

The Study of Religion in American Society

Melinda Bollar Wagner

Reflecting upon her experiences conducting fieldwork with two very different religious movements in America—evangelical or fundamentalist Christians and New Agers—Melinda Bollar Wagner here introduces the basic features of research in cultural anthropology. She emphasizes the concept of ethnography, or the process, as well as end-product, of producing descriptive data through participant observation and interviews. Wagner breaks the process of fieldwork into a series of stages, as typically experienced by researchers. Along the way, the author considers some of the special challenges, as well as benefits, of studying religions within one's own society. Issues of loyalty, belief, bias, and responsibility are significant for all ethnographers, but are perhaps especially acute for those studying religion. Wagner considers these issues in light of the concept of reflexivity, which became important in American anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s.

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The ethnographic enterprise is the same, in many ways, wherever it is practiced. Yet ethnography inside religious groups, and within one's own culture, presents new problems while alleviating others.

Years ago, Evans-Pritchard (1962: 148) described "what the anthropologist does":

He goes to live for some months or years among a people. He lives among them as intimately as he can, and he learns to speak their language, to think

in their concepts and to feel in their values. He then lives the experiences over again critically and interpretatively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge in his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture into another.¹

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1. Evans-Pritchard's work has garnered much criticism lately for discussing, as Tedlock (1991: 74) describes it, "highly abstract, non-empirical entities" presented in an "omniscient third-person authoritative voice," rather than a less-distanced, more subjective portrait of the people (Audience comments in session, "Self or Other?: Reflexive Anthropology in the European Context," American Anthropological Association meeting, Chicago, Illinois, November 20–24, 1991).

An ethnographic description presents the concepts that make up one culture in terms meaningful to readers in another (Spradley and McCurdy 1972). The anthropologist wants both to describe a culture and to explain why it has the form that it has. In order to write ethnographic descriptions, anthropologists must first acquire understanding of these "concepts that make up the culture" themselves. "The meaning system is presumed to have been acquired when the investigator can participate in the symbolism, ritual, and patterned interactions of the culture in a way that is deemed acceptable or 'correct' by its members" (Anthony and Robbins 1974: 481–482).

Acquiring this understanding proceeds in stages. Although we may label them differently, many ethnographers have noted a similar progression of stages, whether their fieldwork has taken them to traditional or modern settings. Those stages might be labeled (1) gaining *entrée*, (2) experiencing culture shock, (3) establishing rapport, (4) attaining an ever-increasing understanding of the culture, (5) leaving the field, and (6) analyzing and interpreting what has been learned.

Stage: Gaining *Entrée*

To gain *entrée*, ethnographers must somehow become acquainted with the groups they wish to learn about. As an example, Gertrude Enders Huntington's first Amish informants were her grandmother's neighbors. I made *entrée* into both the New Age metaphysical network and the conservative Christian schools by enrolling in various classes that metaphysical leaders or Christian school-teachers also attended (Wagner 1983a, 1983b, 1990, 1993).²

Gaining *entrée* brings with it some ethical questions. One of these questions—whether *entrée* should be covert—seems to bedevil participant observers from other fields but is a settled issue for the anthropologist

(Richardson 1991). The American Anthropological Association's (1971) Statement of Ethics is clear on this point.

In research, an anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. The anthropologist must do everything within his power to protect their physical, social and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy. . . . The aims of the investigation should be communicated as well as possible to the informant. . . . Every effort should be exerted to cooperate with members of the host society in the planning and execution of research projects.

However, the role the ethnographer should take once *entrée* has been achieved is not nearly so clear-cut. Anthropological fieldwork brings with it a "triple bind," putting the fieldworker between a rock and two hard places. It is necessary to obtain good field data; anthropological ethics make it necessary to let the informants know what the ethnographer is doing; and it is necessary not to interrupt the ongoing flow and history of the society. (Although engagement and even advocacy are gaining proponents—especially in conflicts between the studied group and the larger society—it is still necessary to be aware of [if not beware of] the researcher's role in the group.) It is necessary to attend to these three goals simultaneously. The proper role of the ethnographer will be taken up again below, in a discussion of establishing rapport.

