EDUCATION AS A LIBERAL AREA OF STUDY

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There is a view, common among academics and educators alike, that education is but an applied area of study, one in which the methods of the traditional disciplines are used to address school related problems. Education is taken in this way because it is said to have no methodological principles or conceptual domain that it can call its own. Unlike disciplines such as physics or chemistry or economics, which are thought of as pure disciplines with an applied wing, education is thought to be unbounded. It cannot claim to be examining bodily motion, or the interaction of elements, or market behavior. Similarly, it is argued that educational studies is deficient because it can lay no claim to a unique methodology. Experimental design, statistical methods or ethnographic techniques do not belong first to education. They are methods developed in other areas which are sometimes useful in addressing issues and problems that we find in schools. Because educational studies is said to lack both a conceptual domain and an identifiable method, it is thought to have no coherent research program. Rather, it must take problems from the schools as the schools give them. Thus it is concluded that with education we have a "discipline" without a method, without substance, and without coherence.

I state this position strongly not simply because I want to take issue with it and argue that the study of education, while applicable to the practices of schools, is consistent with the notion of a liberal field of study, but also because this is a view that dominates the thinking about education that is found in many of our most important academic institutions. Too often
education exists on the periphery of academic life and is perceived as a field comprised of renegades from the schools and outcasts from the disciplines.

To take objection to this view is to begin to define a direction for the study of education, a direction which one can already find in the ongoing work of many educational scholars, but which requires articulation and development. In this paper I want to address the question of the place of educational studies within a university. I begin by looking at the question of the relationship between a discipline and its method and domain. I then address the question of the domain of educational studies as I have been trying to conceptualize it and sketch some of its major features. Finally I draw out some of the implications of this domain for the practical aspects of education.

It is useful to note that the ideal of a discipline against which educational studies has been measured and found wanting is, in fact, an ideal, which accepted disciplines meet only to varying degrees. In some disciplines, such as philosophy, the nature of the conceptual domain is often a central issue of debate. Ironically, without a prior understanding of the boundaries of the discipline, it is difficult to decide just who can and who cannot legitimately participate in that debate.

Other disciplines, economics is one of them, have been able to stipulate a realm that meets with broad consensus among its practitioners. Yet the borders of a conceptual realm, even when well defined, may not always map well onto the activities of practical life, and disciplinary neatness may be accomplished at a considerable cost. Consider, for example, the ups and downs of a plan recently proposed by the economist Alan Enthoven to hold down the rate of increase of hospital costs. Enthoven's plan seemed to fit well into the view of rational, market behavior that has been adopted by the Reagan administration, and the plan was met by favorable acclaim from key administration
officials. Yet as the plan was debated within the administration, some elements of it, such as a ceiling on the tax write-offs that businesses could claim for health insurance, were seriously questioned and were likely to be dropped. Enthoven saw this behavior as irrational. His plan was not meant to be implemented piece by piece. Its effectiveness depended, according to him, on viewing each of its elements as part of a coherent whole. From his point of view, he was seeing irrationality at work. Yet one suspects that from the administration's point of view what was occurring was not irrational. Rather, the boundaries of economic rationality had spilled over into the field of political rationality.

The question then arises do we then pass the problem over to the political scientist to understand, as if we were running a relay race passing a baton from one runner to the next? If we decide to do this, then we still have the problem of deciding whether politically rational behavior consists of generating the broadest support for the plan as Enthoven conceived it, or whether it consists of retaining only those elements of the plan for which support is likely? The answer to this question will depend upon the conception of rationality that particular political scientists bring to bear on the issue.

Some social scientists have tried to argue that there is but one, broadly based concept of rational behavior. For example, some have argued that the behavior of groups, whether it be economic, social, or political behavior, can be reduced to the behavior of individuals as governed by the laws of positive and negative reinforcement. I find this conception of rationality useful for redescribing events, but as a conception of rational behavior it is wanting because what constitutes positive or negative reinforcement is not the foundation of an explanation—an invariable law of human nature. It is rather the product of a human interpretation. In one culture pork is an important
source of nutrition. In another, to eat it is sacrilegious. Human beings have a remarkable capacity to turn what behaviorists identify as positive reinforcers into negative ones and negative reinforcers into positive ones and this in turn is what often needs to be understood.

