

Overview

Fieldwork—the scientific practice of studying a “field” outside the laboratory—is a means for collecting data *in situ*. In anthropology, the term “fieldwork” refers to the process of investigating social phenomena as they occur in the day-to-day lives of humans in the real world, and in real-time. Since the early 20th century, anthropologists have relied on open-ended, long-term fieldwork, often a year or more in extent, to immerse themselves in other perspectives, other modes of being human. Although anthropologists today have radically different ideas about what constitutes “the field” than their predecessors, the truth remains that fieldwork is the signature methodology of anthropology as a discipline of knowledge.

Historically, fieldwork denoted the research component of doing anthropology, and “ethnography” the writing (consider: we read “ethnographies.”) Etymologically, this makes perfect sense: Ethnography is a combination of the roots *eth(n)os* and *graph*, or the writing of a people and their customs. Over the past few decades, this distinction has imploded, and “ethnography” is now commonly used outside anthropology to describe any methodical examination of human experience, not just in the allied fields of sociology and geography but increasingly in business, management, and design.¹ For our purposes in this course, you are welcome to use these two terms interchangeably.

So how does fieldwork... work? Fieldwork is a qualitative methodology that attends to what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called “the imponderabilia of everyday life.”² From detailed descriptions of how people behave in the world (their actions) and how they make sense of that behavior (its meaning), fieldworkers reason inductively from the ground up. In other words, the fieldworker builds theory from the immediate reality of human social life within one or more locales, or “sites.” They do so by situating their findings with a broader contextual frame: economic systems, technological infrastructures, or international geopolitics. By “tacking back-and-forth” between local and global levels of analysis, anthropologists aim to ground abstractions like “the state,” or “capital,” in the concrete facts they have witnessed first-hand in their field. The strength of an anthropological approach is its ability to trouble our common-sense views of the world, our grand, master narratives. Holding theory accountable to the “ordinary,” as Haraway would say, often produces surprising new takes upon the received wisdom that we habitually reproduce. It can, the popular saying goes, “make the familiar strange.”

At the core of fieldwork is the fieldworker’s body, their recording device. By watching people go about their daily activities, most often joining alongside them, and listening to how they talk about and reflect on these pursuits, anthropologists generate data. “Participant observation” and interviews are the two most common techniques that anthropologists use. Over the term, you will have the opportunity to practice these two techniques by conducting a month-long fieldwork project at a local site of your choosing. This will help us make apparent the latent sociomaterial structures in the built environment that shape how people interact with other animals—the sites of encounter, or “contact zones,” that mediate “when [and how] species meet.” This assignment is noticeably shorter

¹ There have been many debates over the expanding “creep” of “ethnography” as a catch-all descriptor, particularly whether “ethnography” even means the same thing anymore as it travels outside anthropology for commercial purposes. For additional discussion, please consult the “Further Reading” section below.

² The epistemological status of fieldwork as a qualitative methodology does not make it any less rigorous. Over the past century, anthropologists have elaborated a robust discourse around the practicalities of method, as well as its politics and its ethics. Look to the “Further Reading” for a discussion.

than traditional fieldwork. Instead, we will collectively and experimentally create provocations, lures, and invitations to re-think space, to perceive it differently, and to imagine it otherwise. In so doing, I hope you will gain a sense of expertise over the procedures of knowledge-making. Together, we will explore the connection between anthropology and design: how anthropology can inform design, and vice versa, how design can inform anthropology.

The remainder of this guide will focus on 1) site, including questions of access and ethics and 2) participant observation. As the term progresses, we will discuss interviewing and how to write through questions of narrative, figuration, contextualization, and theorization (as de-familiarization).

