



The Child in the Ethnographer: Private Worlds and the Writing of Research

Lewis Aptekar

San Jose State University

A few years ago when I was preparing to write about the street children of Colombia a colleague suggested reading Berland's ethnography of the Qalander, a group of nomadic entertainers in Pakistan (1982). From Berland's introduction I learned that the Qalander annually roam a 2,000 mile circle where they perform magic tricks, train animals for shows, and where children as young as five are taught to tell lewd sexual jokes for money.

As fascinated as I was about the Qalander I was also interested in how Berland was able to travel with them. The book contained no information about how Berland's sedentary, urban, and industrialized eyes filtered what he saw, or how he was changed by the experience. I found this particularly striking since the Qalander's livelihood depends on manipulating sedentary and urban people, a group to which Berland belongs.

There are many parallels between the Qalander and the Colombian street children who are also urban peripatetic entertainers adept at manipulating audiences. But the most important part of Berland's book for me was how it touched on my feelings about being an ethnographer, namely the strain of being pulled in two directions at the same time.

As part of the scientific discipline I am asked to participate, but with distance. I am told to belong, but to remain objective. If I write about how I have been changed by the field experience, then I fear the text will be described as sentimental, as a self-indulgent embellishment. If I explain how I have altered the text, because of my past experiences, then my conclusions will be dismissed as subjective. On the other hand, if I give only the cool presentation of the detached narrator as Berland has done then I open myself up to the same criticisms of Berland, namely, a narrative without the convincing depth that comes from personal experience.

The fact is all ethnographies involve abstractions of actual experience. The process of abstracting involves deciding on which phenomena are worthy of putting into words, how much each event will be emphasized in the document, and how the experiences are combined to form ideas, concepts, and hypotheses. In short the whole document, its form and content, is a matter of choice. What makes ethnography valuable as well as valid is that this process is clearly defined. The goal should not be the elimination of the effects of personality, but a clear and concise description of it. This is not new criticism (see Ruby, 1982; Rose, 1989; 1990), but it is still valid for the most part, and certainly with respect to educational research.

A few years after publishing *Street Children of Cali* (Aptekar, 1988), an ethnography about Colombian street children, a change of my life circumstances occurred. Unexpectedly I became a father, indeed an unwed father, or if you will a single parent. This made me realize how the vantage point from which I saw the street children was quite influenced by my own childhood.

As the time got closer to my daughter's birth I thought more and more about the major event of my childhood, the death of my father whom I lost to cancer when I was six years old. This tragedy was made worse because I also lost my mother whose prolonged bereavement meant that I grew up in many ways as an emotional orphan.

I assumed my father would have been the ideal father: caring, nurturing, in all ways helpful to me. Like a child, I could not imagine anything different. As an adult I knew that even if all the best attributes I gave my father were accurate, and I learned all I could have from him, the comparison of who am and who I might have been had he lived could not be made. This was because I could not ignore the influence he had over me by his abrupt withdrawal. I am with his loss an entirely different person than I would have been had he lived, or if he had simply not existed. Only if I erase all the experiences that were forced on me because of his death, and therefore deny who I am, can I imagine myself in his absence. But this would be like committing suicide.

As my thinking continued I began to include an opposite but connected scenario. I was soon to be in my father's place, but there was one important difference. Because of the unplanned pregnancy I had the option of leaving or staying. What might happen if I chose not to "father" my child?

Because I cannot know how my father's absence affected me, I cannot answer how my absence might affect my child. I have to accept myself as the product of the various experiences that came about precisely because my father was absent. I also have to admit the same possibility

for my child. It is impossible to predict if in my absence my child's life will be more deprived or more enriched.

Precisely because I did not have family supervision I was allowed to roam, and not just physically, but also mentally into places, among people, and through circumstances that not only gave me great enjoyment, but that defined who I was, indeed who I am. I took pleasure in the very experiences that were possible because my father was not around to prevent me from having them, to force me into the more ordinary life of children with more typical families. I remember having dinner twice each night, once quickly at my house, then again down the block at a Rumanian friend's house. I sat at his father's table eating food I had never before tasted, while watching his mother interpret Tarot cards. I bathed in the luxury of going back to bed in the mornings, because when my mother left for work the house was empty, pregnant with possibilities. I moved like an extra in and out of friends' and relatives' lives, joining them for a variety of special events. With neglect there was opportunity.

