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Donald G. Hackmann

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Using portraiture in educational leadership research

DONALD G. HACKMANN

Introduction

This commentary defines the portraiture method, maps it onto the broad terrain of research methodology, and highlights numerous educational leadership studies that have used this approach. In contrast to scholars who have criticized its appropriateness in the applied field of educational leadership, the author makes the case that portraiture can indeed be a viable methodology for stimulating educational change and reform, by helping practitioners solve real problems in educational settings.

With the publication of *The Good High School: Portraits in Character and Culture* in 1983, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot introduced the research community to 'portraiture', a unique social science inquiry method that she developed. In *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997) define the portraiture methodology, effectively mapping it onto the broader terrain of qualitative research. Explaining that portraiture seeks to blend artistic expression with scientific rigour to form an aesthetic whole, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997: xv) provide the following description:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image.

Fenwick English (2000) asserts his belief that portraiture possesses serious flaws, making it an inappropriate educational research tool. With humble deference to his many years of experience as a researcher and professor of educational administration, this author respectfully disagrees with Eng-

Donald G. Hackmann is an associate professor of educational administration in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, N229D Lagomarcino Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-3195, USA; e-mail: hackmann@iastate.edu His research interests include educational administration programming and organizational structures that facilitate constructivist teaching practices in middle-level and secondary schools.

lish's critique. This commentary describes portraiture as a viable research methodology, shares its relevance for educational leadership research, and explains why portraiture can be a viable method for stimulating educational change and reform.

Categorizing portraiture within the broad field of research methodology

In traditional quantitative and experimental research, every effort is made to eliminate researcher bias: the design is predetermined and the experimental conditions, methods, and findings can be replicated. Similarly, in traditional forms of qualitative research, investigators also seek to maintain objectivity and to avoid manipulating the research environment. Those who subscribe to positivist research, including English (2000), strive to diminish the impact of their presence within the research setting and to prevent their personal biases and voices from influencing, and potentially contaminating, the final research product (LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

In direct contrast, some researchers appropriately advocate that qualitative research is subject to the researcher's unique imprint (Van Maanen 1988, Wolcott 1999). Acknowledging that researchers frequently are attracted to a project because of personal interests and prior experiences, Marshall and Rossman (1999: 28) note that 'a strong autobiographical element often drives the research interest'. Arguably, there can be inherent difficulties in maintaining researcher objectivity. In fact, Wolcott (1999: 19) urges researchers to remember that the human element is present, adding that researchers should 'regard ourselves as humans who conduct our research *among* rather than *on* them' (emphasis in original). Portraiture stands apart from the more traditional research methods because it makes the researcher's biases and experiences explicit, in essence becoming a lens through which the researcher processes and analyses data collected throughout the study.

Qualitative research can be performed in literally dozens of ways: Tesch (1990) personally has identified 27 formal qualitative methods. Miles and Huberman (1994) sort the various qualitative methods into three approaches: (a) interpretivism, (b) social anthropology, and (c) collaborative social research. Portraiture was designed for the applied field of education, and therefore falls within the social anthropology classification. Wolcott (1999) would categorize portraiture as a participant observation strategy, while Yin (1994: 99) labels it as a descriptive case study, since '[t]he case study investigator is supposed to be free to "tell it like it is"'. Merriam (1988) also classifies portraiture as a case study approach.

Portraiture differs from traditional forms of qualitative research because the investigator's voice purposely is woven into the written document, called a portrait, which is created as a result of the researcher's interactions with the actors in the research setting. Van Maanen (1988) places this method within the genre of 'impressionist tales', a type of auto-ethnography in which the researcher displays her/his own experiences in

the field. Van Maanen (1988: 102) says that these tales 'are not about what usually happens but about what rarely happens'. In portraiture the line of demarcation between researcher and researched, although not erased totally, does become a bit more hazy.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that intertwining the researcher's personal context into the research text is not intended to distract the reader but is to be used only when it enhances understanding of the research subject. Consider the following text from *The Good High School*, in which Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983: 145), who is African-American, describes her observation of a suburban high school literature class discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

Perhaps in response to the faraway looks in her students' eyes, Ms. Wood brings the discussion closer to home. She is trying to reveal the contemporary examples of enslavement all around them. 'Having a slave in Highland Park is not the thing to do . . . it's also slightly illegal. But can't you picture how some of the folks here would deal with slaves . . . see them talk with people who work for them. . . . They are just as despicable as Beecher Stowe's characters!' Maybe they cannot hear the urgency in her voice, but the students' faces show no change. I cannot see the face of the one Black boy in the class who sits in the front by the window, but I project pain onto him. How must he feel as this conversation swirls about him? And how does he experience the disinterest and distance of his peers?

