

## Lesson One

# Fieldwork

*People are different. These differences represent the vast range of human potential and possibility. Our assumptions, beliefs, values, ideas, ideals — even our abilities — are largely a product of our cultures.*

## **ASKING QUESTIONS, MAKING CONNECTIONS, AND TRYING NEW THINGS**

About 20 years ago, I was sitting in a university lecture hall with almost 500 other students waiting for our first lecture in anthropology class. We all had our reasons for being there, and most of them ended with the word "requirement." There was the "Social Sciences 3 of 4" requirement, the "45 hours of General Electives" requirement and the "60 hours at our university" requirement, among many others. For me, it was the "International Overlay" requirement. I had no idea what anthropology was or why it was required. All I knew was what I had learned as I looked up "anthropology" in the dictionary just before rushing off to class.

Anthropology, n. *The study of all humans in all times in all places.*

A smartly dressed, white-haired, bearded professor entered the room and showed us what appeared to be a strange ink blot test on the screen, asking us what we saw. We stared up at these apparently random splatters of ink that we were supposed to decipher like children looking for shapes in the clouds.



I felt proud of myself when I recognized that the splatters were the shapes of the continents and that we were looking at the world upside down, to which the professor challenged, "Is it *really* upside down? The world is a sphere. Who decided that north is up?" He then showed us a map popular in Australia (McArthur's Universal Corrective Map) with Australia standing proudly at the top and center of the world. It struck me that this map was no less true than the one I knew, which placed the United States and Europe standing proudly at the top and center.

He then proceeded to convince us that it wasn't just the world that we had upside down, it was bananas too. We had been peeling them wrong our entire lives. Monkeys and many cultures on the planet know that the best way to peel a banana is not from the stem, but rather "upside down." Even the most stubborn banana opens easily from this end, and you can then immediately throw away the fibrous and inedible black tip and use the stem as a handle.

Then he turned our whole lives upside down, challenging our most basic taken-for-granted assumptions in virtually all aspects of our lives, moving from the economic realm and on to family, society, politics, art, and religion. He challenged our views on success, love, and even happiness. Ultimately, he would challenge us to consider how even our most basic everyday activities – shopping, driving, eating – are connected to all humans everywhere, and gave us

profound and unforgettable reminders of the impacts we might have on others.

He framed the course around a very simple idea: that our beliefs, values, ideas, ideals, and even our abilities are largely a product of our cultures. He introduced three seemingly simple yet tremendously powerful terms to help us explore this idea:

**Ethnocentrism:** holding one's own beliefs, values, ideas, ideals, and assumptions to be the only true and proper ones. This is like a prison for the mind. Until we could move past our ethnocentrism, we would be trapped, with little opportunity to change and grow.

**Cultural relativism:** the antidote to ethnocentrism. This is the idea that we must understand other people's ideas, ideals, assumptions and beliefs relative to their own culture. We have to suspend judgment and try to understand the world in their terms.<sup>2</sup> The beauty of this activity is that once we find our way into a different perspective, we can then look back on our own culture with new eyes.

**Participant Observation:** the hallmark method of anthropology. We do not just observe other people in our attempts to understand them. We join in. Only then can we move closer to their experience and understand them with depth and detail.

While these may seem like nothing more than bold-faced terms in a textbook, to be memorized and then forgotten, they were like fire-bombs for my mind. They were a constant reminder that my hard-set ideas about what was right, true, or possible might be wrong. It was as if a curtain had been drawn back for me to look at the world for

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<sup>2</sup> This does not mean we withhold judgment forever and deny all judgement (which would be "moral relativism"). We simply suspend our judgment so that we can understand them. As Scott Atran, an anthropologist who studies terrorists such as ISIS notes, the key is to "empathize with people, without always sympathizing." Empathy allows anthropologists to understand others from their perspective, regardless of how reprehensible that perspective might seem.

the first time, and each of the thousands upon thousands of different beliefs and practices visible there would be a challenge to my own.

I learned about cultures that challenged my perceived limits of human potential. The Tarahumara of central Mexico can run over *400 miles* without stopping. The Moken of Thailand can intentionally control the pupils of their eyes to see more clearly underwater as they dive for clams, while also willfully decreasing their heart rate so they can hold their breath for five minutes or longer! The Inuit survive the Arctic winter by tracking and killing seals under several feet of ice. The !Kung of southern Africa find food and water in one of the seemingly most desolate deserts on the planet. The Jenna Kuruba of India start making friends with elephants from the time they are small children, training them and eventually riding on their giant backs, walking through life together as lifetime partners.

