CHAPTER ONE

What are the Challenges in Ethnographic Fieldwork?

Introduction

KEY TERMS: rite of passage, ethnographer, fieldwork, socio-cultural anthropology, qualitative research, quantitative research, key informants, gender, ethics, ethnography

Fieldwork is a humbling experience. This statement, admitted by so many anthropologists, holds true today as much as it did 50 years ago. Anthropologists are seldom fully prepared for what they encounter in the field, and the onslaught of new sights, sounds, and smells can be overwhelming. Despite the romantic images some people have of fieldwork, the work is tedious and fraught with frustrations, culture shock, and loneliness.

Fieldwork is often called a **RITE OF PASSAGE**—the time when an anthropologist learns to survive in a foreign environment, and in the process learns to face the personal and moral challenges of fieldwork. In this chapter we will address some of these challenges using anecdotal accounts from "seasoned" anthropologists who have spent considerable time in the field. As anthropologists struggle to understand the many nuances and meanings attached to the daily lives of their study group, they are also learning a great deal about their own ideals and cultural upbringing. This learning process will also be considered.

Anthropologists and Fieldwork

Anthropologists and fieldwork go hand in hand. The field anthropologist, also known as an **ETHNOGRAPHER,** is a stranger in a strange place. Unaware of the local customs and expected behaviour, an ethnographer lives in constant fear of behaving inappropriately, and embarrassing him or herself and others, despite the best of intentions. This is what Annette Weiner encountered early in her fieldwork with the Kiriwini culture of the Trobrianders of New Guinea. While learning the values and norms of the Kiriwina, she also had to let go of her cultural assumptions about work, power, death, family, and friends. According to Weiner (1987: 1), "Walking into a village at the beginning of fieldwork is entering a world without cultural guideposts." Anthropologists must learn to be flexible, adaptable, and creative. In other words, anthropologists must learn "to go with the flow."

Fieldwork is best described as the ultimate learning experience, as you begin like a child and gradually absorb knowledge—and wisdom and insight if all goes well—which matures you in the eyes of your teachers and, ideally, wins you their approval ... the good things have heavily outweighed the bad.

Anthropologist
Robert Tonkinson (1991: 18)

Fieldwork is a journey of discovery for the anthropologist, not only about the cultural group in question, but personally. According to James Clifford (1997) "sojourning somewhere else, learning a language, putting oneself in odd situations and trying to figure them out can be a good way to learn something new, simultaneously about oneself and about the places one visits" (White & Tengan 2001: 381). To that end, ethnographers are strongly influenced by practical, personal, and participatory experiences they have in the field. The role of an ethnographer is to learn and understand as best he or she can the symbols and concepts that have meaning to members of a culture, and then convey this understanding to others. Alice Reich considers the people anthropologists study as the real teachers (Kutsche 1998). Indeed, most anthropologists return from the field with a new sense of self, a newfound confidence in their abilities, and an expanded worldview. Knauft (2005: 37) sums up his fieldwork experience in Papua New Guinea: "We came to see cultural anthropology as a kind of dialogue—a conversation between Gebusi meanings and our own understandings."

A Discussion of Fieldwork

In anthropology, **FIELDWORK** is the process of collecting descriptive data on a specific culture through extended periods of living with members of the culture. Fieldwork is essential to anthropology; indeed, Whitehead and Conaway (1986) suggest that anthropology is shaped by fieldwork, and that anthropologists are shaped by field experiences. This shaping lends itself to more personal and first-hand accounts about the study group—a hallmark of **SOCIO-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY.** As such, fieldwork defines anthropology and gives it a distinctive identity.

The most common and useful form of fieldwork is participant observation, which involves living with a cultural group for an extended

period of time, and interacting with the people on a daily basis. This is where the humbling experience begins. Indeed, Alice Reich calls participant observation "a time honoured tradition of making a fool of oneself for a point" (Kutsche 1998: 5).

