Chapter 3
Ethnography

Studying Culture
Prior to the 1970s, anthropologists typically aimed to work in “exotic” faraway places in order to document the most pronounced cultural differences.

Today, cultural anthropologists are much more aware of the research potential of, and insights about, humanity to be gained from closer-to-home field settings.

At the heart of these research projects, near or far, is a central goal: to learn about people who often live in different cultural circumstances from our own.

Ethnographic methods, which have been around for the better part of a century, have proven to be effective tools for helping anthropologists understand the social complexities they study.
Preparatory Steps for Fieldwork

• Some of the work is done BEFORE you enter the field
  1. One thing that is most important about fieldwork is that the first step is to do determine where you want to work.
  2. The second step is to do your library work; learn everything you can about the society/culture/subculture into which you are entering.
  3. The next thing to keep in mind is that you enter the field at the cultural level of a child. In fact, 3-year-olds know more about the culture than you do!
     • Of course this means you are going to make mistakes (faux pas) The key is to learn from them
     • Two well-known books about this experience are The naked anthropologist & The humbled anthropologist (both in the library)
  4. Need to learn the language (if possible, before you enter the field)
     • As I did not know which village/culture with which I would be working, but I did know that there was a lingua franca in the Solomon Islands
       • This is called Solomon Island pidgin
       • It is very common for missionaries to be the groups working on writing down non-Western languages. Here is an example of a biblical translation.
     • Language is often one of the major hurdles for anthropologists entering the field.
Anthropological Fieldwork is Distinct 1

• Anthropology is generally less well known than other social sciences; this creates a lot of popular misunderstanding about what anthropologists in the field actually do.
• Anthropologists often use quantitative data comparable to other social sciences, but cultural anthropology is the most qualitative of the social sciences.
• Anthropologists are more holistic, traditionally studying all aspects of social life simultaneously as compared to its psychology, sociology & anthropology. It, also, has a different focus:
  • Psychology tends to be Western-focused, about the individual, and the psychologist is the expert, the member of the culture is a subject.
  • Sociology tends to be Western-focused, about the social group, and the sociologist is the expert, the member of the culture is a respondent.
  • Anthropology leans to non-Western foci, is about the culture, and the anthropologist is a novice with the member of the culture as the informant.
• These differences are more than just word choices; they reflect deep differences between these disciplines.
• In anthropology, long-term immersion and participation in a community (at least a year or more) and the application of open-minded cultural relativism yield insights that would be thwarted by preconceived ideas.
Anthropological Fieldwork is Distinct 2

- Fieldwork
  - Given the breadth of research topics in anthropology, there is a myriad of research methods from which to choose (and we do)
  - The prototypical methodology, though, is fieldwork
    - Fieldwork means you are immersed in the culture (or subculture)
    - You live the culture (to the best of your ability).
  - There has been a progression in how anthropological fieldwork was performed:
    1. “Armchair” anthropology was common during the period beginning in the 1870s.
      - The “data” they used were the journals, letters, and such of the 3Ms of colonialism (Chapter 1 notes).
      - No need to go to the field and talk with “ignorant savages” who were too “primitive” to provide direct knowledge.
    2. The second phase of anthropological research, “verandah” anthropology, is linked to two men: Franz Boas (America) and Bronislaw Malinowski (Europe).
      - Beginning in the early 1900s, researchers went to the field.
      - But, they were not completely immersed (thus, verandah)
    3. The third phase is modern anthropology, which uses full immersion in the field and uses participant observation.
• Fieldwork (continued)
  • This long-term immersion is called fieldwork, and it is the defining methodology of cultural anthropology. It allows insights that would never be possible with short visits, surveys, or brief interviews.
  • By personally participating in community activities, ethnographers observe what community members consider important. Also, this approach can yield an understanding of culture and behaviors that people themselves might not even be aware.
  • Clifford Geertz called this “the informal logic of everyday life”.
• Participant-observation: “Disciplined hanging out”
• Participant observation is a key element of anthropological fieldwork: the standard research method used by sociocultural anthropologists that requires the researcher to live in the community he or she is studying to observe and participate in day-to-day activities.
  • Participant observation can be thought of as “disciplined hanging out”—hanging out because anthropologists observe and take part in events, rather than coordinating or directing them.
  • Disciplined because anthropologists methodically record their observations and experiences, while building rapport with community members.
  • Also called “thick hanging out” in honor of Clifford Geertz and his idea of thick description
• There is always a tension between being an observer and a participant.
  • An old-fashioned term for the anthropologist who moves into full participant is ‘going native’. [I dislike this term.]
  • Most anthropologists do not fully merge into another’s culture, but they do develop relationships (after a while).
• Fieldwork (continued)
  • Cultural anthropologists do research by building personal relationships over a long period.
    • How does one build these relationships?
      • Be patient. Like all relationships, it takes time and this is why fieldwork is long-term.
      • Be flexible.
        • Know that making mistakes is part of the experience
        • Also that you are going to be helped by the members of the culture
      • Be able to laugh at your mistakes. Helps build rapport at your field site.
        • Rapport requires the members of the (sub)culture to give trust.
        • It also means the anthropologist has a responsibility to protect the villagers from harm.
        • Rapport is more than “being liked”.
  • It’s nearly impossible to anticipate every challenge that will be faced during the course of ethnographic fieldwork.
    • Doing anthropology is not without risks, including physical dangers (happily this is not true for you at your field site).
    • When I was being trained for my field work, there was no discussion of any physical dangers in the context of how to avoid them.
      • I went from studying malaria to having it.
      • I learned of contaminated water, skin fungi as I learned to sleep under a mosquito net.
      • My weight plummeted (at first this was a ‘good thing’) to the point of being a health hazard.
Anthropological Fieldwork is Distinct 5