By embedding her voice within the text, Lawrence-Lightfoot enables the reader to experience a deeper level of understanding and empathy that would be exceedingly difficult to achieve if one were writing as a dispassionate, detached observer.

When fashioning the research report, an ethnographer may elect to present multiple truths, multiple perspectives, or identify only one perceived truth. English (2000: 23) is sharply critical of the approach advocated by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, noting they wrongly believe they can find '*the truth* (as opposed to *a truth* or *their truth*)'. He further asserts, 'If portraiture were about revealing the presence of simultaneous *multiple truths* it would possess the capability of being reflexive' (English 2000: 26). However, English fails to acknowledge that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997: 193) encourage researchers to look continually for 'the deviant voice', those perceptions that depart from the norm. They argue that searching for divergence serves as a means to reinforce the portraitist's skeptical counterintuitive stance as a researcher. Marble (1997: 61) expands upon this thought, noting that portraiture permits 'multiple ways of knowing and understanding any particular event or situation, and that each has contexts and conditions which must also be recognized and considered'. A skilled portraitist can easily weave competing truths into the final portrait.

Some researchers caution that moving from third-person accounts to writing in the first person is an assertion of power that can violate ethical principles of working sensitively with participants (Lather 1991, Tierney and Lincoln 1997). English (2000) argues that the portraitist inappropriately uses this power by controlling the information that is included in the portrait. This argument is somewhat misguided, since any qualitative researcher would make similar decisions related to the inclusion or exclusion of information in a research report. Portraiture not only

recognizes but also exploits the fact that the investigator's physical presence unalterably changes the cultural dynamics of the research environment. The researcher's prior experiences, biases, and assumptions affect her/his interactions and the forming of intimate relationships with the individual actors in the setting. Consequently, each of these elements has a bearing on the shaping of the portrait text.

Lawrence-Lightfoot argues that, in contrast to an ethnographer who listens *to* a story, the portraitist's approach is a process of listening *for* a story. The portraitist purposefully moves 'from a minimalist stance of restraint and witness' that is typical in traditional qualitative inquiry 'to a place of explicit, audible participation' (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997: 105). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997: 11) characterize the researcher's involvement as overt 'acts of intervention' in which the investigator, rather than remaining detached and aloof, becomes immersed in the research environment, entering peoples' lives, engaging them in discourse, and actively questioning their actions and roles in the setting. English (2000: 22) decries this approach as 'a constructivist activity involving intervention instead of a passive observation of life in context'. However, LeCompte (1999) agrees with the portraitist's approach, noting that the conventional stereotype of detached observer is an overly simplistic notion. Researchers are more effective when they can act upon their hunches and interact with the people they study (LeCompte 1999).

Portraiture differs from qualitative and ethnographic studies in another significant way. This methodology concentrates on unearthing goodness and highlighting successes, while recognizing that imperfections will always be present within a social system (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983, 1986). Social scientists, by contrast, tend to 'focus their investigations on pathology and disease rather than on health and resilience' (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997: 8). Seeking 'to capture the insiders' views of what is important' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983: 14), the portraitist searches for the authentic central story as perceived by the actors within the setting, choosing to expose and describe the story from a framework of strength rather than from deficiency. This approach particularly is appropriate within the field of educational leadership, since educators arguably can gain more from studying successes than they can from failures.

One criticism of the portraiture method is the relative lack of intensive data analysis (Merriam 1988, Yin 1994, English 2000). Yin (1994: 99) explains: 'Little theory is needed, causal links do not have to be made, and analysis is minimal.' Merriam (1988: 127) says these approaches are 'basically descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under study that contain little analysis or interpretation of the data'. Lawrence-Lightfoot acknowledges that portraiture relies heavily on examining human relationships and perspectives within the organizational culture, but she argues that rigorous qualitative data collection methods also are employed. Data triangulation is used to find points of convergence, as the researcher engages in such field work as observations, interviews, reviews of public and private documents, and 'hanging out' in and around the research setting (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1986, Mueller and Kendall 1989, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997).

