The Problems of Participant Observation

As you read on page 22, participant observation can be a source of in-depth cultural understanding. It is also highly subjective, which means that a researcher's point of view and cultural background can shape his or her conclusions. To make their conclusions more reliable, researchers should use objective data (for example, counting populations, mapping, and semi-structured interviews), along with the notes from their participant observations. It is also important for researchers to use reflexivity, the practice of reflecting on their own world view, biases, and impact on the culture they are studying. Researchers should share their work with their subjects and ask them if their interpretations are accurate (Ember and Ember, 1999).

Sex, Lies, and Anthropology: Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman

Margaret Mead is one of anthropology's most influential and controversial figures. Best known for her study of Samoan adolescent girls, Mead was interested in examining whether stresses during adolescence were caused by adolescence itself or by society. Mead studied Samoan adolescent girls using participant observation, living among a small group and conducting interviews over nine months between 1925 and 1926. Mead observed that, in contrast to American adolescent girls, adolescence was a stress-free time for Samoan girls. Mead believed that this easy transition to adulthood was due to the sexual freedom Samoan girls experienced and concluded that sex roles were determined by culture, not biology. This conclusion fit with the anthropological and societal ideas of the 1920s. Women were re-evaluating their roles in North American society, and her findings were popular among women and men who wanted social change. Margaret Mead was a popular speaker and went on to publicize her work and the study of anthropology.

Derek Freeman, who began working in Western Samoa in the 1960s and studying its culture, criticized Mead's work in a book published in 1983. He concluded, based on his own research and interviews, that Samoa actually had very restrictive sexual practices. He felt that Mead had been tricked by her informants, teenage girls who were highly embarrassed by the intensely personal questions of a foreigner, citing specific rituals that indicated the importance of female virginity.

What challenges does participant observation have for the researcher and for those who are being observed?

FIGURE 1-9 Margaret Mead and two Samoan girls, 1926. How did Mead's controversial work in Samoa demonstrate the problems of participant observation?
Anthropologist Paul Shankman published a book in 2009, re-examining Mead's and Freeman's original data and found that Samoans in comparison to other cultures are neither permissive nor restrictive in their sexual practices. However, Shankman concluded that both anthropologists were correct. Mead was working in American Samoa in the 1920s at a time when premarital sex in the United States was uncommon. By the 1960s, when Freeman was doing his fieldwork in Western Samoa, American attitudes around premarital sex had changed greatly. The researchers were coming from different contexts and had different experiences in Samoa. Mead and Freeman were both from different generations, which shaped their outlook, but they were also studying Samoa at very different times. Samoa had changed greatly in the time between Mead's and Freeman's work due to colonization, World War II, and commercialization. More Samoans had also become Christians, which influenced their beliefs about sex during that time.

**Anthropology from a Distance: The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (1946)**

During World War II, anthropologist Ruth Benedict researched Japan for the U.S. government in order to help Americans understand and defeat the Japanese army. Unable to live in Japan during the war, Benedict used all the cultural material available to her, including literature, newspapers, and films, to complete her research. She also interviewed Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans. She was able to make recommendations to the U.S. government to reach terms of surrender. After the war, Benedict's book was translated and published in Japan. Some scholars supported her work, but others criticized her approach. Her methods of studying a culture from a distance have been criticized, but her book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, remains a classic and best-selling work of cultural anthropology.

Look at the photographs on this page. Can you make conclusions about the cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people in these photos from these images? What might be some challenges of studying a culture only through photos? How could you overcome those challenges?

**Reflect and Respond**

1. Why was Mead a controversial figure?
2. How did Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman come to different conclusions using participant observation?
3. Why was Ruth Benedict's research criticized?
4. What are some of the ethical issues of studying the culture of an enemy nation during wartime?
Richard Lee and the Dobe Ju/'hoansi

Richard Lee, one of Canada's most distinguished ethnographers, has lived and worked with the Dobe Ju/'hoansi (pronounced zhut-wasi), a group of San people of Southern Africa for almost 40 years, starting back in the 1960s. (In the past, this group has also been referred to as the !Kung.) In that time the Dobe Ju/'hoansi have changed from a relatively isolated hunter-gatherer society, who foraged for food, to an integrated herding and farming society.

Lee decided to conduct his research among the Dobe Ju/'hoansi because of studies he read about evolution and human behaviour, as well as his personal interest in hunting and gathering societies. He was hoping to gain some insight into human behaviour and how our hunting and gathering ancestors may have behaved. During his first research trip, Lee studied the food gathering or subsistence patterns of these hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari through participant observation, taking detailed notes of his interactions with the Dobe Ju/'hoansi. In addition, Lee collected a great deal of objective data, such as population information, to help him complete his research.