Anthropology can introduce you to cultures where fat is a mark of health and beauty, or where beauty is not a prominent mark of worth at all. Places where the body is an integrated part of who you are, useful and functional in the world, not a thing to be obsessively carving or pumped so that you can be swole, cut, ripped, or chiseled.

Some differences are cute. Others are disturbing. You might find a place where dogs or horses are considered good eating, or where pork and beef are forbidden.

It can transport you to places where people perform strange superstitious rituals, only to discover that these rituals are sophisticated ways of managing their culture and environment. For example, the complex water temples of the Balinese, which have managed water distribution across their rice terraces on the island for over 1200 years—and recently came to the rescue and saved the island from environmental collapse when new agricultural technologies were introduced.

Anthropology introduces you to worlds without clocks or calendars. Places where time is measured by the song of birds or the pangs of a hungry stomach rather than the digits of a clock. Places where there are no deadlines or jobs. No grades or schools. No laws,

lawyers, or judges. No politicians or rulers. Places where smartphones, cars, and electricity are known but forbidden.

You can find differences that seem to cut to the very essence of how we perceive the world. There are cultures where the locus of thinking is believed not to be in the head, but somewhere near the heart – or where the notion of "thinking" is not separated at all from the notion of "feeling." There are cultures that believe there is not just one soul, but several.

There are places where success is measured by how much you give away, not by the size of your house or the cost of your car. Places where winning isn't everything. Places where faith is about being comfortable with the unknown, not with how firmly you believe.

When anthropology is done right, none of these things strike you as exotic oddities. Rather, they are exciting possibilities. They make you reconsider your own taken-for-granted assumptions. They can make you wonder: *If there are humans in the world who can run over 400 miles without rest, or dilate their pupils under water, or hold their breath for five minutes, or find food in an Arctic winter or desert summer ... or make friends with elephants ... why can't I?*

All this cultural diversity was new to me, and much of it was cracking me open to examine parts of my world and worldview I had never even seen before. The cracks reached deep into my everyday life.

My girlfriend had just broken up with me. She was the first love of my life, and at the time I was sure that she was "the one." Now here was a guy presenting me with the idea that the very notion of "the one" was nothing but a cultural construction unique to my culture, time and place. He shared stories about cultures where one man might have many wives ("polygyny") or where one woman might have many husbands ("polyandry"). He shared stories about cultures where marriage was not primarily about romance but about more practical matters of subsistence and partnership. While we all dutifully set about to memorize these new terms, I couldn't help but

see that the very terms of my life were changing. A core ideal that had been the central organizing principle of my life – the idea of "the one" that I had to find to live a happy life, the idea that each one of us might have a soulmate made just for us – was clearly not an idea universally shared across cultures. It was an idea that was contingent on a vast array of cultural and historical forces. The world, it seemed, had a lot to teach me about love that I just didn't know yet.

The professor spoke softly and smoothly, as if unaware of the fact that he was lobbing intellectual fire-bombs into the audience and blowing minds. What on the one hand seemed like a bunch of simple facts to be memorized for an exam carried much deeper and more profound messages for me – that the world is not as it seems, that we know the world only through our own cultural biases, that even the little things matter, that taken together all the little things we do make the world what it is, and that if we are willing to challenge ourselves, truly understand others with empathy, and shed the comfort of our familiar but sometimes blinding, binding, and taken-for-granted assumptions, we can make the world a better place.

The idea that our most central ideas, ideals, beliefs and values are culturally constructed was liberating. It was also terrifying. I found myself struggling with questions I had never considered before. I kept going to the professor with my questions, hoping for answers. But he never offered any.

He just smiled.



Three years later I landed in Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea. It was as far from my small-town Nebraska upbringing as I could imagine, both geographically and culturally. If I wanted the answers to my questions ... if I wanted to understand just how different people could be ... if I wanted to explore the vast range of human potential and possibility ... this seemed like the place to be.

Port Moresby was once described by Paul Theroux as "one of the most violent and decrepit towns on the face of the planet." It frequently tops the Economic Intelligence Unit's annual survey as the world's most unlivable city. There are the normal struggles of an impoverished city: water rationing, intermittent electricity, lack of sanitation, and rampant corruption. But what really sets it apart is its crime rate. *Foreign Policy* named it one of five "murder capitals of the world." Unemployment runs from 60-90%, and opportunistic crime is a common way for people, even the most respectable people, to make ends meet.

