“Researchers Giving Piggyback Rides: Ethnography as a Tool for Understanding Female Adolescent Development”

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Overview
Ethnography allows undergraduate researchers to observe 5th grade girls in settings where they are not seen as authority figures (Hadley 2007). These girls see their “buddies” as friends and mentors. The girls benefit from having a safe space to voice their life experiences and reflect upon their involvement in the Adventure Girls after-school program. Girls’ feelings of safety depend on the support of family and friends. (Status of Girls in Wisconsin 2007). Support networks help early adolescent females avoid problems with self-esteem, puberty, friendships, the transition to middle school, and body image (LeCroy 2008). Our researchers take detailed field notes about the girls’ developmental issues, support networks, and how they negotiate authority.

Adventure Girls After-School Program
Mission: To empower girls through experiential activities and active reflection on their experiences over an eight week program.
Participants: 5th grade girls from a public elementary school in Western Wisconsin. The majority of participants come from under-resourced backgrounds (low income and high percentage of ethnic minorities).
Cohorts: 5 different groups (Spring 2006-Spring 2008)
Structure: Various after-school “adventures” (kayaking, hiking, a ropes course, hip hop dancing, horseback riding) and one-on-one mentoring sessions during the school day.

Methodology
Purpose: Comprehensive data collection
- Participant observation of group adventures and mentoring sessions (field notes)
- Focus groups of cohort at end of program (videotaped and transcribed)
- Qualitative data analysis using Atlas.ti 5.2

Results
Impact of Mentors
"Are you going to be some other girl’s buddy next spring?" I replied, “I don’t know.” She responded, “I don’t want you to be someone else’s buddy.” She told S not to let her buddy be someone else’s buddy next spring, too. (Field Notes)

I liked that the buddies helped us get over our fears. They said like, I’ll do that if you do that and they helped us and we got to see them more often.” (Focus Group)

Rule Breaking & Girls Gaining Power
After-School Program
It seemed like little K really wanted to dominate how we played as well. She told us whose turn it was, told us when to go, shuffled the cards, and gave us direction. She made the game and its rules her domain. (Field Notes)
They are constantly begging for piggy-back rides….their sole ambition in this program is to procure piggy-back rides. (Field Notes)

I feel like the line was crossed a tad today…. We tried journaling and that didn’t work very well…. We did hear lots of fun stories from them…. It’s difficult because we are supposed to be their friend, but we are also supposed to be the “big” kids, and authority figures in a way…. how do you merge two different things? (Field Notes)

Discussion
These selected results illustrate the complexity of ethnographic research. Field workers often try to diminish hierarchies that exist between researchers and subjects (Hadley 2007). While we want our researchers to hang out and play with the girls, we want the girls to have ample time to express themselves by talking or writing in their journals. If the girls begin to get the upper hand, their mentors may burn out and hold back in their interactions with the girls.

Our future researchers/mentors will receive additional training in establishing and maintaining boundaries with the girls. The ethnographic data that they collect will enrich our understanding of adolescent development.

References

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