

Cultural Study Basics for Wannabe Anthropologists

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Abstract: Anthropology is a vast area of study touching almost all aspects of human beings, from physiological to psychological to sociological. This makes it more complex and time consuming process to do any study of any culture. This article serves as reference guide for those who are starting their journey as anthropologists.

Anthropologists learn about the culture of another society through fieldwork and first hand observation in that society. This kind of research is called ethnography. Since culture primarily relates to the way people interact with each other, it is not possible to adequately observe it in a laboratory setting. Imagine how much more would be learned about the actual patterns of interaction of a typical American family by living in their home rather than asking one of the family members in a college or university office.

Cultural anthropologists also do systematic comparisons of similar cultures. This is called ethnology. An example of an ethnological study would be a comparison of what cultures are like in societies that have economies based on hunting and gathering rather than agriculture. The data for this sort of ethnology would come from the existing ethnographies about these peoples. In other words, ethnology is essentially a synthesis of the work of many ethnographers.

Keywords: Anthropology, Ethnography, Stratified Random Sampling.

I. INTRODUCTION

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2. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Anthropologists have discovered that the best way to really get to know another society and its culture is to live in it as an active participant rather than simply an observer. This is called participant observation. By physically and emotionally participating in the social interaction of the host society, it is possible to become accepted as a member. In practice this requires learning their language and establishing close friendship ties. It also usually involves living within the community as a member, eating what they eat, and taking part in normal family activities with them. This can be a physical hardship

and emotionally stressful, particularly when the host society is in a rural area of an underdeveloped nation. Sanitation



may be poor or non-existent, the diet may be unsatisfying, and there may be minimal privacy for personal hygiene and your sex life. However, the trust and familiarity that can result from participant-observation reduces the cultural barriers and allows anthropologists to understand the culture of the host society they are studying.

It is rarely possible to grasp much of another culture during a short visit. Anthropologists have learned that a long-term residence lasting year is necessary to see the range of cultural behavior. If a researcher lives in a small community for only a few months and no one gets married, gives birth, or dies during that time, it is unlikely that the culturally defined ways of dealing with these situations will be observed and understood. Likewise, a short-term visitor is not likely to learn about the intricate details of religious beliefs or even the complex culturally defined patterns of male-female relationships and parent-child interaction.



If you came upon this group of people and knew nothing about North American or European culture, would you be able to figure out what was going on? What cultural patterns could you identify and understand? For instance, what is the significance of the colors and styles of clothing? Why are some of the people holding flowers? Why are most of them smiling? Is the arrangement of people in this photo random?

How long should an anthropologist live within the society being studied? There is no simple answer. It depends on the focus of the study. In some cases the research may be as narrowly focused as learning about agricultural practices. In such cases, a stay of a few months to a few years may be adequate. However, if the focus is the entire culture, many more years may be required. In practice, anthropologists are likely to initially stay for a year or two and then make shorter visits back to the host society every few years over the next decade or more. The American Anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon, spent more than 30 years learning about the Yanomamö Indians of Venezuela and Brazil, though he did not live with them all of that time.

An anthropologist coming as a single visitor to a relatively isolated community, such as an Indian village in Brazil or a small farming town in Pakistan, is likely to be viewed with suspicion. An adult male visitor may be looked at as a potential enemy spy from the outside world or as a sexual predator threatening to seduce their wives, sisters, and daughters. An unchaperoned female visitor may be viewed as a prostitute who might corrupt the women of the community. A husband and wife team of anthropologists is likely to be more acceptable in these cases because their familiar relationship would allay some of the fears of community members about the visitors' intentions. They are more likely to be viewed as non-threatening. If the visitors bring their young children with them, they are even more likely to be seen as fitting a "normal", peaceful pattern. Members of the host society also may be more likely to pass on valuable cultural information about everyday living skills to children because they consider this information to be too obvious to need explanation for adults.

Ideal, Actual, and Believed Behavior:

When learning about another culture or subculture first hand, it is always wise to be cautious about taking at face value what people say about their way of life. They may be politely deceiving you because they are not sure of your intentions or they may want to provide a more favorable view of themselves, their culture, and their society. That is natural. Most of us would do the same thing. If you knew that important visitors from another country were coming to your home, would you clean it first, put on nicer clothes, and make sure that everyone in the house will be on their best behavior? In other words, would you want them to see your home and family as you think that they should be rather than how they actually are most of the time?

Human social behavior is often complicated. In trying to comprehend the interaction between people, it is useful to think in terms of a distinction between ideal, actual, and believed behavior. Ideal behavior is what we think we should be doing and what we want others to believe we are doing. Actual behavior is what is really going on. Believed behavior is what we honestly think we are doing. In reality, our actions are often different from what we believe them to be at that time. For example, many North American husbands assume that they do roughly half of the work of cleaning and maintaining their home. Their wives would probably dispute that assertion. Does this mean that the husbands are not telling the truth? No, it usually means that their perception of what they are doing may not be realistic in this case. Anthropologists are not only interested in learning about actual behavior. Ideal and believed behavior also can tell us much about how a society and its culture work.



Posing for a photograph with the Queen of England are on their best behavior. Do you suppose that this is how they act all of the time?

In the more traditional regions of Latin America, the ideal behavior of men and women is usually more dissimilar than it is in most of North America and Northern Europe. Latin American men are expected to be macho's -i.e., they should be overtly masculine, confident, strong, dignified, brave, always in control of their emotions, and sexually demanding. Women are expected to be emotional, nurturing, faithful, and passive in response to the demands of their husbands. In other words, men and women should have polar opposite but complementary personalities and roles in life. There is no room in this ideal Latin American perception for passive men and aggressive women. In reality, however, few people actually fit the ideal of extreme masculinity or femininity in their daily lives. This discrepancy between male and female ideal and actual behavior is not limited to Latin America, but the contrasts are more apparent in male dominated societies that tolerate little variation in their permissible cultural patterns. The cattle ranching life of Western North America is another subculture that has traditionally placed high value on the ideal of strong, "in control" men and supportive, faithful women.

