

rigor. In the field and at the writing desk, we're always reflecting on the ethics of our actions, as they affect those we study, our readers, students, and the discipline itself. Ethical principles should also guide the student's work with this book.



Heavy Meddle, Part III

Reflecting on my night in the bamboo house, I sometimes wonder whether I would have noticed my impact if Taklun's séance had succeeded that first time—that is, if Rami and his spirits had been brought under control. My students also ask me, "Was Rami really possessed? Was Taklun anything more than a charlatan?" I could see that Rami was a confused and unhappy young man; you would be upset too if you thought your grandfather's spirit gang was trying to recruit you. And Taklun's professional demeanor lent him a degree of charisma. So I wholeheartedly joined the small crowd of family and neighbors who had raised the pesos to pay for this curing ceremony and now were packing into the little house to provide moral support.

So there I am "in the field," bug-bit but ethically mindful, scientifically curious but humanistically appreciative, trying to get involved without becoming a nuisance, so people will get on with their usual business and permit me to study them naturalistically. What do I study? Everything. (And they call chemistry and physics the *hard* sciences?) Chapter 3 introduces the holistic question, which helps us to study everything.

Chapter 2



EXERCISES

Exercise I: Analyzing an Ethnography

If you are reading an ethnography along with this book, ask some naturalistic questions of that work.

1. How did the ethnographer learn about the culture? Compare the ethnographer's techniques for collecting information with the list beginning on page 71.
2. Has the ethnographer supplemented anthropological fieldwork with other sources of information or other disciplines? Has the ethnographer worked alone?

3. Has the ethnographer adopted a scientific approach or a humanistic approach to the study of this community? Is there a contrast between the way the community was studied (perhaps using rigorous scientific methods) and the way it is reported (perhaps more humanistically)?
4. How does the ethnographer select where to conduct fieldwork and how is entrée gained?
5. How does the ethnographer present herself or himself to the studied community? What role or image does she or he have in the community?
6. At what point in the sojourn does the ethnographer appear to have acquired rapport?
7. What evidence is there of the ethnographer's impact on the community being studied?
8. What does the ethnographer do about those impacts?
9. What evidence is there of the community's impact on the ethnographer? Does the fieldworker appear at any point to be suffering culture shock?
10. Are there aspects of community life that the ethnographer does not have access to or chooses to ignore?
11. Did the ethnographer encounter ethical issues, or do you perceive ethical issues that should be addressed?
12. Are the strengths and weaknesses of fieldwork discussed or illustrated?

Exercise 2: Participant Observation

This exercise provides a relatively brief, safe, and inexpensive way to acquire a sense of what participant observation in ethnographic fieldwork is like, and to evaluate its strengths and limitations as a method.

Select an event or activity to observe and, ideally, to participate in at some level. The event or activity may be quite simple, common, small, or frequent—or it may be elaborate, unusual, and different from your own cultural tradition—but it must meet these criteria:

- You have a right to be there, or you have secured permission or an invitation to attend from persons in charge.
- It is not familiar to you.
- It has a clear beginning and end.
- It is limited in time so you can observe the entire event.
- It is legal and risks little harm.
- You are curious about it.
- You have a trusted acquaintance familiar with the event—your key informant—who will accompany you or host you at the event and answer your questions about it.

To assist with your selection, here are examples of events on campus and in the village that meet all these criteria for me, personally:

- Women’s rugby club practice (no scrums, thank you)
- Set building for the drama production
- Campus radio staff meeting
- A session of student video or computer gaming
- Sorority social event with outside guests
- Demolition derby (no driving, thank you)
- Seder celebration

Observe the event, taking a few notes on a small pad, if this can be done unobtrusively, to refresh your memory during debriefing soon after. Request to participate in some way: to throw the ball, wield a hammer, pour the punch, and so on. During the event or the debriefing, ask your key informant to explain what you observed.

After the event, after consulting your field notes and your key informant, debrief yourself by composing a typed document of notes. Include in these notes:

- What happened at the activity. Include sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile memories.
- How you felt during the activity.
- How people responded to you.
- What your key informant told you.
- Evidence that your presence influenced the scene.

Make a line across your sheet after your notes, and then answer the following questions. Bring this sheet and your field notes to class for discussion.

1. What understanding was gained from participation compared to just observing?
2. What did having a key informant add to your understanding?
3. What was learned from participant observation at this event that a questionnaire or interview about it might miss?
4. For what purposes might a questionnaire or interview be better than participant observation?

Exercise 3: Impact of the Observer

In both versions of this exercise you’ll observe a patterned behavior under two conditions. You’ll compose an ethnography—that is, you’ll describe the pattern and infer the cultural rules. You’ll also comment on the effect of the two conditions of observation.

Version 1: Holding the Door

Observe door-opening behavior in a public place. Hang out with the smokers on the sidewalk, for example, while watching a popular entryway to a classroom building. For several minutes at a busy time and again at a slower time, pick out individuals (“Observed1”) and watch them pass through the doorway. Observe the etiquette during individual events of door behavior. That is, does Observed1 passing through the door hold the door for the next person (“Observed2”)? In what manner does Observed1 hold the door, for whom, how long is the door held, how far away from the door can Observed2 be and still motivate Observed1 to hold? Is there any visual or verbal communication between Observed1 and Observed2 during the event? How often does Observed2 become a holder?

