Focus on Four Fields

Cultural Anthropology: Ethnographic Methods

How Do We Study and Understand Other Cultures?

Nineteenth-century Euro-American anthropology was ethnocentric, predominantly biased, and largely shaped by the opinions of upper-class white men who did "armchair" research—that is, they conducted research from the comfort of their own armchairs by reading existing reports prepared by Western explorers, colonial officers, and missionaries rather than going out into the field and interacting directly with the peoples they were studying. This sort of indirect study often led researchers to conclude that there was a fundamental dichotomy between "them" (i.e., non-white, non-Western peoples) and "us" (i.e., white Westerners). From this ethnocentric point of view, "they" were marginalized "savages" who were not equal to "civilized" people and who could be easily dismissed and displaced from their lands. Thankfully, this viewpoint is not shared by contemporary ethnographers. Instead, these researchers try to take a culturally relativistic point of view, which allows them to focus on the human condition with as little bias as possible.

Today's ethnographers recognize that all peoples and cultures must be respected. They also take seriously their responsibility to describe their participants' worlds as fully and as accurately as possible. As such, they place great emphasis on the *context* in which they make their observations. This context consists of not only the circumstances that surround an event but also the backgrounds and perceptions of both the people involved and the ethnographer who is making observations. Being aware of context can help fill in the blanks where the significance of an interaction is unclear or miscommunication has occurred. So, anthropologists must begin their research by understanding the *context* in which social events, day-to-day interactions, and even special occasions take place. This is an essential first step in conducting field work, as is clarifies ambiguity and creates a framework for making valid observations.

Making Observations in the Field

To practise making observations and taking notes from an anthropological perspective, go to your favourite coffee shop or restaurant and record what you see. Begin by sketching a map of the location. Draw in the walls, the furniture, the people, and any other objects or features you can see. Then, spend about an hour observing and taking notes on what is going on around you. Who else is there? How are the people grouped? Is anyone sitting alone? What are the various people doing? As you record your observations, be sure to record the context in which what you observe is happening. Also make notes about your own mental state, which can influence how you see the world around you. Once you have finished, repeat the same process in a library or a study hall, and compare the observations you made in each setting. What similarities and differences did you observe? Consider what you observed others doing, and also reflect on your own actions and perceptions. You may want share your observations with others in your class and discuss any similarities or differences you can identify in terms of your observations or approaches.

Working in the Field

Traditionally, anthropologists have learned about the peoples in whose ways of life they are interested by conducting fieldwork. Fieldwork involves working closely with research participants, observing their daily lives, and making detailed notes on these observations. While the exact methods an ethnographer will employ while engaging in fieldwork can vary greatly depending on the nature of the study and the research questions being asked, the following discussion offers an overview of some principal approaches and concerns.

Before entering the field, researchers must obtain permission and funding for their project. They must also develop a research question and make practical arrangements for their time in the field. These tasks require researchers to collect preliminary information on the peoples with whom they will be working. This process involves reviewing and critically assessing the accounts of any other anthropologists who have studied the particular group of interest. It also involves examining the work of other scholars familiar with the area of the world where they will be doing their research, in order to achieve a general understanding of the group's place in the world. Preparing in this way has the added benefit of helping researchers guard against **culture shock**.

It used to be believed that, before entering the field, ethnographic fieldworkers needed to identify (and overcome) any personal, theoretical, or other biases that could interfere with their work. Ideally, a researcher would be able to step into the field and make observations entirely free from the influence of bias. Today, however, following many decades of reflection on the fieldwork process, sociocultural anthropologists are aware that it is not possible to free oneself from all one's biases. The best we can hope for is to be as aware as we can be of our own preconceived notions that can affect how we see the world around us. For the past forty years at least, ethnographers have been taught to cultivate reflexivity as an essential fieldwork skill. Reflexivity—active reflection on one's own experience, thinking about the way one thinks—is essential, not only in the field, but also every time one returns to one's field notes to write about that field experience. Indeed, reflexivity is stimulated by the ongoing dialogues that fieldworkers have with the people they meet during their research, which offer opportunities to reflect on the similarities and differences in the way their consultants think about the topics under investigation. It helps researchers identify ambiguities and misunderstandings that might otherwise go unnoticed. Reflexive awareness forces researchers to look at their own observations from different perspectives, and it can allow them to identify the significance of social or cultural factors that they had downplayed or ignored. The more thoroughly contextualized one's research becomes, the more accurate and reliable it becomes, not only in the eyes of one's anthropological colleagues, but also from the perspective of the people with whom one has worked.