One potential approach to address Merriam's and Yin's concerns regarding minimal data analysis would be to employ a cross-case analysis approach (Merriam, 1988). The researcher could investigate a phenomenon through multiple individual case studies, looking for common themes among these cases. Such an approach increases the potential for generalizing and 'can be more compelling to a reader than results based on a single instance' (Merriam 1988: 154). Admittedly, a portraiture study is context bound and would be difficult to generalize beyond its unique setting (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983). However, this limitation also exists with other case study methods.

Because the investigator's voice is woven throughout the portrait, attempting to replicate a study would be exceedingly difficult (English, 2000). However, a portraiture artist is minimally concerned with problems of replication. Underscoring the artistic element, 'the social scientist who writes the portrait is more of a creator than the pure research colleague' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983: 14). In spite of this limitation, and because of its 'rigorous attention to detail' (Mueller and Kendall 1989: 4), portraiture reflects an unwavering adherence to the same standards as other research methodologies: authenticity and truth. Even though another investigator's voice and unique imprint on the research report would be different if one were to attempt to replicate the study, the emergent themes identified should remain fairly consistent.

English (2000: 23) advances an argument of potential researcher bias, asserting that the portraiture artist may have a preconceived idea of a 'central story' and merely constructs the story using data selectively collected within the research context as validation. The creation of a portrait that is unsupported through rigorous scientific research methods indeed would be an inappropriate use of the researcher's authority. This fact, however, is true regardless of the research methodology selected: one's ethical principles cannot be compromised. The final product that emerges still must be objective and must reflect the researcher's unbiased understanding of the truth. Marble's (1997) work with undergraduate students may provide a satisfactory rebuttal for English's concerns. Marble observed that as his students became immersed within their research settings they were able to move beyond their personal biases and initial observations into a deeper and more complete understanding of how the organizations functioned.

Portraiture research in educational leadership

A review of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the *Dissertations Abstracts International* (DAI) databases over the past 13 years revealed that a minimum of 40 studies within educational organizations have been conducted using the portraiture method. The keywords 'portraiture' and 'portrait' were used to conduct this search, though it is possible other portraiture studies may have been completed but categorized under other keywords. Studies identified through this search covered a variety of PreK-12 educational settings, including early childhood

programmes (Lawson 1987, Moran 1998), elementary schools (Conway 1999), middle-level schools (Mosley 1999, Schnuit 1990), and secondary schools (Scroggs 1990).

Thirteen portraiture studies were completed to satisfy dissertation requirements for doctoral degrees in educational administration/leadership, and seven of these projects focused on qualities of exemplary educational leaders. Projects represented case studies investigating the implementation of instructional programmes or reforms within an educational setting, such as the transformation of a traditional junior high school to the middle school philosophy (Schnuit 1990), and an elementary school alternative discipline program (Garrett 1989). The remaining studies consisted of portraits of individuals, which probably permitted the researchers a greater degree of creative license. For example, one study examined four successful female elementary principals (Colflesh 1997), and a collaborative dissertation project chronicled the journey of six educational leaders as they completed their doctoral requirements (Kinsey and Sheahan 1997). Only one project focused on the superintendency, which was an interesting study examining forces operating in the daily lives of two superintendents, one who was selected as his state's Superintendent of the Year and another who committed suicide after his dismissal (Westerhaus 1999).

Additional portraiture research has been conducted in a variety of settings, including a clinical teacher education programme within three high schools (Broyles *et al.* 1988), eight schools participating in a school-university partnership programme in Colorado (Kozleski 1999), a job analysis of the work of four curriculum directors (Hamm 1993), a bilingual science education project (Kaiser *et al.* 1995), and a joint curriculum project between elementary schools in the USA and Puerto Rico (Sayers 1991). Irwin (1992) notes that portraiture also could be adapted to support women's gender-equity investigations.

Since Lawrence-Lightfoot developed this model when engaged in school-based research, it would be difficult to argue that portraiture is an inappropriate methodology for conducting case study research in educational settings. Mueller and Kendall (1989: 3) support its use within school systems 'since it combines the more scientific perspective of the researcher with the more anecdotal, impressionistic perspective of the school practitioner'.

Because schools and school systems are ever-changing institutions, Lawrence-Lightfoot believes that a research approach should highlight their transformations by recognizing the goodness inherent within the organizations, rather than attempting to focus on weaknesses. English (2000) might argue that this approach ignores competing truths within an organization. However, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986: 14–15) notes: 'Even the most impressive schools show striking moments of vulnerability, inconsistency, and awkwardness. It is not the absence of weakness that marks a good school, but how a school attends to the weakness.' Fullan and Miles (1992) concur, explaining that the striking difference between successful and ineffective schools is not the quantity of their problems but their ability to solve them. Consequently, observing successful schools in operation and studying effective school leaders can be illuminating

activities, instructive for educators who hope to learn by examining exemplary practices rather than focusing on failure.

