing industrialization in some countries (especially in the Third World), the 'postindustrial' situation in other countries, and the advent of computer literacy and related technologies, there will remain many opportunities for serious ethnographic and sociohistorical research for years to come.

As we begin to understand literacy in its social, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural context, the next challenge will be how to interface this knowledge with the vast literature on literacy skills in the individual. Much of the current research on the social context of literacy has been stimulated by the inability of reading/writing specialists to succeed in promoting individual literacy. A number of interesting questions arise. Will our new-found understanding be able to contribute to developing better avenues for persons to acquire literacy? Will different teaching techniques result from this social knowledge? Will

institutions other than formal modern schools take on more responsibility for promoting literacy? Will our understanding of variation in what it means to be literate lead to different societal expectations of how literate a person needs to be? More specifically, if literacy specialists are capable of serving sufficiently large numbers of individuals, will policy makers (from UNESCO to local school boards) leave the ideological path that dictates (though rarely achieves) 'universal' literacy? There are innumerable questions of this sort which have already been raised based on research such as that undertaken in this volume. One conclusion is certain: we can no longer view reading and writing as simply mental technologies taught out of context. The history of ethno-graphies has been and will continue to be as rich as cultural variation itself. And we have seen only the tip of the iceberg.

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Note

1. The term 'ethno-graphy' is owed to Joshua Fishman, who used it in his presentation in the symposium entitled 'Education, literacy and ethnicity' at the 1980 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, and also in Fishman (1980). The papers of Shuman, Jones, and Wagner and Lotfi were presented in the same AAA symposium.

Support for the preparation of this Introduction and editing of the volume papers was provided by grants from the Spencer Foundation, National Institute of Education (#80-0182) and the National Institutes of Health (#HD-14898). Requests for reprints should be addressed to Daniel A. Wagner, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

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