• Fieldwork (continued)
  • Interviews: Asking and listening
    • Cultural data are not firmly objective or subjective but the product of intersubjectivity: the realization that knowledge about other people emerges out of their relationships with and perceptions of each other.
    • The goal of insightful cultural questions is to get people talking.
  • Two forms of surveying
    • Interviews: Data collection carried out face-to-face.
      • Open-ended interviews are probes, sometimes for specific views or other times to ‘get the feel of things’.
      • Table 5.1 lists a series of other options for interviewing.
    • Questionnaires are the second type of survey.
      • Used with large number of people, more characteristic of other social sciences, less often used in anthropology.
      • Results are not as rich as with open-ended interviews. Good for summarizing and for broad generalizations.
    • Between the 1870s and 1950s, many British and American anthropologists used Notes and Queries, published by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1874), as a source of standardized research questions.
    • Today, anthropologists no longer have a prescribed set of good, general questions.
      • Anthropologists usually have specific questions in mind based on their theoretical backgrounds and research focus.
      • And questions frequently change during fieldwork as new cultural realities present themselves.
• Taking fieldnotes
  • Observations and interviews must be recorded in some manner, most often field notes: any information that the anthropologist writes down or transcribes during fieldwork.
  • Field notes are essential since details can easily be forgotten after months and years have passed.
    • Anthropologists also often record headnotes: the mental notes an anthropologist makes while in the field, which may or may not end up in formal field notes or journals.
    • This is often the reflection component of one’s notes.
  • Long-term fieldwork and detailed field notes led to a profoundly better understanding of human cultures, but they are no guarantee against bias and ethnocentrism.