Observant visitors usually can find clues to the fact that it is difficult to live up to the cultural ideals for gender roles. In rural South China, for instance, there is a traditional saying that encapsulates the complicated relationship between husbands and wives. It is "the husband is the outside master, the wife is the inside master." This alludes to the fact that the public image in the past was one in which Chinese husbands were in total control of their wives and families, but within the home when no one else was present, wives shared in the decision making process. The reality of urban life in mainland China today has begun to alter this husband and wife relationship. Beginning in the late 1970's, the national government's desire to stem population pressure led to a one child policy. Most couples are only allowed to have one child without paying stiff penalties. Because of the traditional pressure on parents to have a son, girl babies have often been aborted even though this practice is illegal. The result has been a disproportionately high percentage of boy babies being born over the last several decades. An unexpected consequence of this has been that young marriageable women are now in relatively short supply. They are in a position to make greater demands on prospective husbands. Young men in China are faced with the reality that if they want to have a good chance of finding an educated wife, they must secure a well paying job and have enough money to buy her a car and a new condo. In addition, they must be prepared to cook, wash dishes, and do other home maintenance jobs traditionally done by wives.

Gathering Data about Culture:

In most ethnographic fieldwork, only a portion of the host society is actually studied intensively. Due to the practical impossibility of observing and talking at length with everyone, only a sample of a community is selected. If the sample of people is chosen carefully, there is an expectation that it will be representative of the entire community. This is referred to as a probability sample--i.e., a sample that has a high probability of reflecting the entire population. Choosing who will be in the sample can be difficult, especially at the beginning of a research project when the first contacts are made and the composition of the society and its culture are still poorly understood.

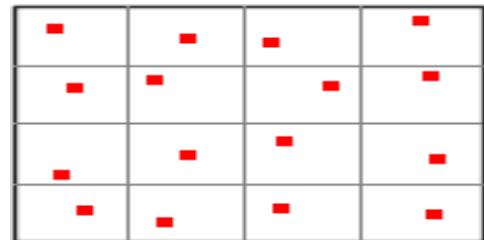
Usually ethnographers opt for one of three types of probability samples--random, stratified, or judgment. A random sample is one in which people are selected on a totally random, unbiased basis. This can be accomplished by assigning a number to everyone in a community and then letting a computer generate a series of random numbers. If a 10% sample is

needed, then the first 10% of the random numbers will indicate who will be the focus of the research. This sampling approach is reasonable for ethnographic research only when there does not seem to be much difference between the people in the population. Since this is rarely the case, random sampling is not often used for ethnographic research.

A stratified sample is one in which people are selected because they come from distinct sub-groups within the society. This is essentially what the U.S. Census Bureau does in its national census every 10 years. One member from each family is asked to answer for the entire family. This approach may be used by ethnographers as well if there are distinct, identifiable groups of people in the society and the information that is being sought is not specialized knowledge such as the esoteric activities of a secret organization with restricted membership.



Random sampling



Stratified sampling

Most ethnographers rely on a judgment sample. This is a limited number of key people selected on the basis of criteria deemed critical to the research questions. For example, religious leaders would be the focus if research concerns religious beliefs and practices. Likewise, talking mostly to women would make sense if the research concerned women's roles within society. The judgment sample approach works best if good informants can be found. These are people who are not only knowledgeable about their own culture but who are able and willing to communicate this knowledge in an understandable way to an outsider. Not everyone has the ability to do this. The quality of data usually depends on the relationships with informants. Ethnographers try to develop a warm and close relationship with their informants. This makes it more likely that they will learn what the host culture is really like.

Culture Shock:

Any person, including an anthropologist, who goes to live in another society that is culturally very different is likely to initially develop culture shock. This is a feeling of confusion, distress, and sometimes depression that can result from the psychological stress that commonly occurs during the first weeks or months of a total cultural immersion in an alien society. Until the new culture becomes familiar and comfortable, it is common to have difficulty in communicating and to make frustrating mistakes in interactions with people in the host society. This is usually compounded by feelings of homesickness. These feelings can be emotionally debilitating. However, culture shock eventually passes and productive fieldwork can begin.

3. CONCLUSION

Ethnographers can collect reliable data and develop a realistic understanding of the cultural patterns in another society through a combination of five things:

1. Proper mental preparation (including adopting the cultural relativity perspective)
2. Participant-observation
3. Competence in using the host culture's language
4. Long-term residence
5. Luck in being at the right place at the right time.

Over months and years, the cultural distance between an ethnographer and the people being studied is reduced. As a result, the complex cultural patterns become understandable. These five things apply whether research is in a small-scale society or a large one. They also apply to non-anthropologists who want to learn about another culture.

In the course of research, anthropologists may gather information about individuals in the host society that can be embarrassing or even dangerous if made public. For instance, if during the study of a Maya Indian village in Central America, paramilitary soldiers arrive and terrorize or even kill community members, it could be very dangerous for the survivors. Publishing a report of the incident might result in the soldiers returning to the village and killing potential witnesses named in your account. In an attempt to help the Indians by exposing what happened to them, you could be putting their lives in even greater danger. In these cases, a sense of professional ethics usually keeps anthropologists from reporting the incident. These are not easy decisions to make.

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