But none of this could dampen my young spirit. I was a twenty-three-year-old small-town boy from Nebraska, eager to explore the world. Perhaps it was my small-town upbringing that had given me this sense of faith and trust in other people. I had an unwavering belief that there are good people everywhere. *Open up to people and they will open up to you*, I thought. Every place on the planet has its charm, and it can usually be found in the spirit of the people themselves. I was looking forward to diving into the life of this busy little city. I left the hotel on my first morning in the city with a full spirit and a fully-loaded backpack, ready for an all-day adventure.

It was a calm and beautiful morning in the tropical paradise. Palm trees slowly swayed above me in the morning breeze. The streets were empty, except for two teenage boys walking my way. "Hey! Moning!" they shouted.

*What an exuberant and kind greeting*, I thought.

They speak Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, a creole with words drawn from English, German, Malay, Portuguese and several local languages. Fortunately, about 80% of the words come from English, so it is fairly easy to pick up for an English speaker.

"Moning! Moning!" I called back.

"*Nogat! Moni! Moni!*" one of the boys responded tersely, and the two, now just 20 steps away, quickened their pace and approached me with clear determination.



I had misunderstood them, but I was clear on what they wanted from me now: They wanted my money. I glanced to my left and right and saw no hope of escape. Fences covered in razor wire crowded the street on both sides, locking me in. *Razor wire*, I thought. *Why hadn't I noticed that before?* It was an intimidating reminder of just how dangerous this place might be.

I continued to try to win them over, still hoping that I could transform this interaction into a polite inconsequential morning ritual. Perhaps if I could just be charming enough, they would let me pass; or if not charming, at least so naïve that they might take pity on me. "Morning!" I replied even more cheerfully, walking confidently toward them, and hopefully, right past them.

"*Nogat! Moni! Moni!*" he responded, slapping his pockets for emphasis.

I thought maybe I could get by them with a little humor. I pretended that I still didn't understand, and acted as if they were teaching me proper pronunciation and the proper gestures that go along with the greeting. "Moni!" I said cheerfully with my best and broadest smile while I slapped my pockets with exuberance. I hoped they might just laugh at the stupid foreigner and let me pass.

They did not think I was very funny. They blocked me, looking angrier than ever.

"*Moni!*" the boy on the left said sternly, as he pulled back his jacket to reveal a 24-inch machete.

I turned my back to them, hoping that if they struck me with the machete the first slash would hit my oversized 40-pound backpack, and I ran.

They must have paused for a moment, because I had 10 steps on them before I could hear them coming. But I was no match for two fit teenagers as my 40-pound pack bounced clumsily on my back. They were closing in fast.

I came to a street corner and veered right. A large group of young men turned to see me coming. In my moment of fear, I expected the worst from them. Blood-red betel nut juice oozed from their lips.

Everything seemed to be in slow motion for me now. One of the men spit his blood-red wad onto the pavement as the whole group turned my way and scowled. I started wondering just how bad this was going to get. I resigned myself to the attack that was to come, and recalled that a friend of mine, also an anthropologist, had been stabbed over 30 times in an attack in Port Moresby, and survived. I wondered if I would be so lucky.

"Hey!" the men shouted toward me.

With razor wire on both sides of me, and a 24-inch machete in pursuit, I had no choice but to keep running toward them. Two of the young men seemed to lunge toward me with raised arms, ready to strike.

And then it was over.

The two young men who appeared to be lunging for me were lunging for the boys, protecting me, and had chased the perpetrators into some nearby woods. The young men apologized profusely for the behavior of the boys and welcomed me to their country.

In the years to come I would find great camaraderie, conversation, and comfort hanging out with locals on street corners like that one, but at the time I was in no mood for conversation. I was shaken to my core.

I went straight to the airport.

I had no ticket, but I knew I wasn't staying in Port Moresby. I stared up at the board labeled "Departures" and contemplated my next move. Brisbane, at the top of the list, looked especially appealing. Australia's legendary Gold Coast would offer surf, sand, sun, and most importantly, *safety*. Below Brisbane was a long list of small towns in New Guinea, a few of which I had heard about in my anthropological readings.

A big part of me just wanted to go to Brisbane for a little taste of home, security, and normalcy. But the answers to my questions weren't going to be in Brisbane. They were going to be somewhere down that list.

