

Anthropology and ethnography

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2010

- 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
 - typically requires becoming reasonably fluent in their language
- **conversations** at various levels of formality:
 - hanging out, casual conversation
 - **interviews** with little formal structure
 - interviews guided by an **interview schedule**
 - interview schedule: an outline of topics to cover
 - ensures that each interview covers all the needed info
 - so that they can all be compared and tallied
 - NOT used rigidly as a script or a questionnaire
 - instead, interviews are open-ended and conversational
 - allow for unplanned digressions that may provide crucial information
 - ideally involves recording (in writing, audio, or video) a lot of conversation in the people's own language and words
 - this is the "*corpus inscriptionum*" that Malinowski called for as one of his three main methods of ethnography
- **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 paid or compensated in other ways
 - the only way to have good informants is to develop good rapport and show respect
 - this is not only a moral imperative, but also a practical one

– **genealogical method**

- systematically collect information about who is related to who, and how
 - typically involves setting up individual or family interviews with everyone in the entire community
 - who was your mother; when was she born; where was she born; at what age did she marry your father; ... who are your siblings; how old is each one...
- putting all this together lets you figure out
 - the interlocking family trees of everyone in the community
 - tendencies and rules about who marries who
 - gender roles, family structure, childrearing practices, etc.
 - relations between villages, clans, etc.
- provides background information that is essential to understanding specific people's interactions
 - as in Monaghan and Just story about the Indonesian Dou Donggo la Ninde "assaulting" ina Mone
 - if you don't know how they are related, you can't understand how they respond to each other
- extra bonus: actually visiting and talking with lots of people to collect 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
- usually involves numerous long interviews
- provides a wide variety of stories and examples, viewpoints, beliefs, raises questions to investigate, etc.
- these are **qualitative** methods
 - in contrast to **quantitative** methods such as surveys, censuses, etc.
 - that produce numerical, statistical results
 - ethnography is mostly based on qualitative methods
- qualitative methods
 - are anecdotal (based on individual stories, events, etc.)
 - but systematically so
 - in that many stories are collected and compared, looking for regularities among them
 - these qualitative methods add up to Malinowski's other two main methods of ethnography:
 - recording the "*imponderabilia of actual life*"
 - collecting "*concrete, statistical documentation*"
 - lots of cases to compare
 - the numerical statistics might come more from surveys or other methods
 - qualitative methods are not numerical or formally representative
 - but they provide the culturally constructed framework of meanings 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"
- surveys are more common in sociology, political science, etc.
- but anthropologists often find them 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 provides information that helps in designing effective surveys
 - you need to know what issues are relevant
 - and the categories and terms that people use to think about them
 - or the questions may turn out to be ambiguous, so that respondents do not answer them in a consistent, meaningful way
 - you have surely seen surveys like that
 - that makes the survey data hard to interpret
 - ethnography in advance helps to avoid the “garbage in, garbage out” problem of interpreting data from poorly written surveys
- in turn, the survey results may raise questions that send you back to do more 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.
 - some ethnographers take a longitudinal approach; others don't
 - depends on the research questions
 - and on practical issues in the anthropologist's life, career, interests, funding, 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
- Anthropologists have to look beyond simply what people say, to figure out cultural constructs that underlie what they say
 - often things that people get uncomfortable or touchy about are particularly telling
 - often indicates a contradiction between ideal culture and real culture
 - or a contradiction between one belief and another
 - contradictions often make assumptions easier to see
 - and they highlight that beliefs are arbitrary cultural constructs
 - example: many Americans believe that 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)
 - these contradictions highlight how factually incorrect the "equal opportunity" belief is
 - "equal opportunity" is part of our "ideal culture", but is contradicted by our "real culture"
 - this contradiction 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
 - does it help us to accept randomness or unfairness that we cannot control?
 - does it help the successful to not feel guilt or obligation to others?
 - does it help to maintain a system that benefits only a limited fraction of the society?
 - how does it relate to other beliefs?
 - why exactly 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?
- people's irritability or denial indicate that the cultural constructs involved are important to them
 - the contradiction calls into question some comfortable cultural assumptions
 - so anthropologists often focus on these contradictions and cultural constructs
 - 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 Chapter 1: A Dispute in Donggo: Fieldwork and 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
 - 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 other long or short term sexual relationships between unmarried people
 - there is no widespread standard for expressing these differences; 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; planning to be married)
 - 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
- The points of the story: why we need ethnography
 - One point: this whole event, and the insights into Dou Donggo ideas of justice and conflict resolution, would not have been visible without participant observation
 - Another: if it *had* been noticed and recorded at all, it would have been misunderstood for lack of the detailed background that only ethnography would provide
 - Third point: ethnography leads to comparing the ethnographer's culture with the one being studied, which gives insights into interesting ideas
 - what insights can we gain about the Dou Donggo 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 actually as clear, logical, and absolute as we think
 - at least we know that one society works fine with a different concept of justice
 - Fourth point: doing ethnography leads to "lucky" breaks like observing this event
 - and to having relationships such that someone will explain it
 - ethnography 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

- mostly in older and less well-done ethnographies
- but always a problem to be avoided
- **Ethnographic present:** style of writing in which observations are expressed in present tense
 - “The Duo Donggo do it this way.”
 - in fact, observations are always in the past
 - using the ethnographic present makes the studied culture seem fossilized, unchanging, outside of history
 - Note that Richard Lee (*The Dobe Ju/'hoansi*) always writes in the past tense, telling stories.
 - he is very conscious of the need to see the Ju/'hoansi as living, current participants in the world
 - whose culture reflects distant and recent historical, political, economic events
 - who will be affected by government policies, tourism, etc.
- **Essentializing:** tendency to discount outside influences, history, change, "the modern"
 - to treat a culture as a fixed, unchanging feature of a group of people
- Ethnography is subjective
 - little can be done about this
 - restudies rare, even then after time has passed, often with different emphases and methods
 - it was once hoped that projects with groups of researchers, rather than just one, would be less subjective, but that has not clearly worked out
- asymmetry of power between the anthropologist and the people being studied; imperialism
 - the ethnographer is doing the writing, gets to pick the themes, interpretations, conclusions
 - which are inevitably colored by his/her own culture, relative wealth, education, politics, etc.
 - response: use unedited "voices"
 - let the people speak for themselves
 - about what they think is important
 - response: **reflexive ethnography**
 - includes more autobiography of ethnographer
 - writing in a way that puts the ethnographer in the picture
 - so you can't forget that you are getting a view through his/her eyes and biases
 - Richard Lee does this well in *The Dobe Ju/'hoansi*
- some of these problems are being corrected as other cultures produce more anthropologists
 - who write about their own cultures
 - or who write about other cultures from points of view very different from ours
 - but this only works to some extent
 - recall that being an *outsider* is important to learning a culture, because outsiders do not already make that culture's assumptions

- it is hard to study one's own culture well, because it is hard to recognize one's own assumptions
 - Ethical issues: more on this later in the course
 - first, do no harm
 - use pseudonyms for people and places
 - or not? what if they want recognition?
 - what if they don't understand consequences in the way the anthropologist thinks he/she does?
 - maybe leave out dangerous subjects
 - maybe leave out subjects that could be used against the people being studied
 - 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?
 - as in advancing one's career, selling textbooks, gaining prestige
 - 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