In the excerpt below, Lee (1993) explains the practice of "insulting the meat." To celebrate Christmas, he slaughtered and cooked a large ox to share with the community. Instead of appearing grateful for the gift, as is customary in Canada, the Ju/'hoan belittled the ox, saying it was only skin and bones, and was barely enough to feed anyone.

Eating Christmas in the Kalahari

We danced and ate that ox two days and two nights; we cooked and distributed fourteen potfuls of meat and no one went home hungry and no fights broke out. But the "joke" stayed in my mind. I had a growing feeling that something important had happened in my relationship with the Bushmen and that the clue lay in the meaning of the joke. Several days later, when most of the people had dispersed back to the bush camps, I raised the question with Hakekgose, a Tswana man who had grown up among the !Kung, married a !Kung girl, and who probably knew their culture better than any other non-Bushman.

"With us whites," I began, "Christmas is supposed to be the day of friendship and brotherly love. What I can't figure out is why the Bushmen went to such lengths to criticize and belittle the ox I had bought for the feast. The animal was perfectly good and their jokes and wisecracks practically ruined the holiday for me."

"So it really did bother you," said Hakekgose. "Well, that's the way they always talk. When I take my rifle and go hunting with them, if I miss, they laugh at me for the rest of the day. But even if I hit and bring one down, it's no better. To them, the kill is always too small or too old or too thin; and as we sit down on the kill site to cook and eat the liver, they keep grumbling, even with their mouths full of meat. They say things like, 'Oh this is awful! What a worthless animal! Whatever made me think that this Tswana rascal could hunt!'"

"Is this the way outsiders are treated?" I asked. "No, it is their custom; they talk that way to each other too. Go and ask them."

/Gaugo had been one of the most enthusiastic in making me feel bad about the merit of the Christmas ox. I sought him out first.

"Why did you tell me the black ox was worthless, when you could see that it was loaded with fat and meat?"

"It is our way," he said smiling. "Say there is a Ju/'hoan who has been hunting. He must not come home and announce like a braggart, 'I have killed a big one in the bush!' He must first sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to the fire and asks, 'What did you see today?' He replies quietly, 'Ah, I'm no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all [pause] just a little tiny one.' Then I smile to myself," /Gaugo continued, "because I know he has killed something big."

"In the morning we make up a party of four or five people to cut up and carry the meat back to the camp. When we arrive at the kill we examine it and cry out, 'You mean to say you have dragged us all the way out here in order to make us cart home your pile of bones? Oh, if I had known it was this thin I wouldn't have come.' Another one pipes up,
What did Lee learn about the Dobe Ju/'hoansi from the practice of insulting the meat?

"People, I'm thinking I gave up a nice day in the shade for this. At home we may be hungry, but at least we have nice cool water to drink. If the horns are big, someone says, 'Did you think that somehow you were going to boil down the horns for soup?'

"To all this you must respond in kind. 'Agreed,' you say, 'this one is not worth the effort; let's just cook the liver for strength and leave the rest for the hyenas. It is not too late to hunt today, and even a duiker or a steenbok would be better than this mess.'"

"Then you set to work nevertheless, butcher the animal, carry the meat back to the camp, and everyone eats," /Cuago concluded.

Things were beginning to make sense. Next, I went to Tomazho. He corroborated /Cuago's story of the obligatory insults over a kill and added a few details of his own.

"But," I asked, "why insult a man after he has gone to all that trouble to track and kill an animal and when he is going to share the meat with you so that your family will have something to eat?"

"Arrogance," was his cryptic answer.

"Arrogance!"

"Yes, when a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody, So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle."

"But why didn't you tell me this before?" I asked Tomazho with some heat.

"Because you never asked me," said Tomazho, echoing the refrain that has come to haunt every field ethnographer. (p. 187-188)

The Dobe Ju/'hoansi have changed a great deal in the years since Lee's first research study. Increased globalization, commercialization, and resource pressure have changed their way of life and made it difficult for them to maintain their language and culture. To assist them, Lee and other researchers established the Kalahari People's Fund in 1973. The fund has helped the Ju/'hoansi to establish appropriate education in their own language, retain control of land and water rights, and preserve their oral history and language through digitization and Internet access. The initial focus on participant observation has shifted to a collaborative research and development approach, which maintains the dignity, rights, and culture of the Ju/'hoansi.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the behavior of the Ju/'hoansi in this story show us their cultural values?

2. Why is it important for a cultural anthropologist to take detailed notes during an interview?

3. What did you learn about the process of participant observation from this excerpt?

4. What assumptions were made about communication in this case? Have you ever made assumptions about something you heard but may not have understood?
The kinds of research carried out by anthropologists, and the settings within which they work, raise a number of important moral questions about the potential uses and abuses of our knowledge. In the early years of the discipline, many anthropologists documented traditional cultures they assumed would disappear due to disease, warfare, or acculturation imposed by colonialism, growing state power, or international market expansion. Some worked as government anthropologists, gathering data used to formulate policies concerning indigenous peoples or even to help predict the behavior of enemies during wartime. After the colonial era ended in the 1960s, anthropologists began to establish a code of ethics to ensure their research did not harm the groups they studied.