Although anthropological fieldwork is inherently **QUALITATIVE**, in some cases **QUANTITATIVE** research is also necessary. When Jon D. Holtzman (2000: 11) studied Nuer immigrants in Minnesota, he administered quantitative surveys to compile a community profile that included demographics, such as "age, gender, tribal and clan affiliation, education and work experiences, and basic outlines of the Nuer refugee experience." Despite structured research methods such as those discussed above, true ethnographic fieldwork relies primarily on personal conversations and interviews, as well as on interacting and participating in the daily lives of the study group (participant observation). Holtzman did not rely solely on his quantitative data, he also conducted life history research, in-depth structured interviews, and created detailed case studies.

KEY INFORMANTS, who are experts in the social complexities of their culture, provide the basis for understanding the culture's experience and meaning. When Robert Anderson (2005: 3) studied the ghosts of Iceland, he joined seance groups to observe and record conversations between the living and dead, and he regularly attended lectures at spiritist schools and spirit society coffee klatches. These informal participatory activities enabled him to better grasp their day-to-day beliefs.

Fieldwork, and in particular participant observation, is a unique method for learning about people and their behaviour. As mentioned in the introduction to the text, the efficacy of this research method has not gone unnoticed in other disciplines, such as psychology, geography, and education. These disciplines and others have "borrowed" participant observation and incorporated this research method into their studies.

"I continue to believe that anthropology is the quintessential liberal arts discipline because it is about meaningful human life, not as a set of answers, but as a series of engaged conversations."

ANTHROPOLOGIST ALICE REICH QUOTED IN KUTSCHE (1998: 4)

CHALLENGES OF FIELDWORK

Anthropologists face many challenges when first entering the field, beginning with the viability of their research proposal and a review by an ethics board, learning the language, dealing with personal and professional uncertainty, developing a rapport with community members, gender issues, and coping with health and safety issues and personal discomforts.

More than one anthropologist has been forced to scrap their original research project when they arrived in the community. Jean L. Briggs was placed in the unenviable position of seeing her research project fall apart when she arrived at Chantrey Inlet in the Arctic in 1963 (Briggs 1970). Planning to study the traditional shamanistic practices of the Utku Inuit, Briggs discovered that missionaries had converted the Utku to Christianity three decades earlier. Briggs' ability to adapt saved her

Utku Inuit Territory

field season. She decided to study Inuit emotional expression and their incredible emotional restraint. The Utku ability to express their hostile feelings in non-hostile ways, such as joking, fascinated Briggs, partly because she never quite mastered the art.

Annette Weiner (1987) did not plan to focus her research on the Trobriander women of New Guinea, but on her first day she happened upon women distributing bundles of dried banana leaves to other women as a way of commemorating the death of a villager. This chance encounter piqued Weiner's interest in women's economic roles, and her research has added considerably to our knowledge of women's wealth and their role in the economic, social, and political systems of the Trobrianders.

The most difficult challenge for the field ethnographer is learning the language—and not just the vocabulary and grammar, but the nuances and perhaps some colloquialisms. Most important of all, ethnographers must learn the non-verbal communication—body language, tone, use of space, and extraneous vocalizations that convey important messages and cues. The Knaufts spent the first six months of their fieldwork learning the Gebusi language by listening closely and trying to distinguish sounds, making endless lists of Gebusi words and phrases, and learning the tense and grammar (Knauft 2005: 36).

Ethnographers must deal with constant uncertainty, both personal and professional. When Robert Tonkinson (1991) arrived in the Gibson Desert in Western Australia to study the Mardu Aborigines,