Site, Access, & Ethics

In recent years, anthropologists have criticized the idyllic and exoticized notions of the “field” that they had inherited from years past—colonial notions of timeless villages in far-away lands. Although cross- and inter-cultural understanding still animates the anthropological enterprise, the discipline now includes studies of government offices, venture capital firms, scientific laboratories, design studios, and countless other “fields” in locales around the world. During this course, we will examine Philadelphia as our field, and each of you will scrutinize one aspect of its built environment. We will collaborate to make hypotheses about human-animal relations in Philadelphia as one analytic inroad into theorizing the contemporary city in the Anthropocene.

You should pick a site that enables you to narrate a story about the spatial dimensions of “becoming with” in the greater Philadelphia area. You should be able to visit this site for one hour every week for four weeks. We will approach this site with two sets of questions: How does the built environment mediate human-animal relationships, and, conversely, how do relationships of humans and animals alter the built environment? You should select a site that affords some insight into these questions. I am leaving the phrase “built environment” ambiguous to accommodate a wider range of projects at varied scales. For instance, you might look toward a technological artifact like the pigeon spikes of Week One. Alternatively, you might choose to interrogate a system of artifacts, also known as an infrastructure, such as bridges, sewers, and buildings. Whatever you select, it should reflect and index some human-made design intervention. We will be analyzing your “space,” broadly construed, as an active contributor to human-animal relations—not a mere vessel or container for the behavior you observe.

The species you choose and the size of the site are also up to you. Will you trace human-pigeon-falcon multispecies relations, as Maan Barua (2021) did in the essay we read? Will you work across multiple sites, in what’s named “multi-sited ethnography,” to track pigeon spike distributions throughout the city and how they differentially implicate humans, animals, and related communities?

All projects, however, *must* be conducted in public areas. Obtaining “access” to private sectors (think homes, offices, and churches) is not only logistically challenging, usually involving a discussion with “gatekeepers” and the cultivation of rapport, but it also raises a host of ethical issues that concern human subjects research and institutional review board (IRB) approval.³ This is not to say there are no moral considerations to be had, and indeed you should heed how your access to the space—even a “public” space—is dependent on your intersecting positionalities both as a researcher

³ For a more in-depth discussion of “access,” consult the literatures at the end of this document.

and as a person. Are the people in your study from a marginalized group?⁴ Over the duration of this course, we will pause to ask ourselves about our own role in fieldwork. Anthropologists describe the self-facing part of this line of questioning as “reflexivity.” How does your own identity or experience affect how you engage with others? What drew you to this site? How does it make you feel? Does it influence how you think and write about the topic? What attitudes and preconceptions do you bring to your fieldwork? Equally, how has fieldwork altered those very same attitudes and preconceptions? We will continue to ask these questions over the semester, especially as we begin to write and design.

Participant Observation

Participant observation—the observation of participants in a social setting—is an art of attention, or “noticing,” in Anna Tsing’s words. You are paying mind to what people say, what people do, and what people say about what they do. We will adopt the stance that the goal of fieldwork is to inhabit an adequate orientation to the world, to attune to the same set of concerns and problem spaces that other people hold. We cannot definitively know “what it is like to be” another, but we can strive for “correspondences,” as the anthropologist Tim Ingold is apt to say, between our views and theirs.

You will do this by “following” people around in your fieldsite. To state this clearly: I do *not* mean this literally. You are not stalking them! Instead, your objective is to “follow,” with your vision, hearing, and other senses, what people “are up to,” to immerse yourself in their perceptual worlds, or at least infer.

One set of questions you should ask yourself center on the question, “Who?” Who frequents your site? What can you glean about their identity? What would you need to know to make those conclusions? Do any characteristics, traits, or qualities mark them? Do they, perhaps, share an obvious profession or other practice (e.g., shared costume, tools, or other signifiers of membership)?

