

Culture & Communication

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Lecture # 9: Ethnographic Methods Across Times and Places

Today

1. What is ethnography?
2. What ethnographers do.
3. Examples of my own ethnographic projects.
4. The anthropology of conflict management,
Ethnography in your own country on a social issue you have
opinions about. Change of paradigm?

Ethnography

1. Writing down (fixing, inscribing) culture, e.g., in “fieldnotes,” transcripts, images, film/videos.
2. Participant observation
3. Asking questions
4. Interviewing
5. Producing “Annotated Transcripts”

Some general principles of research

1. We never get to the ultimate, exhaustive, perfect understanding of anything. We follow certain standards and we are open to improving on them.

“There is an Indian story – at least I heard it as an Indian story – about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? “Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.” (Geertz 1973: 28-9)

2. We have methods that give us knowledge of all kinds of phenomena and on the basis of them we make **generalizations** and, in some cases, **predictions**. If we make our methods and results explicit, others can check to see whether they make the same observations. They might also have other hypotheses to explain the same phenomena.

3. We need to ask “What is this method (or knowledge) good for?” and “Are there other ways of knowing?”

4. We also need to ask whether our methods are **ethically sound** or violate some human rights or other principles that are important to members of the communities we study.

Checking on quality of research

In academia, there are certain **standards** of research.

There are a few general principles that apply to all or most disciplines or areas of research.

There are also **discipline-specific** standards of empirical research.

When we are dealing with **human** subjects as well as with **animals** (especially but not only primates), there are also **ethical** principles governing what kind of methods can be used, whether various degrees of discomfort or harm can be inflicted, and for what purpose.

Ethics in Research – Protection of Human Subjects

- All research protocols must be subject to a peer-review process (by the IRB – Institutional Review Board - on campus) that conforms to Federal Regulations aimed at ensuring that people's rights (human subjects') are not violated during research.
- Certain groups, e.g., children, incarcerated people, mentally disabled people, are considered "vulnerable populations" and their study requires special approval to make sure they will be protected and not negatively affected.
- UCLA complies with these regulations through the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) – All research projects (by faculty or students) are subject to review and approval.
- These rules and precautions do not usually apply to filmmakers, artists, journalists, and those who are outside of academic institutions.

Fieldwork in anthropology

- is an integral part of anthropological research
- exhibits paradoxes
- relies on different tools
- its most general tool is “inscription”
- must match observational and ethical standards

2 Meanings of “Ethnography”

1. A Practice (ways of learning)
2. A Product (a book)

Inscribing culture

Ethnography = lit. the “writing (down)” (-*graphy*) of a people (*ethnos*)

The method used by anthropologists of documenting the social life of a group of people, typically done via ***participant observation***, i.e., living in the community to observe and participate in daily life – “**community**” **changed over time, from villages to neighborhoods, to institutions like schools and hospitals, families, etc.)**

Ethnographers write ***fieldnotes*** about what they have observed, learned, heard.

It involves casual conversations or extended **interviews**, usually with open-ended questions [not necessarily questionnaires]

It can also involve the use of **photos, maps, drawings**, and devices like audio recorders and video cameras.

Linguistic anthropologists today tend to rely more and more on **audio and video** recordings.

Change of paradigm?

According to Thomas Kuhn's 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, "paradigm" refers to a particular tradition of scientific research that has its own questions, theoretical concepts, and methods (e.g., Newton's vs. Einstein's physics are two different paradigms).

Have the questions, concepts, and methods of anthropology changed over the last 120 years?

In the past, ethnographies were meant to be as comprehensive as possible (e.g. “everything you should know about the “X”)

Today ethnographers tend to focus on narrower, specific cultural activities, groups, or experiences within a given community.

- a) Activities (e.g., working, playing, classroom, eating, drinking together, chatting, ceremonies/rituals, religious events, praying, singing, reading)
- b) Groups (e.g., men, women, both, teams, classmates, playmates, working team, artists, policemen)
- c) Individual experience (e.g., migrating, learning a new job, illness, learning a language, traveling, meeting people, being arrested, losing a job, mourning, learning/playing music, finding a partner)

Examples: some of my ethnographic projects

1. 13 months in (then “Western”) Samoa as part of a team lead by Elinor Ochs on language acquisition and socialization (my part: the adult language across social contexts, including meetings of village council [*fono*]) – returned (for shorter periods) in 1981, 1988, 1999, 2000
2. Literacy practices in Samoan families living in Southern California (with E. Ochs and UCLA students from the Samoan community) 1990-1993
3. A political campaign for the U.S. Congress in the 22nd district in California (data collection: 1995-1996)
4. Acquisition of jazz aesthetics, improvisation in music and talk (2002-2011).

Walls, living, family

What is a “house”, “dwelling,” “home”?

What does “living” mean (as in “living together” or “living alone”)?

What does “family” mean?



