

Fields methods in Anthropology

The various ways anthropologists conduct research in naturalistic settings, or in the field, are called field methods. They include participation in social life and various forms of observation. Anthropology relies on field methods as its ultimate source of information. Research in the field, known as fieldwork, involves collecting primary data on humans, other primates, and the objects and processes relevant to their lives. Through further examination, analysis, and comparison in library, laboratory, or office settings, researchers produce the discipline's general principles and theoretical advances. Various field methods are used, depending on the data available, to illuminate a chosen problem. The diverse range of interests in anthropology is usually represented in the North American tradition by reference to its four subfields, namely, physical or biological anthropology; archaeology; sociocultural anthropology, also known as cultural or social anthropology or ethnology; and linguistic anthropology. There is, however, significant overlap in the kinds of data, and therefore the field methods, used in each of the subfields.

Categories of Anthropological Field Methods

All anthropological field methods can be grouped into five basic categories: (1) material observation, (2) biological observation, (3) behavioural observation, (4) direct communication, and (5) participant-observation. All five types of field methods involve observation, including the use of any of the five human senses to acquire information about the environment.

There are two basic means by which the field researcher engages with a topic of study: subject-object and subject-subject relationships. A subject-object relationship is pure observation, involving a subject (the observing anthropologist) and an object (the observed thing, setting, or person). Subject-object relations are one-way, in that an active observer collects information about a passive, independent, or nonresponding object. This is an appropriate method to learn about inanimate objects, including artifacts, which reflect human and nonhuman primate activity. It is also ideal when collecting data on what people actually do as opposed to what they say they do or when biology and behaviour are being observed without purposeful input from the people under study.

Subject-subject relations, involve a mutual, dialogical relationship between two thinking beings. This relationship is ideal for research situations in which the people studied are capable of and willing to communicate information about their inner states or beliefs. The subject-subject mode of engagement

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allows the meanings, abstractions, and mental models of informants to be directly communicated. These data are among the most interesting and rich forms of anthropological knowledge. While all field methods involve observation, they vary in the degree to which subject-object or subject-subject engagement is used.

Material Observation

The observation of physical settings provides the best information on the material foundations of social life, including ecological and economic relations. Observation of physical settings is also the most reliable method for producing evidence of actual, as opposed to ideal, behaviors, which may be repressed or denied by the populations engaging in them. Family, social organization, and even ideologies respond to environmental conditions and leave physical traces.

Observing objects and settings allows the description and analysis of a range of physical characteristics. Anthropologists in the field document landscapes, natural objects, built environments, architectural features, and artifacts.

Contemporarily occupied settings are visible and in use and are often easily accessed, although gaining access may require negotiation with local people. Material remains of past behaviours though, are often buried and deteriorated, making their discovery, recovery, and analysis challenging in other ways. Because material remains are often the only available evidence of past behaviour archaeologists are most consistently developed and specialized in the study of material culture in the field.

Archaeological methods for recovering objects and settings are designed to allow the maximum amount of information to be obtained, preserved, and communicated. Survey methods vary depending on the size and characteristics of the terrain to be mapped for sites of interest, and these methods often make use of statistical techniques to ensure representative coverage. While survey techniques need have no impact on the material record, excavation systematically destroys contextual information about where objects were found in relation to one another. Therefore, excavation is done using an exactly surveyed, three-dimensional grid system, and each layer of soil is slowly and painstakingly removed and a careful record made of each stratum and how any objects found were situated.

Observing materials provides a window through time because of the relative stability of some material traces of behaviour These methods produce data

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from objects rather than people, but in combination with the other methods of anthropology, they provide insight into how people make, use, and understand materials.

Biological Observation

Humans and related primates are biological species that can be studied in the field either as individual organisms or as populations. Such study can use methods that train observation on the form, function, and evolution of life. This group of methods includes gathering data on the anatomy and physiology of humans, hominid ancestors, and other primates.

Some of these data are recorded in the field from living subjects, using calipers, tape measures, scales, and other devices. Anthropometry, as this biological measurement is called, can be done either in the field or in the laboratory and provides data on such variables as stature, growth rate, and nutritional status of populations. In addition, samples of bodily fluids can be taken in the field and tested in the laboratory for blood group, diseases, and genetic characteristics and affinities. Biological observations can also be made of non primate species in order to determine which animals and plants are present in the environment and the ecological relations between these and the population being studied.

