

## **Anthropology and ethnography**

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- How anthropologists actually learn about cultures: by doing ethnography
  - [this section is derived largely from Kottak 2005:26-36 and Middleton 2003:3-7]
- **participant observation**
  - live, work, worship, etc. with people for an extended period
    - that is, *direct contact* with the people
      - armchair speculation, talking with visitors, missionaries, or government administrators, watching TV or from a bus window don't cut it
  - and the contact must be for an *extended period*
    - long enough to really get it, in their language
      - ideally at least a bit more than one year, to get a sample of the entire range of seasonal activities
  - balance observing and taking notes with participating in the activities for first-hand understanding
  - this is the fundamental method of cultural anthropology
  - requires good rapport with people
  - in turn, requires respect for them, no matter how foreign their ways may seem at first
- **conversations** at various levels of formality
  - hanging out, casual conversation
  - **interviews** with little formal structure
  - interviews guided by an **interview schedule**
    - helps ensure that all the needed info is covered
    - but still open-ended and conversational
    - allow for unplanned digressions that may provide crucial information
- **key informants** or **cultural consultants**
  - **informant**: person who teaches an anthropologist about a culture
    - often means just someone the anthropologist interviews or talks with
    - sometimes referred to as a consultant, teacher, assistant, friend...
  - **key informants**: certain people who know a lot about some area of interest and are willing to explain things (sometimes for compensation)
  - the only way to have good informants is to develop good rapport and show respect
    - not only a moral imperative, but also a practical one
- **genealogical method**
  - collect information about who is related to who, and how
  - provides background essential to understanding specific people's interactions, as in Monaghan and Just story about the Indonesian Dou Donggo la Ninde "assaulting" in Mone
  - helps build understanding of marriage rules, family relationships, gender roles, etc.
  - collecting this information sets up many opportunities for people to tell you interesting things, connected to kinship or not
- **life histories**

- collect the life stories of a few willing contacts
- provides a wide variety of data and questions
- these are **qualitative** methods
  - in contrast to **quantitative** methods such as surveys, censuses, etc.
    - that produce numerical, statistical results
  - qualitative methods
    - are anecdotal (based on individual stories, events, etc.), but systematically so
    - they are not numerical or formally representative
    - but they provide the logical, symbolic, constructed framework for understanding a culture
- other methods that complement ethnography and may be done together with it
  - **surveys**
    - provide **quantitative** data
      - like "60% of respondents say they believe in God"
    - still more common in sociology, political science, etc.
    - but useful to fill in quantitative data on some kinds of questions
    - usually a relatively impersonal questionnaire
    - given to a randomly selected sample of the population
    - *doing qualitative ethnographic work first* often helps to design better surveys for collecting quantitative data that will be interpretable
    - while the survey results may lead to doing focused ethnography to understand the fuller context and meaning of the survey's results
  - mapping settlements, routes, layout of houses, use areas within households, etc.
  - recording ecological data like plants, animals, rainfall, etc.
  - health studies
    - any of countless kinds of medical data collection
  - diet studies
    - record (often weigh, etc.) everything people eat for a period of time
  - **time allocation studies**
    - follow people around and systematically record what they are doing on a regular, often minute-by-minute basis
  - **archival research**
    - relevant history
    - census records
    - agricultural records
    - and many others as needed to address particular questions of interest to the researcher
  - **longitudinal research**
    - return and collect comparable data multiple times over many years
    - allows an ethnographically-informed understanding of change over time
    - and of impact of new developments, government policies, ecological changes, missionary activities, medical practices, etc.
  - **comparative approach**
    - in learning about one culture, the anthropologist inevitably compares it to