A final step many researchers take in the preparatory stages is establishing the persona they will project when in the field. In general, this persona should be professional yet approachable. It should also reflect local customs and conventions of behaviour. For example, a researcher who tends to be loud and boisterous when interacting with friends at home might need to adopt a more reserved persona when entering a community in which silence and self-restraint are respected. Or, a young, single researcher who is accustomed to living alone may need to join and live with a family in the field setting in order to be accepted by the local community. Advance research can help researchers identify the type of persona they will need to adopt in the field; however, they must still remain open and flexible in adjusting this persona once fieldwork has begun. It is not until they have begun to live in a new community with specific sociocultural expectations that fieldworkers will truly begin to learn about the varied and complex ways they will be perceived by others.

Adopting a Persona

What sorts of personas might the following individuals want to adopt in order to fit in with the communities they are hoping to study?

- a single woman from Halifax who is in her early twenties and wants to study a patriarchal society in Southeast Asia
- a clean-cut male anthropology student from Vancouver who wants to study the religious ceremonies of an Aboriginal society in northern British Columbia
- a middle-aged, heavily tattooed man who wants to study workplace hierarchies in a top accounting firm in metropolitan Toronto

Why is one's persona an important factor to consider when conducting field research? What problems might a researcher encounter when adopting a persona?

culture shock The feeling, akin to panic, that develops in people living in an unfamiliar society when they cannot understand what is happening around them.

Once in the field, ethnographers typically collect data by engaging in **participant observation**—fieldwork in which the researcher not only *observes* but also *participates in* the lives of his or her informants. Participant observation typically involves living with members of the community and taking part in social events in order to better understand the society's rules, practices, customs, and so on. This sort of fieldwork can help researchers build close social relationships and achieve an intimate understanding of the context in which they are making their observations. Participant observation typically relies on full disclosure in which the members of a society are well aware of the researcher's role and purpose for being among them. This sort of disclosure is essential to building trust, and it is often an ethical requirement of studies being conducted in association with a university or a professional organization.

In order to gain access to a society, anthropologists typically rely on informants—members of the society who are willing to work closely with researchers to provide them with insights about local ways of life. The relationship between a researcher and an informant must be based on mutual respect and trust. The informant needs to trust that the researcher will not misrepresent his or her society, while the researcher needs to trust that the information the informant provides is reliable. Informants often act as translators, and they can explain subtleties of cultural practices that may not be obvious to outsiders. They also often act as facilitators to the relationships that anthropologists continue to make as they work to get a fuller, more accurate picture of the society. In some cases, informants may be the only individuals who are fully aware of the researcher's reasons for interacting with members of the community. Most contemporary ethnographers strive to develop egalitarian working relationships with their informants, with the result that many of them have dropped the term *informants* entirely, replacing it with other terms such as *respondents*, *consultants*, or even, simply, *the people with whom I work*.

participant observation A method of data collection in which a researcher lives and works closely with the people whose way of life she or he is studying while participating in their lives as much as possible.

Thinking about Participant Observation

What might be some advantages and disadvantages of participant observation? Do the apparent advantages outweigh the potential disadvantages? What is the purpose of full disclosure? What are some potential drawbacks to this approach? When might partial disclosure or even covert forms of participant observation be preferable? What sorts of ethical considerations might arise when members of the community are not fully aware of the researcher's purpose for being among them?

The most significant and revealing data ethnographers collect often come from the conversations they have with people in the field. Canadian anthropologist Andrew Walsh (2007, 207), who has done extensive fieldwork in Madagascar, stresses the importance of seemingly mundane conversations:

> The simple fact that anthropological work, and ethnographic fieldwork in particular, necessitates conversations and enables collaborations among people who would otherwise have no reason to associate with one another must surely be one of its most valuable and attractive features. Like unlikely comparisons, unlikely conversations and collaborations can bear unexpected fruit.