On the other hand, I blamed my father's absence for my problems. In my elementary school there were no children with divorced parents, and none save myself with a parent who had died. Because I lived without a father no one quite knew how to handle me. I was angry when people were too nice because I felt they were taking pity on me. When people ignored me I was convinced it was my fault, that they were reacting to some flaw of mine. I imagined that if my father was alive he would stop this confusion, blunt the pain. When my thoughts were in this vein I give a great deal of importance to my father, and to fathering.

None of these thoughts was available to me to when I was engaged in my ethnographic study of Colombian street children. Surprising as it might seem (and it seems surprising to me) I did not think about my childhood and how it might have influenced my study of these children. In part I attribute this embarrassment to my professionalism, which I equated with being objective. I had learned as part of my professional way of doing things to exclude what might well be the heart of the ethnographer's life blood, the personal valve that connects them to their subjects. In this case, I assumed I was to sever the connection between my own childhood and the children I was studying.

My ethnography about the street children takes a very decided tack. According to the Colombian populace and to the international organizations that served the children, the street children were considered "abandoned" (Muñoz & Palacios, 1980). However, I described many of the children as growing up in an orderly fashion from matrifocal homes that stressed an earlier independence from their parents than was common in the socially dominant patrifocal society in which

they lived (Aptekar, 1988, 1991). While I demonstrated that the majority of street children had adequate mental health, the prevailing point of view was that they were emotionally ill (Pineda, de Muñoz, Pineda, Echeverry, & Arias, 1978). I described the children as being free of drugs and crime, while they were commonly portrayed as addicted and delinquent (de Mantilla, 1980; Tacon, 1983).

How much of my description, which was the opposite of what almost everyone else saw, was filtered through my sadness and anger at feeling abandoned as a child, or my sense of pride at having survived (and enjoyed) the experience of being fatherless?

It is unfortunate that I did not try to answer this as it would have made for a more valid study. What I did in writing a traditional ethnography was to present my notes in the form of a lawyerly argument so that the conclusions seemed obvious. I left out the internal dialogue; in fact I did not even allow myself to have one.

This deprived the reader of being able to make a judgment about how much of the relationship between myself and my informants existed before either of us got to the point of actually talking to each other. Take, for example, my observation of two eight-year-old boys who routinely placed themselves at a stop light in the central business district of Cali, Colombia's third largest city.

One of the boys appeared quite unkempt. He dressed in rags, his face was dirty, and his hair matted. The other boy's appearance was considerably better. His clothes and body were clean. As the cars would come up to the red light the unkempt boy would run up from a nearby place out of the driver's view and smear dirt on the window directly in front of the driver's vision. In a matter of moments the cleaner looking of the two boys would stroll up to the driver with a cloth, smile, and offer (for pay) to clean it. The drivers responded quite differently. Some threw up their hands, smiled and paid, while others became infuriated.

What struck me was that the two children seemed to get more pleasure from the drivers they infuriated than they did from the drivers who paid. I presented this situation as an example of the children's strength. It was not poverty that prompted their behavior. It was defiance, based I thought on getting back at feeling unjustly deprived.

One could argue that the problem with this analysis is that it is too autobiographical, being nearly identical to the theme of my childhood. I too was wounded by fate, and angry at the world for it. I took pride in the adventures I was able to have because I was not closely supervised, and I cringed at memories of being weak due to having no fatherly support. In short, I was rooting for these kids to come on strong, to be defiant.

As I said, other authors explained similar scenes as evidence of the children's psychopathology and delinquency. Which of us is right is difficult to know, although I am convinced that my judgments are more accurate than theirs, and I am aware that readers with different points of view might well see this scene in a different light.

What would have been more honest would have been to present a description of the event, some information about myself in reference to my point of view, interpretations of other researchers' ideas, and how I dealt with the variety of hypothesis that existed to explain the event.

The week the baby was supposed to be born passed, then another week. I was still unclear if I was going to accept fatherhood. Finally, late one evening labor began and the next morning a healthy girl, Rosie, was born. By the time I left the hospital a few hours later I found that in the very place where I held her my skin stayed warmer for far longer than it should have.