Why portraiture?

In the applied field of educational administration, 'practitioners apply knowledge to solve real problems in schools' (Haller and Kleine 2001: 6). School leaders are often reluctant to draw upon the findings of formal research reports, possibly for two reasons. First, frequently they perceive that researchers operate from an ivory tower and are 'out of touch' with the real world of administrative practice. Administrators, many of whom are not proficient consumers of educational research, may find it difficult to wade through stilted research jargon as they strive to understand research implications for their schools. Second, since each educational institution is different, school leaders may question whether research findings could be generalized to their own particular school context.

As Haller and Kleine (2001: 12) note: '[r]esearch cannot tell you what you should do when faced with some educational problem. Rather, all that research can do is to help you think more intelligently about your problem.' Even though English (2000) discloses what he perceives to be numerous limitations of the portraiture method, portraiture offers an opportunity for research findings to be presented in a user-friendly manner that permits administrators an opportunity to reflect on their schools' problems, exploring them in a different light. Enhanced understanding (thinking more intelligently) brings with it the possibility of change.

Bolman and Deal (1991) state that organizations can be examined from four perspectives, which they have termed 'frames': structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Frames can be used to gather information, to make judgements about an organization, and to help determine how to accomplish goals. With its emphasis on storytelling, human perspectives, and the exploration of cultural rituals, portraiture fits squarely into the symbolic frame, which 'seeks to interpret and illuminate the basic issues of meaning and faith that make symbols so powerful in every aspect of the human experience, including life in organizations' (Bolman and Deal 1991: 244). Portraiture can be a highly useful tool for examining an educational system's organizational culture, since events frequently can have different meanings for different individuals. Then these varying perceptions can be fashioned onto the canvas of the institution's portrait, in essence becoming a composite representation of various individuals' beliefs regarding their organization.

Frames are tools for action (Bolman and Deal 1991), and a research portrait also can be used to stimulate change within individuals and organizations. In the final chapter of *The Good High School*, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) shares several stories documenting how portraiture research has had a significant emotional impact on the professional lives of individuals in her research settings. Teachers' and administrators' responses to her portraits have ranged from complete agreement to total denial, but in all instances the participants were encouraged to use the

information as an opportunity for self-criticism and reflection. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983: 378) notes:

This textured form may serve as a catalyst for change within an institution. It may become an organizational text that invites response and criticism from its inhabitants. The external, wide-angle view of the portraitist may contrast sharply with the various perspectives of insiders. But the dissonant strains provide opportunities for examining the power of roles, perspectives, and values in school life. Used in this way, social science portraiture may play a critical role in shaping educational practice and inspiring organizational change.

With the current focus on student accountability, educators in countless educational settings are being held responsible for student progress and are challenged to implement significant reforms. Unfortunately, reform initiatives fail when educators act on incomplete information, misunderstand the change process, or simply refuse to change (Fullan and Miles 1992). With their emphasis on design pureness and unequivocal objectivity, researchers employing traditional research methods may produce reports and recommendations that, although authentic and accurate, are viewed by practitioners as being too formal and distant. If they do not see themselves in these reports, and consequently their beliefs and standard practices remain unprovoked and unchallenged, educators may see little reason to change. Very probably those research reports will merely sit on a shelf, collecting dust.

This commentary does not presume to advance the argument that portraiture is the premier research methodology to be used uniformly in all educational settings. It indeed does have some limitations, among them a difficulty with replication, although these limitations are not insurmountable. However, portraiture certainly is worthy of consideration as a viable research method, as is evidenced by Lawrence-Lightfoot's distinction of being honoured with the 1984 Outstanding Book Award from the American Educational Research Association for *The Good High School*.

With its focus on intimacy, the portraiture method documents the perspectives of organizational insiders and provides a voice for those with dissonant views in ways that traditional qualitative and quantitative methods do not. McMillan and Schumacher (1997: 17) state that '[r]esearch advances knowledge and improves practice'. I suspect Fenwick English would agree that, if educational leaders actually use the portraits that are produced to enrich and enhance their understanding and to improve practice within an educational setting, the portraiture method indeed would be a valuable research tool.

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