

Commentary Paper on Anthropological Research Methods

The main difference between anthropological methods of research demonstrated by Johnson and Abidian and methods of scientific research in other disciplines is the human aspect of the things being studied. In traditional scientific research, what is studied is either inanimate, living but not human, or “test cases” who have agreed to participate in the study. This means they can be manipulated and scientists can control them to try to get the best results. In the case of anthropological research, the researcher must immerse themselves into the culture they are studying because the whole goal is to learn about the culture without any external manipulation. Sometimes this involves the researcher changing aspects of themselves. For example, Abidjan talks about “exaggerat[ing her] gender while obscuring [her] race, or [emphasizing her] generational competence with social media use while only hinting at [her] vocational status” (Abidjan, 58). She has to essentially manipulate herself to learn the most about the culture she is studying. Johnson also demonstrates a similar idea when he says “I wanted Mr. Atkins to see me, by local standards, as a man among men” (Johnson, 111). Instead of manipulating some chemicals, he has to change his behavior to gain the trust of the people he is studying.

As a result, the level of commitment of anthropological researchers is higher than that of other scientific disciplines. Anthropological research constitutes a full change in lifestyle, whereas typical scientific work can take up large amounts of time, but it does not require immersing yourself in a different culture for months or years. Johnson mentions that Griaule spent 23 years among the Dogon of Mali gaining their trust before he was able to have 23 days

of conversations about their sacred knowledge (Johnson, 117). Scientific research also often has large and time-consuming parts at the beginning of a project where the sole goal is learning about the subject without conducting any research. There are also plenty of scientific studies that take decades, but they do not require the researcher to live in a different culture. Some people would view this level of commitment as a drawback, while some would not. This is what separates anthropologists from non-anthropologists.

Another difference is that in anthropological research, the personal conduct of the researcher is more important than it is in most scientific research. In traditional research, scientists have to communicate amongst themselves and then present their findings to the outside world. This type of communication is also necessary for anthropological research. The additional degree of communication with the culture they are studying means that the way the anthropologist conducts themselves plays a role in how the research turns out.

Even though anthropological research and scientific research are different in several ways, they are also similar in others. In both, the goal is to discover something new about a field of interest and the process to getting there can be long and arduous with unforeseen obstacles along the way. The traditional scientific method involves creating a hypothesis, doing experiments, evaluating the results, then refining the hypothesis and repeating. In Johnson's work, something similar happens where he tries to gain the trust of the teachers but fails, then learns from his mistakes and tries again. The same type of thing happens when he is trying to gain the trust of Bequia. Another similarity is just this. Even when research does not go as planned and may be considered a "failure" there is still plenty to be considered. It is hard for me to imagine "failed" anthropological research because even if the researcher cannot gain access to what they are learning about, plenty is learned about what that entails. Despite the differences in

them, both traditional scientific research and anthropological research require intense dedication from the researcher and learning from mistakes to do better research.

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