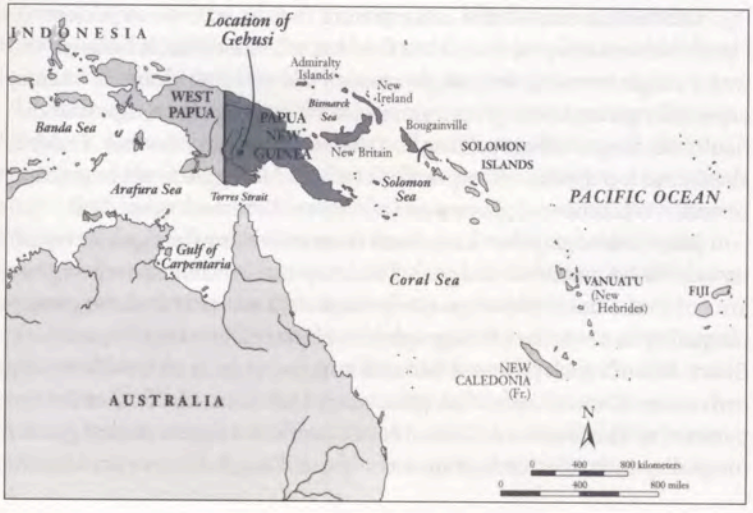
he was plagued with self-doubt and constantly second-guessed his behaviour. When offered some chewing tobacco, Tonkinson worried, "Will refusal offend? Is this what our teachers meant when they said rapport must be established at all costs?" (Tonkinson 1991: 16). This is an example of the insecurity that comes from not understanding the behaviour patterns of a group of people.

In a situation that may seem humorous now, Bruce Knauft (2005) found himself in a difficult and unusual quandary. The issue of human sexuality is always a delicate subject; indeed, anthropologists have been negligent in elaborating on the sexual practices in various cultures, partly because it is such a sensitive subject. Knauft hoped to rectify this weakness in his research with the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea. He knew that Gebusi men took part in homosexual acts during spirit seances and other festivities, but did not know the extent of the practice. One night at a spirit seance, when Bruce Knauft's wife Eileen was away from the village, a Gebusi man propositioned him. Knauft was caught off guard: If he refused, would he lose the trust of the Gebusi men and their willingness to include him in male activities? Would they be angry and insulted? Yet, participant observation only goes so far. Knauft handled the situation remarkably well, telling the man that although some men in his culture did have sex with other men, this was not his custom. Fortunately, the Gebusi man understood, since the same held true for his culture—some did, some did not.

Overcoming culture shock[1] is a long process filled with setbacks, but if the anthropologist is fortunate enough to develop friendships with some members of the community, the sense of isolation and disorientation may ease more quickly. Although ethnographers do not go into the field expecting to be welcomed with open arms, sometimes very special relationships do develop. When Richard B. Lee was adopted by a Ju/'hoan family, his relationship and position among the Ju/'hoansi

"I wanted to know what had gone wrong in my relationships with my Inuit family, so that I could restore those relationships.... Then, trying to explain why my improper expressive behavior was so extremely upsetting to Inuit, I began to notice the social meanings and values they placed on emotions like happiness and anger—meanings and values that were different from mine. For them a happy person was a good person, a safe person; anger was mindless, childish, also dangerous; an angry person might kill. For Inuit, social order did not derive merely from following rules of expression, it depended on feeling the culturally appropriate emotions. As they saw it, emotions motivated behavior."

ANTHROPOLOGIST JEAN L. BRIGGS AS QUOTED IN IVAN MUZYCHKA (N.D.)



Location of Gebusi in Papau New Guinea

Ethnographer Bruce Knauft participates in a Gebusi ritual.

changed from that of an outsider looking in, to a full member of the Dobe Ju/'hoansi community (Lee 2003). His responsibilities also changed as he was now expected to fulfill the roles of a Ju/'hoan son.

Holtzman (2000) slowly developed a rapport with the Nuer immigrants in Minnesota, USA, as he became involved in their lives and helped them settle in their new homes. He gradually became friends with some of the Nuer. These friendships can last a lifetime and, while in the field, offer a support network that can mean the difference between success and failure.

Moving into a strange environment requires courage and determination, and a certain amount of optimism. This was true of anthropologist Jean L. Briggs when she conducted fieldwork in the Arctic (Briggs 1970). For Briggs, a major challenge was bringing her temperament into line with the Utku Inuit outlook on appropriate behaviour. To the Inuit, showing open hostility is taboo. Briggs' difficulty with quelling her natural temperament led to countless incidents and frustrating confrontations with the Utku, and eventually her ostracization from the Utku Inuit and her adoptive family.