After you’ve made some initial observations of the people at your site, you should ask yourself what they are doing, as well as how and when. Do these people share a language, either verbal or bodily, or skills? Do they have any texts (books, pamphlets, graffiti, etc.?) Does their talk or text have any distinctive words? What knowledge do they have? What are they doing? What sort of tasks, activities, rituals, and interactions define their social intercourse? Are people living, working, and/or playing? Are they involved in any events? How are those events organized in space and time? Is there a regularity to their behavior? Does it seem to conform to any obvious rules? Do they face a problem or issue that you can detect? Are there any patterned differences *within* this group of people on the basis that governs their behavior (e.g., age, race, gender, class, etc.)? Do they express obvious feelings as they behave?

Remember that we are especially interested in comprehending the relationship between people and place—the “where” question. What are the defining features of this place? How are people distributed across this place? How does the place and its materiality seem to affect people? How is the place divided? What role might design have played in its organization? Is there a noted influence of the form of this place on the behavior of people? Ultimately, we want to fill out Wolch et al.’s heuristic of the transspecies city. What do you need to know in order to get there? Do people seem to work *with* or *against* the intended design of the site?

⁴ Please reference the literature on “studying down,” “studying up,” and “studying sideways” below.

As you observe, use all of your senses! Look but also listen, smell, touch, and taste, if appropriate. Fieldwork is a multi-sensorial practice. What are your sensory impressions of this place and its inhabitants?

Start asking yourself what is distinctive about your site—its particularity and peculiarity. Conversely, what is normal about it? Do you think the people in your site would agree with that?

In time, you should ponder *why* people are acting as they do, moving from concrete observations to abstract emotions, motives, beliefs, and evaluations. What do these activities mean to people? This is challenging with public fieldwork, but there are always workarounds. Perhaps the people at your site speak audibly enough to hear them. What do they discuss? Are there any phrases or utterances that are distinctive? Perhaps, too, you can find ancillary texts or other media that could reveal their point of view: maps, tables, photographs, or narratives. What categories do these people use to describe their experience? In anthropology, we name these categories “emic” when they show an insider’s perspective. How do these categories deviate from other discourses around the site, such as news articles, governmental reports, or academic literatures? We name these outsider perspectives “etic.” Are there any interesting points of friction between the two? What can you determine about the values these people hold? How are their values shaped by their built environment? How, in turn, do their values shape the built environment?

Once you have figured out what interests people at your site, attend to what they *ignore*. Determine what is unsaid and unsayable, unseen and insensible. Alternatively, are there conflicts between what they say and what they do, or between what some people say versus others? Is there any contradiction? Tensions, lacunae, and contradictions are often very ethnographically revealing.

Take care to attend to your site without judgment, at least during fieldwork. A critical assessment might come later in the process of writing ethnography.

You should write your observations in your notebook (or note app). With time, you will make numerous observations, and the sheer number will elude memory unless you foster a habit of writing “fieldnotes.” By periodically reviewing your fieldnotes, you will be able to note patterns at the site, interpret them, identify shortcomings or lingering questions, and ultimately draw some kind of conclusion. To put it another way, fieldwork is not only a dialogue between you and the people in your field; it is also a dialogue between you and yourself vis-à-vis your fieldnotes. It is both iterative and interactive. Because it is highly personal, do not be afraid to express your fieldnotes in your own voice. They should sound like you speak and think—not like what you think they should sound like! Your observations might not have any obvious theme at first. Keep recording the facts, even if it is a taken-for-granted fact. We want to try to move beyond our inherited notions and frames.

In my field-writing practice, I have three distinct kinds of notes: jottings, fieldnotes, and memos. Jottings are key words that I scribble down when I am rushed. They function as memory aids when I later elaborate them into full notes. You should *not* assume you will remember what they mean later. I have made that mistake too many times to count. Fieldnotes are the second category in my scheme, and they consist of longer phrases or sentences. Mine tend to alternate between details of what I observed and my reflections on them. A short-hand here is fine, especially with names and other recurring words. Every week or two of my fieldwork, I will write brief one- to three-paragraph memos that summarize and thematize my observations. These should point to future research ideas, questions, and connections as you work through the empirical material. Depending on your project,

you should practice taking notes during your site visits and expanding on them after. Assignments in this class will simulate memo-writing.