It is useful when thinking about the nature of a discipline to remember that the boundaries of disciplinary rationality do not always correspond to those of practical rationality and that when the latter oversteps the limits of the former our understanding is not always improved by passing the problem to the next discipline. This observation does not provide education studies with an advantage over other areas. It simply raises questions about the presumed disadvantage.

If the relationship between a discipline and a domain is problematic, then so too is the relationship between a discipline and a method. For example, not so long ago some renegade economists claimed that if we really want to know about market behavior we should try to understand, through observational studies, just how people think and behave when they act in the market place. This would be a rather novel approach for the dismal science and one can imagine the next generation of economists trading in their now outdated computers for the newest technological innovation--a credible informant--and then tramping off to an Indonesian village with Clifford Geertz to learn the techniques of participant-observation. The example may be far fetched but the point is not. There is at best a loose connection between a discipline and a method. Historians use statistics, anthropologists use history and often by so doing their own disciplines are enriched.

The difficulty is not that real disciplines have a clear-cut domain and education does not. Nor is it that for each discipline, except education, there is a single, clear and identifiable method. Domains are not sealed in
cement and distributed one to a discipline. They are convenient ways that have been developed for marking off and thinking about the natural and the cultural worlds. They are no doubt bounded in some ways, but the boundaries are best thought of as open in texture allowing for nourishment, growth, and division to take place. Similarly, a method is a tool. Its function is to serve a particular purpose, but its use and refinement may extend well beyond the purpose for which it was originally developed. A method may originate because of the problems that arise in a given discipline at a certain time, but it does not emerge with a deed of ownership that it presents to its developer. One discipline does not borrow the methods of another because without a title of ownership, no discipline can stand in the position of lender.

The difficulty of establishing educational studies as a liberal field comes not from want of method or lack of domain, but from equally important, yet sometimes conflicting expectations. The first of these is the scholarship required to add perspective to and improve our understanding of the processes and aims of education as it functions in social life. The second has to do with the social responsibility to maintain and improve the institutions of schools. While these tasks are related, they are not the same. We should expect that some of the scholarly perspective will be drawn from a better understanding of the practice of schooling, just as we should also expect that a deeper understanding of the activity and aims of education will help to refine that practice. Yet to understand education requires more than an analysis of what happens in schools, and sometimes what is of immediate practical value for schooling does not require a great deal of scholarly sophistication. In theory this expectation is not different from that which we have about legal scholarship. We expect that the thoughtful study of the law will inform the judicial system and help provide some of the insights needed to improve
yet legal scholarship extends well beyond the law as it functions in the courts of one's own time or location. In doing so it provides a context for understanding the present legal system. The difference between educational and legal scholarship lies in the fact that education work has too often been judged by its promise for immediate payoffs. It is more appropriate, however, to acknowledge that the activities of the schools are but one of the practices that such scholarship seeks to understand and that as part of an organized, compulsory system of education, schools are relatively recent educational innovations.

When attempting to articulate a domain for educational studies it is useful to observe that academic domains are constituted in different ways. Some domains, especially those of the natural sciences, are constituted by focusing upon a single attribute or characteristic of an object. Here we are interested in an object only insofar as it is a manifestation of that characteristic. In classical physics, for example, the actual object is irrelevant (it may be an apple, a rock or a planet) except say insofar as it is a manifestation of bodily motion. There are other domains which are constituted as an attempt to understand an object in its fullness and uniqueness, and to capture the contours of significance that the object itself holds. These disciplines often comprise what Dilthey called the cultural sciences. Each of these ways of constituting a discipline carries with it methodological implications, and the problems of confusing one with the other is well illustrated by Clifford Geertz, drawing on an example developed by Gilbert Ryle.

Consider . . . two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of the right eye. In one this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-Camera, "phenomenalist" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as everyone unfortunate
enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way. . . . The winker has done two things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which doing so counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking."4

Educational scholarship has tended to vacillate between these views. Sometimes the emphasis is placed on methods that are thought to have significant power to generalize and predict while at other times the emphasis has been to capture the unique contours of a particular learning situation. For the most part, however, in both types of study, the school and its activities have been taken as defining the domain of educational research, and each study has difficulty transcending the school's definition of an educational problem.