Refined physical observations are made in the laboratory, but contextual information, such as the disposition of the remains in relation to one another and surrounding objects, are discovered in the field and form the basis for sophisticated interpretations. Thus, field methods for collection and documentation of physical remains specify the same careful and detailed care that artifacts in archaeological sites require. Tiny biological samples, such as bone fragments and burned grains, can be retrieved by shaking soil through screens and by flotation, in which soil is placed in water, which allows light carbonized materials to float to the surface, where they can be removed for identification and study.

Biological observations are also made of fossilized remains of human ancestors and other species, and in these cases the field methods of paleontology come into play. Fossils are often embedded in sedimentary rock and are discovered through systematic survey of landscapes where sediments of appropriate age are eroding on the surface. Once an appropriate area is identified, excavation can reveal more materials and can provide geological samples of plant and animal remains, which can be tested in laboratories to determine the approximate age of the fossils as well as

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climatic, floral, and faunal information about the time when the fossilized animals lived.

Biological and material observation overlap when artifacts and human remains are found in association. For this reason the two groups of methods are often combined. For example, skeletal material associated with grave goods reveals information about mortuary practices and social status.

Physical anthropology traditionally emphasizes the observation of anatomy rather than physiology, which is left more to medical study. However, one extension of physiology, behavior, is of central interest to anthropology and is, for the most part, best observed in the field.

Behavioral Observation

All primates exhibit behaviors, defined as volitional movements, that can be observed directly in the field. These behaviors include kinesics, dance, and speech, as well as specific intentional movements such as ritual performances and food procurement. Behavior, in other words, refers to actions that derive at least in part from intentional direction. These actions include gross movements such as walking or speaking, but not physiological measures like heart rate, although some physiological measures are influenced by volitional behaviors.

By observing behaviors without engaging with the observed individuals, anthropologists can document interactions without influencing them. The primatologist, for example, can watch a monkey troop from a distance using binoculars. Such methods are also useful in situations in which linguistic communication is not possible, such as the earliest phase of some cultural anthropology fieldwork.

Many nuances of daily life reveal themselves to the quiet and patient observer of behaviour. Through these observations one can develop a typology of the kinds of behaviours that are repeated and keep a record of how often and in what circumstances individuals undertake them. For example, one can describe grooming, greeting, and ritualized actions in a relatively objective manner by employing pure observation. Initial language learning also benefits from simple observation of utterances. Certain sounds and words are often repeated, allowing an initial entry into an unfamiliar linguistic world.

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When linguistic communication is possible, one can listen to others' utterances without engaging in conversations. Here, the behaviour observed are linguistic and thus include information on meanings and inner states, but such communications are not truly dialogic, as direct communication is.

Direct Communication

This group of field methods includes all means of linguistic, paralinguistic, and other conscious interaction between anthropologist and research subjects. Rather than merely observing a living person or animal or taking notes on an inert object, these methods include two-way communication and allow the deepest possible exchange of information on mental states between two minds. In other words, direct communication is a subject-subject rather than a subject-object means of encounter.

The weakest form of direct communication is the survey, comprised of a series of standard questions, often requiring numerical or precisely formatted answers, distributed to a large number of people. Surveys are particularly useful for providing information, summarize in charts and graphs, about whole populations. To ensure that survey results are representative of very large groups, for which complete coverage is impractical, the surveys must be distributed to a representative sample of the population.

Surveys are favoured in sociological research but are used only lightly in anthropology because of their tendency to distance the researcher from the subjects and because they can be awkward to use among illiterate populations. Surveys can be conducted in some situations by mail, that is, without the anthropologist's having to enter the field. However, anthropologists can also administer them in person in either written or oral form or distribute them directly while in the field.

Among the most valued field methods in anthropology are interviews, which are conversations between the anthropologist and informants and are designed to elicit a specified kind of information. In formal or structured interviews, the anthropologist provides a standardized list of questions. These are carefully planned to provide data capable of addressing theoretical and empirical concerns. Formal interviewing is a particularly useful method for producing comparable, quantifiable data on a particular topic. Its disadvantage is that it can force informants' knowledge into predetermined categories, ratifying rather than enriching and correcting theoretical models. Furthermore, as an artificial form of communication, it

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has the potential to stifle the more natural and genuine exchange of ideas that is found in informal conversation.