As a guide to what to watch for, an observation protocol sheet (jargon for “form to write your notes on”) is printed in Table 2.1.

PHASE 1: BLENDING IN

This first time, take no notes in public, make no attempt to stand out. After observing for several minutes, pull over an acquaintance emerging from those doors and ask him or her the rules of door etiquette. Are door holders aware of what they’re doing? Can they describe the shared understanding? Did your watching make door users self-conscious? (In this phase, they probably didn’t even notice you.) Slip away to note down your observations and your conversation.

PHASE 2: STANDING OUT

Repeat this observation with the protocol sheet, so that door users will notice that a person with a clipboard is observing them. Watch for evidence that your activity influences the door holding. Experiment with your location until you’re clearly being noticed by many door holders. Compare what you’re observing now with what you observed the first time. How does self-consciousness alter their behavior?

Version 2: From Chat to Interview

Here’s a smaller-scale version of the same type of exercise. Enter into an apparently casual conversation with a couple of friends on a topic of common practice such as phoning home or decorating your room. When things are going along nicely, produce a tape recorder or a clipboard and propose to conduct an “interview for class” on that same topic. Watch for changes in body language and verbal responses by your friends. Is there evidence that they are now more self-conscious? Is the information you’re getting now different from what it was before the tape recorder or clipboard appeared?

Exercise 4: Inferring Culture from Behavior

I have proposed that in its scientific mode, cultural anthropology seeks to generalize about humans, to build up a description of the understandings people share

Table 2.1 Observation Protocol
Door-Holding Events

| Event | Event 1 | Event 2 | Event 3 | Event 4 | Event 5 | Event 6 |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <i>Observed1</i> | male(M)/female(F)? Student(S)/Other(O)? Entering(I)/Exiting(O)? | M S O | | | | |
| <i>Held Door?</i> | yes(Y)/no(N) | Y | | | | |
| <i>Holding technique (describe):</i> | with shoulder | | | | | |
| <i>Observed2</i> | male(M)/female(F)? Student(S)/Other(O)? Entering(I)/Exiting(O)? Distance when door held | F S I 15 ft. | | | | |
| <i>Interaction</i> | Eye contact (Y/N)? Thanks (Y/N)? Other (describe): | Y Y O2 nods, smiles | | | | |
| <i>Additional notes on event</i> | | O2's arms full of packages | | | | |

Duplicate this protocol for use during version 1's phase 2.

by discovering patterns in their behavior. That pattern may be in what they tell you, or in what you observe. Sometimes, people don't know what to tell you, and you have to puzzle it out entirely from observation. In this exercise you will look both at what the culture's participants say and at the patterns of their behavior, to infer the cultural pattern.

Imagine how long it would take an anthropologist from a non-Christian country such as Morocco to figure out when Easter occurs in the United States. A brief inquiry will reveal that Easter doesn't occur on the same calendar day each year, as do Christmas or Halloween. So the anthropologist turns to you, the informant, and asks, "What is the cultural rule for determining the date of Easter?" You reply,

— I haven't a clue

— I think it is . . . (fill in)

What proportion of students in the class don't know? ___%

How many students in the class think they know how the date is determined? ___%

(Don't explain it to us yet; we need to do some data analysis.)

It appears that the date of Easter is assigned by a cultural rule that most of us don't know. We're quite familiar with the Christian holy day, even if it's not in our religion, but calculation of the date appears to be a cultural rule that we leave to our ritual experts to know.

So, if the ordinary member of society isn't much help as informant, the Moroccan anthropologist will have to infer a pattern from behavior—in this case, from the dates on which we have commemorated Easter. If the Moroccan were to make a list of the dates of Easter for a number of years, noting also events in the lunar calendar, eventually the pattern would emerge. It appears that the crucial variables are the day of the week, the phase of the moon, and the first day of spring (vernal equinox). Here are the Moroccan's data:

Table 2.2 Calendar Dates of Easter

| Year | Month | Date | Day | Moon Phase | Vernal Equinox |
|------|-------|------|--------|-------------------|----------------|
| 2001 | April | 15 | Sunday | 7 days after full | Mar 20 |
| 2002 | March | 31 | Sunday | 3 days after full | Mar 20 |
| 2003 | April | 20 | Sunday | 4 days after full | Mar 21 |
| 2004 | April | 11 | Sunday | 6 days after full | Mar 20 |
| 2005 | March | 27 | Sunday | 2 days after full | Mar 20 |

Source: *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2001* (2001); U.S. Naval Observatory (2004); <http://Scienceworld.wolfram.com> (2005).

There is a formula; what is it? Your answer has to be precise enough that only one day a year qualifies.

Test your formula: when is (was) Easter this year?

For those of you who thought you knew how Easter was calculated: were you right—should the Moroccan have believed you?

Even omitting highly sophisticated technology such as putting a robot on Mars, there is much that we in the United States know and do—that is, there is much in our culture—that we can't explain. For example, which side of a man's shirt has the buttonholes? which side of a woman's shirt? Why?

In what other areas of culture—areas much more important than buttonholes—do participants share experience or awareness but can't explain it to the anthropologist?