



Fieldwork: A Meeting of Cultural Traditions

Chapter Outline

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- Modes of Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Short History
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- The Effects of Fieldwork
 - The Effects of Fieldwork on Participants
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 - The Humanizing Effects of Fieldwork
- The Production of Anthropological Knowledge
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Key Points

1. Anthropological fieldwork traditionally involved **participant-observation**, which includes extended periods of close contact at a single site with members of another society. Anthropologists were expected to carry out research in societies different from their own, but in recent years, increasing numbers have worked in their own societies. Each setting has its own advantages and draw-backs for ethnographers.
2. Early anthropologists who wanted to be scientific tried to remake fieldwork in the image of controlled laboratory research. According to **positivist** scientists and philosophers, laboratory research was the prototype of scientific investigation. Following this positivist model, anthropologists systematically collected what they believed were highly accurate and objective data on societies in many parts of the world, although there were concerns about the positivist method being insensitive to the informants. Now anthropologists realize that there is not just one, but a variety of scientific methods that researchers may use in order to generate anthropological knowledge.

3. When anthropologists study another cultures, it is important that they do so in a relativistic and reflective manner. Successful fieldwork involves anthropologists who think about the way they think about other cultures. Informants also must reflect on the way they and others in their society think and they must try to convey these insights to the anthropologist. This is basic to the **reflexive** approach to fieldwork, which sees participant-observation as an active dialogue about the meaning of experience in the informant's culture. Fieldworkers and informants must work together to construct an inter-subjective world of meaning.
4. Fieldwork can present challenges to both the researcher and the people whom they wish to study. The success of any research project depends on the anthropologist being able to gain appropriate authorization to work in a particular place and she or he must also gain acceptance from the individuals who will be participants in the study. Both endeavours can be hard to do.
5. In recent years, a number of anthropologists have begun to carry out fieldwork that takes them to a number of different sites. **Multi-sited fieldwork** is usually the outcome of following cultural phenomena wherever they lead, often crossing local, regional, and national boundaries in the process. This form of fieldwork is becoming more common in our globalized world. Such fieldwork allows anthropologists to better understand many cultural processes that link people, things, metaphors, plots, and lives that are not confined to a single site. Although multi-sited fieldwork is usually built around one site, there is concern that having to navigate knowledge and data from so many sites of research may dilute the depth and understanding of the researcher.
6. Taking part in ethnographic fieldwork has the potential to change informants and researchers. Many anthropologists experience isolation and discomfort during fieldwork. This is referred to as **culture shock**. Some anthropologists, when faced with the real struggles of the people they are studying, have committed time to working with their informants to bring about social change. Not all anthropologists are comfortable with this type of transformative participation in the lives of the people they are studying. Many researchers believe that the main goal and focus of an anthropologist during fieldwork should be to interpret and explain the dynamics of the culture, rather than trying to change it.
7. Because cultural meanings are inter-subjectively constructed during fieldwork, cultural **facts** do not speak for themselves. They speak only when they are interpreted and placed in a context of meaning that makes them intelligible. These facts are made and remade. In order for the anthropologist to have the most accurate interpretation possible, she or he must work closely with the people who provided the facts to them
8. The knowledge generated by anthropologists cannot be objective, because the researchers are never able to fully escape their own cultural views. In order to account for this, the researcher must constantly be reflexive, critically thinking about the way they are viewing and interpreting things, while gathering data. In the field of anthropology, there will always be more to know and learn as all cultures are dynamic and constantly changing.
9. The academic agenda of an anthropologist can often be coordinated with the needs of a particular community in which he or she chooses and is invited to work in. Beyond simply getting permission to study a community and using an ethical approach when dealing with its inhabitants, anthropologists often look for ways that they may help with the local agendas of their

hosts. A more collaborative approach to doing anthropology benefits both the anthropologist and the community studied.