Once *entrée* has been made, it is customary in any ethnographic setting to stay in the field for at least one year. The reasoning behind this unwritten rule is threefold. First, one year will allow an annual round of seasons, holidays, and activities to unfold before the ethnographer. Even so, the ethnographer may miss events that do not happen annually. Second, staying in the field for an extended period of time will eventually give ethnographers the unnoticed "fly on the wall" or "mouse in the corner" status that they desire. Finally, the extended time in the field allows for sampling a wider variety of informants. Margaret Mead asserted that ethnographic sampling depends on knowing the various roles that informants carry; ethnographers use this knowledge as a substitute for the large numbers of anonymous respondents used by survey research to ensure that the sample represents the population.

2. *Metaphysics* is defined by its adherents as a "practical religious philosophy." Devotees seek to use psychic phenomena in practical ways in everyday life and to experience "spiritual growth," defined as an ever-increasing awareness of the divine inner self. *Conservative Christians* refers to evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic, Pentecostal, and Holiness believers.

Stage: Experiencing Culture Shock

After fieldwork is under way, even the professional student of culture is by no means insulated from culture shock. Generally, culture shock refers to the discomfort that accompanies perceiving phenomena that are surprising to the ethnographer, are misunderstood by the ethnographer, or are uncomfortable because they don't fit with the ethnographer's own cultural background. When fieldwork is undertaken in a subculture of the ethnographer's own society, the culture shock should not be as broad, nor last as long, as it would in a totally "foreign" culture. The problems associated with living day to day in a totally different environment are much mitigated. There is no new language to add to the struggle. Yet the vocabulary used in religious gatherings can seem nearly a new language (Zaretsky 1969, 1972). And its ring of familiarity can be shallow—leading ethnographers to mistakenly assume that they understand what they do not.

It is unfortunate that I have labeled culture shock a "stage" of fieldwork, as if it is to be gotten through and passed, never to be felt again. This is not the case; it waxes and wanes, taking its turn with rapport.

Stage: Establishing Rapport

Anthropologists "break out" of culture shock (at least momentarily) and can begin to understand the meaning system of a culture when they have established rapport with people in the community. Establishing rapport generally occurs side by side with being given, or taking on, a role within the society. This occurrence does not necessarily follow from the ethnographer's own efforts; it is a give-and-take negotiation between the anthropologist and the informants.

Let us now deal with the dilemma of the ethnographer's proper role vis-à-vis informants—today's most controversial issue within the anthropological community. How much (or how little) "distance" should ethnographers keep from their "subjects"? Studying within one's own culture exacerbates the quandary.³

3. There is no consensus on this issue; the commentary here must be seen as my own, based on several years of field research experience. I believe it to be a "middle ground" position.

Scientifically detached, value-free, and objective are all different labels that have been variously applied to the social scientist's role, implying different degrees of distance. Some theorists say conscious reason, and language itself, inevitably separates us from the object of our thought (van Baal 1971). Durkheim (1895/1958) thought that the social facts that are the objects of study for sociologists and anthropologists are things to be known from the outside, rather than from within. He took it as a matter of principle that "the other" has no relation to the ethnographer; the ethnographer must learn about the other by observing. Lévi-Strauss (1955/1969), on the other hand, took a different view of the ethnographic means of discernment. We all are human beings, he argued, and it was not necessary, nor desirable, for anthropologists to sacrifice their humanity and to become mere registering devices.⁴

The extreme distance of "scientific detachment" has not generally been pursued by anthropologists, whose methods include *participation* as well as observation. Being "value free" is no longer thought to be possible; a value-free social scientist has a fool for a philosopher. Postmodern science (in Toulmin's [1982] sense) "will be candid about its value dimension" and requires the same of its practitioners (Rappaport 1994).

Historically, ethnographers have sought to recognize their own values, thus not being caught in the value-free trap and delivering themselves from the culture blindness that might affect the objective nature of their studies. And to attain "objectivity" they have also striven to maintain some distance, wishing not to completely "go native." But some years ago, ethnographers began to question whether objectivity was possible. Today, some ethnographers are questioning whether objectivity is a worthy goal at all.