Houses

fale 'house'

fale sāmōa '(traditional) Samoan house'

fale pālāgi 'foreign house' (with walls)

Fale tele 'big house' (to host meetings)

fale `ese 'latrine' (*`ese* 'away, different')

fale fasipovi 'butcher house' (*fasi* 'beat, kill' *povi* 'cow')

Fale logo 'Bell-tower' (*logo* 'bell')

`umu or *`umu kuka* 'cooking house'

Fale puipui 'prison' (***puipui*** 'to surround, fence')

Participant-Observation

- Anthropologists need to “be there”
- This need creates paradoxes.

The Participant Observer's Paradox

A. The researcher must be present in order to observe what people really do and say;

B. By being present, the observer is part of the interaction and may affect what people do.

(and not telling people what we are there for is not acceptable to the academic profession)

Solutions

1. Accept that there will always be some self-consciousness by the members of the community, for being observed but it will be intermittent and variable.
2. By being present in the same situation over time to get people used to having ethnographer around and learning *how to be in a given situation, when and how to ask questions or record interaction.*
3. Recording for extended periods of time. It is difficult for people to monitor themselves all the time.

Ways of being

- 4. Be a good observer.
- 5. Be a good listener.
- 6. Be respectful.
- 7. Learn when and how to ask questions.

Being there by video taping



A. Duranti & M. Platt getting ready to record a saofa`i (installation of new chiefly titles) in Falefâ, (Western) Samoa, 1979.

Complete Participation



Researcher and son sit at Sunday lunch (to'ona'i) in Falefâ,
(Western) Samoa, 1988

In the flow: filming along



Observer's Effects in Other Fields, e.g., Physics

- The Observer's Paradox is not unique to the study of human beings.
- To measure the pressure of a tire, we let some air out, thereby changing the pressure.
- The mercury-in-glass thermometer produces or absorbs thermal energy and thereby changes the temperature of the body.
- In Quantum mechanics, the measurement of certain phenomena can change due to what is used to measure them.

The "Law" in "traditional" societies

There is a long tradition of anthropological studies of how non-western societies handle violations of local norms and serious crimes (the field is called "legal anthropology")

In linguistic anthropology, there have been studies of events where the community addresses conflicts about properties and rights (e.g., over land, labor, kinship, inheritance) or acts of physical aggression.

The Samoan “fono” as political-judiciary arena

My dissertation is about one event, called *fono*, where the community's leaders (heads of families, called *matai*, comprising both chiefs, *ali`i*, and ‘orators’, *tulāfale*) discussed any conflict involving the entire community or members of the *fono*. (This was framed as applying “tradition” *aganu`u*)

There were other *komiti* that dealt with minor infractions involving people of lower rank.

There are also government courts in the capital, Apia, e.g., the Supreme Court, a Court of Appeal, Family court etc., which follow a western-style proceedings, for violation of the written laws (*tulafono*).

Traditional ways of handling a Murder in Samoa

Ifoga = representatives of the offender visit the family of the victim to ask for forgiveness.

(see Shore, Bradd 1982. *Sala`Ilua: A Samoan Mystery*. New York: Columbia University Press)

Hierarchical (stratified) vs Egalitarian societies

This distinction was an important one in the anthropology of the 20th century.

“Hierarchical” or “stratified” was used for societies where there are status or rank distinctions among members, e.g., some individuals hold “titles” of various importance that give them right over land, labor force, and the products of the labor.

“Egalitarian” refers to societies where there are no distinctions of status or rank except for age, gender, and personal prestige (M. Sahlins 1958)

Anthropology of Law: Papua New Guinea

Pospisil, Leopold 1981. "Modern and Traditional Administration of Justice in New Guinea." *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*.19: 93-116.

Legal system in an egalitarian society

“Kapauku political and legal systems were based on an egalitarian philosophy and notion of equity. All people were ideally regarded as equal in law and their relations were expected to be balanced: any favor or payment extended to another person ultimately had to be countered by an equivalent prestation - a notion of balance called uta-uta, "half-half" (or even better, "fifty-fifty"). Conformity with social and legal norms was achieved by inducement rather than compulsion. The Kapauku did not force anyone into conformity. They did, of course, punish offenders for crimes and torts, but the punishment was regarded as reestablishing the uta-uta balance and was recognized also as a corrective measure for the culprit and a deterrent for potential offenders. The people regarded individual freedom as, possibly, their most valuable possession. It was not taken from anyone, not even from a convicted criminal.” (Pospisil, Leopold 1981: 96)

Consequences of incarceration in PNG

“Such institutions as jails, home imprisonment, captivity in war, servitude, or slavery were unheard of. Indeed, freedom of movement and of premeditated action was regarded as the basic condition for life. If a body were physically forced to remain in one place such as a prison, or forced to work, the soul, displeased and unable to direct the individual's activity, would leave the body permanently, thus causing death. ” (Pospisil, ib.)

Review

Ethnography as a method.

Changes of paradigm in anthropology.

Examples of ethnographic projects (Duranti's projects).

Different kinds of "inscriptions" (fieldnotes, audio, video recording)

Researching the administration of "justice" in different societies.

Different kinds of punishments and reconciliation.

The consequences of imprisonment in egalitarian societies.