I began to claim fatherhood. "Coming out" tested my feelings and forced me to deal with unanticipated questions. Typically stated, "I'm friends with Rosie's mother, but it's not a relationship that will lead to marriage. When she told me that she was pregnant I was totally opposed to having a child. But as soon as Rosie was born I became delighted." Sometimes I felt comfortable with my story.

On the phone with my mother, feeling shaky, I inhale deeply before saying, "You have a granddaughter." Without waiting for a reply I continue with details, purposely keeping positive. At first she asks, "How in this day and age can you have sex without a condom?" Then in nearly the same breath, "are you going to get married?" "No, that wouldn't work." After a pause, she tells me, "I'm worried you'll become too involved and then your heart will be broken if Rosie's mother takes the baby away from you." This comment not only mirrored her own experience: her heart was broken when her husband was taken from her, but it also depicted my childhood when my heart was broken from my father's death and my mother's withdrawal.

As I began to tell my friends I realized that each act of telling was also coupled with advice. Byron, with whom my friendship reaches back from before my ex-wife and through our bachelorhoods to his current status of father of a two-year-old boy, tells me, "Marry her. Spend every chance you can with Rosie. She is only small once, it'll pass incredibly quickly. Take full advantage of it."

Dinah and Linda, a mother and daughter who fight as fiercely as they love each other, suggest I do nothing until I know for sure if Rosie is mine. Then they insist I bring her to their house so they can see her. As time progresses the mother tells me that I am "hooked" meaning, I

guess, as in love with Rosie as she is with her daughter. “You’ll end up getting married so you can be with Rosie.” Linda, Dinah’s daughter tells me, as if instructing me on how to stand up to parental authority, “you have an independent right to be with Rosie. Don’t depend on the good will of Rosie’s mother. You’re the father.”

Robbie, whose eight-year-old son died of cancer six years ago, is at first silent, then warns me, “this is the end of your freedom.”

Susan, at 42, knows there is little likelihood of having her own child begins to cry, “this is the best thing that could have happened to you. It was probably your last chance to have a baby. I think its terrific.”

And so it goes. But, there are people, both friends and acquaintances, whose views are predictably judgmental. When I tell them, each detail comes out like an arrow aimed at myself. A Christian neighbor asks, “Are you getting married?” A woman I teach with inexplicably reports another teacher saying, “He knocked the girl up and I bet he won’t take responsibility for it.” Two men I barely know from the gym laughingly tell me, “she’ll **** you now.”

I tried matching each scenario with the person’s age, his or her marital history, if he or she had been divorced. Were my advisors fathers or mothers, how old were their children, how did they get along with them? I thought about every factor that might influence their comments, and found almost no pattern. I could see that different people saw the same event in different ways. They ascribed to it different motivations, found in it different meanings, and they gave different advice, all of which appeared to be based on their point of view prior to my becoming a father, as if their advice was waiting in the wings for whatever play might come on stage. I could find no objective reality to put my feet on or to draw a conclusion. I remained confused, ricocheting between the warmth I received from holding Rosie, my thoughts and feelings about my childhood and family, and the various suggestions I received.

Even the open disclosure of how an ethnographer comes to deal with competing points of view will only help reduce some of the problems of validity an ethnographer faces. Another layer of bias exists at the level of getting information. Until now I have shown in the description of the two boys cleaning the car window how my childhood influenced the conclusions I reached about other children. I have also shown how I tried to come to some sort of a conclusion about my new status as a father. I did this in a way that exemplifies how an ethnography might deal with competing hypotheses rather than, as I did in my traditional street children ethnography, present only the conclusion without showing the tribulations associated with coming to that conclusion.

What is left is to show how my childhood also determined why I was comfortable with certain children and uncomfortable with others and thus influenced who I got information from and what information I received.

Geraldo is about 12 years old, but he already has broadened out in the shoulder. He has facial hair, and speaks with a deep voice. Rubio, one of the uncommon blond-haired street children, is 11 years old. He is dressed in pants far too large for his frail and small frame. The only thing that keeps his trousers from falling is the makeshift rope belt firmly tied around his waist.

The boys show up at Bosconia (the storefront program where I collect notes) in the mid-afternoon. Geraldo strips his clothes off, and goes through a series of flexing exercises. He then demands that the younger children touch his muscles. After his shower Geraldo puts his dirty clothes back on.

As soon as Rubio arrives he jumps under the cold water, clothes and all. He pushes and shoves the other boys who are already in the shower with good will. Then he reaches out and grabs a few other boys who are standing too close to the shower and gets them, also clothes and all, under the cold water.