In mulling over the thorny points of this issue, let us begin with how active the ethnographer studying religion in American society should be. The degree of participation in "participant observation" can vary along a continuum from none at all ("nonparticipation" or "passive" participation, in Spradley's [1980a, 1980b] terms) to quite a lot ("active," or

4. The old and continuing argument within anthropology as to whether there is a psychic unity of humankind—whether thought processes of all human beings are the same—obviously plays a part in this debate.

"complete" participation). For example, the degree of participation I undertook at the conservative Christian schools varied from school to school, from classroom to classroom, depending on how the teachers and I negotiated it. At some schools, my role was observer. At others I was observer and teacher's aide. Often, I was confidante. But I was always a "passive" observer in the sense that I wasn't in charge of or responsible for anything.

It would be very easy to take on roles of responsibility in groups within the researcher's own culture. Ethnographers come equipped with the academic credentials and skills that religious organizations are seeking. If the researcher is interested in learning about leadership in metaphysical groups, is it ethical to become a leader? If she is interested in learning about teaching in Christian schools, is it ethical to become a teacher? All anthropologists would not agree on the answers. I would say no. Both of these roles were offered to me, and I refused both. My reasoning is that these are roles of *responsibility* that put the ethnographer in the position of having an impact on the flow and direction of the group. Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter (1956) showed that the statements and actions of an active observer can assume much importance in groups that believe in the legitimacy of personal revelation.

Another reason for avoiding these roles is that an ethnographer has quite enough to do to observe, maintain a balance between active and passive participation, keep informants apprised of what she means to be doing, and keep field notes assiduously. How can totally active participants manage to record what they and their informants are doing simultaneously? Fieldwork itself demands, as Dorothy Lee (1986: 83, emphasis hers) says of motherhood, "full commitment to, the situation, with all one's senses and other capacities *there*, alive and straining and alert."

Reflexivity has become the label for some of the concerns contained within the quandary of the ethnographer's proper role. Since this issue is a major one for today's ethnographers, let me paint a broad-stroked portrait of its sources and parameters.

In anthropology, there has long been a tension between those who see anthropology's goal as an emulator of the natural sciences, versus those who prefer humanistic understanding. Eric Wolf (1990: 587) emphasized that anthropology is the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanistic of the sciences.

But in truth the two strains have often been at odds. The reflexivity—which favors the humanistic side—could perhaps be seen in the context of that ongoing tension. On the "scientific" "objective" margin of a continuum would be ethnographies that present data about a culture with the ethnographer removed from the picture. As Stephen Tyler (1987) noted, this style of ethnography is a genre that discredits or discourages narrative, subjectivity, confessional, personal anecdote, or accounts of the ethnographer's experience. On the far other end is a reflexive, personal, subjective account of the ethnographer's own experience in the field. The rationale for this account is that ethnographers can only validly report their own experience.⁵ (See Ortner 1984 for a review article on anthropological theory; see Tedlock 1991 on reflexivity.)

A source of reflexivity is the questioning of epistemologies that began in the 1970s. Reflexivity, then, is akin to poststructuralism in general, and the New Historicism in particular, in the literary world. An impetus for both was a similar fear—that we are fooling ourselves and our readers to think that we can understand what the natives understand (Fabian 1983; Tedlock 1991; Veesser 1989).

Brandes (1991) noted application of literary techniques to ethnography as another source of the turn toward reflexivity. In the days of anthropologist Franz Boas and one of his many students, Paul Radin, the ethnographer was pencil, recorder. Ethnographies were verbatim records of transactions with informants, including however many versions of the origin story were collected, including however many blueberry pie recipes were collected. In the new day, the ethnographer is storyteller. As Brandes (1991) noted, at the far end of the reflexive continuum, stories about ourselves are being identified as the focus rather than the background.

5. Felicitas Goodman (1991: 339–340) says that studying religious *experience* is particularly problematic for Western anthropologists. On the one hand, when we "concern ourselves scientifically" with the "external accoutrements of a particular religious system"—the "history, the organizational form, the system of symbols, the dogma, the theology"—"little danger of attack accrues to us researchers." But when we "work on . . . the experiential contact with the alternative reality, that will for reasons deeply embedded in our history and psychological make-up touch a raw nerve. What appears in that case then is what we might term the discomfiture of religious experience."

