

The Fieldwork Tradition

This book offers a personal and humanistic glimpse of the life and work of cultural anthropology. Many manuals or “how to” books on fieldwork are available. Our aim instead is to explore what being an anthropologist and doing fieldwork are like. We tell stories from our own experiences as well as recount some from the many students we have taught over the years. By doing so we hope to convey the range of topics anthropologists study and the different kinds of research they do. We describe the strategies and techniques we used to gather data, some of our findings, and the problems and pleasures of doing fieldwork. We hope these stories impart a sense of the anthropological approach to knowledge as well as the excitement and challenge of living in and learning from other cultures. The chapters that follow include experiences in diverse cultures, with representatives from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean.

THE FIELD

“The field” refers to the cultural setting where anthropologists do their research. Until a few decades ago, this was usually a non-Western place and involved living among tribal or peasant peoples. Typically, fieldwork

meant moving into a village, learning the language, gaining rapport, and living as closely as possible to the way of the “natives” for at least a year. Many anthropologists still go to distant and unfamiliar places to do this kind of fieldwork, but today the field can be just about anywhere, from a village in Kenya to a New York City street corner, an ethnic enclave in Paris, or the corridors of a transnational corporation. It can also refer to more than one place, since more and more research requires or benefits from a multisited approach. Now it is common among scholars studying migration, for example, to do fieldwork in both the migrants’ home society and their destination communities. Regardless of geographic location or cultural group, however, the notion of “the field” or being “in the field” is symbolically and emotionally laden. Doing fieldwork remains a rite of passage in anthropology, turning graduate students into professionals.

The appeal of and opportunity to travel abroad and learn about another culture by living among its people probably attract as many students to anthropology as its vast subject matter. The prospect of conducting surveys or reading manuscripts, in contrast, holds less allure as the reason someone would choose to go into sociology or history. While in the field, there is no sharp boundary between an anthropologist’s work and play, public and personal life. In contrast, the sociologist administering a survey or the historian reading documents in an archive usually commutes to his or her research site and returns home at the end of the day. Not so for most anthropologists. Even during casual conversations or while just hanging out at their research site, anthropologists are always “on the job,” their antennae up.

As we hope becomes evident in the following chapters, fieldwork is more than a particular methodology of research. It is also a transformative experience for the individuals who engage in it. Going to the field means leaving one’s own culture and immersing oneself deeply in the life of another and is usually totally absorbing. As such, it is a personal as well as a professional crucible. In the process of learning about others, anthropologists also discover a great deal about themselves and their own culture. It is no wonder that a mystique surrounds the discipline.

FIELDWORK: PAST AND PRESENT

For readers who may not know the history of anthropology, we should point out that fieldwork has not always been a core component of the discipline. Most nineteenth-century anthropologists were “armchair” scholars who never ventured into the field, relying instead on the descriptions of native life written by missionaries, colonial administrators, and explorers as the data upon which they based their hypotheses and theories. These early cultural anthropologists were less interested in individual cultures than in developing grand schemes of how culture had evolved.

Fieldwork did not become an essential part of the professional practice of anthropology until the early twentieth century, largely due to the pioneering research of Franz Boas among the Inuit and Kwakiutl (or Kwakwaka'wakw) and Bronislaw Malinowski among the Trobriand Islanders.¹ By residing among the people they were studying, and living to a large extent as the locals did, Boas and Malinowski produced descriptions of culture far richer and vastly more reliable than the schema produced by earlier armchair anthropologists.

When we began graduate school in the late 1960s, there were few published accounts of fieldwork. Ethnographies were written almost as if no fieldworker had been present. In fact, most anthropologists said little about how they collected their data and even less about their experiences in gaining entrée into a distant society, learning a little-known language, or getting along with their subjects. Some observers have suggested that anthropologists didn't say much because of the idiosyncratic and personal nature of field research. Perhaps. But there were a few exceptions, all written by women and at a time when there were not that many women in the discipline. Laura Bohannon, under the nom de plume of Elenore Bowen, published *Return to Laughter* in 1954, a popularized and somewhat fictionalized version of her research among the Tiv of Nigeria. She used a pseudonym to protect her reputation as a serious ethnographer. Hortense Powdermaker in *Stranger and Friend* (1966) described her research experiences in four different

cultures. A few years later, Jean Briggs in *Never in Anger* (1970) vividly recounted the hardship and cultural misunderstandings of her fieldwork among the Inuit, who shunned her for a time.