A more fruitful way to constitute the domain of educational studies is to attempt, through the identification of a common function, to capture the universal features which are represented by the practice of education while also recognizing the various forms that these features may take in specific situations. After all, even the most committed ethnographers must presuppose some shared, intercultural categories as they go about trying to understand the uniqueness of social life. In other words, there must be some taken for granted categories which allow us to describe even the most unique social units and which allow us to classify certain people as members of that society rather than simply as an aggregate of individuals. For example, to recognize that a certain ceremony is to be taken humorously or ironically rather than seriously or literally, is to place it in a general category which transcends the specific and unique culture in which it is being performed.

It is the attempt to identify the universal aspects of educational practice that constitutes the important feature of those studies which look upon education as the process of socialization or cultural transmission. However,
these studies represent only a partial understanding of educational practice and are mistaken in viewing the study of education itself as simply a part of sociology or anthropology.

Studies of socialization and also those of cultural transmission have tended to take as their problem the way in which an individual becomes a member of a group. Traditional socialization research begins by accepting the structure of social relations as fixed and unproblematic. The focus of understanding is directed at the individual and seeks to analyze just how that individual takes on the behavior and roles that society defines as appropriate. Whereas the society is perceived as fixed and unchanging, the individual is treated as if adaptable to any structure that can develop a sufficient socializing apparatus.

What is missing from this account is the fact that society itself is continually recreated, although not always in the same form, through a shared understanding in which all of its members, to one degree or another, and within different frameworks, participate. The production of a society is a function of the development of such shared understanding and this production is the primary function of education, first as a social activity and only later as a social institution. Thus, while it is productive to view educational studies in terms of an analysis of a universal feature of social life, individual socialization is only a derivative aspect of that study. That is, educational studies is conceived of here as the study of the way in which a society reproduces itself over time and the various patterns of understanding that comprise the product of that reproduction.

In order to understand what this entails we can return briefly to look at the notion of socialization and distinguish it from that of social reproduction. One distinction is obvious. Individuals are socialized, but a soci-
ety is reproduced. When we are studying social reproduction, we are examining the normative structure into which individuals are socialized. If we look again at the process of socialization, we should begin to see where it intersects with that of social reproduction.

When an individual is socialized what has occurred is that the person has learned a given role or set of roles along with the behavior that is appropriate to that set. Yet socialization also involves learning how one's own role functions in relationship to others and learning that in any specific situation appropriate role behavior is defined relationally. A simple example is drawn from the fact that behavior appropriate for the corporal in the presence of the private is not always appropriate in the presence of the captain. This means that one of the key factors entailed in learning the set of behaviors that define a given role is learning when it is appropriate to exhibit a specific subset of that behavior. What this suggests, however, is that when socialization occurs what is learned is not just a set of behaviors, but a set of socially shared categories and definitions that are understood relationally to one another, such as worker to owner, husband to wife, mother to daughter, and so forth. What remains to be understood after the sociologists have done their work is the patterns of understanding out of which role behavior is generated. It is this pattern and the processes used to reproduce it that I take to constitute the domain of educational studies.

The study of education as social reproduction is the study of patterns and processes through which a society's identity is maintained and within which social change is defined. The practice of education in this sense has two functions. First, there is the reproduction of skills that meet socially defined needs. Second, there is the reproduction of consciousness or the shared understanding that provides the basis of social life. This shared
understanding includes the sense that people have of the interrelationship and purpose of different skills as well as a sense of the way in which the bearers of different skills, as they occupy different social positions, are supposed to behave in this or that context. The task of educational scholarship, however, is not restricted to simply reflecting such forms or understanding them in precisely the same way as those who participate in them fully. In contrast to the unreflective and naturalistic understanding of the participant, the function of educational scholarship is to reflectively understand these relationships as social constructions with historical antecedents and thereby to initiate an awareness that these patterns, or at least some of them, are objects of choice and possible candidates for change. Thus, educational scholarship adds a reflectively critical dimension to the social activity of education.