Closer to the center of our imaginary science/humanities continuum are reflexivists who think that the focus of the ethnography should be the dialogue between the ethnographer and the natives. That is, the usual "what were they to me" information should be accompanied with "what was I to them" (Tedlock 1991).

My critique of the controversy is signaled by the way I have organized this article, that is, by discussing the various stages of ethnographic fieldwork.⁶ It seems to me that ethnographers in the field in the course of a year spend time being *both* the objective-at-a-distance "scientist" collecting data and the "gone-native" humanist. It seems, too, that the closeness and the distance are a constant back-and-forth movement of the mind. The feelings and thoughts one has during fieldwork—of friendship and loyalty, disjunctures with one's own value system, observation, understanding, and analysis—become a kind of dance of pulling in closer and pushing away. And it would be naive to think that we are the only ones pondering our relationship. Our informants, too, are coming close—then pushing away, distancing themselves—back and forth. We both are entrenched in an introspective *pas de deux* of "presentation of self."

I still think that it is possible and important, even and especially in the study of religion, to compartmentalize ethnographic activity and one's own reactions to the culture. Geertz (1973: 230) noted that "scientific studies of religion ought [not] to begin with unnecessary questions about the legitimacy of the substantive claims of their subject matter." It is possible to "dissociate" from concern for the truth or falsehood of religious doctrine; it is possible to "suspend belief or disbelief." Of course, ethnographers do not become unfeeling automatons upon entering the field. They react inside when hearing statements that don't match their own values. But "the promise of anthropology requires that the individual should agree to distinguish between his absolute convictions and

his specialized activity as an anthropologist" (Dumont 1986: 205). Undergraduate methods students soon learn to distinguish empirical observations from their own judgments and feelings. They record the former in field notes and the latter in a diary. The diary is not unimportant. Indeed, it is the home of the information on the dialogue between informant and ethnographer that the best of the reflexivists desire. Indeed, it makes ethnographers' methods clear to themselves; it clarifies what they are and are not seeing, what they are and are not "looking for."

The controversy concerning reflexivity has brought to the ethnographer's awareness an important caution made by the philosopher Dilthey (1914/1976) long ago. There is a difference between life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression). And ethnographers add still another level of abstraction to the story, as they interpret it for readers. The final product, it seems to me, should reflect a kind of biculturalism in which the ethnographer understands cultural phenomenon in both emic (native) and etic (outsider) ways. "Analogous experiences" can help to achieve emic understanding.⁷ For example, Harding (1987: 169) describes nearly having a car accident after engaging in a long interview with a fundamentalist Baptist minister. As she slammed on the brakes, the thought came to her, "What is God trying to tell me?" She reports, "It was my voice, but not my language. I had been invaded by the fundamental Baptist tongue I was investigating." Packing for a trip, I suddenly remember some seldom-worn shoes. I say to myself, "[The conservative Christians would say] God showed me those shoes." These are analogous experiences. Evans-Pritchard (1962) would say that we have become successful in "thinking in their concepts."

As we noted earlier, the role of the ethnographer is a negotiated one. No matter how diligently the ethnographer tries to avoid certain roles, and to explain what she is and is not doing, no matter how she tries to maintain control over her presentation of self, informants will sometimes perceive the situation differently.

6. I would like to add one other caution: It is not difficult to believe that American anthropologists could spend a good deal of time pondering *themselves*; perhaps we should keep this cultural context in mind. As Brandes (1991) noted, it is hoped that ultimately the ethnographer's reflexivity will reveal something about the other (and not, I would say, devolve into autobiographical angst).

7. I am grateful to Nancy Tatom Ammerman for giving situations similar to these this label, from the audience at the session on Qualitative Approaches to the Study of Religion at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion meeting, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 8–10, 1991.

For example, in my fieldwork in the metaphysical fellowship, it was clear to me that there was a difference in my own conception of my role and the group's conception of it. To me, I was a member of the group because I was studying it. To the group, I was a member who was also studying it. Although the group leaders and most of the members knew I was a student of the group, they insisted from time to time that I was undergoing spiritual growth, just as they were. If I did not protest, I would be uncomfortable. If I protested too much, it would make the group uncomfortable, which would in turn make me uncomfortable.