GENDER is one of the determining factors in field experiences. Hazel Weidman (1970) found her field experience difficult because she was a single woman, and single women did not live alone in Burma, especially given the high crime rate. As a consequence, she had difficulty finding a village willing to take responsibility for her. Indeed, she found her fieldwork experience to be a "struggle from beginning to end" (Whitehead & Conaway 1986 from Weidman 1970: 242).

Many ethnographers have come from societies where gender equality is at least a strived-for goal. This may not be the case when they are out in the field, and when confronted with situations where gender inequality is obvious, ethnographers are placed in a moral quandary. Bruce Knauft (2005) found himself unsure of how to deal with his own sense of morality, ethics, gender, and justice in the face of Gebusi patriarchy. The women of Gebusi society endured a great deal of gender inequality and male domination according to Knauft. They were excluded

from spirit seances and other festive activities, their productive work (e.g., gardening, cooking) was not openly appreciated, and wife beating was fairly common. Knauft had to reconcile his sense of gender rights and roles with those of the community he was living in—an example of cultural relativism at work. If he had tried to interfere, his fieldwork would likely have ended right there. Yet, as discussed in the introduction to the text, the desire to step in and help is almost overwhelming.

Ethnographers also have to deal with research limitations due to gender. Male anthropologists have difficulty crossing gender barriers and discussing "women's issues" with the women, either because the women are unwilling or the men will not allow it. So, too, female ethnographers are often relegated to the women's side of society, and refused entry into the man's world. Knauft's wife, Eileen, found herself barred from male activities in the village even though she was an outsider—her gender, not her nationality, established her rights or lack thereof (Knauft 2005). Yet, there is a suggestion that older, single women may in fact have an easier time gaining access to field sites to study both male and female activities than others, mainly because of their age and academic status.

Nuisance problems also have a way of impacting the field research experience. Tonkinson (1991) had to deal with wild dingo dogs stealing whatever they could and, most annoying of all, millions of flies that got into everything, including his mouth, nose, and ears. Knauft (2005: 33) and his wife Eileen suffered malaria, digestive disorders, intestinal worms, skin lesions, boils, rashes, and jungle rot in all the wrong places. Heat and humidity, and swarms of insects were the most annoying daily problem. These little problems and chronic discomforts can become a "big deal" over the course of an extended field season.

Anthropologists have learned the hard way that taking the advice of the locals is usually wise. When Richard B. Lee was first setting up his camp near the Dobe Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, he ignored the advice of the Ju/'hoan men and pitched his tent under a grove of trees on the edge of a rocky area. His choice was fine during the dry season, but once the rains started, Lee awoke in ankle-deep water to the sounds of the Ju/'hoan men laughing (Lee 2003).

Although it may seem a trivial point, food is an important issue in fieldwork. Refusing to eat the same food as other members of the community could be construed as an insult. Thus, anthropologists must make every effort to eat the traditional foods. The ensuing intestinal discomforts are part of the fieldwork experience. Food can also be perceived as a symbolic gift that establishes future relations, and food sharing establishes a support network that the anthropologist may dearly need.

A second seemingly trivial problem is toilet facilities and personal hygiene. Many an anthropologist has had to make do with non-existent toilet facilities, and the opportunity to bathe, except in a nearby stream, may be remote. Lack of cleanliness undoubtedly leads to various medical problems, such as skin lesions and infections.

The challenge of living and working with the Gebusi turned our own lives into something of an extreme sport. But in the crucible of personal experience, the Gebusi became not only human to us but also, despite their tragic violence, wonderful people. With wit and passion, they lived rich and festive lives. Vibrant and friendly, they turned life's cruellest ironies into their best jokes, and its biggest tensions into their most elaborate fantasies. Their humor, spirituality, deep togetherness, and raw pragmatism made them, for the most part, great fun to be with. I have never felt more included in a social world. And what personalities! To lump them together as simply "Gebusi" is as bland as it would be to describe David Letterman, Michael Jordan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Hilary Rodman Clinton as simply "American." The Gebusi were not simply "a society" or "a culture;" they were an incredible group of individuals.

