Lessons from the Writings of Robert Redfield On Relationships between Schools and Society

By Robert L. Blomeyer, Jr.

This essay is dedicated to and was inspired by the late Professor Joseph Cassagrande, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois from 1960 through 1982.

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Written, 1981

Preface

This essay was originally written as a required final paper for a graduate-level course entitled “The History of Anthropology,” and taught by the late Professor Joseph Cassagrande at the University of Illinois. Joe was my teacher.

The “History of Anthropology” course was a requirement for all doctoral students in the Anthropology Department at UIUC. My advisor in Educational policy Studies, Professor Rudolph C. Troike (English Department, University of Arizona, Tuscon, AZ), gave me lots of excellent guidance, but advising me to take Joe’s course was *notable*.

Joe was a master teacher and was dedicated not only to the discipline of Anthropology, but more generally to improving educational policy and practice for all the children of our world’s many diverse cultures and languages. One of his instructional practices was meeting with each of us individually for multiple hour-long appointments.

During those, Joe encouraged me to pursue research on the writings of Robert Redfield as the subject for his required “term paper,” I put my heart and soul into writing it, got it in on time, and waited expectantly as Joe handed the graded papers back during the final meeting. I was crushed to discover I’d received a “B,” not an “A” on the term paper.

He read my face and body language, called me up to speak with him after class, and scheduled another meeting with me in his office for the next day. When I arrived for the appointment, he asked me to sit down and said:

> Mr. Blomeyer, that paper of yours on Redfield was good. In fact, it was probably as good as or better than some of the other papers I gave A’s to.
>
> The problem is that the university expects it’s professor’s to award no more than 80% A’s. All the other students in the class were anthropology majors. If anthropology majors received any grade but an A in my required class, it would be professionally and emotionally devastating.
>
> Since you’re an education student, my course is an elective and I’m sure no one in your department will hold it against you. *But I wanted you to know you disserved better*.

What I learned from Joe Cassagrande about the history of anthropology was priceless and irreplaceable. I also learned something even more important. I’m not an anthropologist and by becoming an “educator” who applies knowledge from the “Social Sciences” to improving teaching and learning in the “global community,” I discovered my true “calling” and life’s work.

The essay that follows has lines that are limited to about 60 characters. It was originally written using the WordStar word processor on 8088 IBM PC’s with monochrome monitors that only accommodated sixty character lines.

Introduction

Robert Redfield was a humanist, a social scientist, and an educator. His humanism was not limited to the classical sense of literary scholarly tradition. His works demonstrate a broad concern for "the creative values of human life in it social process, the competence of reason and scientific method to aid in the understanding of human actions, relationships, and problems, and the responsibility of man to man in the affairs of life" (Human Nature and the Study of Society, p. ix). His fieldwork and writings as an anthropologist illustrate an orientation toward the study of cultural change. For Redfield, this understanding of cultural change was no less than an instrument for the perfection of the human condition.

The purpose of this paper is to review the theoretical conceptions that Robert Redfield used to demonstrate the relationship between his theoretical perspective on culture and his writings on the subject of education and its relationship to the process of acculturation in American society. Rather than offering a discrete theory of education, Redfield presents a theory of culture that includes the study of educational process as an essential and integral component in the analysis of social continuity and change. Thoughtful consideration of this viewpoint can contribute significantly to the theory and practice of educational research and to a broader view of educational practice within communities as the specified unit of socio-cultural analysis.

Redfield considered education in cultural context both as a social scientist studying primitive culture and as a lecturer and administration in American universities. His view of formal learning as a component in overall acculturation and social change provides a pragmatic basis for understanding his contributions to anthropological theory and the dominant conception of "liberal arts" or "general" education:

> A When education is considered as it occurs in a modern society, we think first of school. In a primitive society there are neither schools nor pedagogues; yet we speak of "education" of the primitive child. In so doing we are, of course, recognizing a conception of education much wider than the domain of the school; we are thinking of it as "the process of cultural trans mission and renewal" a process present in all societies, and, indeed, indistinguishable from the process by which

> all societies persist and change. (Social Uses of Social Science, pp. 12-13)

This broad view of formal education as a component in overall cultural transmission was not only characteristic of Redfield's written works, but also in his long career as an educator and educational administrator at the University of Chicago. For Redfield, the social sciences and the educational process were fundamentally interrelated. He believed that understanding the methods of social sciences inquiry was a basic and necessary part of a general education.