We remember an anthropology department meeting at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) in 1969 when a group of graduate students asked the faculty to offer a course on field-research methods. Some were preparing to depart for field sites across the developing world with only a vague idea about how to carry out this mysterious thing called “fieldwork.” One senior professor told us that he couldn’t teach such a course because fieldwork was so highly individual. Every culture was different, and doing good fieldwork meant being able to adapt to and develop relationships with the people you were studying. That, he said, “can’t be taught. Figuring out how to do it is part of the challenge of fieldwork . . . it’s sink or swim.” Another professor chimed in to say that having devoted his entire career to studying a tribal group in Southeast Asia, he could not possibly advise us on how to study Mexican villagers, Athabascan Indians, or Filipino farmers—some of the groups that our fellow graduate students were heading off to study. There were no textbooks or guides for fieldworkers back then; the closest was the 1951 edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. The first edition, published nearly a century earlier in 1874, had been subtitled *For the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands*. Its aim, in the words of the authors, was to be “a handy *aide-memoir* . . . to stimulate accurate observation and the recording of information thus obtained by anyone in contact with peoples and cultures hitherto imperfectly described.”² There was also a small body of anthropology folklore about the arcane and largely useless advice about fieldwork that famous anthropologists had given their departing graduate students. Renowned British anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown reputedly told his students to “get a large notebook and start in the middle because you never know which way things will develop.” At the University of California, Berkeley, Alfred Kroeber instructed his charges to buy notebooks and pencils “and take a big skillet.” Before leaving for his first fieldwork in a village

in India in 1952, Alan Beals was told by his mentor, “Never accept free housing and always carry a supply of marmalade.”

While the UCSB faculty did not take up our suggestion to offer a research-methods course, they did agree to invite Berkeley anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker to campus. She had studied under Bronislaw Malinowski, the anthropologist most responsible for convincing the entire discipline of the value of long-term fieldwork, and she had recently published her lively field account. Despite ill health, she accepted the invitation and traveled down the coast to meet us. Almost reverently, we grad students sat at her feet on the living room floor of Professor David Brokensha’s house in the hills above Santa Barbara, listening to her stories. Her enthusiasm for fieldwork was infectious and made us eager to get our own research under way.

When we finished our doctoral dissertations in 1975, there still wasn’t much interest within the discipline in personal accounts of field experiences. When I (George) wrote about my fieldwork in the first draft of my doctoral dissertation, my advisor, Charles Erasmus, wrote in the margins, “Is all this necessary? It all seems very graduate studentish.” Another member of my committee referred to the account as “Boy Scout tales” and recommended deleting the chapter, which I did in the next draft. A few years later, however, when the dissertation was revised into a book, I reinserted it as an appendix, and a decade later when the book was reissued, it became a separate chapter, reflecting the changing opinions within anthropology about the value of reporting one’s field experiences. Today, not only are there an increasing number of books about fieldwork, but some anthropologists also post blogs as they carry out their research.

Today, the attitude of our UCSB professors, who in the 1960s and 1970s thought themselves unable to teach field methods, seems archaic. Few anthropology departments today do not offer such a course, and not just for graduate students. Indeed, a research-methods course is now usually required for undergraduate anthropology majors, and some departments offer summer “field schools” in which students travel

to and live with local families in another culture while learning how to conduct fieldwork under the supervision of a faculty mentor.

A few words about our own academic backgrounds before turning to the chapters. Our intellectual underpinnings are fairly typical of anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s. We both majored in anthropology as undergraduates: George at Stanford, and Sharon at the University of California, Santa Barbara. We both went to graduate school at UCSB, and, therefore, early in our careers we were the products of the curriculum and training offered there. UCSB was like most graduate programs in that the interests of its graduate students varied depending upon the particular professors they studied under. Cultural evolution, cultural ecology, and cultural materialism were then the major theoretical orientations of the UCSB faculty. Whatever the paradigm, we all embraced anthropology's aim to understand human cultures in the broadest possible terms and took pride in the discipline's comprehensive approach—historically, geographically, and holistically considering all aspects of culture. We were trained and took our “comps” (comprehensive exams) in all “four fields”—cultural anthropology as well as archaeology, linguistics, and biological anthropology—learning about humans as biological as well as cultural beings.

We have spent eight of the past forty years in the field, living among and studying Irish Travellers, English Gypsies, the Tlingit, Barbadian villagers, Japanese suburbanites, rural Newfoundlanders, American baseball players, and tourists and tourism workers in many places. Some of our fieldwork, especially in the early years, wears the label of classic “people and places” ethnography in which the research involved a fairly holistic description of a culture. Most of it, however, has focused on specific issues or slices of culture rather than the whole pie. Again, our aim in writing this account is to convey what life and work in cultural anthropology is like. Although there is much in the following chapters about how research is done, this is not a conventional text. We also hope these fieldwork accounts and stories impart a sense of the excitement and challenge of living in and learning from other cultures.