A comprehensive analysis of education for any given society would include an examination of the structure, production and distribution of knowledge as well as the scope of knowledgeable activity and the level of knowledge which is presumed attached to given social roles. Thus, the study of education as social reproduction examines both the way in which knowledge is produced and the way in which it is distributed in a society. For example, physicians and nurses are presumed to share knowledge over essentially the same range of activity, that is the scope of their knowledge is similar. However, the presumed knowledge of the disease process and its treatment is thought to differ in terms of level, a difference which is reflected in the formal education and status of the two groups. Whereas the concept of scope describes the nature of the field over which knowledge is exercised, the concept of level differentiates the roles within a field and provides an understanding of the variations in status that are attached to different roles.
Hence, using health care again as an example, while one of the major functions of physicians is to prescribe medication, they are usually not prohibited from dispensing it, at least in small doses, and the institutional assumption is that the knowledge involved in dispensing is available to physicians if they would choose to make use of it. The role of the pharmacist, however, is restricted to dispensing an order from the physician and the institutional assumption is that the act of prescribing is beyond his or her trained capacity. One can often understand the conflicts between established and aspiring professions as involving attempts to alter perceptions about the scope or level of knowledge possessed by a given group. Such conflicts often involve a challenge to the institutionally sanctioned presumptions about knowledge. Hence in arguing the case for greater professional autonomy, nurses deny that physicians and nurses share the same scope of knowledge. Physicians are said to be proficient in clinical judgments related to crisis intervention, while nurses are seen as experts in the social and cultural factors which affect the way in which patients cope with disease. Similarly, pharmacists attempt to affirm their independence over physicians by claiming a greater level of understanding about the interaction of drugs. Such challenges are really attempts to rearrange the skills associated with a given role and hence to change the way in which the role is perceived.

The educational system, both formal and informal, functions to reproduce and distribute or redistribute skills as they are clustered into roles and thereby it serves to maintain or to alter the work relations in society. Included with the reproduction of skills is the reproduction of ideas about the ownership of knowledge and the reproduction of ideas about the rights and responsibilities of those who possess certain forms of institutionally granted
knowledge. This aspect of education may be seen as the reproduction of consciousness.

Thus, the reproduction of consciousness is the other side of the reproduction of skills. It is the factor that enables the clustering of skills into specific roles and the clustering of roles into specific classes to persist in societies where it provides the normative vision that justifies the existing distribution. In other words, a consciousness is reproduced which codes the exercise of the rights, privileges, duties and obligations associated with the possession of a certain set of skills as just, fair, and acceptable (or, in unstable societies, as unjust, unfair and not acceptable). The term "knowledge code" is intended to suggest that education imparts, in addition to a set of skills, a certain mode of consciousness, a way of thinking, about the network of such skills. We learn, for example, what is high and low status knowledge and we also learn, either through manner, mode of expression, dress or physical environment, how to appraise and communicate to people with differently valued skills. We learn the range of activity over which a person with a certain level of knowledge is to be granted authority. Thus, a knowledge code ideally binds together the reproduction of skills and the reproduction of consciousness and its formal articulation is to be understood as an interrelated body of arguments and beliefs about the relative value and inter-relationship of different skills. Formal education can be understood as a consciously designed and institutionalized system of instruction that functions to maintain a given knowledge code and to further the pattern of intellectual development that is associated with it.

With this basic sketch behind us, we now turn to look at some of the different kinds of projects that may be suggested by it. The struggle between the medical and nursing professions, mentioned earlier, is a useful place to
begin. The attempt by nursing to establish greater independence from the medical profession can be understood in part as an effort to redefine the knowledge code involved in health care delivery by disengaging the knowledge base of nursing from that of medicine, reclustering the skills associated with the role of the nurse and reworking the professional consciousness of nurses and physicians.

The difficulty that nurses have had in establishing their own professional identity can be understood largely by the institutional assumption that nursing knowledge is but a subset of medical knowledge, an assumption which is now being challenged by many nurses. The developments now occurring provide an opportunity for educational scholars to analyze the process whereby a group sets out to consciously redefine its essential knowledge base. The issues that this attempt involves are many; there are questions about the reworking of basic definitions of health and disease; there are issues about the relative worth of clinical, scientific, and social science knowledge in health care; there is the question of the way in which professional dominance and male dominance intermingle in the relations between occupational groups; and there are questions about the implications that an emerging professional identity has for formal educational structures.