In contrast to formal interviews, which are more structured and thus less likely to uncover unexpected information, informal conversations can lead to a fuller understanding of what is important to informants. Informal conversations allow anthropologists and those with whom they work to encounter one another on a more equal footing, which permits the consultants more freedom to direct the course the discussion takes and elaborate on points they feel to be critical to their experiences. By establishing the researcher as an equal participant rather than a leader in the interaction, conversations also encourage informants to feel more at ease and thus more willing to reveal the intimate details of their lives.

Anthropologists working in the field must find a balance between professionalism and friendship when establishing relationships with the people with whom they carry out their fieldwork. Friendship often arises naturally between people who work closely for an extended period of time, but maintaining focus on an end goal is necessary to the success of a research project. At the same time, this focus should not be so rigid that it forces a static structure upon the researcher's interactions with others. Human interaction is subject to variation, and the most authentic discoveries are often a result of the unexpected.

Recording Data

Fieldwork involves more than participating and observing—it also involves recording what happened in the field. Effective note taking is essential to fieldwork because researchers cannot trust their memories to keep track of the vast amount of information that comes at them in the field. Fieldworkers often carry around a notebook and a pencil to jot down brief notes about what they are seeing, hearing, doing, or thinking, as well as the context in which significant events take place. Notes about context are essential because they can communicate important but subtle details that are easily forgotten. These days, fieldworkers also often use digital cameras and audio recorders to document what they are seeing and hearing. Whichever method a researcher chooses to use, data recording should take place as unobtrusively as possible, to avoid interfering with the natural course of events or making participants feel as though their actions are under scrutiny. On the other hand, fieldworkers may sometimes find that participants want their activities to be recorded and may even solicit the researcher's involvement.

Creating field notes is a two-step process. Step one is taking brief jottings (or making digital recordings) in the field. Step two involves turning those brief jottings (or recordings) into detailed field notes. As a result, anthropologists tend to spend a lot of time in front of their computers, writing as complete and coherent a set of notes as possible. Most ethnographers try to write up field notes on a daily basis. As they do, places for further inquiry become plain, and a back-and-forth process begins. The ethnographer collects information, writes it down, thinks about it, analyzes it, and then takes new questions and interpretations back to the people with whom he or she is working to see if the new questions and interpretations are more accurate than the previous ones.

When writing up field notes—and even when making brief jottings in the field—researchers must always remain aware of their own role as a participant and an observer. The relationships anthropologists form with their informants and other members of the community can influence the results of the ethnography. So too can anthropologists' feelings and personal impressions affect what details they record and how they interpret what they have seen and experienced. Here is a setting where ethnographers can explicitly engage in a reflexive exploration of their own field experiences as well as the perspectives of those with whom they have been working.

The ability to do fieldwork and then write about it in a productive and coherent manner is an art that anthropologists strive to perfect throughout their careers. It requires field researchers to remain dedicated to their project, attentive to many sorts of details, and open to the unfamiliar. As important as these personal qualities are, however, researchers must always remember that they are not alone in the field. The success of their endeavours depends on the willingness of others to share aspects of their lives with them. In return for this great gift of time and resources, anthropologists are obligated—at the very least—to depict their informants' ways of life as accurately and faithfully as possible.

Questions of Authority

Fifty years ago, many Western readers of ethnographies often assumed that the most reliable accounts of non-Western ways of life were those written by anthropologists or other social scientists. Today, most members of the academic community recognize that the people at the centre of a study are in fact the ultimate authority on their own experiences. This change in perspective accompanied the recognition that the content of ethnography is a joint production of conversations in which ethnographers and the people with whom they work are equal partners. As a result, contemporary ethnographers try to work *with* communities to include individuals' voices within their texts.

Michael J. Kral and Lori Idlout (2006) describe how these approaches are exemplified in the Unikkaartuit

Project—a **participatory action research (PAR)** project focussed on Inuit communities in Nunavut. An important part of this project has been the merging of anthropological and Inuit understandings. This objective was achieved through the inclusion of members of the communities under investigation as researchers, and through the collection of community members' stories, as told by the people themselves. This focus on individuals' stories was so integral to the research approach that it gave the project its name—*unikkaartuit* means "the people's stories" (Kral and Idlout 2006, 60).

