1-77

CHAPTER **1**

Introduction: The Nature of the Question

What is it like to be a high school student? . . . to enter a large building of corridors and classrooms every morning, where one is expected to be in homeroom at 8:05, English class at 9:00, then on to gym or history or perhaps home economics, math, or mechanical drawing, finally to the cafeteria where one eats his lunch with noisy and excited friends before rushing off to another class with another teacher? Or perhaps, since there is no such thing as a representative "high school student," we could ask what it is like to be any particular student. What was Horatio Gates Senior High to Jack, the captain of the football team, the most popular senior, an all-county defensive end, one who, by his own choosing, could be vice-president rather than president of the student council? Was his experience similar to that of Nick's, a small, shy boy who would volunteer to a total stranger, "You probably noticed I'm not too popular around here. I don't have many friends." Or consider Jean, the highest achieving student in the school, number one in her class for three years, one who, in her junior year, was awarded a national merit scholarship and accepted at a prestigious college. Was the school in which she spent her time the same school from which her classmate Ken skipped fifty-eight days in one year because he had no friends? Or Tony, the personable and accomplished senior class president, did he see the school as did Bill, who spent his days hanging around the halls and his evenings stealing from cars?

Do any of us who presume to understand, work in, and make decisions about high schools have any basic understanding or any feeling for what students see or think

about when they look at their school and their relationship to that school? Despite the vast body of literature on high school students, the answer to the question is probably "No." There is actually very little that gives us any feeling for the way high school students actually deal with their classes, teachers, desks, assignments, books, papers, rules, and regulations. Nor do we have satisfactory answers to a host of related questions: How do students regard their role of "student"? What parts of the school are important to them? Why do they choose to ignore other parts? What accommodation do they work out with the rules and regulations which confront them? What, after all, are they really learning?

While the complexity of the total school situation makes such questions difficult to answer, all students must, in a sense, think something of school and their relation to school. Most attend class, fulfill requirements, take part in some school-sponsored events or activities, and, in general, deal with the school in a fairly reasonable and orderly fashion. Even those few who are less compliant with the organization's demands, who consistently skip classes, ignore assignments, and become familiar sights in the vice-principal's office, must have developed some ordered understanding of their relationship to the school which they consistently defy. After all, if one is to make any sense of his daily routine, he cannot behave in a completely random fashion, but must develop a patterned, and fairly consistent way of dealing with his situation.

What we are actually looking for is more complicated then simply an attitude or description of behavior. Essentially, what we want is an explanation of the students' "perspective" which Tamotsu Shibutani defines as "an ordered view of one's world; what is taken for granted about the attributes of various objects, events and human nature. It is an order of things remembered and expected as well as actually perceived, an organized conception of what is plausible and what is possible."[1] The term "perspective" includes both actions and beliefs about those actions. It assumes that a human being is an active agent, constantly engaged in the process of constructing his social self, and that what he does depends on how he perceives himself in relation to various features of his environment. In turn, his beliefs reflect an evaluation of his actions in terms of their success or failure. It is this dynamic process of interaction between self and environment and the resulting combination of an individual's beliefs and actions in relation to that environment that the term "perspective" attempts to explain.

[1] Tamotsu Shibutani, "Reference Groups as Perspectives," in Jerome Manis and Bernard Meltzer, eds., *Symbolic Interaction* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), p. 161.

Implied in this concept is the assumption that a school, or indeed any social situation, may not be taken as a single, plainly discernable entity, commonly perceived and understood by all those related to it. Rather, we accept a school—or any organization—as a dynamic and multifaceted process, the perceived nature of which varies according to both individual and collective perspectives. Certainly we may expect teachers to think of and react to school in a fashion different from students, administrators from teachers, and students from both teachers and administrators.

Therefore, this book represents an attempt to understand a single high school from the viewpoint of some of its students. More specifically, it seeks to develop a statement of the "perspective" used by those students to deal with their school. This will involve a number of elements. Since it was demonstrated that the students develop perspective in relation to their environment, Chapter 2 begins by describing as closely as possible that total school environment. Chapter 3 deals with a general description of the behavior of all students, and since the intent of this book is to detail specific student behaviors, Chapters 4, and 5 deal with students and, in general, with the way most of their activity and involvement seems to be centered around their friendship patterns. Chapter 6 then describes the actions of four isolated students who had no friends and who therefore behaved differently from the majority. In all the chapters there are many passages which raise questions for people who are interested in, or

plan careers in, public schools. For the most part I have saved questions, suggested answers, and my editorializing for the chapter summaries, rather than incorporate them into the descriptive passages. I preferred to keep the narrative as unembellished and objective as possible. Chapter 7 proposes an explanation of the relationship between student perspectives and the school environment. Finally, in Chapter 8 there is some attempt to discuss all these issues as they effect the learning process in that particular secondary school.