One way to think more generally about the issues developing in health care is to recognize that different groups and individuals, depending upon the nature of their developed skills, stand in different relations to a knowledge code and view it through different frames. Because of this, a knowledge code has built into it a potential instability. Most segments of society will be expected to take on faith the fact that the definition and distribution of high status knowledge is justified, but with the exception of the initiated, most will only be able to view such knowledge from the outside. As long as
there is a general acceptance that the clustering of skills and the definition and distribution of high status knowledge comprise a natural process or are of functional benefit to all, stability will likely remain. As in the cases of many nurses who still identify closely with the medical profession, this stability is an indication of a tight bond between a code and its relevant frames.

Yet because a frame provides a perspective for viewing a knowledge code, it is always possible that the dominant code or some aspect of it will be de-naturalized and looked at as just another framework, one that belongs to and simply rationalizes the position of the dominant social group. It is interesting that some medical students whom I have interviewed view the basic medical science courses in this way, as simply an initiation rite without functional value. Were this perception to be held on a large scale it would be a sign of a crisis of confidence within the profession, and the potential instability of a knowledge code might begin to erupt from within as it becomes dis-engaged from those who are expected to be the prime bearers of that code.

The instability of a code is not, however, simply a function of the way in which it is tied to its relevant frames. It is also a function of the way in which those who are antagonistic to a dominant code are able to communicate their individual frameworks to one another. Such communication is often the major weapon of informal culture groups, occurring both in the classroom and the work place, and it often takes the sophisticated skills of an ethnographer to decipher. When there is good reason to believe that there is not a radical difference between the official meanings of the dominant code and the shared meanings of the relevant frames, then it seems appropriate to apply standardized research procedures. However, when such congruence cannot be assumed, then it is difficult for standard procedures to capture the event. For exam-
ple, the efficiency engineer can describe in detail the formal, task-directed behaviors of the workers on the shop floor and when the workers share the basic goals of the enterprise this may be all that is required. When such goals are not shared, however, what the efficiency engineer cannot capture are the swaggers and posturing which his or her very presence triggers. Indeed if timed correctly, the engineer will simply take these as the natural behavior of working class people. Yet it is precisely this posturing that serves as the network through which these people may communicate to one another their shared framework of antagonism. The presence of the engineer of course is, for them, simply the symbol of the object of this antagonism, i.e., the basic goals and purposes of the organization. The other side of this process involves the design of formal bureaucratic organizations which are often structured in such a way as to minimize the possibility of lateral communication.

By identifying the domain of educational studies as that of social reproduction, it is possible to focus the concerns of educational scholarship and to cement its interdisciplinary character. The study of education as social reproduction shifts the basic unity of these disciplines from a strictly pragmatic one that is called into operation to repair dysfunctions in the schools to an organic one in which each discipline focuses on a different moment in the reproductive process. The problems of schools are not forgotten, however, because in contemporary society they comprise a major vehicle for social reproduction.

Under such a conception, educational philosophy might be concerned to analyze the formal coherence of the knowledge code while exploring some of the conceptual ambiguities and problems which might be concealed by it. Educational history could attempt to explore the forces that were instrumental in
its development while studies in literature could explore the way in which, through metaphor and other communicative structures, a code is extended from one area of study to another. The social sciences might be concerned to understand the way in which the present code extends or limits possibilities for different segments of the social order while the behavioral sciences might attempt to elaborate the way in which present forms of reproduction and the present distribution of skills influence the frames through which the existing code is perceived.

The important consideration, however, is not the particular way in which the various disciplinary traditions might decide to distribute the conceptual domain of education. It is rather that by recognizing that there is a reasonably clear domain for educational studies that the work of these disciplines and their problematics are altered. A clearer understanding of the domain provides educational studies with a more coherent program regardless of the particular discipline or method needed at a given time.