Today, this code grapples with serious questions: Who will utilize our findings and for what purposes? Who decides what research questions are asked? Who, if anyone, will profit from the research? For example, in the case of research on an ethnic or religious minority whose values may be at odds with the dominant mainstream society, will government or corporate interests use anthropological data to suppress that group? And what of traditional communities around the world? Who is to decide what changes should, or should not, be introduced for community “betterment”? And who defines what constitutes betterment—the community, a national government, or an international agency like the World Health Organization? What are the limits of cultural relativism when a traditional practice is considered a human rights abuse globally?

Today, many universities require that anthropologists, like other researchers, communicate in advance the nature, purpose, and potential impact of the planned study to individuals who provide information—and obtain their informed consent, or formal recorded agreement to participate in the research. Of course, this requirement is easier to fulfill in some societies or cultures than in others. When it is a challenge to obtain informed consent, or even impossible to precisely explain the meaning and purpose of this concept and its actual consequences, anthropologists may protect the identities of individuals, families, or even entire communities by altering their names and locations. For example, when Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok studied the Sicilian mafia, he did not obtain the informed consent of this violent secret group but opted not to disclose their real identities.

Anthropologists deal with matters that are private and sensitive, including things that individuals would prefer not to have generally known about them. How does one write about such important but delicate issues and at the same time protect the privacy of the individuals who have shared their stories?

The dilemma facing anthropologists is also recognized in the preamble to the code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), which was formalized in 1971 and revised in 1998 and again in 2009. This document outlines the various ethical responsibilities and moral obligations of anthropologists, including this central maxim: “Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities.” The recent healthy round of debates regarding this code has focused on the potential ethical breaches if anthropologists undertake classified contract work for the military, as some have in Afghanistan, or work for corporations. Some argue that in both cases the required transparency to the people studied cannot be maintained under these circumstances.

The AAA ethics statement is an educational document that lays out the rules and ideals applicable to anthropologists in all the subdisciplines. While the AAA has no legal authority, it does issue policy statements on research ethics questions as they come up. For example, recently the AAA recommended that field notes from medical settings be protected and not subject to subpoena in malpractice lawsuits. This honors the ethical imperative to protect the privacy of individuals who have shared their stories with anthropologists.

informed consent Formal recorded agreement to participate in research; federally mandated for all research in the United States and Europe.
The consumption habits of people in more temperate parts of the world are threatening the lifestyle of people from circumpolar regions. As global warming melts the polar ice caps, traditional ways of life, such as building an igloo, may become impossible. This Inuit man—in Iqaluit, the capital of the Canadian territory of Nunavut—may not be able to construct an igloo much longer. Therefore, the Inuit people consider global warming a human rights issue.

Emerging technologies have ethical implications that impact anthropological inquiry. For example, the ability to sequence and patent particular genes has led to debates about who has the right to hold a patent—the individuals from whom the particular genes were obtained or the researcher who studies the genes? Given the radical changes taking place in the world today, a scientific understanding of the past has never been more important. Do ancient remains belong to the scientist, to the people living in the region under scientific investigation, or to whoever happens to have possession of them? Market forces convert these remains into very expensive collectibles and lead to systematic mining of archaeological and fossil sites. Collaboration between local people and scientists not only preserves the ancient remains from market forces but also honors the connections of indigenous people to the places and remains under study.

To sort out the answers to all of the above questions, anthropologists recognize that they have special obligations to three sets of people: those whom they study, those who fund the research, and those in the profession who rely on published findings to increase our collective knowledge. Because fieldwork requires a relationship of trust between fieldworkers and the community in which they work, the anthropologist's first responsibility clearly is to the people who have shared their stories and the greater community. Everything possible must be done to protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy.

This task is frequently complex. For example, telling the story of a people gives information both to relief agencies who might help them and to others who might take advantage of them. While anthropologists regard a people's right to maintain their own culture as a basic premise, any connections with outsiders can endanger the cultural identity of the community being studied. To surmount these obstacles, anthropologists frequently collaborate with and contribute to the communities in which they are working, allowing the people being studied to have some say about how their stories are told.

**Anthropology and Globalization**

A holistic perspective and a long-term commitment to understanding the human species in all its variety are the essence of anthropology. Thus, anthropology is well equipped to grapple with an issue that has overriding importance for all of us at the beginning of the 21st century: **globalization**. This term refers to worldwide interconnectedness, evidenced in global movements of natural resources, trade goods, human labor, finance capital, information, and infectious diseases. Although worldwide travel, trade relations, and information flow have existed for several centuries, the pace and magnitude of these