Likewise, there were some roles that the conservative Christian schools held open for me that I could not take on. One of these was "evaluator" of their efforts at educating children. At each school I observed, it was necessary to explain that I was not evaluating the teachers and that I could not be seen as an "educational consultant." I explained that I had no expertise that would allow me to take on those roles. Then it was necessary to follow through on this by not offering opinions, criticism, or even praise. It was necessary, of course, to thank the teachers for what they were teaching me but, at the same time, to avoid any kind of commentary. I tried to change their perceived "evaluator/evaluatee" statuses for us to the more appropriate "collaborators in teaching me about Christian schools" roles.

Another role that I had to avoid was "spy" of sorts. The Christian school administrators would ask me questions about the teachers, about what parents said, about other schools, and about what the students did when the teachers were out of the classroom—questions that I sidestepped as best I could.

It seems that the major epistemological difference in doing participant observation fieldwork in one's own culture and in an alien culture must be that when one crosses international cultural boundaries, one must constantly struggle to "get close," to get in as far as he can, and to see as much as he can. He will never be all the way in because he is obviously foreign in some way. He is of a different color, taller or shorter, has a different native tongue, or at least a different background. Unlike anthropologists who do fieldwork in foreign lands and foreign languages, I had nothing to separate me from my informants. I was not different in age, sex, or background from many of my informants. When all the obvious cul-

tural differences are obliterated, one must struggle to stay somewhat "out" of the group, to remember to observe and not just participate. Rappaport (1994) has agreed that the anthropology of the strange and the anthropology of the familiar are different. In the anthropology of the strange, it is necessary to correct for being an observer by participating. In the anthropology of the familiar, the ethnographer corrects for being a participant and is more rigorous about observation.

Stage: Attaining an Ever-Increasing Understanding of the Culture

Once rapport is established (and it is a fragile thing, which waxes and wanes), the anthropologist can begin to understand the culture. Evans-Pritchard (1962: 148) said that ultimately the anthropologist lives the field "experiences over again critically and interpretatively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge in his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture into another." He compares what he has observed in this culture to ethnographers' descriptions of other cultures.

Eventually, anthropologists take the specifics they have observed and generalize from them; they pin them to a theoretical backdrop. This is analogous to taking a photo and blowing it up to a larger size. If the original photo was taken with a sharp lens and fine-grained film, the blown-up image is still acute. If, however, the lens is out of focus or the film is coarse-grained, the blown-up picture is blurry. Just so, a record of human behavior must be clear and detailed if the analysis of it is to be valid.

To make this ethnographic record, I think most anthropologists use certain principles, perhaps not specifically labeling them as Spradley (1980a, 1980b) does; for example, "the language identification principle" requires that the ethnographer carefully record who said what so that various vocabularies used by different people, having various statuses, in different circumstances, can be learned. His "verbatim principle" requires that the record of what people say be exact and detailed. The "concrete principle" means that observations of what people do must be made, again, in exact, detailed language. Following these principles works to keep the "ethnographic film" fine-grained. If meanings, patterns,

and generalizations are to be sought, the analysis cannot begin with field notes that are themselves already generalizations; it must start with what was seen, heard, tasted, smelled, and felt (in both the sensory and the emotional sense). Ethnographers use these principles in participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, collecting life histories, and recording time diaries. They may also utilize more structured interviews and questionnaires. These principles, Spradley (1980a, 1980b) notes, are meant to overcome the ethnographers' tendencies—be they students or professionals—to translate and simplify, to assume they understand what's going on. (See also Balch, Wagner, and Greil 1982 concerning principles for studying religion in the United States.)