Moreover, an understanding of the variety of frameworks that children bring with them to school has some important implications for understanding classroom behavior and for helping to improve the teaching process. For example, different frameworks will often entail different rules about the context in which truth telling is appropriate and even what constitutes telling the truth. In some situations where there is a presumption of shared antagonism and illegitimate authority, saying what happened will not be seen as telling the truth, but as an acknowledgement of submissiveness. Whether saying what happened will be taken as truth telling will depend on who says it, in what setting and to whom it is said. This is the case in the classroom, the shop, and the corporation. For example, in the corporation certain matters may be shared on a private level, and may be widely, but privately acknowledged to be
the case. However, to utter these matters publicly is not taken as truth
telling, but as indiscretions, or signs of untrustworthiness. The reason this
is so is not too difficult to analyze formally. There are important practical
differences between: (1) my knowing something is the case; (2) my knowing
that you also know it is the case; (3) my knowing that you know that I know it
is the case; and (4) you and I knowing that it is publicly known that together
we know it is the case. Each of these stages comes closer to forcing choice
and action. It is important for teachers to understand these formal aspects
so that they are not prone to label children with a somewhat different set of
truth telling rules as simply deviants. In other words, teachers need to know
what may be at stake in certain instances where truth telling and displays of
other values are being called for.

That the understanding of classroom behavior can often be improved by
understanding the interaction between an official code and its relevant frames
can be illustrated by looking at a study by Paul Willis of working class boys
in an English school. The focus of Willis' ethnographic account was a small
subgroup of troublemakers who called themselves The Lads. With the exception
of The Lads, when order is maintained in the school, as it is with most, it is
because the students' own cultural framework allows them to accept the basic
knowledge code as articulated by teachers. The official, but sometimes
implicit message of the school, is that if students respect the teacher's
authority, the teacher will provide them with worthwhile (usually theoretical)
knowledge which will lead to a meaningful credential, which will then lead to
a promising job. For The Lads, however, this exchange breaks down. For them
one damn job is the same as any other (as one of them put it after a lecture
on becoming an interior decorator, "Got to be someone who slops on walls"),
then the credential is meaningless, the knowledge literally useless and the
respect bogus. For most students in the school, order, discipline, and truth telling as teachers define it are part of the bargain. For The Lads the same values are viewed as complicity with an illegitimate authority and a violation of their own group norms.

Willis' study is but one example of the kind of research project that fits into the model of education as social reproduction. Yet the process by which subordinate frameworks influence the way in which different groups come to relate to the dominate knowledge structure is an area that educational scholarship has only begun to explore, and even Willis' insightful treatment of The Lads' working class subculture calls out for an analysis on other levels.

Willis believes that in their understanding of the world of work, The Lads display many insights into the oppressive nature of capitalism. The author calls these insights, "penetrations." Penetrations reveal an understanding into the deeper requirements and determining forces of capitalist society. These penetrations do not, according to Willis, provide the kind of theoretical understanding which, through an analysis of the mechanisms of domination, would provide the perspective and strategy required to act on such insights. To put it somewhat differently than Willis does, the insights that he perceives as truths about capitalism are not perceived by The Lads in this way. To The Lads these are truths about life itself. Capitalism, while central to Willis' analysis, is really only incidental to The Lads' own understanding. Thus when they observe that someone has to do society's nasty work, or that one job is the same as any other, they are not intending to provide a critique of capitalism. It is rather Willis who sees these observations as such a critique. To The Lads, their observations are rather expressions about life itself. In other words, their understanding of work is not perceived by
them as an insight into capitalism, but rather as an insight into the natural law of social organization. What stunts The Lads' understanding and enables their own insights to be used to place them on the shop floor is their own inbred functionalism. This is what in fact limits their penetrations. Willis correctly perceives these as limitations. However, it remains to analyze their conceptual source and to provide a critique of their moral authority.

Willis' study is an example of the way in which an analysis of one aspect of the reproductive process points to the need to examine other aspects. His work is not ultimately an analysis of The Lads' subculture. It is a critique of capitalism and an exploration of the mechanisms that it employs to reproduce class inequality. Yet the implicit conflict between The Lads' functionalist acceptance of capitalism and Willis' critique of it provides the material for a different kind of analysis, one which explores the possibilities for a reclustering of skills that are available in contemporary society. In other words, the kind of educational scholarship described here as educational studies requires a critique of the social product of reproduction as well as an exploration of the mechanisms, whether cultural or economic, through which reproduction takes place.
Endnotes