As the two boys wait for lunch they seek out their own friends. Geraldo gathers around the adolescents, finding ways to make himself appear older by copying their mannerisms, dress styles, and linguistic inflections. Then he goes over to where the younger boys are playing and tries to make them tie his shoes.

Rubio hardly waits for lunch. He is in constant motion, flying between games of tag, makeshift soccer, and heated, joking conversations among kids his own age. Geraldo approaches Rubio and his friends. Rubio alerts his friends and they try to disperse. Geraldo comes back and this time they stand together, gaining strength in numbers as they hold their ground and Geraldo returns to his adolescent group, where he is forced to carry their dirty lunch plates to the garbage container.

After many episodes like this I came to avoid Geraldo as much as I sought out Rubio. I relied on Rubio as a trusted informant, but I degraded Geraldo's information as being unreliable and self-serving. I concluded that Geraldo was a thug and Rubio a vagabond.

Why was I drawn to what I characterized as Rubio's play and repulsed by what I described as Geraldo's vacillation of being overpowering or submissive? I could just as easily have seen each child as a product of circumstance and be equally at ease or unease at gathering data from either one. However, my attitude toward each of them was based on two parts of myself that caused me conflict. As a child I hoped to be free

and independent as I imagined Rubio to be and I feared being submissive and bullying like Geraldo. So one of them became a trusted informant and the other was avoided and treated as untrustworthy.

As I tried to gain a sense of what being a father was to mean, I began to see myself reliving the experience of my family of origin. My confusion about what to do must have been similar to my mother's when she received advice after my father died: get married and give the children another father; don't be with another man, that will confuse your children.

I saw the possibility of my daughter repeating my fatherless childhood. I thought about the pains of my childhood when I was the only child without a father on father's day, when I had the only mother at hockey games, when my stomach ached each time I had to leave blank or, worse, fill in the blank with "deceased" on the various forms routinely given to schoolchildren, to Cub Scouts, even to readers of the weekly reader. To parry these painful events, I was forced to become public with information that was very private. I learned to weave a fabric of half-truths, evasions, and if necessary lies in order to spare myself the judgments and discomfort of other people's responses, not to speak of trying to avoid the deeper pain of my reality.

Will my daughter, moving between the twin blades of private doubts and public inquiry, become adept at controlling personal information? Will she seek out unusual circumstances and avoid people whose judgments come from traditional morality and conventional opinion? Will we come to share autobiographies?

Looking back at the possibilities contemplated for my daughter I not only realized that she might be repeating my past, but that we all had much in common with Geraldo and Rubio. They too had unusual childhoods. They had opportunities beyond the years of most of their peers and they had learned to weave a complicated web of information and misinformation about themselves in order to get what they needed, which in many cases was no more than what was commonly available to children of most families. Thus their feelings toward traditional families, like my own and possibly Rosie's, were filled with envy and disdain.

Not only might my daughter, should I chose to leave her, be reliving aspects of my childhood, but she might also live a life similar to that of these two boys. Although I wished for her to be as I imagined Rubio, I equally feared she might become like Geraldo, which I think as much as anything will determine what my relationship to Rosie will become.

References

Aptekar, L. (1988). *Street children of Cali*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Aptekar, L. (1991). Are Colombian street children neglected? The contributions of ethnographic and ethnohistorical approaches to the study of street children. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 22(2), 326-349.
- Berland, J. (1982). *No five fingers are alike*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- de Mantilla, N. (1980). El gamin: Problema social de la cultura urbana (The gamin: A social problem of urban culture). *Revista Javeriana*, 94, 457-464.
- Muñoz, V.C., & Palacios, X.C. (1980). *El niño trabajador (The child worker)*. Bogota: Carlos Valencia Editores.
- Pineda, V.G., de Muñoz, E. I., Pineda P. V., Echeverry, Y., & Arias, J. (1978). *El gamin, su albergue social y su familia (The gamin's social home and family)* (vol. 1). Bogota: Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar.
- Ruby, J. (1982). *A crack in the mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Rose, D. (1989). *Patterns of American culture: Ethnography and estrangement*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Rose, D. (1990). *Living the ethnographic life*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tacon, P. (1983). *Regional program for Latin America and the Caribbean*. New York: UNICEF.