> A general education in the social sciences brings the realization that human behavior may be considered as natural phenomena and can be compared and distinguished from one another as objects of study and dispassionate reflection (ibid., pp. 80-81)

In this sense the study of social science methods provides the student, the teacher, and the social inquirer with a descriptive framework for the examination of human social processes and an underlying system of values for assessing the worth of the description. According to Redfield,

> We call these values, objectivity, precision, tentativeness, theoretical analysis, and synthesis; or, more briefly, truth. (ibid., p. 81)

One part of the social phenomena studied by Robert Redfield was the role of education in cultural transmission. Implicit within his mature writings, outlining a conceptual basis for the study of "human wholes," is a theoretical framework appropriate for the description and analysis of the phenomenon of education. Because the focus of his anthropological inquiry was the midpoint on a continuum between folk and urban culture, he chose small peasant communities as the object of his fieldwork and subsequently chose The Little Community (U. of C. Press, 1955) as the structural boundary for the exposition of his concepts and theories on the nature of social relationships and basic human nature. This orientation toward the community as the organizational boundary defining the scope of investigations into the role of education in cultural transmission has particular utility for studying a significant amount of contemporary educational research. The increasing use of anthropological and ethnographic approaches in the study of educational phenomena gives new significance to both Redfield's theoretical and educationally oriented writings.

A Theoretical Focus on the Small Community

The most comprehensive source for Robert Redfield's theoretical writings is The Little Community, View Points for the Study of a Human Whole (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1955). In it we find a synthesis of his experiences from fieldwork in Latin America, examples taken from related ethnographic and anthropological studies in other parts of the world, and Redfield's particular vision of the small community as the dynamic focus of cultural change. Like much of his work, The Little Community is eclectic in character, both in the sense that it is a fusion of existing terms and conventions of social anthropology and ethnography, and in that it places his own ideas from earlier publications in a comprehensive framework. In the study of small communities three areas emerge that may serve as a basis for an analysis of Redfield's theoretical perspective: (1) the role of individual subjective perception in the conceptualization of broad social phenomena, (2) an epistemological basis for cultural portrayal, and (3) the nature and limitations of social understanding. The following three sections will illustrate and explore these conceptions, referring to both The Little Community and other writings by Robert Redfield.

Wholism and Subjective Perception

As indicated previously, the primary unit of analysis for Redfield's perception of social reality is the small community. In the study of "primitive" culture the small community is a convenient and practical unit of analysis. Other case boundaries (districts within cities, schools within districts, classes within schools, etc.) have shown themselves important in studies of education in contemporary culture. The methodology that he advocates for the comprehensive analysis of the small community or other cases under investigation are that the researcher present both an analytic viewpoint on the particularistic nature of the community and the synthetic viewpoint that characterizes comparison of the single community to others of a related sort. Regarding the tension inherent in this dualistic perspective he says:

> The point of departure is a certain strain or struggle, so to speak, between the claims of the human whole--person or village or civilization--to communicate to us its nature as a whole, a convincing complex entity, on the one hand, and the disposition of science to take things apart and work toward the precise description of relationships between parts and parts, on the other. Human wholes persist through time, each one preserving,

> for years or centuries, a certain unique character which one may come to know through personal experience or reading. (ibid., p. 2)

To achieve the dual perception of the analytic and synthetic viewpoints necessary for a broad understanding of a community as a comprehensive whole requires that the inquirer obtain in that community the status of participant)observer. In this role the inquirer can both have the insider's perspective on the routine and collective functioning of the community's residents, and gain access to those broader impressions that characterize the intuitive or subjective reactions to patterns within the cultural system. These patterns give the keys to the unique identity of the particular community and the characteristics that it holds in common with a larger system of communities sharing a cultural heritage.

