

## TEACHERS' CORNER: STUDENT ETHNOGRAPHY

Editor's Note: How can students experience fieldwork? In the last issue of *Anthro·Notes*, Martha Williams' article "Fieldwork in the Classroom" described how her anthropology students interviewed foreign students in her school's English as a Second Language classes. Another way to have students do fieldwork is described below by Beatrice Kleppner, a Boston teacher. Her 11th and 12th grade students do mini-fieldwork projects in the community at the end of their year-long course in anthropology. Mrs. Kleppner shares with you her instructions to the students for preparing their "ethnography of a small cultural unit."

### Getting Started:

Choose a cultural unit for your study. This might be a neighborhood, office, store, a club, or an interest group. If at all possible, choose a subject with which you have a tie or contact. Your criteria for selecting the cultural unit are simplicity, accessibility, unobstrusiveness, permissibility, and recurring activities. Before setting to work be sure to discuss your choice with me.

### A Note on Ethical Responsibility:

Before starting fieldwork, you should be aware of your responsibility with respect to ethical problems which may arise. The American Anthropological Association's publication, "A.A.A. Principles of Professional Responsibility" (A.A.A. NEWSLETTER 11(9), 1970), is required reading.

### Style:

A successful ethnographic study requires perceptive and detailed observation and a skillful narrative style. It is important that you study at least one professional monograph. I recommend

Spradley and Mann's *COCKTAIL WAITRESS* (John Wiley and Sons, 1975) or Carol Stack's *ALL OUR KIN* (Harper and Row, 1975).

### Point of View:

To carry out a successful study you must be very sensitive to the point of view of your subjects. For instance, a café could be described from the point of view of the customer, the waiter, the owner, the dishwasher, the chef, the janitor, or the cabaret performer. Your study may concentrate on one point of view; nevertheless, you should be aware of all the points of view involved, not least your own point of view.

### Your Notebook:

Keep a record of your research in a separate notebook. This will be the prime resource for writing your paper and must be handed in with it. The notebook should contain:

- 1) a description of the physical setting of the institution or scene. A map or sketch can be helpful;
- 2) a short introductory description of the cultural unit, with a brief history, if appropriate;
- 3) a list of informants with a description of each;
- 4) a list of questions that you will ask;
- 5) the responses of your informants. Direct quotes from these responses will be an important part of your paper. Wherever possible, quotes should be verbatim. A tape recorder can be useful, and the tapes can later be transcribed in your notebook;
- 6) notes and jottings on your own opinions and observations as they occur and dates for each entry; and
- 7) a glossary of specialized terms or slang used by the person or persons you observe.

(cont'd)

### The Paper:

Before starting to write your paper, you must organize and analyze your data. At this point you may very well find you have not asked the right questions or that the data is incomplete. If this should occur, please discuss the problem with me during our weekly conference. The paper should include:

#### 1. Introduction

A general statement about the subject and your reason for choosing it. If possible, attempt to relate it to universal cultural concerns. For instance, a study of a nursing home could refer to the universal problems of aging in all societies and to ethnographic studies, such as Leo Simmon's *ROLE OF THE AGED IN PRIMITIVE SOCIETY* (Hamden, Ct.: Shoe-string Press, 1970).

#### 2. Description of the Cultural Unit.

This is drawn directly from your notes.

#### 3. Discussion of Your Fieldwork Experience

Describe how you found your informants, characteristics of informants, defects in your approach, and any special problems you might have encountered. (For example, a study of a student lounge may hit sensitive information about vandalism.)

#### 4. The Main Body of the Paper

This will include your data, your observations, and your thoughts. Each should be clearly identified. It is important that you pull together and clearly analyze the data in order to support your interpretation.

#### 5. The Conclusion

Your study should point to a few dominant themes. These should be clarified or emphasized in your conclusion.

#### 6. Footnotes and Bibliography

Beatrice S. Kleppner  
Beaver Country Day School  
Boston, Massachusetts

(Editor's Note: see bibliography next page)



BIBLIOGRAPHY ON STUDENT FIELD PROJECTS

Crane, Julia G. and Michael V. Angrosino. *FIELD PROJECTS IN ANTHROPOLOGY: A STUDENT HANDBOOK*. Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1974.

While designed for undergraduate students, the book gives 14 projects that could be revised for high school students. The projects represent some of the most commonly used data collection techniques such as making maps, charting kinship, collecting life histories, and digging into cultural history. A readable text, appropriately designed activities, and an excellent selected annotated bibliography for each project result in a valuable resource for teachers.

Hunter, David E. and Mary Ann B. Foley. *DOING ANTHROPOLOGY: A STUDENT CENTERED APPROACH TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY*. N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1976.

Applying an easy-to-use, inductive approach, this book consists of 27 exercises with extended discussions. It is designed to teach students with little or no previous exposure to anthropology how to observe and think like an anthropologist, not how to master field techniques. The exercises focus on observations; settings; categorization, especially of food; ego and his networks; and patterns. The exercises are short, directed to a single point, and do not demand that the student juggle a large amount of data

Spradley, James P. and David W. McCurdy. *THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE: ETHNOGRAPHY IN A COMPLEX SOCIETY*. Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1972.

An excellent source by authors who believe in active student involve-

ment. From their teaching experience, they found students did not know what questions to ask and how to ask them. The first section contains five chapters: covering goals of fieldwork, how to find a culture to study in our own complex society, how to find and work with informants, ethnographic semantics, and how to analyze field data and write an ethnographic account. The second section includes a dozen sample ethnographies ranging from an ethnography of a junior high school to an ethnography of fire-fighters. The book concludes with a six page bibliography.

Spradley, James P. *THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW*. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.

Compared to *THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE*, the next two books by Spradley are far more detailed in methodology for conducting community fieldwork and the instructions are for the student, not the teacher. The two volumes, however, do not contain sample student ethnographies. This excellent book clarifies the nature of ethnography and gives specific guidelines for doing ethnography for professionals and students without long years of training in anthropology. Spradley sets forth 12 major interview tasks designed to guide the investigator from the starting point of locating an informant to the goal of writing the ethnography.

Spradley, James P. *PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION*. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980.

The step-by-step instructions show the beginning student how to do fieldwork in their community using participant observation. The activities take several hours each week. The goal is to begin and complete a qualitative research project. This very practical and clearly explained book is divided into two parts: 1) ethnography and culture; and 2) the 12 step developmental research sequence.