10. Many anthropologists recognize that the communities they study do not have a single uniform culture that regulates everyone's behaviour. The study of particular subcultures, smaller units of culture practiced by people sharing a common interest, is increasingly popular. This sort of research often takes place within the culture one lives in. Anthropologists seek to understand and participate in the activities of many small social groups like skateboarders, video gamers, punk musicians or lawn bowlers. Each small group shapes culture to their particular needs.

Key Terms

Culture shock The feeling of physical and mental dislocation/discomfort a person experiences when in a new or strange cultural setting. It can manifest most deeply on returning "home," with home seeming exceedingly strange after extended stays in the fieldwork situation.

Dialectic of fieldwork The process of building a bridge of understanding between anthropologist and informant so that each can begin to understand the other.

Fact A widely accepted observation, a taken-for-granted item of common knowledge, which becomes intelligible only when it is interpreted and placed in a context of meaning.

Fieldwork An extended period of close involvement with the people in whose way of life anthropologists are interested, during which anthropologists ordinarily collect most of their data.

Intersubjective meanings Meaning rooted in the symbolic systems of a culture and shared by the participants in that culture.

Material world The tangible, physical material reality that we perceive as the physical world around us.

Multi-sited ethnography Ethnographic research on cultural processes that are not contained by social, ethnic, religious, or national boundaries in which the ethnographer follows the process from site to site, often doing fieldwork in sites and with persons that were traditionally never subject to ethnographic analysis.

Objective knowledge Knowledge about reality that is absolute and true for all people, in all times and places.

Participant-observation The method anthropologists use to gather information by living and working with the people whose culture they are studying while participating in their lives as much as possible.

Phenomenology A philosophical approach that studies phenomenon as they appear to the consciousness of an individual or group of people as part of our lived experiences.

Positionality A person's uniquely situated social position, which reflects his or her gender, nationality, political views, previous experiences, and so on.

Positivism The view that there is a reality "out there" that can be detected through the senses and that there is a single, appropriate scientific method for investigating that reality.

Reflexivity Critically thinking about the way one thinks; reflecting on one's own experience.

Situated knowledge Knowledge that is set within or specific to a precise context or situation.

Structured interviews A method for gathering information whereby an anthropologist (or another researcher) asks a set of predetermined questions and records participants responses.

Subjective meaning Meaning that seems true to a particular person, based on his or her personal values, beliefs, opinions, and assumptions.

Review Questions

1. What are some of the methods that anthropologists use when conducting fieldwork?
2. How is participant-observation different from other types of research methods?
3. What are rich points? Can you think of any examples of these from your own experience?
4. What is the dialectic of fieldwork?
5. What are some of the challenges that anthropologists face when conducting fieldwork?
6. How does fieldwork affect the researcher and the people about whom he/she will write?
7. What is the role of fieldwork in the production of anthropological knowledge?
8. How does fieldwork, and participant-observation in particular, complement the anthropological perspective?
9. Are you able to do research within your own culture? What advantages or disadvantages do you think may be experienced?
10. What is multi-sited research? What concerns do some anthropologists have about this research method?
11. How can the more philosophical phenomenological approach help us better understand the world's that people occupy?
12. What are some of the humanizing effects of fieldwork?

Additional Resources

Films

- *Wade Davis: Dreams from Endangered Cultures*. TED.com. 2003.
Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis on the loss of cultures, and the resulting loss of the worldviews that those cultures possess
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/wade_davis_on_endangered_cultures.html
- *Cultures of the World - 04 - Fieldwork and the Anthropological Method*
An excellent 30-minute lecture video on many aspects of anthropological fieldwork.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARaguMCG51o>

Annotated Video Links

Tales from the Jungle: Bronislaw Malinowski

This excellent full-length film examines the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, often revered as the founding father of modern anthropology. He is best known as the first person who conducted extended anthropological field work by living among the natives. He was one of the first to work in the language of his informants and utilize participant observation as a research technique.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f22VsAIOwbc>

Anthropological Field Work

This cute animated short covers the basics of different types of anthropological fieldwork concisely and in a fun way.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4hiXAFgJPw>

