Emic and Etic Perspectives

When anthropologists conduct fieldwork, they gather data. An important tool for gathering anthropological data is **ethnography**—the in-depth study of everyday practices and lives of a people. Ethnography produces a detailed description of the studied group at a particular time and location, also known as a "**thick description,**" a term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures* to describe this type of research and writing. A thick description explains not only the behavior or cultural event in question but also the context in which it occurs and anthropological interpretations of it. Such descriptions help readers better understand the internal logic of why people in a culture behave as they do and why the behaviors are meaningful to them. This is important because understanding the attitudes, perspectives, and motivations of cultural insiders is at the heart of anthropology.

Ethnographers gather data from many different sources. One source is the anthropologist's own observations and thoughts. Ethnographers keep field notebooks that document their ideas and reflections as well as what they do and observe when participating in activities with the people they are studying, a research technique known as **participant observation**. Other sources of data include informal conversations and more-formal interviews that are recorded and transcribed. They also collect documents such as letters, photographs, artifacts, public records, books, and reports.

Different types of data produce different kinds of ethnographic descriptions, which also vary in terms of perspective—from the perspective of the studied culture (**emic**) or from the perspective of the observer (**etic**). Emic perspectives refer to descriptions of behaviors and beliefs in terms that are meaningful to people who belong to a specific culture, e.g., how people perceive and categorize their culture and experiences, why people believe they do what they do, how they imagine and explain things. To uncover emic perspectives, ethnographers talk to people, observe what they do, and participate in their daily activities with them. Emic perspectives are essential for anthropologists' efforts to obtain a detailed understanding of a culture and to avoid interpreting others through their own cultural beliefs.

Etic perspectives refer to explanations for behavior made by an outside observer in ways that are meaningful to the observer. For an anthropologist, etic descriptions typically arise from conversations between the ethnographer and the anthropological community. These explanations tend to be based in science and are informed by historical, political, and economic studies and other types of research. The etic approach acknowledges that members of a culture are unlikely to view the things they do as noteworthy or unusual. They cannot easily stand back and view their own behavior objectively or from another perspective. For example, you may have never thought twice about the way you brush your teeth and the practice of going to the dentist or how you experienced your teenage years. For you, these parts of your culture are so normal and "natural" you probably would never consider questioning them. An emic lens gives us an alternative perspective that is essential when constructing a comprehensive view of a people.

Holism

In the throes of salvage ethnography, anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century actively documented anything and everything they could about the cultures they viewed as endangered. They collected artifacts, excavated ancient sites, wrote dictionaries of non-written languages, and documented cultural traditions, stories, and beliefs. In the United States, those efforts developed into what is known today as the four-field approach or simply as general anthropology. This approach integrates multiple scientific and humanistic perspectives into a single comprehensive discipline composed of cultural, archaeological, biological/physical, and linguistic anthropology.

A hallmark of the four-field approach is its holistic perspective: anthropologists are interested in studying everything that makes us human. Thus, they use multiple approaches to understanding humans throughout time and throughout the world. They also acknowledge that to understand people fully one cannot look solely at biology, culture, history, or language; rather, all of those things must be considered. The interrelationships between the four subfields of anthropology are important for many anthropologists today.

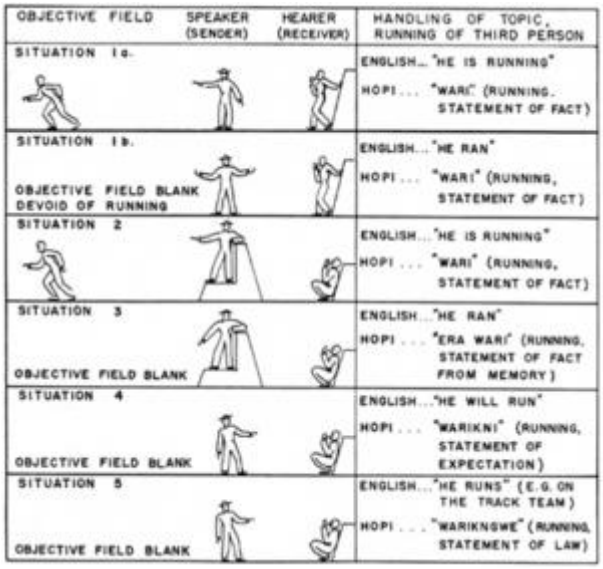

Figure 5: A chart from a 1940 publication by Whorf illustrates differences between a "temporal" language (English) and a "timeless" language (Hopi).