- his or her own culture
- other cultures
- looking for regularities that might explain or highlight differences and similarities
- Just talking with people can reveal more than simply what they tell you.
  - example in Middleton of informant Malik in Morocco
    - Malik becomes uncomfortable as anthropologist Rabinow asks about various people's total wealth
  - Malik is not used to thinking that way, and doesn't like what he is discovering
    - his culture emphasizes general success
    - does not categorize people by class or wealth
    - downplays individual differences so much that he has never considered them carefully
  - Point: exploring things that make people uncomfortable is a common anthropological method
    - noticing what makes people uncomfortable to talk about is often a big clue to deeply buried assumptions, ways of thinking, values
      - including what makes *us* uncomfortable
      - in this example, Malik's discomfort helped Rabinow to recognize the culturally standardized attitude towards the group vs. the individual
    - discomfort often indicates a contradiction between ideal culture and real culture
      - or between one belief and others
      - in this case, the contradiction between
        - the assumption that when things were going well for the group, things were going well for all the individuals in it (ideal culture)
        - and the objective evidence that even though the group was doing well, some individuals within it were not (real culture)
    - these contradictions often make assumptions or beliefs easier to see
      - also highlight their arbitrariness
      - Malik might think: "Hmm... there isn't actually any reason to assume that what is good for the group is good for me... that was just an assumption, not a fact..."
    - noticing what makes yourself uncomfortable is similarly a clue about both the other culture and your own culture
      - if some subject is really irritating or touchy, that suggests that there is some assumption or value that conflicts with some other one or with outside evidence
      - a hint of something that you have not considered or resolved about your own culture
- The anthropological approach thus helps us to take a fresh look at both other cultures and our own
  - trying to describe not only what is supposed to be (ideal culture), but also what actually is (real culture)
  - example: many middle-class Americans believe that despite some inequities, by and large, people have an equal opportunity to succeed in life here
    - yet lots of evidence suggests that this is not actually true
      - a fairly limited number of families provide a disproportionate number of the politicians that run the country

- people born into some ethnic or economic groups have much lower incomes, poorer health, etc. than people born into others
- the surest predictor of a person's income as an adult is the income of their parents
- the children of the rich get richer, and those of the poor get poorer (see the US census report on incomes in 2004 and 2005, reported in the New York Times on August 30, 2006 and elsewhere)
- so this aspect of "ideal culture" is contradicted by "real culture"
- these contradictions highlight how factually incorrect the "equal opportunity" belief is
  - leads us to think about why this belief persists in the face of evidence
  - leads us to think about the role this belief plays in our culture
  - how does it relate to other beliefs?
  - why does it make people irritable if you question it?
  - why does it seem so important to maintain this belief, in spite of plentiful evidence that it is false?
- contradictions like these often make people uncomfortable
  - they call into question the reality of comfortable cultural assumptions
  - by focusing on these contradictions, anthropologists often seem to be pointing out hypocrisy
  - they seem to be calling for outrage
  - of course, sometimes they really are...
- focusing on these contradictions often makes anthropologists seem cynical
  - it may seem that anthropologists are often pointing out hypocrisy
  - but really, they are pointing out disjunctures between ideal and real culture
  - which is a way of discovering assumptions and recognizing them as arbitrary cultural constructions
  - all cultures have these contradictions, not only ours
  - the point is not to be cynical, but to become aware of what aspects of our perceived reality are actually arbitrary cultural constructs
    - which, because they are only cultural constructs, presumably could be changed
      - this can be hopeful and idealistic, not cynical
  - anthropology can help us to understand:
    - that some (many? most?) beliefs are just arbitrary cultural constructs
    - how those beliefs fit into the rest of the culture
      - what the function or effect of a given belief is
      - what other aspects of the culture support these beliefs or depend on them
      - maybe what other changes would ripple through the culture if a given belief changed
- Monaghan and Just 2000 Intro, Ch 1 - ethnography
  - Peter Just
    - studies Dou Donggo of the Indonesian island of Sumbawa
    - swidden (slash-and-burn) farmers shifting to rice
    - mountain people, maintained identity and beliefs through waves of Hindu and Muslim dominance