Anthropologist
Bruce Knauft (2005: 3–4)

The climate may also be a source of extreme discomfort. Ethnographers often find themselves living in environments with scorching heat and intense humidity, or freezing cold. A tropical rainforest is considerably different from a North American metropolis, just as an Arctic environment is very different from both of these. Jean L. Briggs (1970) quickly realized she could not survive on her own; rather she had to rely on the benevolence of her Utku family. Tonkinson (1991) had to endure the harsh Australian desert weather, ranging from blistering heat in the summer to freezing cold in the winter.

Oftentimes, ethnographers are called upon to perform other duties while conducting their research; some have become teachers, others offer medical services. In Tonkinson's (1991) case, he was able to serve as an interpreter for the government welfare patrols that visited Mardu camps. When Jon D. Holtzman (2000) began his research into Nuer immigrants in Minnesota, he set out to ease their adjustment to American life. He helped organize a household-goods drive through a local church, drove Nuer men to job interviews, and developed a mentorship/friendship program between Nuer and American youths.

Anthropologists struggle with the need to find a balance in their fieldwork. They must remain neutral and objective, report what they learn, and maintain a culturally relativistic perspective by not passing judgment or interfering in the lives of the study group. Yet, Knauft (2005) wonders, at what point do we draw a line between appreciation of cultural diversity and critiquing some of the cultural practices and beliefs that are obviously harmful to at least some members of the community? In the case of the Gebusi, although Knauft saw the richness and vibrancy of their culture, he also saw the underside—the male dominance and subjugation of women, and the sorcerer accusations that often ended in the murder of an innocent person.

One of the valuable lessons of fieldwork is experiencing, even for a short time, what it feels like to be a minority person. Most ethnographers have come from Western societies where people of European descent are the "mainstream" and enjoy the highest position in society. To become the object of curiosity, the "odd" one, is an eye-opening experience that can fundamentally change the way we view ourselves and others, and should increase our cultural sensitivity.

FIELDWORK AND ETHICS

Ethical guidelines are an important part of ethnographic research. Anthropologists owe their allegiance first and foremost to the people they are studying—without their trust, an anthropologist's work becomes difficult if not impossible. Anthropologists endeavour to take every possible measure to protect the privacy and dignity of their study group (Fedorak 2006).

Regarding **ETHICS**, several areas deserve some further consideration. First, confidentiality is a concern. Some of the information anthropologists gather may be sensitive or even present some danger for the key informants. For example, will governments use information on a minority group to suppress their activism? Second, who is this research benefiting? The old joke "The anthropologists are coming! The anthropologists are coming!" is not so funny. Ethnographers have studied virtually every cultural group in existence and certainly the knowledge they have gained is academically valuable, but is that enough? This is where applied anthropology comes into play. As discussed in the introduction, applied anthropology makes anthropology relevant in the real world. It is putting to practical use the knowledge hiding in ethnographies. Anthropologists such as Harvey Feit, who, after completing his PhD research, worked with the James Bay Cree in their struggle to stop construction of a hydroelectric dam on their traditional hunting grounds was giving something back to the community (Feit 1995), as was Victoria J. Baker, who served as the schoolteacher in a Sinhalese village she was studying in Sri Lanka (Baker 1998).

Anthropologists are not always studying exotic cultures in far, distant places; sometimes the research is in their own backyard. American anthropologist William R. Ury studied conflict resolution at a Kentucky coal mine for his PhD. Since then he has helped resolve conflict in several high-profile cases, including the ongoing mediation of peace between the Russians and Chechens (Integral Naked 2004). Employing an anthropological perspective learned through years of experience with first-hand fieldwork (participant observation), Ury's work is becoming increasingly relevant in a world mired in conflict.

It is not the mandate of anthropologists to change a community, yet many anthropologists have found it exceedingly difficult to turn away when there is an obvious need. However, by whose definition is there a need? Gender inequalities and protection of children present a particularly difficult dilemma.[2] Another challenge, though not often mentioned, is the difficulty of navigating ethics review boards at universities, which at the very least may have a tremendous impact on what the anthropologist is allowed to study.

