



DATA WORKSHOP

Analyzing Everyday Life

Seeing Culture in a Subculture



When it comes to culture, we are like fish in water. Because we're so deeply immersed in it, we may not really see it. When culture becomes something we take for granted, we lose sight of what's distinctive or different about it. One of the best ways to "see" culture is to approach it as an outsider, or as someone who is learning about it for the first time. Even if it's a culture to which you've belonged your entire life, you can always act as if you are a new member trying to understand your group. In any event, to better appreciate culture you'll need to suspend your ethnocentrism and practice cultural relativism.

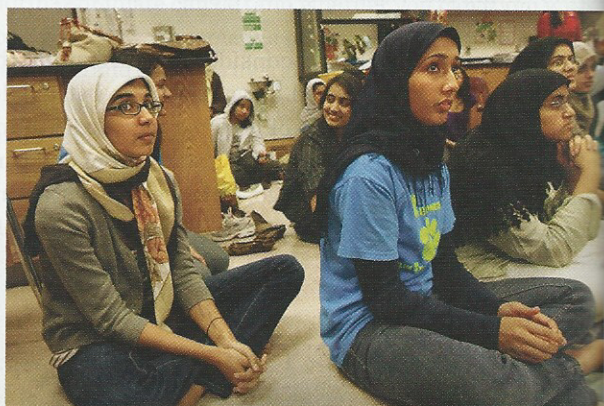
In this Data Workshop, you will be examining a subcultural group to which you belong. As someone living in a diverse, modern society, you are likely to belong to many subcultural groups. You'll be doing some participant observation research in a social setting (and taking field notes), focusing on various components of material and symbolic culture that help to define your group. At the same time you'll be reflecting on your own membership in the group, and writing a short ethnography about it. Refer to the section in Chapter 2 on participant observation/ethnographic research methods for a review before conducting your study.

Step 1: Choosing Your Cultural Group

Begin by choosing a subculture to examine. There are numerous possibilities. You could choose an ethnic group (such as Latino or African American), a nationality (such as Mexican or Swedish), a religion (such as Catholic or Mormon), an occupation (such as a server or parking valet), a sports team or club (such as intramural Ultimate Frisbee or student government), or an interest or hobby (such as video gaming or crafting). With so many from which to choose, the most important thing is to select one that gives you plenty of material to work with and is easy to observe. Provide a brief description of the subcultural group and its members.

Step 2: Observing Group Culture

Find a place where you can observe members of your subculture in some naturally occurring social setting. Depending on which subculture you choose, you might visit a church, park, or gym, a retail store or restaurant,



Culture on Campus College campuses are home to myriad subcultures, including "Quidditch" players and members of the Muslim Students Association.

the student center on campus, or a large family gathering. Spend at least 30 minutes in the setting, considering both the material and symbolic culture embodied in your field site. Jot down notes with some specific details about what you see, both in the physical environment and in social interactions among members of the group.

Step 3: Identifying Cultural Components

Read through your field notes and reflect on your experience. Then consider the following questions:

- * What aspects of material culture did you notice in the setting? This can include the physical surroundings, architecture, furniture, equipment, clothing, artwork, food, or other objects. Can you explain the meaning, function, or purpose of particular items of material culture?
- * What did you notice about language in the setting? Are there any particular words, terms, mottos, or sayings that are commonly used among members? What are their meanings? What else did you notice about talk and interaction in the setting? Were there

any signs or other written materials associated with the setting?

- * What aspects of symbolic culture are part of this subculture? Describe values that members of the group uphold, listing at least three values that are key to the group's culture. What are the group's ideas, beliefs, or attitudes? Does the group have a mission or goal?
- * What kinds of social norms guide the behavior of individuals, and how are these norms related to group values? What are the folkways of the group? How do these folkways shape what members do or say? What are some of the rules governing members? Why are they important?
- * What did you observe in the setting that seemed especially familiar or unfamiliar to you? Was there anything that surprised you? What insights were you able to gain by suspending ethnocentrism and practicing cultural relativism? What did you learn about yourself as a member of the subculture after conducting this study?

There are two options for completing this Data Workshop:

PREP-PAIR-SHARE Do the fieldwork outlined in Steps 1 and 2, and bring your field notes with you to class for reference. In groups of two or three, discuss your experiences and exchange answers to the questions in Step 3. Take this opportunity to learn more about different subcultural groups.

DO-IT-YOURSELF Write a three- to four-page essay analyzing your field experiences and taking into consideration the questions in Step 3. Make sure to refer to your field notes in the essay and include them as an attachment to your paper.

Variations in Culture

We know there are differences between cultures, but there can also be variations within cultures. For instance, sociologists who have tried to identify the core values that make up American society (Bellah et al. 1985; Williams 1965) have found that while there do seem to be certain beliefs that most Americans share, such as freedom and democracy, there are also inconsistencies between such beliefs as individualism (in which we do what is best for ourselves) and humanitarianism (in which we do what is best for others), and between equality and group superiority. New values such as self-fulfillment and environmentalism could also be added to the list, having gained popularity in recent years.

It is even difficult to speak of an "American culture." "Cultural diversity" and "multiculturalism" have both become buzzwords in the past few decades, precisely because people are aware of the increasing variety of cultural groups within American society. **Multiculturalism** generally describes a policy that involves honoring the diverse racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic backgrounds of various individuals and groups. In the following chapters, we will explore some of these differences in greater depth.

Dominant Culture

Although "culture" is a term we usually apply to an entire group of people, what we find in reality is that there are often many subgroups within a larger culture, each with its own particular makeup. These subgroups, however, are not all equal. Some, by virtue of size, wealth, or historical happenstance, are able to lay claim to greater power and influence in society than others. The values, norms, and practices of the most powerful groups are referred to as the mainstream or **dominant culture**, while others are seen as "alternative" or minority views. The power of the dominant culture may mean that other ways of seeing and doing things are relegated to second-class status—in this way, dominant culture can produce cultural **hegemony**, or dominance (Gramsci 1985, 1988).

Let's take popular music as an example. Commercial radio stations often have very limited playlists. No matter what the genre (country, pop, hip-hop, metal), the songs played are determined by station and record company business interests, not your artistic preferences. Truly new artists and alternative sounds are more likely to be heard on public, college, or satellite radio stations or online. Even music streaming services like Pandora or Spotify must deliver audiences to advertisers, which may make it harder to resist the pressure to "mainstream." The dominant status of commercial radio (even online) and the corporate interests of the music industry dictate that musicians outside the mainstream will never be as big as Lady Gaga or Justin Bieber.

Subcultures and Countercultures

If sociologists focus only on the dominant culture in American society, we risk overlooking the inequalities that structure our society—as well as the influences that even small

MULTICULTURALISM a policy that values diverse racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic backgrounds and so encourages the retention of cultural differences within the larger society

DOMINANT CULTURE the values, norms, and practices of the group within society that is most powerful (in terms of wealth, prestige, status, influence, etc.)

HEGEMONY term developed by Antonio Gramsci to describe the cultural aspects of social control, whereby the ideas of the dominant group are accepted by all