• **Writing field notes takes great discipline.**

• Native’s point of view
  • Many of the behaviors anthropologists observe may seem paradoxical. But if one earnestly seeks to see things in terms of local context, things that people say and do begin to make cultural sense.
    • One enters the field with an etic (or outsider’s) perspective.
      • **Etic perspective:** the use of culture-neutral (scientific) terms and categories to describe a culture.
      • From the term phonetic (linguistics).
    • One begins to see the world from an emic (or insider’s) perspective.
      • **Emic perspective:** the use of culture-specific ideas, categories, and explanations to describe a culture.
      • From the term phonemic (linguistics).
• Avoid cultural “tunnel vision”
  • Most people assume that their own way of doing things is inherently better than everyone else’s.
    • Even anthropologists are subject to cultural tunnel vision: unquestioned tacit meanings and perspectives drawn from our own culture that prevent us from seeing and thinking in terms of another culture’s tacit meanings and perspectives.
    • I experienced this when I noticed young children were sweeping the areas outside of my house in the Solomon Islands. This happened every morning as I sat and drank tea.
    • I was not surprised by this; as a child of similar age one of my daily chores was to sweep the kitchen floor and so I assumed this was similar.
    • Only after I was there for 6 months did I learn they were doing MY job as a courtesy.
  • Tunnel vision is not unique to Europeans and Americans.
    • Everyone has a tendency toward ethnocentrism.
    • Informants feel that their way of doing things; their moral, ethical, and legal codes; and their ways of thinking about the world are correct, while everyone else’s are flawed—they have their own tunnel vision.
• The major drawback of anthropological approaches is that the human anthropologist is there.
  • Heisenberg effect (how the presence of any observer will affect the data) is drawn from physics; more generally called the “observer effect”.
  • Rashomon effect (how a particular anthropologist affects the data).
    • That being male versus female will have specific filters or that being young or old.
    • The name is derived from the famous Japanese film Rashomon (remade in the US as Pulp Fiction).
    • In sociology they use a similar term: the Hawthorne effect.
Other Research Methods 1

- **Comparative method**
  - The comparative method, comparing data from many different cultures, has always been part of anthropology.
  - Lewis Henry Morgan gathered kinship data from around the world by mail and published his results in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871).
  - Others used comparative data to rank human societies (invariably with their own societies on top).
  - Comparative information is still relevant in modern anthropology and readily available via the Human Relations Area Files ([hraf.yale.edu](http://hraf.yale.edu)), which includes ethnographic data from hundreds of societies.
  - George Murdock was the anthropologist who attempted to gather all sorts of data sets on cultures around the world and compiled them into the *Ethnographic Atlas*.
  - Others later recoded into the [eHRAF World Cultures](http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu).

- **Genealogical method**
  - The genealogical method was first used by English anthropologist William H. R. Rivers.
  - In 1898 he visited the Torres Strait (near Australia).
  - He wanted to study the heritability of color blindness and needed accurate data on familial relations.
  - Rivers adapted to the complexity of their kinship system by developing a systematic way of classifying all kin according to their relationship to his informants.
Other Research Methods 2

- **Life histories**
  - **Life history**: Any survey of an informant’s life, including such topics as residence, occupation, marriage, family, and difficulties, usually collected to reveal patterns that cannot be observed today.
  - Life histories reveal age-related aspects of social life. As people go through life, they take on different roles in society and in social institutions.
  - Ethnographers can understand how age affects typical social roles by recording multiple life histories within a society.

- **Ethnohistory**
  - **Ethnohistory**: The study of cultural change in societies and periods for which the community had no written histories or historical documents, usually relying heavily on oral history for data.
  - Ethnohistory may also refer to a view of history from the native’s point of view, which often differs from an outsider’s view.
  - Ethnohistory combines ethnographic and cultural approaches to understanding how cultures change through time.

- **Rapid appraisals**
  - **Rapid appraisal**: Short-term, focused ethnographic research typically lasting no more than a few weeks about narrow research questions or problems.
  - Such “parachute ethnography”, may be required for highly specific questions or when funding cannot support year-round field research.
• **Action research**
  • In the 1950s, American anthropologist Sol Tax advocated for **action anthropology**:
    • **Action anthropology**: Research in which the goal of a researcher’s involvement in a community is to help make social change.
    • Tax encouraged anthropologists to give voice to disenfranchised communities and aid in collective problem-solving.
    • Today, some anthropologists use participatory action research.
      • **Participatory action research**: A research method in which the research questions, data collection, and data analysis are defined through collaboration between the researcher and the subjects of research.
      • A major goal is for the research subjects to develop the capacity to investigate and take action on their primary political, economic, or social problems.
  • **Anthropology at a distance**
    • Anthropologists may choose to attempt “anthropology at a distance” by interviewing informants from the study community who have moved elsewhere if this is the only option.
    • For example, during World War II, Ruth Benedict was unable to pursue field research in Japan.
    • Ruth Benedict used interviews with long-term immigrants, newspapers, movies and other indirect sources for her analyses in her book *The chrysanthemum and the sword* (1946).
    • The picture she created applied to a Japan of the 1890s rather than the 1940s.
  • **Analyzing secondary materials**
    • **Secondary materials**: Any data that come from secondary sources such as a census, regional survey, historical report, other researchers, and the like that are not compiled by the field researcher.
    • Secondary materials must be read critically, with the author’s motivations and potential biases taken into account.
The anthropologist in one’s own culture
- modern anthropologists are as liable to be working in their own cultures as in distant locations.
- Considering this, what special challenges do anthropologists working in their own societies face?
  - Anthropologists working “at home” experience both the benefits and the drawbacks of familiarity.
    - They are familiar with language and customs
    - But this familiarity has the potential to blind them to patterns obvious to an outsider.
- Solutions:
  - Solution 1: Compare own culture to another.
  - Solution 2: Study a sub-culture not your own.
- Non-Western anthropologists
- Non-Western anthropologist studying Western cultures
  - John Ogbu (a native of Nigeria) looked at schooling in Stockton, California in the 1970s. He was particularly interested in why poor black and Hispanics children were failing in this school system.
  - He had many advantages, among them was the ability to ask questions no Westerner would be able to ask (i.e.; Why do you have schools?”).
- Increasingly, ethnographic fieldwork is not just about indigenous peoples but by indigenous peoples.
  - Indigenous anthropologists can speak both about and for their own people
  - For example, the Pan-Maya ethnic movement in Guatemala asserts a research agenda relevant to Maya social interactions and worldviews
Other Research Methods 5