- John Monaghan
  - studies Mixtec of Santiago Nuyoo, Oaxaca, Mexico
  - swidden maize farmers
  - maintain strong community in face of long and varied wage migration
- Chapter 1: A Dispute in Donggo: Fieldwork and Ethnography
  - complicated story of la Ninde's "assault" on ina Mone
    - la Ninde is convicted, but didn't actually do it
    - everyone knows this, but still feels that justice was done
  - To understand this, we need to use **genealogical notation**
    - box or triangle represents a male
    - circle represents a female
    - double horizontal lines are a marriage
      - or sometimes mating by unmarried people
        - there is no widespread standard for expressing this difference; each author does it in his/her own way
    - vertical lines connect parents (or the marriage) to children
    - we will use double dotted lines for betrothal (fiancés)
      - this is not particularly standardized, though
  - So, how could everyone feel justice was done in condemning la Ninde for an assault they all know he did not commit?
    - he was really being admonished for flirting with la Fia, a betrothed girl
    - and for endangering the institution of betrothal
    - and in particular, for endangering betrothals of sons of ama Panci, who is father of both la Fia and the boy who is betrothed to ina Mone's daughter
      - ina Mone's daughter was betrothed to a son of ama Panci
      - la Fia was betrothed to another son of the same ama Panci
    - put bluntly, la Mone was afraid that if la Ninde could get away with cheating with the girl betrothed to one of ama Panci's sons, then the other son might be inclined to cheat on her daughter
    - note that the judge who particularly berated la Ninde was ama Panci, father of la Fia and of the son betrothed to la Mone's daughter
      - he was both upset with la Ninde for interfering with his son's betrothal to la Fia
      - and was reassuring la Mone that her daughter's betrothal to his other son was safe
    - so everyone's motives make sense
    - and the "false" conviction actually did address the concerns of all involved, even though they were not the ones explicitly stated
  - look at the genealogy chart...
    - see why you have to understand who is related to whom in order to get what is going on?
    - if the ethnographer doesn't understand the kin relations, then
      - he/she won't understand a specific case like this one correctly, and then
      - he/she will use that misunderstanding to draw incorrect conclusions about how this culture handles trials, their ideas of justice, and so on

- this whole event, and the insights into Dou Donggo ideas of justice and conflict resolution, would not have been visible without participant observation
  - or, if detected at all, it would have been misunderstood for lack of the detailed background necessary
- what insights can we gain about the culture from this case?
  - notion that justice is distinct from factual evidence or guilt
  - that punishment for what someone *might have* done is appropriate
  - that resolving conflict and tensions is more important than factual truth
  - even that "real" truth (intentions, attitudes, values) is more important than mere "actual" truth (actions actually completed)
  - that justice, truth, etc. are not universal values, even though they seem logically distinct and clear to us
  - thus perhaps they are not as clear and necessarily privileged as we think
  - at least we know that one society works fine with a different concept of justice
- doing ethnography leads to "lucky" breaks like observing this event
- and to having relationships such that someone will explain it
- it seems like an unsystematic, casual method, but it reliably leads to this kind of "random" discovery that casts light on how a culture works
- this case is another example of how anthropologists often seek to contrast what an event is apparently about, and what it is "really" about
  - leads to the impression of cynicism discussed earlier
  - but does provide insights if well done
- Critiques of ethnography
  - romanticization, idealization
  - ethnographic present
  - tendency to discount outside influences, history, change, "the modern"
  - subjectivity
    - little can be done about this
    - restudies rare, even then after time has passed, often with different foci
    - group projects not obviously any less subjective
  - asymmetry of power, imperialism
    - response: use unedited "voices"
    - response: include more autobiography of ethnographer
      - writing in which the writer puts him or herself obviously in the picture is called **reflexive**
  - some of these problems are self-correcting, as other cultures produce more anthropologists
  - but recall that being an outsider learning a culture is important for the point of view it provides
    - hard to study one's own culture well, because it is hard to detect one's own assumptions
- Ethical issues: more on this later in the course
  - first, do no harm
  - leave out damaging subjects

- use pseudonyms
    - or not? what if they want recognition?
    - what if they don't understand consequences in the way the anthropologist thinks he/she does?
  - when, if ever, is it OK to interfere?
  - how much advocacy is appropriate?
  - is it fair for the anthropologist to "profit" from knowledge provided by informants, or that might "belong" to the group?
  - is adding to (western, literate, academic) knowledge enough, or do anthropologists owe more to the people they study, or to anyone else?
- Anthropology “makes the strange familiar, and the familiar strange” Spiro 1995, in Kottak 2002.
- what does this mean?
  - makes the strange familiar: makes other cultures understandable
  - makes the familiar strange: makes us stop taking our own culture for granted, and look into our beliefs and behaviors more carefully