Linguistic anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, for instance, examined interrelationships between culture, language, and cognition. They argued that the language one speaks plays a critical role in determining how one thinks, particularly in terms of understanding time, space, and matter. They proposed that people who speak different languages view the world differently as a result. In a well-known example, Whorf contrasted the Hopi and English languages. Because verbs in Hopi contained no future or past tenses, Whorf argued that Hopi-speakers understand time in a fundamentally different way than English-speakers. An observation by an English-speaker would focus on the difference in time while an observation by a Hopi-speaker would focus on validity.[3]

Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

The guiding philosophy of modern anthropology is **cultural relativism**—the idea that we should seek to understand another person's beliefs and behaviors from the perspective of their culture rather than our own. Anthropologists do not judge other cultures based on their values nor view other cultural ways of doing things as inferior. Instead, anthropologists seek to understand people's beliefs within the system they have for explaining things.

Cultural relativism is an important methodological consideration when conducting research. In the field, anthropologists must temporarily suspend their own value, moral, and esthetic judgments and seek to understand and respect the values, morals, and esthetics of the other culture on their terms. This can be a challenging task, particularly when a culture is significantly different from the one in which they were raised.

During my first field experience in Brazil, I learned firsthand how challenging cultural relativism could be. Preferences for physical proximity and comfort talking about one's body are among the first differences likely to be noticed by U.S. visitors to Brazil. Compared to Americans, Brazilians generally are much more comfortable standing close, touching, holding hands, and even smelling one another and often discuss each other's bodies. Children and adults commonly refer to each other using playful nicknames that refer to their body size, body shape, or skin color. Neighbors and even strangers frequently stopped me on the street to comment on the color of my skin (It concerned some as being overly pale or pink—Was I ill? Was I sunburned?), the texture of my hair (How did I get it so smooth? Did I straighten my hair?), and my body size and shape ("You have a nice bust, but if you lost a little weight around the middle you would be even more attractive!").

During my first few months in Brazil, I had to remind myself constantly that these comments were not rude, disrespectful, or inappropriate as I would have perceived them to be in the United States. On the contrary, it was one of the ways that people showed affection toward me. From a culturally relativistic perspective, the comments demonstrated that they cared about me, were concerned with my well-being, and wanted me to be part of the community. Had I not taken a culturally relativistic view at the outset and instead judged the actions based on my cultural perspective, I would have been continually frustrated and likely would have confused and offended people in the community. And offending your informants and the rest of the community certainly is not conducive to completing high-quality ethnography! Had I not fully understood the importance of body contact and physical proximity in communication in Brazil, I would have missed an important component of the culture.

Another perspective that has been rejected by anthropologists is **ethnocentrism**—the tendency to view one's own culture as most important and correct and as a stick by which to measure all other cultures. People who are ethnocentric view their own cultures as central and normal and reject all other cultures as inferior and morally suspect. As it turns out, many people and cultures are ethnocentric to some degree; ethnocentrism is a common human experience. Why do we respond the way we do? Why do we behave the way we do? Why do

we believe what we believe? Most people find these kinds of questions difficult to answer. Often the answer is simply “because that is how it is done.” They believe what they believe because that is what one normally believes and doing things any other way seems wrong.

Ethnocentrism is not a useful perspective in contexts in which people from different cultural backgrounds come into close contact with one another, as is the case in many cities and communities throughout the world. People increasingly find that they must adopt culturally relativistic perspectives in governing communities and as a guide for their interactions with members of the community. For anthropologists in the field, cultural relativism is especially important. We must set aside our innate ethnocentrisms and let cultural relativism guide our inquiries and interactions with others so that our observations are not biased. Cultural relativism is at the core of the discipline of anthropology.

Observation and Participant Observation

Of the various techniques and tools used to conduct ethnographic research, observation in general and participant observation in particular are among the most important. Ethnographers are trained to pay attention to everything happening around them when in the field—from routine daily activities such as cooking dinner to major events such as an annual religious celebration. They observe how people interact with each other, how the environment affects people, and how people affect the environment. It is essential for anthropologists to rigorously document their observations, usually by writing field notes and recording their feelings and perceptions in a personal journal or diary.