Fieldwork has long been a solitary pursuit: Mentors have sent students into the field with scant direction apart from a handful of scattered tips and tricks. In the past couple decades, anthropologists have become interested in collaborative fieldwork. Building on that approach, we will collaborate in this course to articulate a shared theory of “bestial urbanism,” or the *Multispecies Metropolis*. Based on our differing sites and interests, we will co-produce a mosaic appreciation for the contemporary city. In addition, many of you have partnered with your peers. For those of you undertaking a group project, I recommend that you each assume a theme, question, or set of themes and questions that will guide your individual observations. When you reconvene as a group, you can compare and contrast your notes. In this manner, you can not only support one another during the process but also learn from what you *didn't* notice. Your passions and proclivities will be a strength, and a source of expertise.

Interviews

In tandem with participant observation, fieldworkers typically rely on conversations with people within their fieldsites to glean information about social phenomena. Through the sharing of stories with one another, we gain rich, detailed, and personal insights into *why* humans behave the way they do, their individual and social reasons, and *how* they portray—sometimes idealistically—their actions and experiences in the world.

Talking takes two conventional forms: informal and formal. Over the course of one's fieldwork, one meets people, learns about their lives, and asks them questions, all very casually. Sometimes, the fieldworker might have questions about their observations and conversations that cannot be answered or addressed during these informal meetings. This situation might warrant an interview: the second primary research technique in the anthropologist's methodological toolkit.

For your fieldwork in this course, you will conduct at least one interview. Fieldworkers usually solicit interviews only after they have established trust in the community and especially with the interviewee. This is because interviews are coproductions between two people. Your relationship with the interviewee will shape the interview: If the person you are interviewing does not trust you, they are less likely to share information with you. Because of the limited time we have this semester, we will necessarily have to request interviews with near-strangers. Please keep this mind as you begin to interpret your findings: How might your positionality shape what kind of stories are told to you?⁵

How do you identify an interviewee? Before you make any decisions, I recommend you return to your fieldnotes. What have you observed thus far? What remains partial, incomplete, and uncertain? Are these remaining questions due to the way you are conducting the study, or would it make sense to ask someone at this point? If so, whom? Do you want an “insider's” perspective on the subject? Is that insider “representative” of others, or do they hold a unique point of view? Does it make more sense, perhaps, to get an “outsider's” viewpoint—someone who *disagrees* or otherwise feels differently about the topic? In the literature on methodology, this is the problem of “sampling”

⁵ There is a lengthy history of discussing “insider” and “outsider” points of view in anthropology. For an introduction, see the bibliography below.

the field: How does your sample fit within the whole? These sorts of considerations should drive the way you “recruit” participants into your study. Who can best answer your questions?

In the case of multispecies ethnography, it is likely that you will want to speak with an ethologist of animal behavior. If you decide to go down this route, ask yourself whether this person represents a viewpoint shared by others, or whether their “expert” knowledge constitutes a different “community of practice.” What is the relationship between the two? To think anthropologically you must learn to think relationally, or comparatively, between groups. How can you accommodate their difference in power and authority into your analysis?

Once you have selected your interviewee, you must prepare for the interview proper. Included among your tasks are, first, determining a time as well as a location that will work for your interviewee. Remember that they are doing this voluntarily to support your research, and you should work to make them comfortable (within reason, of course). The next stage of your planning consists of conducting background research on your interviewee, especially if they are a public figure. What is their profession; what organizations are they associated with; have they said anything about the topic before; and so on? This preparatory work will not only give you material to reference during the talk: for instance, “I saw you said X before. Could you elaborate on that?” It will also show that you value their time—that you’ve “done the work.” If you ask questions that this person has already addressed elsewhere, or questions that are too generic, they might not think you respect them. What would this specific person be able to answer best?

