

FIELD WORK TRADITION IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is popularly known as a “field science”. This is because in its study of humans, both socially and biologically, it depends on authenticating its data from real experiences and knowledge. This reality is captured not by suppositions and theories but by gathering first hand knowledge on it. This is where fieldwork as an approach of study comes in. This module will discuss the relevance of fieldwork and its tradition in anthropology and put forward how, it as a methodology since its inception and evolution has played an important role in anthropological study.

Concept of Fieldwork

Fieldwork is central to the inquiry of anthropology. It can be said to have formed the foundation of the discipline. The famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead notes: “We still have no way to make an anthropologist except by sending him into the field: this contact with living material is our distinguishing mark”

Traditionally the word “field” indicates the area where the members of the group to be researched by the investigator, live in. However today, the “field” may also be the internet, a museum, a school, a library, a hospital, a lab, a market, an urban eating joint, a virtual space etc. The “field” becomes the readymade laboratory for the researcher. Fieldwork is investigation in anthropology where the researcher stays in or visits the place of investigation for long periods of time, not less than a year, receives firsthand experience and collects data. Powdermaker defines fieldwork as “the study of people and of their culture in their natural habitat. Anthropological fieldwork has been characterised by the prolonged residence of the investigator, his participation in and observation of the society, and his attempt to understand the inside view of the native people and to achieve the holistic view of a social scientist” (cited in Robben and Sluka 2007: 7). Others like Luhrmann points out that, “Anthropology is the naturalist’s trade: you sit and watch and learn from the species in its natural environment”

Fieldwork is equally important to the socio-cultural anthropologists, the physical anthropologists and the archaeological anthropologists. It is one methodology they follow in their distinct branches throughout their academic lifetime due to the remarkable awareness it provides. Anthropologists depend on fieldwork as their ultimate source of gathering valid data. It is because as Srivastava puts it, “compared to the other methods, fieldwork yields a lot of data about the lifestyles of people and the meaning they attribute to their actions. Fieldwork also teaches the distinction between ‘what people think’, ‘what people say’, ‘what people do, and ‘what people say they ought to have done’”

Fieldwork is a kind of characteristic custom, a procedure that assists anthropologists in the inquiry of human life. It offers a huge level of flexibility to the fieldworker as s/he can modify approaches and techniques of investigation and collection of data, create and add

newer processes and formulate “on-the-spot strategies to come to grips with unforeseen challenges of fieldwork”

History of Fieldwork in Anthropology Anthropology today may hold a strong position in fieldwork expertise. But this was not always the case. When anthropology began as a valid discipline, its precursors though very much interested in knowing about how people lived all over the world, were however not too keen to go out and investigate on their own. These European scholars of the nineteenth century rather preferred to be dependent on the inquiries made by missionaries, voyagers, traders, administrators, etc. who were based locally in their places of interest, mostly colonies. Such scholars were generally known as armchair anthropologists.

E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), one of our first generation anthropologists who probably gave the most famous definition of culture and an advocate of theory of human development (called evolutionism), did assist an amateur archaeologist in his field expedition to Mexico in the mid 1850s. His first book, *Anahuac, or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* (1861), was based on this fieldwork.

Another contemporary of Tylor’s and also a promoter of evolutionism, American scholar, L.H. Morgan (1818-1881) known for his studies on family, marriage and kinship, conducted his first fieldwork among the Iroquois, a native American tribe in the 1840s. He published his findings in the form of book called *League of the Iroquois* (1851). Unlike armchair anthropologists of his time, he continued his field expeditions among many other North American tribes collecting data on their kinship systems. Though fieldwork as a full fledged process of investigation in anthropology was not yet introduced in the discipline, Morgan is influential in promoting the development and use of genealogical method during fieldwork while studying family, marriage and kinship.

There was more fieldwork conducted by both the British and the Americans during the late nineteenth century. British stalwarts, W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) and A.C. Haddon (1855-1940) organised the famous expedition to the Torres Straits in the Pacific, in Australia in 1898 and Franz Boas (1858- 1942), revered American anthropologist, did his first fieldwork among the Eskimos in Baffin Island, Canada in 1883. Rivers focused on the understanding of kinship relations and by the time he studied the Todas of Southern India, anthropologists realised the importance of visiting and directly gathering knowledge of societies they were interested in rather than theorising from their homes.

Boas, popularly called the father of American anthropology, strongly denounced the half-baked generalisations propagated by early 19th century anthropologists based on their scanty data made available through others. For Boas, to theorise one had to be dependent on proper ethnographic data collected on a first hand basis. Boas vehemently believed that all fields of anthropology had to be investigated in order to procure accurate data and to provide a viewpoint. This thought of his permitted him to reconstruct “the history of the growth of ideas with much greater accuracy than the generalizations of a comparative method” (Hyatt 1990:43). Boas thus introduced new ways of doing fieldwork in anthropology where he

emphasised on ethnographic fieldwork, cultural relativism and participant observation method. His cultural relativism brought in new insights to the study of anthropology as the emphasis shifted from the reasoning of the investigating anthropologist to the perception and interpretation of the respondents of the culture investigated. This was to do away with objective notions of one society being claimed more superior than another, or more correct than the other.

This historical narrative would not be complete without mentioning the significant contributions of Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, to fieldwork and the development of British social anthropology. Malinowski changed the way fieldwork was conducted in anthropological investigation. His published works based on his experiences with the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea enlightened the anthropological fraternity and others on how culture, society and its people were to be researched coherently. He mainly stressed on the following while doing fieldwork: Intensive ethnographic fieldwork; Participant observation; and Communicating in the local language. The first two are similar to what Boas had proposed, with slight variance in them. Malinowski pointed out the importance of building rapport, staying for a long period of time (for about a year or two) and getting to know the society being studied as convincingly as possible. To guide in this, participant observation denoting the involvement of the investigator in day to day events and dealings is a must. Both staying with the respondents and taking part in everyday happenings would require the investigator to build a certain level of comfort and trust among the respondents, the hosts. This can be created by communicating in the local language which Malinowski believed to be of immense assistance. Malinowski's elaborate description of the practice of Kula ring in his celebrated, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) with the use of his prescribed fieldwork methods still remains the hallmark of ethnographic investigation.

Women's entry into anthropology's fieldwork, once a male dominated space, happened before World War I, with Elsie Clews Parsons one of the few women of her time who did fieldwork in the American Southwest in 1910. It was gradually held that women have more access to women respondents' lives, a point which was advocated by E. B. Tylor in the 19th century itself who suggested that wives should assist their husbands for fieldwork to assist in such areas (Visweswaran, 1997). Boas too advocated this sentiment as he believed that "women had access to areas of social life men did not have; he considered women more intuitive and skilled in interpersonal relationships and urged them to collect data on the emotional expressive sides of life" (Modell, 1984: 181).

It was no surprise then that Boas' students, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Cora Du Bois etc. were women who did their fieldwork in the 1920s and 30s and became leading anthropologists of their time. In the late 1940s women like Mary Douglas came to the forefront, doing her fieldwork in the Congo and became famous for her works on ritual purity and impurity and symbolism. These women through their research also brought in the notions of feminism and sexuality in their works and gave a much needed twist to the anthropology that was practiced at that time. These advances in the history of anthropology set the ground

for serious fieldwork methodology and established anthropology into a legitimate field science. This concise historical account now leads us to how fieldwork as a tradition in anthropology exists.