As previously mentioned, participant observation involves ethnographers observing while they participate in activities with their informants. This technique is important because it allows the researcher to better understand why people do what they do from an emic perspective. Malinowski noted that participant observation is an important tool by which “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world.”[6]

To conduct participant observation, ethnographers must live with or spend considerable time with their informants to establish a strong rapport with them. Rapport is a sense of trust and a comfortable working relationship in which the informant and the ethnographer are at ease with each other and agreeable to working together.

The comparative approach: This is a much misunderstood term.
The so-called comparative approach, usually of individual traits or culture complexes torn from context, underlay the nineteenth-century anthropology which led to the evolutionary theory characterizing that period.
After this theory went out of vogue, first under the attack of Boas, the comparative approach fell into disfavor. However, when anthropology advanced to the point of recognizing that knowledge of process (rather than of specific historical sequences) and of generic structures and functions--social types, in a word--was its primary concern, the significance of the comparative method became clear. Hence we feel today that fully to exploit the results of any field study these results must be compared with

those of other studies. Contemporary comparative analysis already has told us much about the structure of societies in general, and it has contributed particularly to our knowledge of basic change processes. Just as years ago we began to recognize that individual behavior forms and institutions could be understood only in the context of the entire social system, so today we accept the fact that a single social system and its elements can be understood most fully only in the comparative context of other societies, in which similarities and differences can be noted, and in which, above all, regularities in process can be delineated.

4) **The potential significance of all data:** Since they believe that a culture or social system is a logical, integrated, holistic phenomenon in which the parts fit together in meaningful patterns, anthropologists assume that every bit of data and all forms of behavior in the system have meaning which ultimately can be fitted into patterns and hypotheses. This is what Rapoport means when he writes that "The anthropologist's approach is also to be distinguished from that of academic psychologists and sociologists by the anthropologist's fascination with the irrational and nonrational aspects of social life" (Rapoport 1963: 1900). Anthropologists have been criticized for their "vacuum sweeper"

approach to data-gathering.

5) The use of multiple data-gathering techniques: No single data-gathering technique is adequate to the anthropologist's task of acquiring as many and as varied data as he can. The open-ended or unstructured interview with an informant continues to be his single most important technique. The assumption underlying this method is that a few people telling the anthropologist a great deal will produce kinds of data not obtainable by a great many people telling him relatively little. The open-ended interview functions in much the same fashion as the psychiatric interview: the informant, like the patient (and not the anthropologist or the psychiatrist), defines the problem areas, although it is unlikely that he is aware of what he is doing. It is the task of the anthropologist, like the psychiatrist, to recognize the significant clues which, on the basis of his training and experience, permit formulation of hypotheses

that ultimately should lead to success.

The "key" informant is an invaluable ally; the best field work cannot be done without him. However much one is part of a community, however fluent in the language he may be, and however free his access to community activities, the time comes when the anthropologist must sit down with a knowledgeable and willing person who in systematic fashion will answer his questions. But the key informant technique, if overdone, produces a culture of informants rather than a culture of society. In addition to living in a community and looking, listening, asking casual questions, and working systematically with a few people, the anthropologist will use a great many other data-gathering techniques which provide information not otherwise available. These may include the taking of a census, the use of projective

tests, the recording of life histories, and the search for local statistical and historical materials. Increasingly anthropologists use questionnaires to get at special problems. These, however, they tend to see as adjuncts to other methods, as devices to quantify special problem areas, rather than as the primary data-gathering technique itself. The relative superficiality of survey research techniques makes them unsuitable in most anthropological settings, except for certain limited goals and usually after the basic culture is rather well known.

6**) The use of native languages:** Anthropologists assume they must speak and understand the language used by the people they study if their research results are to meet today's exacting requirements. To live, probably as the only representative of his society, in an exotic community for a year or more means the anthropologist, for sheer survival and communication, must learn the local language. Although much early field work was done through interpreters, today's social anthropological field research cannot be done other than on the basis of good linguisticcontrol. In addition to being able to ask questions and understand answers an anthropologist must, so to speak, eavesdrop: he must be able to understand what people are saying when they forget his presence, when they

talk among themselves oblivious to his reaction. When on one occasion