Chapter 3

Ethnographic Research:
Its History, Methods, and Theories

Western Science

- Objective reality
- Falsify things, not prove
- Empirical observations
  - Objective
  - Subjective

Scientific Method

- Data
- Hypothesis
- Theory
- Law
How and Why Did Ethnographic Research Evolve?

• In the early years of the discipline, many anthropologists documented traditional cultures they assumed would disappear due.
• After the colonial era ended in the 1960s, anthropologists established a code of ethics to ensure their research does not harm the groups they study.

How Is Research Related to Theory?

• Data resulting from research provide anthropologists with material needed to produce a comprehensive ethnography.
• Theories help us frame new questions that deepen our understanding of cultural phenomena.

Anthropology’s Theoretical Perspectives

• Idealist perspective
  – A theoretical approach stressing the primacy of superstructure in cultural research and analysis.
• Materialist perspective
  – A theoretical approach stressing the primacy of infrastructure (material conditions) in cultural research and analysis.
Components of Cultural Anthropology

1. Ethnography
   - A detailed description of a particular culture primarily based on fieldwork.

2. Ethnology
   - The study and analysis of different cultures from a comparative point of view.

Cultural Anthropology Methods

- 2 Broad Categories of Investigation
  - Ethnographic
  - Comparative
- Two types within each category
  - Present
  - Recent past

Ethnographic Fieldwork

- Extended on-location research to gather detailed and in-depth information on a society's customary ideas, values, and practices through participation in its collective social life.
Ethnographic Methods

- Fieldwork
  - Deals with present time
  - Ethnography
  - Going to the group you study
    - Stages of fieldwork
    - Methods for fieldwork

Methods for Fieldwork

- Participant Observation
- Interview
- Media
- Informants

Fieldwork

- Ecologist James Kremer and anthropologist Stephen Lansing who have researched the traditional rituals and network of water temples linked to the irrigation management of rice fields on the island of Bali in Indonesia are explaining a computer simulation of this system to the high priest of the supreme water temple, as other temple priests look on.
Participant Observation

- A research method in which one learns about a group’s beliefs and behaviors through social participation and personal observation within the community, as well as interviews and discussion with individual members of the group over an extended stay in the community.

Interviewing

- Informal interview
  - An unstructured, open-ended conversation in everyday life.
- Formal interview
  - A structured question/answer session carefully notated as it occurs and based on prepared questions.

Photographs

- Anthropologists sometimes use photographs during fieldwork as eliciting devices, sharing pictures of cultural objects or activities for example, to encourage locals to talk about and explain what they see.
Digital Ethnography

- The use of digital technologies (audio and visual) for the collection, analysis, and representation of ethnographic data.

Key Consultant

- A member of the society being studied, who provides information that helps researchers understand the meaning of what they observe.
- Early anthropologists referred to such individuals as informants.

Informed Consent

- Formal recorded agreement to participate in research.
- When it is a challenge to obtain informed consent, or even impossible to precisely explain the meaning and purpose of this concept and its actual consequences, anthropologists may protect the identities of individuals.
Quantitative Data
• Statistical or measurable information, such as demographic composition, the types and quantities of crops grown, or the ratio of spouses born and raised within or outside the community.

Qualitative Data
• Nonstatistical information such as personal life stories and customary beliefs and practices.

Challenges of Anthropology
• Among the numerous mental challenges anthropologists commonly face are
  – Culture shock
  – Loneliness
  – Feeling like an ignorant outsider
  – Being socially awkward in a new cultural setting.
Challenges of Anthropology

• Physical challenges typically include:
  – Adjusting to unfamiliar food, climate, and hygiene conditions
  – Needing to be constantly alert because anything that is happening or being said may be significant to one's research.
  – Ethnographers must spend considerable time interviewing, making copious notes, and analyzing data.

Accurately Describing a Culture

• To accurately describe a culture an anthropologist needs to seek out and consider three kinds of data:
  1. The people's own understanding of their culture and the general rules they share.
  2. The extent to which people believe they are observing those rules.
  3. The behavior that can be directly observed.

Ethnohistory

• A study of cultures of the recent past through oral histories, accounts of explorers, missionaries, and traders, and through analysis of records such as land titles, birth and death records, and other archival materials.
Ethnohistory

- Look at past culture systems
- Get data from text sources
- How far do you go back?
- Biased records
- Different than history

Comparative methods

- Cross-cultural comparisons
  - Deals with current cultures
- Controlled historical comparisons
  - Use ethnohistories

Human Relations Area Files (HRAF)

- A vast collection of cross-indexed ethnographic and archaeological data catalogued by cultural characteristics and geographic locations.
- Archived in about 300 libraries (on microfiche and/or online).
Urgent Anthropology

- Ethnographic research that documents endangered cultures.
- Also known as salvage ethnography.

Applied Anthropology

- The use of anthropological knowledge and methods to solve practical problems in communities confronting new challenges.

Peasant Studies

- Peasants represent an important category between modern industrial society and traditional subsistence foragers, herders, farmers, and fishers.
- Peasantry represents the largest social category of our species so far.
- Because peasant unrest over economic and social problems fuels political instability anthropological studies of rural populations are considered significant and practical.
Peasant Studies

A peasant leader addresses a crowd in front of the presidential palace in Paraguay’s capital city Asuncion at a massive protest rally against land dispossession.

Advocacy Anthropology

Anthropologists committed to social justice and human rights have become actively involved in efforts to assist indigenous groups, peasant communities, and ethnic minorities.

Most anthropologists committed to community based and politically involved research refer to their work as advocacy anthropology.

Advocacy Anthropology

Anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis interviews Xavante Indians in the Brazilian savannah where he has made numerous fieldwork visits since the 1950s.

Maybury-Lewis is founder of the indigenous advocacy organization Cultural Survival, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Advocacy Anthropology

• Today’s most wide ranging advocacy anthropologist is Rodolfo Stavenhagen, special rapporteur on indigenous rights for the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights.

Multi-sited Research

• In her explorations on Chinese identities in the context of U.S. and Chinese racial and multicultural politics, anthropologist Andrea Louie (center) has done multi-sited research in St. Louis, San Francisco, Hong Kong, and China.