A sign that some degree of understanding has been achieved is the ability to participate in the culture's activities with greater and greater ease—to be able to do things and say things correctly. Another sign of this understanding is the ability to explain cultural phenomena in both emic (native) and etic (outsider) terms. For example, Evans-Pritchard (1937) could understand that an Englishman and an Azande tribesman would derive different answers for the question, Why has this granary fallen and killed this man? The Englishman—with his penchant for such rationalized (in Weber's [1920–1921/1948, 1922/1963] sense) questions as, Why do the good die young and the evil flourish as the green bay tree?—would chalk the unfortunate incident up to carpenter ants, and to coincidence. The Azande, on the other hand, would be more likely to rephrase the question: Why has the granary fallen on my brother and not on someone else's brother? The answer: carpenter ants and witchcraft. A suicide that occurred in the metaphysical network during my fieldwork can also be explained in various idioms. To try to explain why a woman had ended her life, I could give the etic explanation—relying on sociological, psychological, and biological reasons. But I could also articulate and understand the emic reasons, which relied on overly long periods of meditation, opening of the chakras (psychic centers in the body), and possession.

A third signal that understanding has been reached is that the actions of the culture's actors become predictable to ethnographers. It is very much like learning a language. As long as you remain in the group, ability to use their concepts grows. As you move away, facility with use of the idiom lessens.

Stage: Leaving the Field

Leaving the field is a stage that is seldom discussed by ethnographers. It is a stage of leaving behind those to whom one has become loyal, reentering the ethnographer's usual workaday world, and often encountering culture shock again in this world that has lost its familiar and taken-for-granted qualities. Leaving the field is made more complicated when studying within one's own country, because geographical distance as a signifier of the changed role is missing. After "leaving" the field, ethnographers may still see their erstwhile informants at the grocery store. They may take on new roles with them, which invites new ethical questions. For example, some of my informants later became students in my classes. By reading the journals my former informants wrote for my courses, I could gain insight into the conservative Christian way. Would it be unethical to treat these journals like field notes?

Stage: Analyzing and Interpreting What Has Been Learned

In ethnography, like archaeology, the dig is the most fun, but then comes the lab work—the analysis—to see what has been learned. The ethnographic story must be based on empirical data and an analysis that seeks cultural patterns. Aids to seeing patterns are to look for repetition and to think about alternatives. Imagining cultural alternatives shows what "might be"—and thus throws into relief "what is." What are all the *other* ways people could be doing this? Why, then, are they doing it *this* way? It helps, of course, if the ethnographer has a repertoire of cultural alternatives that she knows about or can imagine.

Another aid can be quantitative analysis of field data collected by qualitative means. This can act as a corrective for a "trust-me" impressionistic tone. For example, my *impression* of the sorts of solutions metaphysical devotees gave for personal problems was that they were all *spiritual* in nature ("Put it in the Light"; "Say the word 'God'"). My impression of the sorts of discipline used in Christian schools was that Christian symbols were often invoked ("What would Jesus say if you spit on him?" "If Jesus asked you to do your math page, what would you say?"). These made an impression on me, because they were

new to me; they stood out in my mind. But in both cases, a quantitative analysis of field notes showed that my impressions were in error. Of course, a quantitative analysis is only as good as the field data on which it is based.

Some anthropologists take a much more deductive approach to ethnography than I am describing here, creating specific hypotheses before going into the field. I am partial to Spradley's (1980a, 1980b) image of the ethnographer as inductive "map-maker" charting unknown territory, saying "Let's see what's out there," unfettered by a *rigid*, preconceived research agenda. The ultimate question of this discovery-oriented research is, What are the cultural meanings people are using to build new cultural forms, to organize their behavior, and to interpret their experience? In this mode, after ethnographers have sought cultural patterns, they ask what explanations or theories best explain why these patterns are present in this culture and connect the data to the explanation. In a problem-oriented research method, these things occur the other way around, with the specific hypothesis or question following from the original theoretical perspective. Of course, these research decisions are linked to where the researcher stands on the matter of whether anthropology should pursue scientific or humanistic methods; the former would be more inclined to test hypotheses, and the latter to take an inductive approach.

Issue: Loyalty—Which Side Are You On?

If a person embarks on ethnographic research inside religions in American society, she will face questions of loyalty.⁸ This matter is intensified when the subjects are sophisticated about the dissemination of the ethnographer's findings. The apprehension such queries inevitably cause in the ethnographer has been called "audience anxiety" (Michalowski 1991). Loyalty questions arise at many stages along the way and from many quarters. Informants' concerns

over loyalties are more prevalent in some religious entities than in others, and they rise and fall; ethnographers' academic colleagues question their loyalties; and in truth, ethnographers feel their own loyalties shift during the course of fieldwork.