The justification for this effort can be stated quite simply. If we are to have any understanding of what individuals make of their lives, then we have to make a genuine attempt to see and understand their world as they see and understand it. Therefore, those of us who plan to teach in or administer, understand, and make decisions about the powerful and extensive system of secondary education in America should make some rudimentary attempt to see that system as do the individual students and their friends who confront it every day. If we fail to see it as they see it, we will not understand what they do, nor ultimately, what we do.

The Method of Inquiry

A further implication of the term "perspective" is that if one is to gain a reasonable understanding of a social environment, he should study it from the viewpoint of the groups which create it. The best method with which to carry on such a study is the field method used by anthropologists, that of participant observation. The method is conceptually simple. A participant observer begins by locating himself by and making himself acceptable to those he wishes to study. While it may not be absolutely necessary for him to adopt their dress and customs, he has to begin by respecting their behavior and accepting them as reasonable human beings. Then, over an extended period of time, he makes himself familiar with their day to day lives, keeps extensive notes and records of their comments

and behavioral patterns, and eventually, through reworking and studying his notes, attempts an accurate description and explanation of their behavior. He can easily check his perceptions by asking them to describe and explain a particular event or asking them to verify his perceptions for accuracy. Having consciously placed himself in that situation, he will become socialized, will become a participant in the subject group, and will to some degree take on the perspective which he is studying; that is, he will begin to develop patterns of belief and behavior similar to those of his subjects.

If this process is done consciously and explained carefully, it can add insight into a social situation. It can give the writer an awareness of what it means to gradually become one of the subjects, and thus he can more clearly explain that group's perspective against this own at various stages of his assimilation into that society. By being continually conscious of his own development, the researcher will avoid the problem of becoming so entangled in the process that he loses his objectivity. His concluding conceptual scheme must, therefore, be the one developed by the subjects, not by himself.

A general criticism of the participant observation method is that since the subjects are usually limited in number and selected by chance, the resulting data, while interesting, is not transferable to other situations. On a superficial level that might appear true. However, those of us who undertake such studies feel that men are more alike than they are different, and what is reasonable behavior for one human being in a given situation will, at least in some way, be reasonable behavior for others given the same situation. Furthermore, a good description of the behavior of individuals in any situation can be intelligible to an individual regardless of the differences between that individual and the subjects.

It is true that in this case only one school was selected and only a small number of students comprised the sample. Yet in addition to the understanding the reader can gain of the students who actually comprise the sample, it is

hoped that because of this school's similarity to other schools, he can also gain a better understanding of the behavior of secondary school students in general.

Selection of the School

Having phrased the questions and selected the methodology, the problems of where to begin—which school to study and why, how to gain permission from administrators, teachers, and students, and perhaps most importantly, which students to study—all had to be dealt with in order.

The problem of access to a school was really quite simple. It is unnecessary to describe the steps taken; it is enough to say that if one presents himself as serious, genuinely interested, and neutral, there are many schools to which he would be granted access as a participant observer in the student subculture. A number of superintendents agreed that the project was basically worthwhile and said they would recommend it to their building principals and in turn to their teachers. A school was selected and the necessary permissions were granted.

The most serious question concerned the selection of students. This particular school has 1100 tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students who were partially separated into academic, vocational, and business sequences. Of course, it would be impossible to meet, observe, and participate with all these individuals under those circumstances. However, a number of studies on school and on adolescent behavior has indicated that students subdivide themselves into small groups, and therefore it was decided to attempt entrance into a small, informal group of students and begin the study from there.[2] It was hoped that acceptance into a group would lead not only to acceptance by other students, but would provide an important experience in itself.

I then presented myself to the school and after a number of brief introductions and explanations, met three senior boys chosen because both the vice-principal and the English chairman agreed, "He had to start somewhere." I was introduced to the three, explained that I was from the university, and that I wanted to see what school was like from the students' side. While appearing amused, they were quite friendly and agreed to guide me around for as long as I liked. And so began a six month period during which I attended school each day, went to classes, ate in the cafeteria, hung around the halls, and took part in gym and other activities. I also attended athletic events, club and council meetings, and, by the end of the second month, was regularly attending weekend activities and social events.

The issue of my acceptability to the group members and other students was much easier to accomplish than to plan. It was, after all, not my intent to become an adolescent but only to become a member of an adolescent group in school. While a youthful appearance probably helped, a firm belief that distances between people are caused more by specific role differentiation than by nature probably helped more. Taking off a former role of teacher-administrator and the suit, tie, official manner, and didactic communication pattern that went with it, and putting on and accepting the group norms, behavior, and dress, combined with an unthreatening manner, was really all that was needed. Of course acceptance by and rapport with students took time. It was not until the end of the second month that an invitation came to share an evening over some beer, but it was only a matter of a few weeks before my presence in the places where students gathered in school was viewed as natural. Throughout the study I found like W. F. Whyte in *Street Corner Society* that acceptance by the people I was studying "depended on the personal relationship I developed far more than upon any explanation I might give."[3]

[2] See August B. Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth* (New York: Wiley, 1949); C. W. Gordon, *The Social System of the High School* (New York: Free Press, 1957); and James Coleman, *The Adolescent Society* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

[3] William F. Whyte, Street Corner Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 300.