And that's when I realized why my professor had been smiling. A basic insight dawned upon me that would forever change my life:

*Great questions will take you farther than you ever thought possible.*



I hopped on the next plane to somewhere down that list. But of course, the planes from a city like Port Moresby only land in slightly smaller cities, with only slightly smaller crime problems, so I immediately jumped on another plane to somewhere on a much smaller list, and then again, until I was flying into a little grass airstrip in the center of New Guinea where there was no electricity, plumbing, roads, Internet, phone service, television, or any of the other technologies that we take for granted as making up the basic infrastructure of our lives. There was no hotel to check into and no food to buy. My money would be no good. It was just what I had been looking for.

There were a few familiar sights, even in this remote outpost. A small and simple Baptist church, a two-room schoolhouse, and a small medical aid post sat at the head of the airstrip, made mostly of local materials and looking more- or-less like traditional houses but topped with corrugated steel roofing.

And there was soccer.

People of all ages crowded onto the airstrip after the plane left, whooping and hollering with joy as the ball sailed this way and that. Well over 50 people were playing in this single game, while another 100 or so looked on. A young man approached me and started talking to me in Tok Pisin. I was relieved to hear the language. I knew enough to get by in it, and I was concerned that perhaps nobody would speak it in a remote location like this. We soon found out that we were the same age, 23, and we had one very important complementary interest. He wanted to learn English, and I wanted to learn his language. We were soon fast friends. I had an Aerobie flying

ring in my bag and we started tossing it around. Soon we were sailing it down the airstrip and inventing a new game that was like a cross between Soccer and Ultimate Frisbee. The Aerobie would soar overhead as a sea of pursuers rushed after it collectively chanting "*Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!*" a call that would become increasingly familiar and endearing to me over the coming years.

He took me to his home that night, and over the coming days I was quickly adopted into the family. Almost immediately they started referring to me as kin, using words like "brother" and "tambu" (which means "taboo" and is used between in-laws of similar age such as my brothers' wives).

I immersed myself in their lives, craving the full experience of what it was like to live and think as they did. I went with them to their gardens and learned how they cleared the forest and then burned it to create rich nutrients for the soil. I helped them harvest their most important staple crops, like sweet potato, taro, and bananas. I learned how to start and manage a fire, taking exquisite care to not waste too much precious firewood while maintaining a steady ember to light the next fire.

And when they offered me snake, of course I accepted. Our neighbor had found the 15-foot snake in a nearby tree. It had recently eaten a large rodent, so it was an easy catch, and came with the added bonus that the rodent could be removed and cooked up as our appetizer.

After a week of eating nothing but sweet potatoes and taro, the snake tasted like an exquisitely buttered lobster in a five-star restaurant. But as I ate, I couldn't help but notice that a snake like that could probably crawl through any one of several holes in the hut. *Surely this snake has family*, I thought, *and they will be coming for us*. I made a mental note to seal myself up especially tight that night.

I was already in the practice of sealing myself up in my sleeping bag every night, mostly to protect myself against the bugs and rodents I would see scurrying around as we sat talking around the fire every night. But it was the tropics, and we were sleeping by a fire.

Inevitably I would get too hot, slip out of my covers, wake up to something scurrying across my face, wipe it off, and cover myself up again.

After eating a 15-foot snake found just a few feet from our house, I was extra-vigilant. But it was no use. I woke up in the middle of the night to find my worst nightmare.

I was outside of my sleeping bag, completely exposed to the elements: And I could feel it, as thick as the one I had just eaten, laying across my chest. It felt cold, heavy, and about four inches thick. I couldn't see anything in the dark, but I managed to grab it with my left hand and throw it off of me. Or, at least I tried to throw it off of me. As I threw it, I went with it. *I was wrapped up with this thing somehow.* I eventually managed to wrestle it to the ground and pin it down with my left hand. I tried to free my right arm so I could pin it down with two hands, but I just could not move my right arm. I started to panic and scream.

And that's when I realized ...

I had pinned down my own right arm.

My arm had just fallen asleep and had been resting across my chest.

There was no snake.

This started an all-night cackle of laughter and richly entertaining conversation about me. My language skills were not great. I couldn't quite follow the conversation myself. The only word I could clearly make out was "whiteman," which was invariably followed by a collective laugh; gabbles of "hahahaha!" ... and then all together in unison, "Yeeeeeeeeee!!!"