Redfield suggests that for him this analytical process begins with the intuitive awareness of patterns, and then moves to the systematic analysis of particulars:

> We have before us a problem of relations of intuited wholes, particular facts and systems. The intuited whole appears in the immediate and unconsidered apprehension of the unique character of something recognized as complex but taken as one thing. A system, on the other hand, is another kind of whole: it is an analyzed whole; the entities that compose it and their interrelationships are understood. It is such an arrangement of related parts as may be seen separated from other things about it. I see a community first as an intuited whole. I then begin to discover particular things about it. (The Little Community, pp. 18-19)

This movement from intuited to analyzed wholes enables the inquirer to establish the interrelatedness of the physical and material attributes of the community with the individual and collective behaviors of its residents. These relationships illustrate the ecological nature of relationships within the system of the small communities which Redfield gives as examples.

Because the peasant communities studied by Redfield were all based on subsistence agricultural economics, it can be argued that his position on the ecological nature of relationships within small communities may not be strictly applicable to larger organizational units having a more diversified economic infrastructure. However, the fundamental approach to an analysis

which moves from intuited to analyzed wholes seems applicable even to community studies of a more complex nature. (See Peshkin, Growing Up in American, 1978). The subjective perceptions of a knowledgeable inquirer utilizing participant-observation methodology will detect patterns and interrelationships within the scene and its actors regardless of the economic structure of the community. The more salient question regarding this subjective inquiry mode is whether the patterns are only in the mind of the beholder. To the extent that the observer utilizes some systematic categorization of the observable artifacts and events that can be used as data to document the existence of these relationships and patterns, they establish a basis for portraying the social reality of the small community.

An Epistemological Basis for Cultural Portrayal

Robert Redfield's theoretical writings offer an epistemological basis for the portrayal of social and cultural relationships within the small community. The categories that he implies are suggested by the following concepts: (1) ethical paradigms, or "the limiting conditions within which the conduct of individuals takes place" (The Little Community, p. 46); (2) ideal types, or stereotypical roles within the community discussed in a bibliographical form which describe the human community as a "kind of person" (ibid., p. 65); (3) the modal personality, or "what people are however they think they are or ought to be" (ibid., p. 80); (4) the world view, or the cognitive, normative, and affective conception of "the whole meaningful universe seen from the inside view" (ibid., p. 86); (5) the historical context, or a multidimensional view showing the degree to which various accounts overlap "at the points where the past conditions of one community coincide with the present conditions" (ibid., p. 100); and (6) the folk)urban continuum, or the relationship of lesser to greater communities seen as the "interpretation" between levels of interaction within the greater whole (ibid., pp. 130)31). Rather than discrete categories, these concepts themselves form a composite view of reality which moves from the specificity of the individual within the community to the complex relationships between communities that are indigenous to a national state.

In a sense, this "nested" representation of social structure is itself a "world view" from Robert Redfield, the cultural anthropologist. In his own words:

> Now we are conceiving the possibility of using the terms and forms of thought that the natives uses for

> ordering his life. If we use only his terms and forms of thought, we merely become, natives like those we study, speaking and thinking as he does--imagining for a moment that this possibility can be achieved--and no communication to the outside world takes place. (The Little Community, p. 92)

If we accept Redfield's conception of the little community as a "social whole," then we establish an alternative basis for understanding cultural phenomena than is possible when using our own repertoire of knowledge about the world. In this way the basis for a dialectical or comparative understanding of social reality is established within the individual researcher that may serve as an organizational framework for communicating the observable particulars of that phenomenon to other people. According to Redfield:

> The point that I have chosen to make is that among the many and varied mental instruments for the understanding of little communities, is to be included a controlled conversation, a dialectic of opposites, carried out within one's self. (ibid., p. 148)

The portrayal of reality that Redfield advocates requires the attention of the inquirer to be focused both on the events and artifacts that are quantifiable within the small community or other specified social whole and on the configurations or structural patterns that are found among these parts. The strength of this relationship between the whole and its parts gives a basis for assessment of the degree to which the pattern itself may be considered as a descriptive system and the extent to which it may be representative of other wholes. In this same sense, to the extent that the particular facts and the configurations of a given cultural portrayal hold a strong relationship to the experience of more than one person, a basis may exist for generalizability of the description (The Little Community, pp. 159-160).

