4.2: Ethnography and Ethnology

The word Ethnography comes from these two Greek words: "Ethnos", meaning people & "Graphein", meaning writing.

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\) - By Franz Boas (Science, Vol. 5, No. 108, p. 171) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

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Wolcott (1999) defines ethnography as a description of “the customary social behaviors of an identifiable group of people”. Ethnography is often referred to as “culture writing,” and it refers to a type of documentation often employed by Anthropologists in their field work. This genre of writing uses detailed first-hand written descriptions of a culture based on first-hand research in the field.

Ethnographies often reflect the anthropological desire for holism, the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. In the case of ethnography, holism refers to the fact that a culture can be best understood through the understanding of as many aspects of the cultural context as possible.

Cultural anthropologists who write ethnographies are often called ethnographers. Ethnographers who write about what they have learned from the people that they have been working with often use a research method known as participant-observation. Participant Observation is a technique of field research used in anthropology by which an anthropologist studies the life of a group by sharing in its activities.

Ethnographic information can take many different forms. Articles, journals, statistical data, and documentaries are just a few of the many forms that ethnographic information can be conveyed. A very common form is a book written by the person participating in the research or observation. A great example of a book would be “Waiting For An Ordinary Day” by Farnaz Fassihi because as a journalist traveling to Iraq during the Iraq war, she participates in Iraqi daily life and documents her description of it, because of her methods and style of writing although Fassihi may not consider herself an anthropologist, her book Waiting for an Ordinary Day is ethnographic. Eventually, she turns all of her journalistic notes into a book which describes certain events that help her define the Iraqi culture. She uses the participant-observation method, and also uses the concept of holism to explain the whole of Iraqi culture, rather than just small aspects of it.

Anthropologists, scientists, philosophers, historians and most social scientists have been reexamining assumptions about what science is and how it works. They have challenged the traditional distinction between hard sciences (such as physics, chemistry, and biology) and soft sciences (psychology, sociology, and anthropology). They think they have more in common than previously believed. Anthropologists aid in the effort to study and reconsider what science is all about through gathering information about diverse cultural views on the process of explanation gained during participant-observation-based fieldwork.

**Ethnology**

Ethnology is the comparative study of two or more cultures. Ethnology utilizes the data taken from ethnographic research and applies it to a single cross-cultural topic. The ethnographic approach can be used to identify and attempt to explain cross-cultural variation in cultural elements such as marriage, religion, subsistence practices, political organization, and parenting, just to name a few. Ethnology often compares and contrasts various cultures. Anthropologists who focus on one culture are often called ethnographers while those who focus on several cultures are often called ethnologists. The term ethnology is credited to Adam Franz Kollár who used and defined it in his Historiae ivrisqve pvblici Regni Vngariae amoenitates published in Vienna in 1783.\[12\]
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