This is just one among many stories I could tell about my early days in New Guinea. While they would all seem funny, you can't help but recognize the signs of struggle. Such nightmares were just one manifestation of the fears I struggled with every day. The food and water scared me. The creatures scared me. The plants scared me. I thought that at any moment I could taste or touch something that might kill me, and the closest hospital was a seven-day trek over cold

and treacherous mountains. I felt uncomfortable and disoriented most of the time.

The people were impossibly kind and welcoming, but I did not trust them yet. I did not feel worthy of the warmth they offered. I felt like a free-loader and a burden.

They organized a large dance for my enjoyment. It was an all-night affair. The men wore their longest and most decorated penis gourds, covered themselves in red ochre, painted magnificent designs on their faces and strapped bird of paradise plumes to their heads. Women wore grass skirts, carefully woven leg and arm bands, and beaded necklaces. And they danced all night. It was surreal in how magnificent it appeared—and how utterly bored and depressed I felt.

This should be a dream come true for any budding anthropologist. I should have been joyfully decoding the rich symbolism, but I just felt bored and confused. None of it made sense, and I had no idea why they thought their dance was any good. It was just a bunch of guys monotonously banging a drum as they bobbed up and down, the women doing the same, back and forth, all night long. Boring.

More than anything, I felt all alone. My language skills were not good enough to have a real conversation, even with my brothers who spoke Tok Pisin. Language was reduced to mostly practical matters.

Nobody really knew me. What we wear, how we stand, how we walk, how we laugh, when we laugh, even a simple glance made in a certain way can be expressions of our selves. But the meanings associated with all of these expressions is continually worked out within the never-ending dance we call *culture*. Step onto a new dance floor, and not only do you feel lost, you might feel like you lost yourself. My gestures, smiles, and glances were continuously misconstrued. My jokes (clumsily delivered through broken words and flailing gestures) fell flat. There seemed to be no way for me to express to them who I really was.

We learned a term for all this in our anthropology textbook: **culture shock**. Google defines it as "the feeling of disorientation

experienced by someone who is suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture." But it can be so much more than just "disorientation." For me, it was a complete loss of self.

I fell into a deep depression. My worst moments were the moments that should have been the best. A picturesque sunset would not fill me with awe, but with a deep longing for the awe that I should be feeling. Until that moment, I had always thought of my "self" as something inside me that I had carefully shaped over the years. I worked hard to be smart, funny, and kind, characteristics that I valued. I thought of these traits as something inside me that I projected outward.

What I discovered in New Guinea was that who we are is also reflected back to us by the people around us. George Cooley called this "the looking glass self." As he says, "I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am." When I think that the people around me don't think I am smart, funny, or kind, I start to internalize those judgments. And when I thought the people around me in New Guinea did not know who I was or what I was doing there, I found myself asking those same questions. I didn't know who I was or what I was doing there.

I may have had great questions to pursue, but I did not feel safe and comfortable enough to pursue them. I was not immersing myself in their lives. And I wasn't learning anything. I rarely spoke. I was protecting whatever was left of my fragile self. I was afraid that if I tried to speak the local language that I would be mocked and seen as the village idiot. So I stayed silent.

I was closing down and shutting out the world, counting the days until the next plane might come and take me home. I made an amendment to my earlier revelation about questions:

*Questions may take you farther than you ever thought possible, but it won't matter if you can't open up and connect with people when you get there*

One morning in the depths of my depression, I was walking along a mountain ridge with two of my "brothers" as the sun was

rising. From the ridge where we walked we had a breathtaking view of the mountainous green landscape, the sun casting a beautiful orange glow onto the peaks. We were just above the morning clouds, and the green forested mountaintops looked like fluorescent islands in a soft white sea. A crisp blue sky framed the peaceful idyllic vision.

I saw all these things, but I couldn't really experience them. I was not well. I have always been a happy person. I've never suffered from depression or even been hampered by a mild malaise. But here I was viewing what had to be the most spectacular and wondrous vision I had ever seen, and I was literally collapsing in sadness. My inability to experience the beauty that I knew was right there in front of me destroyed my spirit. My legs grew weak. I started to stumble. My knees hit the ground. I knelt for a moment, and then simply collapsed to the ground, crying.

My brothers came to my side. They had tears in their eyes. They could not have known why I was crying, and yet there they were crying right along with me. "Brother Mike," they asked, "Why are you crying?"

All I could think about was home and my wife, so I said, "I miss my wife."