• There are a number of other research methods not mentioned in the text.
• I provide an example of a few that are commonly a component of research.
  • Focus groups
    • Focus groups are interviews of small groups of people.
    • Often found in business world. Here is an example of a local group:
      *Ethnographic Insight.*
    • Can be a good source of information, but best with an anthropologist who knows
      the language well and the people too.
  • Unobtrusive data collection
    • Unobtrusive data collection in the use of existing sources of data without
      interfering with the culture directly.
    • This includes the library and film archives (called content analyses)
    • Also from what are called indirect measures such as looking at wear patterns on
      tiles at a museum, or radio station preferences from junked cars.
  • Recording field data
    • At one time a typewriter and carbon paper or hand-written notes (me) were
      common. Now we use the use of laptops to record notes.
    • Cameras of all types are more common than ever.
    • Tape recordings too.
Ethical Dilemmas

- This seems like a good time to discuss permissions.
- When I conducted my fieldwork, I was required to solicit permission from:
  - My granting agency, my Ph.D. committee, my university, & the Human Subjects Board
  - In the Solomon Islands from, the national government via research permits, the provincial government of Guadalcanal, 2 district governments, 3 groups of village leaders and each person each time I conducted work.
- At one point, a village disagreement bled over into my research and one sub-village pulled out.
- All anthropologists face common ethical dilemmas: the commitment to do no harm, considerations about to whom anthropologists are responsible, and who should control anthropology’s findings.
- In order to do no harm, anthropologists must use pseudonyms for informants in published accounts and make every effort to conceal identities.
- For example, Margaret Mead (1928) altered details about the adolescent girls she interviewed so they could not be identified, especially those who engaged in socially disapproved behaviors like premarital sex.
- Unlike journalists, anthropologists in the United States have no First Amendment protections.
  - Anthropologists are obligated to protect their informants, but field data are subject to a subpoena from a court in criminal investigations.
  - Most anthropologists view field notes as too private for publication, except in carefully edited excerpts.
- It is questionable whether field notes should be made available to informant communities.
- Conducting ethnographic research during wartime can result in a conflict of interest: are anthropologists obligated to their informants, their government, or both?
Writing an Ethnography

- How does one present the report?
  - One choice is the format (the ethnography or as a journal article)
  - The second choice is how much of the anthropologist is to be included in the writing
- There are 2 major styles to consider given these questions:
  - The reflexive style
    - Reflexivity refers to the ethnographic writing that describes how the presence of the anthropologist affected behaviors.
    - A major nod to Heisenberg effect.
      - Explores the research experience itself
      - Highly personalized
      - Poetic?
  - The realist style
    - Uses a third-person voice
    - Uses a more scientific approach
    - I urge you to write more in this style, not because it is better but I have found the reflexive style to be harder to achieve for most novice anthropologists (there is a tendency to make it about oneself, when it is about the culture).