On dress: During my training, I often heard that I should try to imitate the attire of whomever I was interviewing. In other words, I should wear business attire to interview a design practitioner or business professional and everyday clothes for other interviews. This advice follows the social fact that our self-presentation—our dress, our posture, our tone, our gestures—shapes the image we convey to the world. While this is true in some sense, I feel that you should wear what you are comfortable wearing. If you want to “dress up” to “study up,” that is fine, but it is also perfectly fine to present however you wish.

Writing an “interview guide” is the last stage of preparing for your interview. Most often, anthropologists conduct what are called “semi-structured interviews.” With a “structured interview,” also known as a “quantitative interview,” you read off a set of questions to the interviewee, who will answer them in turn. This is not unlike a survey, with the important distinction that it is done face to face. Diagnostic interviews in mental health care are examples of structured interviews. Not unlike a structured interview, you will also prepare questions beforehand for your semi-structured interviews. These, however, are intended to serve as prompts for discussion. They should be open-ended, which will facilitate a free-flowing conversation between you and your interviewee.⁶ The goal of this type of interview is to create a space for the sharing of stories—stories that will help you to understand their life and experience of it. The questions you prepare will function as rails to help steer the discussion, but they should not delimit what can and cannot be said.

There are many schools of thought about what kinds of questions to ask. In general, it is advisable to ask questions, especially at the beginning of the interview, that allow you to get a picture or snapshot of some normal aspect of this person’s life. For instance, “Could you tell me about your

⁶ For this reason, among others, we often refer to our interviewees as “interlocutors,” rather than “informants,” which implies a one-way transfer of information.

[background or day at your work/home/this site]?” Once you have a rough map of their histories, activities, and concerns, you might pose questions that either invite them to elaborate (“Can you talk more about X?”), or draw connections that help you organize this knowledge (“Was X an interest of yours at Y time?”). Alternatively, you might wish to delve into their feelings about a topic they raised or alluded. “What was that like?” (“How did that make you feel?” often comes across too clinical...), “How would you characterize that moment for you?”, or “What [appealed/bothered/etc.] you about that instance?” are all effective styles of questioning.

A few miscellaneous interviewing tips I have learned over the years:

- 1) Do not pose questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no” unless you explicitly ask them to explain their reasoning.
- 2) Avoid multiple questions at once. Move slowly and methodically.
- 3) Intentional silence can give your interviewee time to process.
- 4) Refrain from leading questions: “Did that experience upset you?”
- 5) “Why?” can seem like a judgmental question. Try: “What were your reasons for X?”
- 6) Share an artifact you found, (contradictory) opinion you read, or current event, and ask your interviewee to comment on it.

With your interview guide in hand, you are ready to start. After you have met your interviewee and greeted one another, you should begin the consent process. I have provided you with a template that you can use. Because interviewing necessarily entails human subjects research, we are ethically, and institutionally, required to receive informed consent from our interviewees.⁷ It is for this reason that participants in your study *must be over 18 years old*. Your interviewee should read the form (or you can outline its main points) and then sign it. Please send me a copy of your consent forms. In addition to the form, which articulates the purpose and potential uses of the interview, you should also summarize the questions that you will ask, clarify that you could quote them in the paper but *not* in the design project, and indicate that you will *not* be recording, which poses storage issues in the future. Although these instructions are specific to interviewing, whenever you speak with anyone in the field, you should be forthright about who you are and your reasons for being there.

For the interview itself, keep in mind that this interpersonal event should encourage interviewees to share stories about their life history, including beliefs, reasons, and emotions. It is, therefore, very important that you create a relationship between the two of you that is comfortable, productive, and friendly. You are not there to judge them but to learn about their experience. If you like, you might even say this explicitly. You can also demonstrate it through your words and through your body language. One of the best ways to show this is to spend some time at the beginning of the interview developing rapport. Ask your interviewee about their day, share something about your day, or tell a joke (if relevant and appropriate). This sets the mood and conveys your intention to be their conversation partner, not just an interrogator or data miner. As the interview commences, you ought to give your interviewee the freedom to chart the course of your conversation, with gentle nudges in the direction you find most compelling. Often times, the most surprising information comes when a research participant goes off on a “tangent.” One way to encourage or invite your interviewee to talk more about a particular subject is to follow up with questions, especially about repeated phrases they use. You might also try restating what they said, in their words or by paraphrasing. This will allow an