In reflecting on how these analyzed wholes should be communicated to his wider audience, Redfield stresses that the work of the anthropologist should be manifestly understandable. The three roles that he presents for portrayal of the small community are pure description of ethnography, theory building, and the open acceptance of a role as an agent of social change.

> Whenever I work, whatever guides my thoughts and methods affect me, the product I turn out will affect different interests in the community of its readers, will serve

> different human ends. The communication of the nature of a culture, a community, or a work of art, is a part of the business and joy of human living.... So, if the characterization of a community stops at some place between imaginative portraiture on the one hand, and a statement of proved hypothesis as to past relations on the other, it may serve, although perhaps only a little, several of these needs and purposes. It may be a piece of humane education; a contribution to the understanding of just this analyzed system on which, perhaps, we can now more effectively act; a context of reality within which to examine or test some hypothesis as to a special problem; a tiny brick in some future wall of competent general propositions as to the kinds of transformations of human communities; and a seed)bed or generator of possible propositions for a human behavioral science." (ibid., p. 117)

There is evidence in Redfield's writings that he accepted all three of the roles outlined above. His early fieldwork on Mexico yielded significant ethnographic contributions to knowledge of the Incan and Mayan cultures of Mexico. (See: Tepoztlan, A Mexican Village (1930); Chan Kom: A Mayan Village (1934); and Folk Culture of the Yukatan (1951).) Both as a writer and editor, his later contributions to theory were influential in the entire realm of humanistic social inquiry, especially his "expression of the 'illuminating function' of social science" (Firth, 1962). In his lectures and collected writings on the subject of education we can clearly see his acceptance of the "change agent" role. Redfield was himself a social activist who worked diligently for racial equality, academic freedom, and rational consideration of world government as an instrument to mediate mankind's tendency toward self)destruction and social irresponsibility. His writings on the practice of social sciences education reflected his activism and called both for social scientists to cooperate in the practice of education and for teachers to consider the anthropologists' world view on culture and their dominant values in the social sciences. The final section of this paper will present a summary of his writings on education and its contribution to the maintenance of both change and stability within the American cultural pattern.

Redfield on General Education

A Fable:

> A fable, which Aesop somehow neglected to record, tells of a hen who was making an effort to instruct her chicks about their future sources of food supply while she and they were precariously balanced on a chicken coop which was being carried down river by a flood. It was a long time since the hen had studied the forests on the bank and the account she was giving her chicks of the forest resources was none too good. She called to a wise owl on the bank for help. "You know the woods, oh owl, for you stay in the forest and study it," said the hen. "Will you not tell me what to teach my chicks about life in the forest?" But the owl had overheard what the hen had been telling to the chicks about the forest and he thought it to be scientifically inaccurate and superficial. Besides, he was just then very busy completing a monograph on the incidence of beetle larva in acorns. So he pretended not to have heard the hen. The hen, turned back upon herself, proceeded as well as she could to prepare and put into effect an instruction unit on the food resources of oak forests, meanwhile struggling to keep the chicks from falling off the roof of the chicken coop. The chicks took the instruction very well, and later the chicken coop stopped at a point far downstream, and the chicks all went ashore--to begin their adult lives in a treeless meadow.
>
> The problems of the teaching of social science in connection with general education are chiefly two: how to get the owls to help the hens and the hens to make use of what they learn from the owls; and how to take account of the fact that the chicken coop is constantly being carried along the current of events. (Social Uses of Social Science, p. 85)

