

Ethnography

1. **INTRO** Originally people who studied cultures were amateurs who happened to either be particularly observant or who happened to travel a lot. Some of them did more or less what people did today.
 - a. Ibn Khaldun was a famous Arab scholar who did observations of everyone, including the Vikings.
 - b. For example, the Jesuit Missionaries in Canada the 17th century would send reports back to their superiors in France, partly as propaganda to get more missionaries to come out. Compiled something like 42 volumes of detailed descriptions of native life.
 - i. A famous Franciscan missionary in Mexico in the 16th century had a kind of ethnographic sweatshop. Had a whole group of natives who worked with him. He produced many studies of Aztec language and culture over the years
 - c. So the impulse to write about your own culture or someone else's culture is not a new idea.
2. **MODERN ETHNOGRAPHY** Ethnography as we know it is a product of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - a. As anthropologist started to become more professionalized, a lot of projects were carried out on expeditions. They'd travel to a foreign country, pay the natives to stage dances and rituals for them, talk to a few people and then go home again after a few weeks or months.
 - b. Here in the states, some studies became more long term with the establishment of the Bureau of American Ethnography
 - c. But mostly we give credit to the start of ethnography to a famous Polish-British anthropologist named **Bronislaw Malinowski**.
 - i. During WWI was beginning to study people in New Guinea and the nearby islands. He had to give his word of honor that he wouldn't work for the Germans, put on parole and could study the Trobriand Islanders.

- ii. Wrote a series of very long books. One of the first great field workers.
 - iii. Insisted that you had to live with the people you studied and learn their language and immerse yourself in their lives. This became one of the main tenants of fieldwork.
 - iv. After he died, his second wife published his diary and we found out that Malinowski didn't always practice what he preached. He spent a lot of time flirting with the wives of missionaries, obsessing about his mother and sitting in his tent. He had servants and talked about the natives using the English word "nigger".
 - d. Malinowski had a student named **E.E. Evans-Pritchard** who studied the Nuer. Had it rough. People didn't trust him, had a hard time doing interviews, and couldn't connect with the people. But his descriptions of fieldwork set the standard of what fieldwork should be.
- 3. **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION** Oxymoron? How can you observe when you're participating? But you can make observations and take notes later. You're observing while still being a part of the social setting you're observing. At any given time you might be doing more of one than the other.
 - a. It helps to build trust. You eat that they eat, and work when they work, you build trust.
 - b. Traditionally anthropologists studies people who have less power or wealth than them and there can be a lot of suspicion. Living with the people starts to allow them to see you as a person.
 - i. For example, and anthropologist working in Bali attended a cockfight with the people he was studying. When the cops came to break it up he had to run out an hide with the rest of them. That showed his solidarity with the people he was studying.
 - c. Some things only come over time.
 - i. When Prof Howe worked with the Kuna in Panama, people kept asking if he and his wife were afraid of sleeping alone. After a

while they found out that Kuna were worried that spirits might carry them off, so they slept with one another.

- d. Things come little by little. In your head you have a persistent set of questions and eventually you understand their answers.
 - i. An old ethnography of the Kuna done by a missionary said that the Kuna didn't store food. But the missionary had never gone to the forest. When Howe went to the forest with the Kuna, he saw that they had planted their banana crops so that they'd ripen at different times during the year. Thus they did have stored food, they just "stored" it in the field.
- e. Participant observation can be dangerous. Mostly accident; car wreck, animal bites, illness and the like. Car and truck wrecks are the most common.
- f. There's a question about if your presence there distorts people's behavior. Are the people self-conscious about your being there?
 - i. Often if you stay there long enough, people grow more comfortable. You have to keep that in mind when you make your observations.
- g. (Field notes projected on the screen.) Anthropologists are very secretive about their field notes.
- h. One of the problems is the struggle between note taking and participating.
- i. Another key aspect is open-ended, qualitative interviewing, almost the opposite of questionnaires.
 - i. Questionnaires have limitations because they box you into answers. Anthropologists look for a way to talk about things that doesn't foreclose options or box in people's answers.
 1. This happened in casual conversations and in formal interviews.
 2. You're looking for what is important to the people you speak to. You have to let people talk about what they want to talk about.