In informal or unstructured interviews, anthropologist and informant chat about a set topic. While the anthropologist has particular questions and a range of issues in mind, he or she allows the conversation partner to indulge in digressions and tangents and to take a great deal of control over the content of the discussion. The data produced by informal interviews are relatively idiosyncratic and thus often not amenable to statistical analysis. However, they may represent the best compromise between obtaining data to test a particular hypothesis and gaining insight into local views.

In focus groups, the researcher brings together several people selected for their particular knowledge or social roles and moderates a discussion among them about a topic of interest. The advantage of focus groups is that the participants jog one another's memories, encourage one another, and together can provide a more complete, nuanced, and publicly acceptable account of the topic of interest than an individual interviewee could.

The simplest yet also the most intimate and rich form of direct communication is a spontaneous conversation between the anthropologist and an informant. Interlocutors are most likely to speak in an unselfconscious manner, revealing those things that are most important to them.

Finally, there are forms of direct communication that are non linguistic but nevertheless often deeply revealing. First of all, during conversations and interviews, a great deal of valuable information is conveyed paralinguistically, by such means as tone of voice, facial expression, and gesture; although these paralinguistic modes could also be categorized as observed behaviors, in a conversational context they are often used to enrich direct communication.

When the interaction is between a human researcher and a nonhuman primate, non linguistic behaviour are a valuable medium for direct communication. Calls, gestures, and glances can communicate feelings and desires between species. In ethological field research, however, anthropologists must avoid assuming that expressions resembling ones from their species and culture have a similar meaning for another species. Nevertheless, anthropological researchers of nonhuman primates can attain a remarkable degree of direct communication with their research subjects without the benefit of language or mental apparatus identical to the other species.

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Direct communication allows intentional transmission between researchers and subjects of information about internal states. However, except insofar as the local language and its idioms are used, researchers using direct communication need not enter the world of their informants behaviorally. Crossing that threshold characterizes the final group of anthropological field methods.

Participant-Observation

Participant-observation involves the immersion of the researcher in another social world. The researcher seeks to emulate the subjects' behaviors and thought patterns in order to achieve an empathetic understanding of their points of view.

The attempt to emulate local ways of life gives the researcher a firsthand experience of what they are like, and it demonstrates the researcher's respect for local customs, which may improve rapport. However, it must be stressed that even though an anthropologist lives in a local style of dwelling, eats traditional foods, attends native rituals, and so on, the anthropologist does not have exactly the same quality of experience as these activities evoke in local people. This is so first of all because the anthropologist does not merely participate in routines but is highly conscious and observant, taking nothing for granted and noting the experience in great detail. Second, if the anthropologist hails from another cultural background, these new experiences will be registered in the context of earlier experiences that are different from those of local people and that may on a personal level seem strange or even immoral.

Participant-observation is suited almost exclusively to the study of living human societies. To an even greater degree than interviewing, it allows the anthropologist to attain a sense of local points of view, cultural assumptions, and social conventions because one must live in accordance with them. Social errors are frequent at first but are often easily forgiven by one's hosts, who recognize the foreign anthropologist as being in a childlike condition of ignorance but growing in poise under their instruction. Each social blunder in participant-observation is a learning experience pointing to a cultural difference between the anthropologist's and the hosts' cultures. As time goes on, errors become fewer and competence grows.

The lengthy period scheduled for participant-observation fieldwork, typically at least a year, allows initial impressions to be tempered, enriched, and corrected as familiarity with the local way of life deepens. It also allows a

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growing rapport that, under the right conditions, matures into a state in which the anthropologist's presence becomes so familiar to people that they behave more naturally. For this reason, in spite of its relatively high reliance on subjective feelings of empathy, participant-observation is arguably the most accurate way of understanding another culture.

Technologies of Fieldwork

Anthropologists use a wide variety of technologies to enhance what can be taken in by the senses and recorded in memory. Survey and excavation of artifacts and biological remains make use of many tools, ranging from rulers to remote sensing and geographic information systems equipment to precisely locate and map finds. Simple trowels in dry settings, and hoses in wet ones, aid the recovery of objects from the earth.

