3.3: Fieldwork Methods

In anthropology there are several types of fieldwork methods that are used while conducting research. Below we will go more into depth with several fieldwork methods that are used.

Observational Methods

The observational method is viewed as the least invasive method where the anthropologist minimally integrates themselves into the society they are studying and gathers data through verbal communication while attempting to remain non-intrusive of the culture.

This group of methods focuses on community interaction through language. It usually entails many open ended interviews with participants who are members of a group being studied. The researcher strives to learn as much as they can about the history of the community as well as the individuals within it in order to gain a full understanding of how their culture functions. Interviews can take place individually or with focus groups within the community based on age, status, gender, and other factors that contribute to differences within the community.

This type of research often strives to create an open dialogue, called a dialectic, in which information flows back and forth between researcher and subject. Think of this situation as a conversation between two people about homework or an upcoming exam. This dialectic poses a challenge to the objectivity of socially produced data. The challenge is dealt with through reflection on the inter-subjective creation of meaning. This leads anthropologists to value reflexive abilities in their ethnographic writing. Because many anthropologists also hope to help the communities they work with to make change on their own terms within the confines of their own culture, in some cases objectivity is abandoned in favor of community based activism and social change.
Participant Observation

Participant observation is a method for anthropological Fieldwork, used to collect data such that the anthropologist must create an intimate relationship between themselves and the culture studied. This method requires that an anthropologist participate in a social event that is part of a specific culture. This includes, but is not limited to, observing members of a culture by taking notes, eating the food that is provided, and participating in festivities. The goal of participant observation is to be involved in the culture like a member of that society, all while observing and studying the culture. An example of participation observation would be if an anthropologist went to a Native American Tribal gathering and took notes on the energy and traditions they were being shown. This anthropologist could participate in things like face painting or songs, and eat the food that the Natives eat. The information gathered in this observation is then recorded and reflected upon to gain further insight into the culture being studied. This observation method helps the anthropologist develop a deeper rapport with the people of the culture and can help others understand their culture further. This experience may result in the individuals opening up more to the anthropologist which allows them to understand more than an etic point of view of the culture.

Non-Participant Observation

In contrast to participant observation, non-participant observation is the anthropological method of collecting data by entering within a community but with limited interaction with the people within the culture. This anthropologist can be thought of as a fly on the wall. An etic approach that researchers often use to examine the details of how the subjects interact with one another and the environment around them. Detailed research such as body behavior (e.g. eye gaze, facial expression), speech styles (e.g. pitch) can be recorded through the nonparticipant method, but usually the emic approach is preferred when observing social context. An example of data collected through non-participant research would be the an estimation of how often women in a household wear high heels due to how worn out the carpet is.

The non-participant observation, although effective in providing some research, has limitations. One being, the observer affect. This is caused by the presence of the researcher having an influence over the participants' actions. The researcher may use systematic approaches of field notes, sampling and data to ensure and increase comfortable interactions. While using the non-participant observation method, the researcher's opinions may oppose that of the participant's on a certain issue. The only solution to this problem and to have a fuller and unbiased take on the research is to use both non-participant and participant method.

Ethnographic Method

Cultural data assumes the form of directly observable material items, individual behaviors, performances, ideas and arrangements that exist only in people's heads. From the perspective of the culture concept, anthropologists must first treat all these elements as symbols within a coherent system and must record observations with attention to the cultural context and the meanings assigned by the culture's practitioners. These demands are met through two major research techniques: participant observation and key informant interviewing.

After the initial orientation or entry period, which may take 3 months or longer, the researcher follows a more systematic program of formal interviews involving questions related to research hypotheses and specialized topics. Several different
methods of selecting informants are possible. Usually, a few key informants are selected for in-depth sessions, since the investigation of cultural patterns usually calls for lengthy and repeated open-ended interviews. Selection of such a small number does not allow for strict assurance of a representative sample, so the anthropologist must be careful to choose subjects who are well informed and reliable. Ethnographic researchers will also train informants to systematically report cultural data and recognize significant cultural elements and interconnections as the interview sequences unfold.

Key informant selection is known as judgment sampling and is particularly important for the kind of qualitative research that characterizes ethnography. Anthropologists will very frequently also need to carry out quantitative research from which statistically validated inferences can be drawn. Accordingly, they must construct an either larger random sample or a total population census for more narrowly focused interviewing according to a closed questionnaire design. Other important quantitative data might include direct measurement of such items as farm size, crop yield, daily caloric intake, or even blood pressure, depending on the anthropologist's research focus. Aside from written observation and records, researchers will often provide ethnographic representations in other forms, such as collected artifacts, photographs, tape recordings, films, and videos.

### Comparative Method

Since the beginning of anthropological studies, the Comparative Method has been a way to allow a systematic comparison of information and data from multiple sources. It is a common approach for testing multiple hypotheses on subjects including co-evolution of cultures, the adaptation of cultural practices to the environment, and kinship terms in local languages from around the world. The comparative method, may seem like an outdated form of fieldwork information gathering, however this method is still quite prevalent in modern day anthropological research. The use of this form of information gathering is intended to compare globalization, which uses a version of this method called multi-sited Ethnography by participant observation gathered from many different social settings. Another form of the comparative research method is shown through the Human Relations Area Files, which collects and organizes ethnographic texts from hundreds of societies all over the world. These files cover topics ranging from types of kinship systems, to trading practices found in all of human culture.