The culmination of months, even years, in the field is the **ETHNOGRAPHY**—a detailed descriptive account of the daily lives of a cultural group. The ethnography is written when the anthropologist returns home, compiled from copious field notes written in leather-bound crumpled journals, or more likely today, saved to a compact disk. Here, issues of voice, objectivity, and the validity of the information concern the anthropologist the most. As study groups have increasingly demanded their voices be heard, anthropologists have become recorders as well as interpreters of cultural data. Narratives from the people themselves may offer another level of information, but at all times, anthropologists must struggle to ensure the validity and objectivity

"Those encounters with my grandfather totally and fundamentally changed my understanding. They made me realize that I should live my life knowing that I will live on in an afterlife. Knowing that life goes on after death is a reality with enormous implications for how one should live this life in an earthly body."

PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF MAGNUS SKARPHEDINSSON (ANDERSON 2005: 11)

of not only their interpretations but also their informants. Anderson (2005) gave voice to his key informants, who, through their personal narratives, spoke for themselves.

Interestingly, some anthropologists have turned the rigours of their fieldwork into literature as well.[3] These accounts provide a window into the experiences of the ethnographer. Diamond Jenness (1959), one of the most prestigious Canadian anthropologists, wrote *People of the Twilight*, which contains many personal accounts of his fieldwork experiences.

Conclusion

As we have seen, ethnographic fieldwork is a complex endeavour, fraught with pitfalls and challenges. Yet, as anthropologists such as Bruce Knauft readily point out, this struggle is not without its rewards. The relevance of ethnographic fieldwork becomes particularly evident when ethnographers become involved in the community they are studying, whether this is by providing interpreter or education services, or serving as advocates for the needs of "their" culture.

Most anthropologists see their fieldwork, at least in hindsight, as a rite of passage, a time when they became real anthropologists. Fieldwork is the foundation of anthropological studies, and is the source of cultural data and discussions that will be presented in the following chapters of *Anthropology Matters!* So important is fieldwork to anthropology that British anthropologist C.G. Seligman proclaimed, "Field research in anthropology is what the blood of the martyrs is to the church" (Lewis 1976: 27).

Questions for Consideration

1. Outline a strategy for preparing for fieldwork. What preparations do you consider most important for your personal well-being? For your professional efficacy? For the reassurance of your study group?

2. Discuss the ethics of anthropology. What measures can an ethnographer take to ensure the privacy of his or her study group?

3. Anthropologists live with a study group and observe their daily lives. Imagine yourself as part of a study group. If an anthropologist moved into your community (be it your hometown, university dorm, or so on), how would you respond to this person's continuing presence in your life? What types of questions and topics would you be willing to discuss, and what aspects of your life would be considered too private to discuss with a stranger? Would the gender or age of the anthropologist make any difference to you?

4. Design a fieldwork project. Choose to study a "culture scene" close to home (e.g., your church group, the local Goth club, skateboarders, a Tupperware party, etc.).

NOTES

1 See Chapter 12 in this volume for a detailed discussion of culture shock, including the experiences of several anthropologists.

2 See Chapter 7 on female circumcision for an extensive discussion of this ethical dilemma.

3 See *The Naked Anthropologist* (1992) by Philip R. DeVita for personal accounts of fieldwork.

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Suggested Readings

BRIGGS, J.L. (1970). *Never in anger. Portrait of an Eskimo family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Although slightly dated, Briggs' fieldwork experiences, more than any other ethnography, highlight the many challenges that anthropologists face in an alien and sometimes harsh environment.

DEVITA, P.R. (Ed.) (1992). *The naked anthropologist. Tales from around the world*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

DeVita has put together a collection of stories that recount sometimes embarrassing, sometimes startling experiences of anthropologists in the field. Readers should gain an understanding of the challenges faced by anthropologists as they deal with their insecurities, ignorance, isolation, missteps, and happenstance.

KNAUFT, B. (2005). *The Gebusi: Lives transformed in a rainforest world*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.

A refreshing ethnography on a previously little-known group of hunter–gatherers living in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea. This book provides students with an excellent example of the ethnographic experience.