Methods and Approaches in Cultural Anthropology

Throughout the twentieth century three approaches to cultural anthropology dominated. These are the positivist approach, reflexive approach and multi-sited approach. Each of these has their relative strengths and weaknesses. This 15-minute lecture video highlights the theory and methods of several key theorists of anthropology.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QEzOKInTyo>

Websites

- Wiki Book: *Cultural Anthropology/ Anthropological Methods*
An overview of cultural anthropology and a summary of the main anthropological fieldwork methods and types of research analyses
http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Cultural_Anthropology/Anthropological_Methods
- “Field of screams: difficulty and ethnographic fieldwork.” Amy Pollard, 2009, *Anthropology Matters*, 11(2).
A look at some of the difficulties and frustrations faced by anthropology students conducting fieldwork
http://www.anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/10

- “Culture: Can you take it anywhere?” Michael Agar, 2006, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2). This paper discusses the difficulty in defining culture and discusses rich points (see page 33). http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/PDF/agar.pdf
- HRAF Ethnographic Database is a comparative information database on various customs and practices of many of the planet’s cultures. Somewhat dated but still useful when looking for points of comparison. <http://www.yale.edu/hraf/>

A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

A Sense of Fieldwork in Our Daily Lives

In early 2013, Anthony Bourdain, the American chef and host of the popular travel-dining show *Parts Unknown*, headed off to Quebec. There, in a wooden ice shack in the middle of a frozen lake, he enjoyed an exquisite meal filled with local delicacies and wine. At one point during the meal, Bourdain boldly declared: “Is there a billionaire or a despot anywhere on Earth who at this precise moment is eating better than us? . . . No.” The epic meal ended with another sort of delicacy—imported Cuban cigars—followed by “a dessert as rare as it gets”: the Gateau Marjolaine, a traditional French cake with layers of almond, hazelnut meringue, and chocolate buttercream.

While Bourdain chose to travel to a remote location to enjoy his meal, most of us need not go to such lengths to venture into the unfamiliar territory of new cuisine. Many “exotic” and “ethnic” foods are readily available in most urban centres and moderately sized towns across the country. Simply search the Internet or download a take-out app to begin exploring the possibilities open to you where you live.

Seeking out and trying new foods is a sort of fieldwork. It can lead us to think reflexively on the history, cultural significance, and production of “ethnic” foods, as well as what these foods mean in a global world. Often, the meals we find at “ethnic” restaurants are not truly “authentic.” That is, they are adapted to our local tastes. Eating these sorts of dishes feels sort of like staying in a Holiday Inn while travelling to a remote and mysterious location—there is an element of unfamiliarity, but it is cushioned within the familiar comforts of home. Yet when we have the opportunity to taste

something truly unfamiliar, we can rise to the challenge and consider the deeper significance of the experience.

Canadian ethnologists Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli (2002) have looked closely at this sort of fieldwork. Taking a multi-sited approach, they have examined the intercultural experience of ethnic dining in Quebec City. They see ethnic restaurants as “microspaces of intercultural encounter and exchange, places where people can see, touch, and consume the cuisine of the ‘other’ ” (2002: 247). At the same time, they observe, most ethnic restaurants make “the foreign” more familiar, transforming traditional foods of distant cultures into something more recognizable to local diners. In some senses, the authors argue, this transformation is a form of cultural appropriation, a way for powerful Western societies to selectively change and consume aspects of less powerful cultures.

This appropriation of foreign foods also impacts what we think of as local foods. Regional cuisines, like cultures, inevitably change over time, in response to both external influences and internal developments. Thus Bourdain’s experience in rural Quebec likely did not reflect what the locals were eating. The French Canadian cuisine of the past is not the cuisine of modern Quebec. Rather than feasting on traditional *tourtières* (meat pies), *oreilles de crisse* (fried pork strips), and *pâté chinois* (a layered dish of meat, potatoes, and vegetables), Quebecers are more likely to eat foods with an “international” flavour. And this sort of culinary shift is nothing new—what we think of as “traditional” French Canadian cuisine is itself a blend of French, Aboriginal, and other traditions that developed long ago to meet the needs of a past society.