Informants seldom questioned my loyalty in the New Age group because the metaphysicians were quite tolerant of views other than their own. However, seldom having loyalty questioned does not mean that informants are not making erroneous assumptions about it. In situations like these, it is well to remember that, at least within the United States, "silence signals assent."⁹

In the conservative Christian groups, loyalty is a more salient concern, since witnessing to nonbelievers is a requirement of evangelical religion. One of my informants doubted the anthropological enterprise in the same way that the reflexivists do. A college missionary, he thought that only a believer could understand Christian culture and that a neutral stance could never lead to understanding.

Another informant questioned my ability to be neutral, from the other side of the coin. She was a teacher in the Christian school where I spent the most time. In the first conversation I had with her, when I explained my mission, she asked, "How are you going to remain objective? Even captives eventually get to like their captors."

Colleagues, too, will question loyalties. These questions are particularly vexing when studying within one's own culture, when studying religion, and especially when studying a religion that is not acceptable to the societal mainstream (Harding 1991).

Although Robbins and Robertson (1991: 321) note that "many sociologists and other 'scientific students' of religion" in the early days of the scientific study of religion were clerics, a recent poll showed that when asked, "What is your present religion?" 65 percent of anthropologists claimed no religion. In this national survey of college faculty, anthropologists had the highest percentage of nonbelievers (ISAE 1991). (See also Kasnitz and Wagner [1972] and Reed [1974] for more discussion of the religious involvement of social scientists who study religion.) Most would

8. I owe a debt of thanks to Mary Schweitzer (1991a, 1991b) for helping me to clarify my thoughts on this issue, for giving me the nomenclature of "loyalty" to label it, and for organizing sessions at professional meetings that showed that the problem was by no means mine alone.

9. Gertrude Enders Huntington taught me this and many other necessary principles of doing fieldwork on religion in American society.

answer this loyalty question as did Peacock (1986: 6-7) and for the same reasons. He reports that

once in a small-town mosque in Java, a congregation of several hundred prayed that I convert to Islam. What was the source of my resistance? For one thing, I had taken the stance of the "researcher," the fieldworker "studying" this tradition, rather than the stance of a believer in one thing open to something else. In fact, when the Muslim group once asked me, "What is your religion?" I replied, "My religion is anthropology"; I meant that I was a student of belief, rather than a believer. At a deeper level, to convert would have meant giving up a cultural identity as well as accepting a religious commitment.

These questions raised by the loyalty issue are queries for which, try as they might, researchers will not formulate answers that are satisfactory to interrogators. If, for example, researchers are admitted believers, their ethnographic work will be dismissed with, "They're too faith-committed." (Although good examples of believer-authored ethnographies are found in both the sociological and the anthropological literature on American religion.) If they are nonbelievers, questions and rumors regarding loyalties will never cease (see Harding 1991; Heller 1991; Schweitzer 1991a, 1991b; Wagner 1991a, 1991b). If they are successful in convincing the interlocutors that they are not believers, the ethnographers will be criticized for not being able to experience what believers do. If they refrain from "debunking" certain religious groups, they will be accused of being in league with unacceptable factions of American society.

These constant ambivalences of loyalty are unique to the study of religion in American society. Studying religion in other cultures produces no such ambiguity. No one thought that Evans-Pritchard had taken on the native Azande belief system. Although Peacock's (1986) informants were concerned about his beliefs, none of them thought that he *was* a Muslim. Studying other topics within American society produces no such concern and ambiguity. An economic anthropologist who studies contemporary economic manifestations in the United States may not be as persistently asked, "Did you grow up around flea markets?" "Are you a flea marketer yourself?"

Ethnographers' own loyalties do shift as the stages of fieldwork I have outlined here unfold.