As a student of "primitive" peoples, Redfield no doubt encountered the utilization of the folktale or fable in passing on both the form and the content of knowledge necessary for appropriate acculturation. The above fable is not only a sensitive didactic usage of this age)old technique to present his views on the relationship between the social sciences and education, but is also a clear illustration of his views on adaptation to social change as an integral part of American culture. Like Ruth Benedict, he concludes that the dominant pattern of our culture is "always changing and never integrated" and that each individual need adjust to the certainty of change in the face of unforeseen conditions (Benedict, 1934). For the conduct of education in our society this means that the educational experience should be adapted to this given element of

uncertainty. According to Redfield:

> For the teacher the significance lies in the need to develop the capacities of the individual to deal with circumstances which the teacher cannot foresee. . . . Children are to be educated so as to find what personal and cultural security they can find in the communities that now exist, and they are also to be educated to make, by effort and understanding, new integrations out of whatever pieces of living the future may hand them. (Social Uses of Social Science, p. 101)

The strategy that is suggested by Redfield to accomplish the necessary balance between representing elements of continuity and of change in general education is the study of culture as a component of general education. He proposes that this be accomplished through the introduction of the student to an unfamiliar and highly integrated culture group. In his words:

> The end in view here is to bring the young person to understand that every normal human being is reared in a society with ways of life characteristic to that society; that these ways "make sense" as one way is seen to be related to the next consistent with it and supporting it; that the motives which people have and the values which they embrace are derived, generally speaking, from this traditional culture. (ibid., pp. 95-96)

Redfield goes on to say that this experience provides both teacher and student with a basis for the understanding of human nature in an altered socio)cultural context and an improved reflexive understanding of their own culture:

> The further objective is to lead the young person to look upon his own culture from the vantage point secured in the understanding gained from other cultures and thus achieve that objectivity and capacity to consider thoughtfully his own conduct and the institutions of his own society which are, in part, a result of thinking as if within another culture. (ibid, p. 96)

In this way both the concepts of culture and human nature are illustrated pragmatically with particular information, first from a highly integrated culture with a distinguishable pattern and then from our own less integrated but complex culture that typically has no fixed pattern (ibid., p. 101).

Redfield describes the effect of this experience of coming to understand and appreciate the inside viewpoint of another culture as "liberalizing." He maintains that although first encounters with an alien culture may be difficult, as the process continues the individual will gradually begin to perceive his or her "common humanity" with the men and women in the group under study:

> We are all limited in an understanding of our own conduct and that of our neighbors because we see everything by the preconceptions offered by our own culture. It is the task of education to provide a viewpoint from which the educated person may free himself from the limitations of these preconceptions. (The Social Uses of the Social Sciences, p. 113)

The study of culture and human nature proposed by Redfield as a component of general education is particularly significant for more specialized studies in the social sciences as they are taught later in the years of formal education. If the general study of culture and human nature has increased the sensitivity of participating students to the relationships in society that are the actual basis for social sciences research, then the study of methodology can be easily and meaningfully accomplished through application of appropriate observational techniques to this factual context in a precise and controlled manner.

The mutual responsibility of both the educator and the social scientist was previously indicated in Redfield's fable of "the chicken and the owl," i.e., the social scientists should function as educators and aid them in the dissemination of new knowledge about social reality, and the educator should function as the social scientist in inquiry into the nature of their resident instruction to students on the values and methods of scientific inquiry. This instruction should be provided by individuals who themselves have familiarity and experience with the design and execution of fieldwork. Redfield maintains that the separation of educational practitioners from the conduct of research not only limit their effectiveness in the formulation of teaching strategies necessary for demonstrating the craft of social inquiry but also excludes their participation as valuable resources in inquiries at the level of their individual communities.* In his own words:

> A program of general education in the field of social science that will continuously express the influence of research upon knowledge is one in which the teachers are themselves carrying knowledge forward, and in which the

