

SOCI 421: Social Anthropology

Session 3 – The Nature of Social Anthropological Enquiry

Lecturer: Dr. Kodzovi Akpabli-Honu
Contact Information: kodzovi@ug.edu.gh



UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

School of Continuing and Distance Education

2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

Introduction

- This session introduces students to the various methods used in the study of the subject matter of social anthropology. The methods are relative to the various phenomena they study.

Objectives

- Be able to list the various types of methods used in investigating the subject matter of social anthropology.
- Describe the various methods of social anthropological enquiry.
- Identify which method is suitable for which category of social anthropological subject matter.
- Demonstrate the use of social anthropological methods in the investigation of any social phenomenon.

Session Outline

In this session we shall be concerned with the following:

- Participant Observation
- Case Study
- Life Histories
- Genealogies
- Focus Group Discussion

Reading List

- Kottak, C. P. (2004), *Cultural Anthropology*, Boston: McGraw Hill Ltd.

Topic One: Participant Observation

- This method of anthropological enquiry has been introduced to students in the second semester, Level 100.
- This method is used for ethnographic research.
- Ethnography is characterized by first hand information gathering from small communities or ethnic groups.
- This method was popularized by Bronislaw Malinowski (the Polish Anthropologist) who used it to study the culture of simple societies for the advancement of his functionalist theory.

Participant Observation

- With this method, ethnographers get acquainted to their hosts and take part in most of their socio-cultural activities.
- They view individual and collective behaviour in varying settings.
- They learn the language of the people as they get along with them and nothing seems alien to them anymore.
- These demands on the ethnographer means he/she must spent a lengthy duration of time with the hosts.
- Initial unfamiliar issues become clarified with time.

Participant Observation

- Ethnographers establish rapport - friendly and good relationship – with the people they study to allow for facilitated data collection.
- The researchers record what they observe in formal field notes and their personal diaries.
- Ethnographers take part in several activities of the people so as to understand the practices better to enable them report accurately on them.
- While some researchers take part in the activities of the people for which reason they are active participant observers, other keep their distance hence are referred to as passive participant observers.

Participant Observation

- The active participant observer, besides the opportunity he/she has to gain deeper insight for accurate reportage of what is observed, has the tendency becoming a cultural bearer anthropologist – being biased.
- On the other hand, the passive participant observer may be faced with the tendency of inaccurate reportage because of the social distance kept from the people. This prevents him from having deeper insight of the activities of the people.

Topic Two: Life Histories

- This is used by the researcher in tracing the life of an individual throughout his/her life cycle.
- Anthropologists use this method to collect the life history of a personality they encounter on the field and find to be unusually interesting.
- It is usually a recollection of a lifetime experiences of an individual which provides a cultural portrait.
- The recording of the personality's experiences may be by tape recording, video recording or even documentation.
- The analyzed data reveal how people specifically perceive, react to, and contribute to changes that affect them in life.

Topic Two: Life Histories

- Such data may depict the level of diversity that pertains in a community through how different people react to issues that affect their lives.
- “Baba of Karo” (1954) is an example of such method of study used by Mary Smith to study Hausa people through an oral account of the daughter of a Hausa.
- Mary Smith was engaged in fieldwork in Nigeria when she came across Baba the daughter of a Hausa farmer and Koranic teacher in 1949.
- This study of Baba has left the old woman’s memories of the days of the slave raid and interstate warfare in Nigeria preceding the British occupation.

Topic Three: Case Study

- This method is used when a social phenomenon to be addressed attracts questions such as ‘how’ and ‘why’.
- Further, the method is used if the investigator has little control over events which has focus on contemporary phenomenon with some real context.
- In this case, the case study research becomes explanatory – to isolate cause and effect variables.
- Explicatory or descriptive research is a complement to a case study.
- While a case study is exploratory in nature, explicatory research is analytical or illustrative.

Case Study

- Often, a case study is used when boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clearly evident for which reason multiple sources of evidence are used as clarification paradigm.
- The earliest anthropologists relied on stories brought to them by travelers, missionaries, administrators etc. making them armchair anthropologists.
- Then came professional anthropologists who collected ethnographic material directly by observing their hosts directly.
- This was the period of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman.

Topic Four: Focus Group Discussion

- This research method is utilized in understanding group norms, values and social behaviour in general.
- It is an in-depth discussion in which a small number of people usually between eight (8) and twelve (12) under the guidance of a facilitator, talk about issues that are of particular importance to a forthcoming project or activity.
- It can be used in discussing health and family planning issues.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

- Data from FGD can be used to develop educational materials for awareness creation, design of survey questionnaire, decision on how to approach the introduction of a recommended practice or planning and understanding certain beliefs related to some practices.
- The participants must have similar and not varied characteristics and relative to what is to be discussed.

Focus Group Discussion

- The discussion must be made to take place in a congenial environment to prevent intrusions.
- The facilitator should be the same sex as the discussants, speak a common language of the participants and must also be familiar with the topic to be discussed.
- The facilitator should be flexible, sensitive and humorous.
- He/She must be able to link group ideas together and must involve every group member in the discussion.

Focus Group Discussion

- There should be a note taker or someone to do the recording (tape, video, etc.) when participants allow such recordings to be done.
- Snack may be served to calm the participants, they may also be asked if they have any information to share besides the introduction which must be done before the main discussion.
- The discussions of the groups involved are finally compared and analyzed.

Topic Five: Genealogical Studies

- This anthropological method of research is used in studying kinship or social relations in non-industrialized societies.
- This enables the understanding of why people live and work together.
- Genealogy is the basis of social organization in simple societies.
- It is a building block.

Genealogical Studies

- Genealogical studies enable the understanding of contemporary social relations as well as the reconstruction of history.
- In many simple societies which are kin-based groups, issues of who can marry one another and who cannot marry themselves are issues that are settled through genealogy.
- Although marriage can strike alliance between groups, it must be carefully considered and negotiated to prevent commission of taboos.

Conclusion.

- In this session, anthropological methods of enquiry have been discussed.
- These include participant observation, case studies, life histories, focus group discussion and genealogical studies.
- The appropriate situations in which they are used have been explained as well as their usefulness.
- The conduct of these research methods have well been discussed.