They started laughing and laughing, tears still streaming down their faces. "Oh, Mike!" they exclaimed, "we would never miss our wives! But we miss our kids," they said, starting to cry again. They shook their heads side to side while quickly tapping their tongues on the roof of their mouths, a sound I would come to know as the sound one makes when you are allowing the feelings of another to become your own.

That cry was like the sweat that breaks a fever. I felt renewed with a new joy for life. I immediately started to feel better. Something about their show of empathy made me feel understood and known for the first time in months. I felt like the word "brother" really meant something, that they would stand by me no matter what, that they would be willing to walk with me through the arduous learning process of understanding their language and culture even as I



stumbled along. My joy for life was back and I was living my dream of diving into a cultural world radically different than the one in which I had been raised.

I have never learned faster than in those coming months. My fear was gone. I started playing with the local language, trying it out with my brothers and friends. I didn't care that I sounded like a two-year-old or the village idiot. Because soon I was sounding like a three-year-old, and then a four-year-old.

That's when I learned the true meaning and power of participant observation. I wasn't just learning to speak the language. As I opened myself up to this new culture, it was as if the whole ethos of the culture started to course through my veins. I could feel my whole body re-arrange itself into their postures and habits. My back loosened, my arms swung a little more freely, and my feet came alive, feeling the terrain like an extra set of hands. I learned to walk with a springy step over mountains I once had to crawl up and down. I tuned my senses to see and understand the world as they did. I learned to see the stories a plant could tell and to hear birds as clocks and harbingers of what was to come. I learned the joy of growing your own food, and of hunting, trapping, skinning, and feasting. I learned the values of humility, calm and patience required to live in a small community with people you have always known and will always know. I learned to feel the cool wind coming down over the mountain as a signal of the coming rain.

Some years later, another dance was arranged. This time, *they* did not don their best penis gourds and headdresses. *We* did. I did not feel like an imposter anymore. The dance did not feel like a performance for me. It just seemed like something fun to do together. As I started to drum and bounce along with them I immediately noticed that something wasn't quite right. My tailfeather wasn't bouncing, it just hung limply off my backside. Women were pointing and laughing at me. Apparently, this dance that I originally saw as simple and boring was more complex than I thought. My brother pulled me aside and showed me how to "pop" by backside

up, making my tailfeather soar up and down. The ladies shrieked with approval. Throughout the evening women flirtatiously pulled and tugged on the bounding and bouncing tailfeathers of their favorite dancers, and soon I saw people coupling up and disappearing into the woods.

It would be easy to stand off to the side of this dance and try to decipher some deep meaning for it, the men and women both dressed as birds, moving this way and that way in an apparently timeless tribal pattern. But on this night I saw meanings that could not be deciphered from the outside. I saw meanings that could only be understood by joining in the dance yourself. It was fun. It was riddled with anticipation, excitement, and apprehension. My bachelor friends were especially nervous, hoping to catch the eye of their latest crush. Nervous laughter and teasing bounced around the open fire when we took breaks from the dance. And having rested, the boys would shake their tailfeathers ever more vigorously, hoping to win the hearts of their favorite girls.

As we danced under the full moon I reflected on the true power of those three terms at the heart of anthropology and how they had changed my life. "Ethnocentrism" challenged me to ask questions that ended up taking me halfway around the world. "Cultural relativism" challenged me to make real connections with people, to truly open up to them and understand the world from an entirely different point of view. And "participant observation" challenged me to try new things, to join the dance of this other culture, immersing myself in a different way of life.

Asking questions, making connections, and trying new things are the essence of this science of human beings. But I have found them to be much more than that. They are also the foundation for being the best human you can be.

## Challenge One: Talking to Strangers

Your first challenge is to approach a stranger and engage them in "big talk" (as opposed to "small talk"). Hear their story and ask if you can share it on Instagram with #anth101challenge1

Objective: Practice the anthropological mindset of asking questions, making connections, and trying new things.

Capturing and telling the stories of humans in compelling ways is an essential component of anthropology, and these days that means mastering multiple forms of storytelling in multiple media (photography, video, audio, as well as text).

But capturing a great story is not just capturing a good picture. You will need to practice the art of anthropology – asking questions, making connections, and trying new things. Try to move past "small talk" and into "big talk." Ask big questions and offer your own answers too.

Try to get in a positive mindset as you approach strangers, and let that carry you through this challenge. Remember that people are different, and these differences represent the vast range of human potential and possibility.

Go to [ANTH101.com/challenge1](https://anth101.com/challenge1) for additional photo-taking tips and "big talk" inspiration.