> true nature of social)science progress is made clear. (The Social Uses of the Social Sciences, p. 128)
>
> The teacher of social science in general education has particular advantages in bringing, into his teaching, experience with the design and conduct of descriptions to some degree controlled. . . . The scientific method, in its simplest and most basic character, as objective observation with regard to a defined question, can be practiced more easily in connection with man in society than it can be practiced in agronomy or sociology or comparative anatomy. Man is the most immediately present of all that surrounds the learner. (ibid., p. 131)

Robert Redfield believed that social sciences education provides all students with the basic instrumentalities and conceptions to view social relationships as scientifically and rationally verifiable truth. By aiding the student in developing a clear conception of culture and the mechanisms of social processes, true educational experiences are provided for the student in opposition to dogma or indoctrination. Not only are these ideas characteristic of his views on general education, but the distinction between education and dogma is also important in understanding his official positions regarding racial equality and academic freedom. These two issues were every bit as current when Redfield was the Dean of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago as they are now. Dean Redfield was outspoken both on the elimination of racist practices from admission to higher education and on the removal of racist dogma from curriculum content. (See: Social Uses of Social Science, "Race and Human Nature," pp. 137-145 and "Race and Religion in Selective Admission," pp. 171-184). During his years as a university administrator, he was also a crusader for academic freedom. In the "McCarthy Era" he acted as a spokesman for free speech and free ideas during the periodic anti)communist "witch hunts" which made incursions into the University of Chicago community. His writings and lectures on those subjects held that democracy and human freedom could only be preserved in a social

(*Redfield himself worked with village schoolmaster Hector Villa)Rajas as co)researcher and co)author of Chan Kom: A Mayan Village.)

climate where a free exchange of ideas is preserved in the university, including those dangerous and radical ideas that were then proscribed by anti-communist dogma. In his words:

> I put forward the view that this reputation for dangerous radicalism is an evidence that the university is doing its duty. I suggest that it shows that the university is engaging in and extending the very liberties which its detractors believe it to be endangering. I would go so far as to say that if the university were not from time to time accused of dangerous thoughts its professors would not then be doing their study to think. It is good that the university people make some other people a little uneasy because that uneasiness is a sign of their activity in the public service. (ibid., p. 214)

In summary, Redfield's position on the role of social sciences in general education, the strategies which he advocated for teaching the content and concepts of the social sciences, and his work as an educator and educational administrator all display an internal consistency with his basic theoretical perspectives which use the community as the primary unit of analysis for understanding human social relations. For Redfield the verifiable facts of human existence and the patterns of relationship linking the individual items of information into an internally consistent system were a pragmatic instrument for impacting the "truth" in human wholes.

The communities in which Redfield himself was most actively involved were the academic community of the University of Chicago and the Indian communities of Central Mexico and the Yucatan. As an anthropological fieldworker, as an educator, and as a university administrator, his values were always those of theory, scholarship, and science. These elements of his own "worldview" display the integrated character that he ascribes in his own writings to individuals living in more "primitive" societies. In these "primitive" societies and in more complex ones like our own, transmission of culture is not necessarily a formal process.

> In these societies of which I write, then, the educational process is not greatly dependent upon institutions organized for pedagogical purposes or upon organized and deliberate instruction within the family or primary group. . . . Here, as else-where, the heritage of the group is communicated and modified in situations much less clearly defined than any of which mention so far has been made in this paper. I refer to that multitude of daily situations in which, by word and gesture, some part of tradition is communicated from one individual to another without the presence of any formal instruction and without any deliberate inculcation.

Robert Redfield discovered or regained a way of knowing about the life of a community that opens the phenomenal reality of life in all its complexity to the observer. The educational significance of this method of analyzing "human wholes" through participant observation lies in its heuristic potential for portraying the relationship between formal education and the process of cultural transmission in contemporary society. When this relationship is viewed from the perspective that the community is the basis for educational policy formulation in the American society, it becomes clear that the content and conduct of public education must be congruent with the cultural norms of "ethical paradigms" of the individual communities. By helping to evaluate the "fit" between these norms and the content and practice of public education, social scientists and educators can make a significant contribution to the understanding and maintenance of the complex pattern of American culture.

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