All anthropological fieldwork makes intensive use of writing, either on paper or via computer, to produce permanent records of findings, or field notes. Taking good field notes depends on purposeful observation, as true in ethnographic as in other anthropological research. Quite often, rough notes are taken during the day's labor, as much to avoid being obtrusive as to allow the field-worker to take in what is happening with full attention. In the evening, before sleep intervenes and memories are lost, rough notes are carefully transformed into full, detailed ones.

Descriptive field notes are supplemented by technologies that allow the direct capture of information. Sound recording allows exact words, songs, and linguistic samples to be collected. Photography allows the capture of settings, sites, objects, and activities. Cinematic recording captures visual action and sound together and is particularly useful for the study of dance and craft techniques. Of course, portable computers allow storage of all of these media and can run helpful applications, such as databases that store data for further analysis. Genealogical information, for example, is managed much more easily with the help of computer databases. Where there are no power grids, portable solar electric systems can be used to power this equipment.

Ethical Issues

A variety of ethical concerns surround fieldwork. For example, anthropologists must take care to collect information in the field without producing harm or discomfort for their hosts. Field-workers avoid putting

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informants into dangerous or awkward positions. For instance, field-workers may allow informants to remain anonymous if they desire.

Field-workers may also encounter conflicts over the ownership and study of the artifacts, biological specimens, and even ethnographic data they collect. The populations under study, as well as people acting as their descendants or representatives, may challenge researchers. To ensure that local groups' approval is secured and respected, it is vital that proper permits be obtained and that those groups be consulted and involved in the research.

Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity

All anthropological research requires attention to perspectives as an integral part of its system of knowledge, or epistemology. In the field, this attention takes the form of an awareness of multiple points of view, guiding assumptions, and purposes.

From the perspective of the researcher, there are three possible epistemological stances, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, and each appropriate to different kinds of fieldwork: objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. Objectivity refers to perceiving and describing something from as neutral and unbiased a perspective as possible in order to produce observations that can be verified by a trained community of observers. Although objectivity can never be absolute or perfect, it is an important baseline from which to accurately and comparably measure objects, organisms, and behaviours. Objectivity is also needed to provide a factual description of what things physically exist, as opposed to imagined, abstract, or metaphysical entities. It also provides a guide for accuracy. Without a commitment to objectivity, anthropological fieldwork loses its grounding perspective as well as its trustworthiness.

Objectivity is insufficient for successful fieldwork, however, because it enforces a distance between researchers and researched, serving as a barrier to empathy. Self-consciously engaging their own subjectivity, researchers can draw on their own background and interests to allow a more emotional and value-based engagement. Using subjectivity in the field, one interprets observations with the help of personal feelings or opinions, which provide one with a more meaningful and artistically expressive connection to the objects and subjects of research. While unbridled subjectivity can allow observers to lose touch with the reality before them, measured and self-conscious subjectivity can deeply enrich the humanistic engagement of researchers with the topic or people under study. Indeed, since even the

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most objective observation is tinged with subjectivity, field-workers strive to know their own biases.

While elements of both objectivity and subjectivity are involved in all the field methods, a third mode of engagement characterizes direct communication and participant-observation. This mode is inter-subjectivity, or the mutual engagement of two or more subjective perspectives in conversation or activity. Intersubjectivity is self-consciously used as a field method to remind researchers that their individual informants are, perceiving their world from unique perspectives meaningful to them. Intersubjectivity is a valuable method to communicate the meaning systems of conversation partners in a way that helps to preserve their emotional tenor.

The theoretical perspective of a researcher profoundly influences what questions are asked and what field methods are employed. A theoretical interest in how environmental factors influence behaviour would direct the field-worker to observe and measure these factors in quality and quantity. On the other hand, a theoretical interest in how local value systems influence choices would necessitate interactions with people to access, relate to, and describe their inner states.

Through anthropology we study ourselves by learning how we compare to others: our ancestors, other peoples and cultures, and our cousins in the animal kingdom. The range of field methods reflects anthropology's effort to understand humanity from within and without, in both its broadest outlines and its most particular manifestations.

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