Kral and Idlout identify the central "problem" with traditional ethnographic work as a lack of effort "to involve communities in the design and planning of the research," which "too often fail[s] to provide results in forms that are useful to the people studied" (2006, 56). Although anthropologists try to provide accounts of other ways of life that are accurate and trustworthy, it has often been the case that their research projects have been shaped primarily by controversies within their academic discipline. This state of affairs has often meant that projects have involved no prior consultation with the people who will be the focus of the research. By not allowing community members to articulate their own interests at all stages of the research, anthropologists risk misrepresenting and misinterpreting key aspects of social life. They also risk allowing their own research interest to inordinately shape the outcomes of their fieldwork. Ultimately, this sort of one-sided approach can lead to a largely false representation of the society as a whole. A related problem with traditional ethnographic approaches is that they establish a hierarchy of authority in which the researcher is at the top, followed by the informants with whom she or he works most closely, and finally the members of the wider society who are less directly involved in the research. This hierarchy often creates tension and animosity between the researcher and members of the community. Involving members of the community in developing and executing the research plan and in analyzing and disseminating the outcomes of the research project dissolves this hierarchy, allowing for the inclusion of more perspectives. As a result, a truer, more nuanced reflection of reality can develop.

participatory action research (PAR) A type of fieldwork that aims to bring about social change through the collection of data and the empowerment of community members as researchers in the projects.

Conducting an Informal Interview

Find a partner whose way of life you would like to learn more about. Meet with that person to identify a research question that relates to his or her lifestyle (e.g., "How does your partner's cultural background influence the types of foods she or he likes to prepare for dinner?"). Once you have decided on a research question, conduct an informal interview in which you discuss topics relevant to your question. As the discussion progresses, take brief notes to record what your partner says and any contextualizing factors that could be relevant to your study. Throughout the process, try to make your partner feel at ease, and be as unobtrusive as possible while taking notes. When you feel that you have fully explored your research question, thank your partner for his or her time, and begin the process of turning your brief notes into detailed field notes. As you write, try to recall exactly what your partner said, and keep the following questions in mind: What impact could the setting have had on the interview process? Was the setting formal or informal? Familiar or unfamiliar? Quiet or noisy? Did your mental state influence the way in which you interacted with your partner? Did any of your partner's responses make you feel uncomfortable in any way? How might your actions and reactions—either verbal or non-verbal—have influenced what your partner decided to tell you? How might your pre-existing relationship with your partner have affected the discussion? Did the interview feel like a discussion between equals, or did one of you have more power than the other? Were any of your partner's responses surprising to you, and did any take the conversation in an entirely unanticipated direction?

Today, more and more ethnographers are consulting with the people whose way of life they study to identify research projects that build on issues of central concern to people themselves. This kind of prior consultation, which allows ethnographers and their consultants to locate a research focus where their interests coincide, avoids creating a hierarchy of authority in which the researcher is at the top. The inequalities engendered by such a hierarchy risk creating tension and animosity between the researcher and members of the community. Involving members of the community not only in developing and executing the research plan but also in analyzing and disseminating the outcomes of the research project disrupts this hierarchy, allowing for the inclusion of more perspectives. As a result, a more accurate, nuanced ethnographic account can be developed.

Kral and Idlout describe how researchers and community members drew on the principles of PAR in carrying out the Unikkaartuit Project, the main purpose of which was "to help understand the context for the high incidence of suicide in Nunavut" (2006, 59). The idea for the project arose at a conference on suicide prevention, out of a discussion involving Inuit and non-Inuit, "including northerners, front-line mental health workers in the North and South, and academics" (ibid.). All involved agreed that the project should involve collaborative approaches that embraced contributions from members of the affected communities. The planning of the study was undertaken by a "multidisciplinary academic research team" in conjunction with a "steering committee" made up of Inuit "youth, elders, and others involved in community health and wellness" (60). After the team had secured funding, the team worked together to design and conduct semi-structured and open-ended interviews meant to "reveal Inuit meanings and experiences of wellness, happiness, health, unhappiness, and healing" and also "explicate local understandings of causes and consequences of suicide" (61). Throughout the interview process, the Inuit and non-Inuit fieldworkers met with local community leaders to review their findings. In the end, by integrating the voices of the researched equally with the voices of the researchers, the study uncovered a vast amount of information that benefitted the discipline of anthropology and the Inuit communities alike.

Key Terms

culture shock
participant observation
participatory action research

References

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