Anthropologists Ruth Mace--an anthropologist who specializes in evolutionary ecology--and Mark Pagel explore the comparative method of anthropological research in their article [The Comparative Method in Anthropology](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Cultural_Anthropology/Book%3A_Cultural_Anthropology_(Wikibook)). They explain how in the past decade there have been many expansions in other branches of anthropology, including cultural diversity as a scientific endeavor. This is when the comparative method is used by those interested in cultural evolution and by those who study other human sciences. However, "cultures cannot be treated as independent for purposes of investigating cross culture trends," therefore they must instead be studied in relation to one another: How two or more cultures grow together, or how they are researched together has the ability to outline the entire premise of the comparative method. Having been used for hundreds of years, this method is still one of the main forms of research for anthropologists all over the world.

### Reflexivity

**Reflexivity** is the awareness of the researcher of the effect they may be having on the research. It involves a constant awareness and assessment of the researcher's own contribution to and influence on the researcher's subjects and their
findings. This principle was perhaps first thought of by William Thomas, as the "Thomas Theorem". Fieldwork in cultural anthropology is a reflexive experience. Anthropologists must constantly be aware that the information they are gathering may be skewed by their ethical opinions, or political standings. Even an anthropologists’ presence in that culture can affect the results they receive. Reflexive fieldwork must retain a respect for detailed, accurate information gathering while also paying precise attention to the ethical and political context of research, the background of the researchers, and the full cooperation of informants. In our everyday lives reflexivity is used to better understand ourselves by comparing our culture to others. For example, when someone talks about their religion, you may immediately disagree with specific aspects of their religion because you have not grown up believing it as they have. By being reflexive, one would be able to recognize their bias. Some anthropologists have taken this method to the extreme, Margaret Wilson, for example, wrote her book 'Dance Lest We all Fall Down' in a reflexive biographical manner; this accounted for her inability to fully integrate into Brazilian society.²

### Intersubjectivity

**Intersubjectivity** is the realization that knowledge about other people emerges out of people's relationships with and perceptions of each other. The concept was first introduced by the principal founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and creates a “theoretical frame for thinking about the ways in which humans interpret, organize, and reproduce particular forms of social life and social cognition”. Intersubjectivity is defined by five key principles. The first is that intersubjectivity is not limited to the concept of matching one’s mental state with another’s mental state. Instead of a one-way transaction, intersubjectivity should be seen more as a type of mutual understanding. The second claim of Husserl's dissertation is that intersubjectivity is founded on the principle that we all share the same world, so that if two individuals were to "trade places", it would be present itself in the same way. Through empathetic insight, human beings achieve **Platzwechsel**, which is a term used in chess to mean "place exchange". The third claim is that intersubjectivity creates a synthesis of worldviews through the usage of empathy. Although there may be different perspectives in the relationship presented, the collective world is assumed to be the same through the bilateral insight of shared knowledge. The fourth claim is that intersubjectivity must precede meaningful interaction, as well as "The possibility of reflection on the self, discovery of the ego, capacity for performing any epoché, and the possibility of all communication and of establishing a communicative surrounding world as well". In other words, intersubjectivity is not the result of communication, instead it is the condition required for it to occur. Finally, the fifth claim is that intersubjectivity is the principle by which anthropologists must view their work. In order to properly create an account of a group of people, one must develop relationships with others and deduce perceptions through experience.

### Participatory Action Research

This specific method requires a community commitment to change. It occurs in five steps:

1. **Education on the Process or Creating a Dialogue**
2. **Collective Investigation**
3. **Collective Interpretation**
4. **Collective Action**
5. **Transformation: Self-Determination and Empowerment**
Because of the intrinsic qualities of this type of research (ideally being conducted by people with close ties or membership of a community), it is usually very applicable to situations in the community. The research is an analysis of the community's behavior by the community's members. Not only are they by necessity, motivated to work on the problem, but they will already have significant rapport with other community members which allows them to better address and analyze it. The dynamic attributes of the process allow constant reevaluation and change. This cyclic or regularly repeated tendencies can develop into healthy adaptation patterns in the community without outside contributions or aid.

### Triangulation Method

The triangulation method is the "combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon".\[^3\]\ It is used to investigate a single topic through individual perspectives or multiple methodologies. It is usually the preferred way to research because it can combine all methods of researching to get the best results. It uses qualitative and quantitative practices together. The qualitative practice gives the triangulation method its inquiry results. The quantitative practice gives it the validation results. It combines a scientific approach with an observational approach. According to the Administrative Science Quarterly, it is a "vehicle for cross-validation when two or more distinct methods are found to be congruent and yield comparable data".\[^4\]\ The foundation of triangulation relies on one form of research being weak and the other form stepping up to make up for it. Relying on one form of research can create a bias. The general problem with measurement data, is the individual or group being researched tends to tell you what you want to hear instead of the full truth. Triangulation helps prevent bias by giving the researcher the opportunity to participate in individual, self-reported and observational methods with those being researched. Sampling bias generally means that the researcher doesn't have time to cover the entire group they are focusing on. Or they focus on what they think the important parts of a society are and don't study the less important aspects. Triangulation can combine phone research, face-to-face interviews, and online surveys to ensure that the researcher is getting the most accurate results. In all, the triangulation method for fieldwork can combine all aspects of research to create the most accurate and detailed results, taking different perspectives and various sources to culminate into the most accurate model or a culture.