⁷ For histories of human subjects research protocols, as well as important discussions of rationales for, and exceptions to, the protocol I have outlined, consult the readings below.

opportunity for correction. No matter how you go about the interview, your behavior should convey that you are “active listening.” Eye contact, nodding, and voiced um-hums go a long way toward this objective.

Everyone brings an individual style to the interview. You will eventually figure out what works best for you. This is a skill that takes a considerable amount of practice, so do not become frustrated if your first interview does not go exactly as planned, as long as you were respectful to the interviewee. To conclude your interview, wrap up the conversation, thank your interlocutor for their time and generosity, and reiterate that you are available if they have any additional questions. I often, after an interviewee, hear suggestions for future participants to contact. This is called “snowballing,” and through this approach, you can progress and add more nuance to your research.

Postscript: Interview Ethics

The history of scientific, particularly, medical experimentation on human bodies is long, dark, and quite literally torturous. It encompasses Nazi experiments during World War II, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the Guatemalan prison experiment, and the Stanford prison experiment, to name only four over the past century. In 1974, the U.S. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects convened to develop a set of ethical principles that would protect human subjects and guide academic research. The result of this convention, the 1979 *Belmont Report*, codified human dignity and harm protection as its two guiding morals.

The *Belmont Report* also called for a federal system of regulation, now known as the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), and a university-based system of regulation, commonly known as the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All research that falls under the purview of “human subjects research” must seek IRB approval, whether conducted by faculty or students. There are two important elements to this definition:

- (1) “Human subjects,” defined as “a *living individual about whom* an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research *obtains information* or biospecimens through intervention or *interaction with the individual*, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information or biospecimens; or obtains, uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens” [emphasis added]
- (2) “Research,” defined as a “systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to *generalizable knowledge*”

Because anthropological fieldwork, especially interviews, tend to elicit “information” “about” “living individuals” through “interaction” with them, it matches the first part of the phrase. Usually, an interview undertaken in a classroom setting for the sake of pedagogy does not constitute an act of “research” because it is not “generalizable.” That said, we are organizing an exhibition that, because it is public (i.e., outside the classroom), *is* “generalizable.” For the projects, therefore, do *not* include any information gathered from your interview, as a general rule of thumb. Interview data can inspire your work, but you should not explicitly reference it. There is, of course, any exception to the rule, which is an “information-gathering interview.” In this style of interview, you do not collect data *about* individuals, but *from* them about other topics (e.g., animals, designs, locations, activities, etc.). It is imperative that these data are factual, and do not involve a person’s thoughts about those subjects.

Keep these definitions and exceptions in mind as you enter the field, but do not stress! As your instructor, I have built several “checks” into the process to ensure that we are treating research subjects with dignity and without harm.

Multispecies Ethnography

Most fieldwork (and therefore most instructions for fieldwork) is human-centered. That said, it shouldn't be too difficult to ask most, if not all, of the questions above with respect to human and animal interactions (i.e., “more-than-human sociality”). How are the who, what, how, when, where, and why affected by the becoming-with of different species? How are nonhuman animals implicated within human social worlds? How do they “touch”? What questions do not apply? What would you need to know from an ethnologist or other biological specialist? What “ethno-ethnological” method do you need? Is Anna Tsing's “critical description” enough? Is there sign of “unintentional design” and “nonhuman sociality” at your site?

Contacts

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Further Reading⁸

General

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⁸ This is an incomplete list that does not include literature on apprenticeship, observant participation, auto-ethnography, linguistic anthropology, network analysis, or material culture analysis.

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