3. Example, anthropologist found that homeless people were poorly captured in surveys. One found that an important term to the homeless was “flops”, meaning a place where you can put your stuff down and sleep. Much of the lives of homeless people revolved around finding flops or getting to flops. This work eventually led to a new way of thinking about and dealing with homeless people.
4. **INFORMANTS** *Informant* can have the connotation of “spy”, but the term is still used. Myerhoff uses “informants” quite a bit. Today “consultant” is often used instead.
 - a. Informants are people who are particularly helpful, observant or eloquent in explaining their culture.
 - b. Sometimes the informants are people who are starved for attention, or have been observing and thinking themselves. Some relationships with informants go on for many years.
 - c. You also have to guard against being too swayed by this one person.

5. LANGUAGE

- a. If you work in a culture with a foreign language, you are expected to learn the language.
- b. This is especially hard if the language is unwritten.
- c. Often times you have to learn the national language as well as the field language.
- d. As you learn the language you learn a lot about the people.
 - i. For example, Howe found that the people who lived near by the Kuna were called the “Bila” the word for “war”. Indicated that these people were traditional enemies.
- e. Anthropology’s dirty little secret is that many ethnographers actually don’t learn the language or only learn a little bit.
 - i. Sometimes because everyone speaks the national language
 - ii. Sometimes because it’s too hard.
- f. You have to realize that your translator may not be totally accurate.

- g. Learning the language and working in it is still best.
6. **DICTATE THEIR OWN STORIES** Another example you see in Myerhoff , sometimes you have people speak their own stories, recorded on tape.
- a. Franz Boas – One of the most famous names in modern anthropology, got people to write down their stories or recipes.
 - b. When you let people just talk about what they want to tell you, it can be very informative.
 - c. You have to transcribe the info, which is very time consuming
 - d. It's great to hear people talk when they don't think you're listening.
People often talk more frankly when you're not there. This is again seen in Myerhoff.
7. **QUESTIONAIRES** Anthropologists often use questionnaires, but only after they figure out the right questions.
- a. "Culturally appropriate" questionnaires are informed by the information you've collected.
 - b. The most common questionnaire is a household census.
 - c. Create maps of relationships.
8. **THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS A STRANGER** Implicit in this is that you are a stranger.
- a. You are learning something new from the beginning.
 - b. You are a child, or perhaps the village idiot. There is much you don't know and have to be corrected on.
 - i. Helps to even out the power differences.
 - c. Myerhoff's work was different because anthropologists traditionally didn't look at their own cultures. Now this is more common.
 - i. With Myerhoff, she shares a lot with her subjects, but she tries to make things seem different and strange to deepen our understanding by getting us to not take things for granted.
 - d. This doesn't mean ethnography is a cold and dispassionate endeavor.
 - i. Your feelings always get involved, but that in itself is revealing.

- ii. You have to spend some time after the fieldwork sorting out what your biases were.
- iii. Ultimately this is more useful than trying to be dispassionate towards your fieldwork. You will be right in the middle of very real social dramas and you have to work your way through.

9. **ETHICS AND ETHNOGRAPHY** There are a lot of issues with ethnography.

- a. Is it ok if you're rich and privileged to go study someone less privileged than you if they can't come and study your culture? There are some ethical issues of the power relations.
- b. What if someone asks you to get them medicine? Do you say no, or do you pass out medicines you're not licensed to distribute?
- c. Good book "Return to Laughter" by Eleanor Smith Bowen. Looks at problems she had studying Nigerian culture where at first the people seemed very callous to each other and Bowen had to come to grips with this.
- d. You become close to the people you study, but what if you want to write something that may not be flattering?
- e. You want to support the people you work with, but you may have a different take on something than they do.
 - i. Classic example John Marquand wrote stories about New England. Wrote about wealthy people in Newberyport. He described a wealthy family that was sliding in status and the family didn't want the world to know that about them. In the novel an obnoxious anthropologist upsets the narrator by writing about his family. The character was based on a social scientist named Lloyd Warner who studied Newberyport. The narrator was upset because the study said hard but true things about his family.
- f. Can you write about culture without making enemies?
 - i. Someone wrote an article in reply to this question entitled: No.
- g. If people are doing something illegal do you write about it?
- h. What if what you've written is used to harm the people you study?

- i. French anthropologist wrote about highlanders in North Vietnam and the Vietnamese army used the study to guide in their pacification efforts.
- i. *Number Our Days* brings up a lot of these questions. Moral question, identification questions, questions of how you learn...