The words of the teacher who had allowed that even captives get to like their captors would echo back to me as I felt my own loyalties shift during and after my fieldwork in the Christian schools. I admit that I had seen the vans with "Faith Christian School" emblazoned on the side and had applied the usual stereotypes to them. The thought had crossed my mind, "Do I want to be associated with these people?" But as in any participant observation research, getting close to the people removes the cardboard cutout stereotypes held when first entering the field. After awhile, I gave no thought to being associated with these folks. During the time of my fieldwork, the teachers, administrators, parents, and students at these schools were my "peer group." I was away from my usual colleagues, and my loyalties did shift to the new peers.

During this stage, I had little problem with my own loyalties, as long as my efforts at compartmentalization worked: that is, if informants in the field remained informants (and friends and confidantes and teachers and collaborators—all the roles we ethnographer/informants allowed ourselves) and those outside the field did not become informants. (But people did not always cooperate with my neat categorizations.)

Culture shock reared its head again when I came out of the field and went back to teaching. I found that I had acquired a kind of pariah status for having spent time with the conservative Christians. (See Douglas [1982] and Marsden [1982] for the historical background to this vehemence of feeling against conservative Christians.)¹⁰ Then I began to feel my loyalties shifting again. I was away from the conservative Christians now; my colleagues were again my peers, and I felt myself swaying to their "peer pressure." Nevertheless, questions of my loyalty have not ceased.

10. When anthropologists return from the field, they customarily display artifacts from their field sites in their offices. In my case, my colleagues would not have approved. My artifacts were paperweights from Jim Bakker's Heritage USA; Christmas message buttons that said "Jesus is the reason for the season"; seventh-grade essays critiquing the theory of evolution; and posters asking, "Where Will You Spend Eternity?" showing distressed people engulfed in the flames of hell.

Issue: Avoiding the Anti-Popular Culture Bias

When studying subgroups within their own culture, obviously academics have to avoid being less than objective due to their own ideological convictions (they have to suspend belief/disbelief). In the case of some subgroups, they have to guard against intolerance of intolerance. But it seems to me that there is a more subtle threat to our neutrality—a bias against popular culture. We tend to presume that everyone is as concerned with ideology, language, and thought as we are. We expect that the discourse of religion, especially, takes place on a sophisticated and high plane—“different” from the everyday and common. When the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer is “updated” so that “Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul” (Psalms 69:1, King James) becomes “Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck” (Psalms 69:1, RSV), we wince, along with David Martin (1982). When Christmas becomes “Jesus is the reason for the season” and a sprig of holly printed on a “message button”; when children wear “God is awesome” T-shirts; when teachers can buy pop bottle-shaped stickers that say “God loves you and soda I”—we wince again. It offends our sensibilities; it upsets our epicurean natures. But these relatively naively pursued trends of the “common man” are important and worthy of study and understanding; popular culture is culture.

Conclusion

In my own work, I try to strike a balance between data gathering (“science”) and understanding (“humanism”). I take careful field notes and quantify certain elements of them, because quantification has shown me that my *impressions* are colored by my own cultural experiences and by surprise stemming from my sometimes erroneous expectations—no matter how hard I have tried to rid myself of any expectations.

To me the most flattering comments about my work come from readers who say that they cannot tell whether I am a believer or not. This has been said

about the ethnographies of New Age groups and conservative Christian groups alike. “Neutrality,” meaning the ground that lies in the interstices between advocating, apologizing, and excoriating, is still my own goal in the study of religion in the United States. That ground may become shaky, however, and I may be called upon to reassess where I stand upon it; I may then find myself writing a different chapter on the anthropological study of religions in American society.

Study Question

What are the main features of research in cultural anthropology? What special issues do anthropologists face when studying religion in their own societies?

Related Readings and Media

Numerous publications discuss the nature of ethnographic fieldwork and provide guidance to students preparing to conduct their own research. Three useful such works are:

- DeWalt, Kathleen M., and Billie R. DeWalt
2001 *Participant-Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*. Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press.
 - Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw
1995 *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd Edition. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing.
 - Russell, Bernard H.
2005 *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Altamira Press.
- <http://pewforum.org/>
- The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life hosts an informative and wide-ranging website with links to reliable articles on all facets of religion in U.S. public life. This is an excellent starting point for research of any type on American religion.
- www.aaanet.org/_cs_upload/issues/policy-advocacy/23970_1.pdf

The Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association outlines professional responsibilities for researchers.