

OBITUARY

IN MEMORIAM: HARRY F. WOLCOTT,
THE APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGIST:
1929-2012

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Harry Wolcott, an exemplar of applied anthropology, passed away on October 31, 2012. At that time he was Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oregon. Wolcott had served on the faculties of the College of Education and Department of Anthropology at Oregon since 1964. He wrote extensively on ethnographic research, anthropology and education, and the art of field

work. He is remembered for his path breaking books: *The Man in the Principal's Office*; *The Art of Field Work*; *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*; *Writing Up Qualitative Research*; countless articles, monographs, essays and the *Sneaky Kid* trilogy.

These are some remarks from his colleagues and friends when learning of Harry's death:

- Harry had an outstanding intellect; he leaves behind an enormous legacy;
- Harry was an engaging and affable personality;
- A truly great researcher and key mentor for all types of scholarly writing;
- Recently thinking of him as I pulled one of his books from my shelf.

Wolcott's last book, before his death in 2012, was *Ethnography Lessons: A Primer* published by Left Coast Press in 2010. This volume made use of a fascinating approach to ethnography. The book's format and illustrations resemble children's books such as those of Beatrice Potter's *Peter Rabbit* series. The cover and initial pages have decorative borders with a clever drawing of a baker about to shovel bread into an open oven. The baker appears (at least for me) to

look like Harry with a tall chef hat and beard. Harry was always fond of employing analogies of common, everyday practices or objects to enliven his descriptions of anthropological concepts or terms. Hence, using his characteristic gift of writing with humor, Wolcott offers his extensive analogy of the process of "doing an ethnography" to baking a loaf of bread (129-132).

THE PRIMER: AN ERUDITE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S ADVICE

I continue this article with affectionate observations and notes on *Ethnography Lessons* in memory of Harry Wolcott. With "Lesson One" in Chapter One, Wolcott, then a doctoral student, describes in detail his experiences of meeting with George Spindler, professor of anthropology and education at Stanford University. Reading further into the initial chapters of *Ethnography Lessons*, one has to marvel at Wolcott's amazing abilities to recall, not only the details of his doctoral dissertation, but also the people and courses he took during his undergraduate and graduate school years. Possibly these particulars might not jump out for all readers, but for peers and close colleagues these remembrances in the *Primer* are unique. They jog our memories and make us think about similar events in our lives. Through reconsidering and revisiting his major works, Wolcott gathered together the content for this book. This effort, sadly, became his final contribution to the literature in the social sciences. He writes: "As you can guess from this writing (some remarkable old references coupled with a few new ones), I am at an age now when I spend more time looking back over what I have accomplished than looking forward for what to do next" (44). His book provides a model that encourages mature scholars to review and extend the body of their research and writings later in their careers.

Those who have known Harry Wolcott over the years of his long career are able to almost hear his voice speaking from the pages of *A Primer*. In Chapter Three, dealing extensively with "serendipity," he tells us about conceiving the invaluable monograph *Writing Up Qualitative Research*, "... that the little monograph that resulted has seen two revisions and has helped many students get their research written" (61). Or this perceptive and forthright observation about the necessity for ethnographers to collect first-hand information by going to great lengths to reach the research site.

The idea of "being there" represents an idealistic view of how fieldwork should be conducted,

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something we can all agree is highly desirable, but often in the cases we know first-hand, impractical. Time alone may preclude the possibility of being there, and maybe there is no “there” there at all, as for example, studying internet communities that exist without face-to-face interaction, or ham radio operators, or people engaged in telephone sex (99).

Ethnography Lessons: A Primer emerges as a book of advice from a wise, highly experienced elder (not necessarily a “tribal” elder). Here Wolcott is not sermonizing, but giving astute and straight-forward observations and comments. The tone of the book is one of distilling needed information that would guide the anthropologist attempting to design and then write up research projects. The later chapters are devoted to elaborating on the characteristics of ethnography and anthropology in general. A chart-like illustration on p.108 lists these features: holistic, cross-cultural, comparative, authentic, real, intimate, non-judgmental, descriptive, specific, adaptive, corroborative, and idiosyncratic. In a sampling of his commentary on the characteristic of ethnography, Wolcott ruminates:

We study The Other, no disrespect intended, but we agonize over what still seems to come down to the privileged position of the observer. We alter our approach; today we study *with* you; we are careful not to call you our *subjects*. Nor do we like calling you our *informants*, although we nonetheless expect you to inform us (102).

When discussing the very essence of anthropological knowledge, that of “the cross-cultural,” Wolcott writes: “Cross-cultural settings may have been where the action was, but today we’ve brought our methods home. Even for the anthropologist, the ideal of prior cross-cultural study in a dramatically different society remains something of a desirable but not always obtainable goal” (96). Focusing on the need for corroboration, Wolcott asks that as desirable as triangulation is for anthropologists and sociologists, how does the researcher know that the information collected is accurate and complete? “...Who told you *that*? We are at the mercy of our informants.... [W]e are not anxious to admit our vulnerability...” (106).

ON THE PASSING OF A BELOVED COLLEAGUE

Harry Wolcott was known for his delightful and unique use of humor in his lectures, as well as in written form. At the close of *Ethnography Lessons* his ability to employ subtle humor, to underscore his potent anthropological wisdom, is evident. Here are his opinions on intimacy and objectivity:

I decided that I would have to consider myself as having sufficient intimate knowledge of another person (for ethnographic purposes) if I knew: 1. An individual’s sleeping arrangements, which with refinement, became “Who sleeps by whom?”; 2.

How that individual’s laundry gets washed, dried, and put away; 3. Something about his or her grandparents.

Harry Wolcott was a superb social scientist. His many contributions attest to this. In a touching farewell, his colleagues in the Council on Anthropology and Education wrote: “Harry will be greatly missed in the field of anthropology and education. He leaves an unforgettable legacy in his scholarship, his students, and all those whose lives he touched and changed for the better.” I can only echo these words as Harry’s colleague, friend, a learner from sociology, an advocate, and supporter of thirty years.

On a personal note, over the years Harry Wolcott gave me invaluable, constant, and forthright editorial advice, not only for my articles and research papers, but also for chapters in my books. Here is just one example of Harry’s anthropological scholarship passed on to this colleague.

Margaret Mead revealed the power of social science concepts and their relevance to the personal and immediate lives of the general public. Recognizing a little known contribution by Margaret Mead, Harry Wolcott, the highly regarded anthropologist and researcher, tells us that Mead pointed out and wrote about a unique example of “anthropological sampling.” This is a type of sampling in research that builds a case on the basis of only one or a few known examples. Wolcott describes this type of “anthropological sampling” quoting from A. L. Kroeber’s 1953 volume:

Anthropological sampling ... is simply a different kind of sampling, in which the validity of the sample depends not so much upon the number of cases as upon the proper specification of the informant in terms of a large number of variables.... Within this very extensive degree of specification, each informant is studied as a perfect example, an organic representation of his complete cultural experience. (Margaret Mead, 1953: 654-655; in Wolcott 2010: 34)

Furthermore, Wolcott explains that this kind of sampling allowed anthropologists to depict a society when only a few survivors of a possibly dying or vanished culture remained (p.34). (Excerpted from *Social Thought On Education*, King 2011: 41)

To complement this “In Memorium” is a photograph I took of Harry at an American Educational Research Association meeting some years ago. Just faintly visible are the titles of Harry’s books embroidered on the tie. This amazing piece of art work was created by fabric artist Norman Delue, Harry’s life partner.



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