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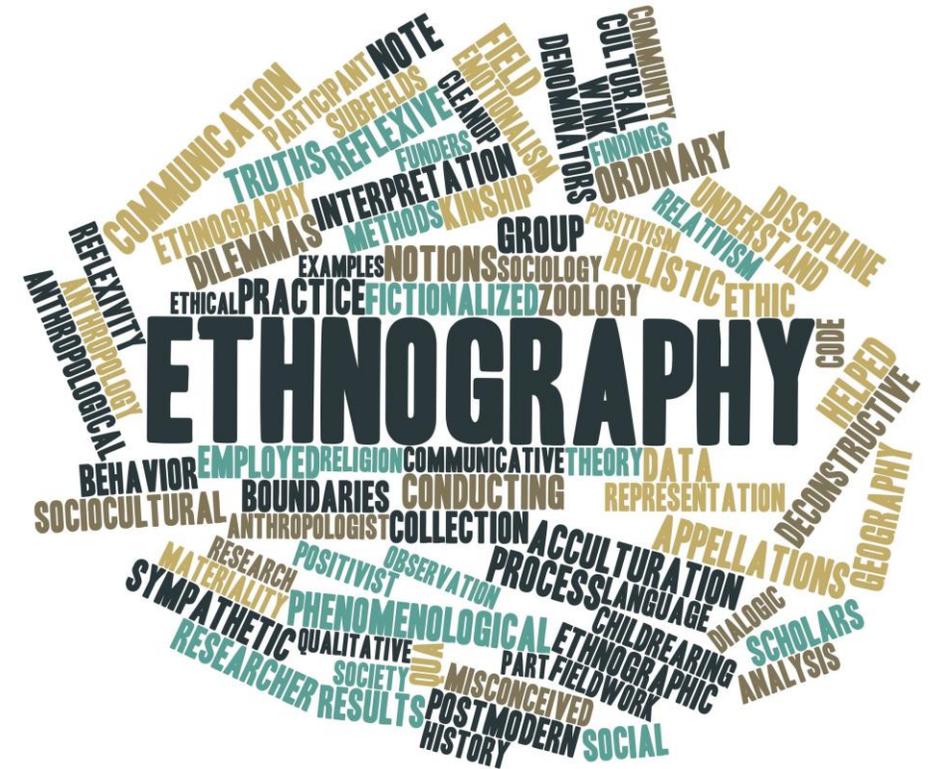
Since 1898

# Ethnography in maternal & newborn health

Nicola Desmond  
Department of International Public Health  
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

# What is ethnography

- Literally the word means a description of a people or ethnic group
  - Groups can be geographically or socially defined
  - An individual may be part of more than one group
- Describing and understanding another way of life from the 'emic (or insider) perspective'
- Ethnography also refers to the actual fieldwork on which anthropologists base their descriptions
- Grounded, interpretative methodology used in anthropology, cultural studies and sociology (Crotty, 1998)
- Ethnography as both art & science



# Ontological basis for ethnography: What is reality?

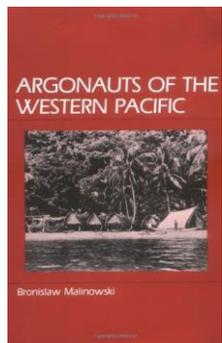


- What people would like to do (normative statements)
- What people recall they do (narrative reconstructions)
- What people actually do
  - explicit logic
  - tacit logic

# The development of ethnography through some key individuals



**Bronislaw Malinowski**  
**(1884-1942)**  
in the Tobriand Islands



*The final goal ... is to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world.*



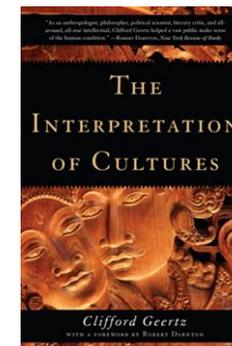
**Edward Evans-Pritchard**  
**(1902-1972)**  
with the Nuer in Sudan



*Anyone can produce a new fact; the thing is to produce a new idea.*

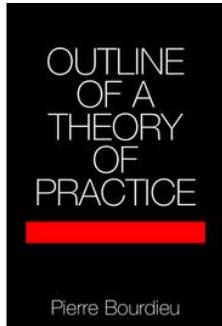


**Clifford Geertz**  
**(1926-2006)**  
A Balinese cockfight



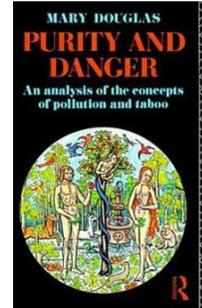
*Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.*

# The development of ethnography through some key quotations



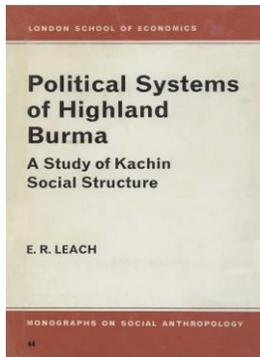
The point of my work is to show that culture and education aren't simply hobbies or minor influences. They are hugely important in the affirmation of differences between groups and social classes and in the reproduction of those differences.

Pierre Bourdieu  
(1930-2002)



If you want to change the culture, you will have to start by changing the organization.

Mary Douglas  
(1921-2007)



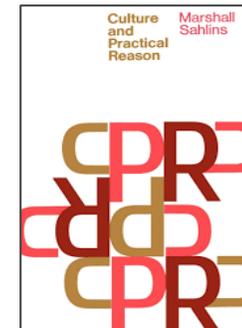
How can a modern anthropologist embark upon a generalization with any hope of arriving at a satisfactory conclusion? By thinking of the organizational ideas that are present in any society as a mathematical pattern.

Edmund Leach  
(1910-1989)



The wise man doesn't give the right answers, he poses the right questions.

Claude Lévi-Strauss  
(1908-2009)

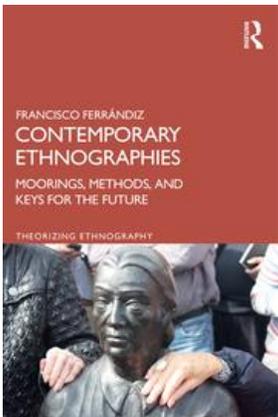


We can reproduce within our own minds the way that the world is put together for other people. This is the extraordinary privilege and adventure of anthropology.

Marshall Sahlins  
(1930 - )

# Key characteristics of contemporary ethnography from 1980 -

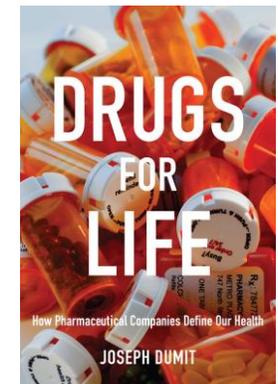
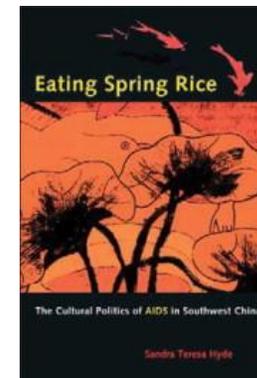
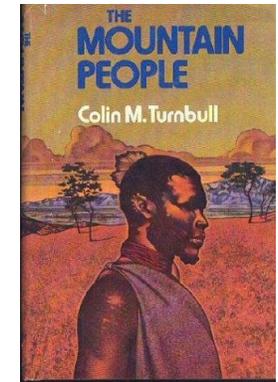
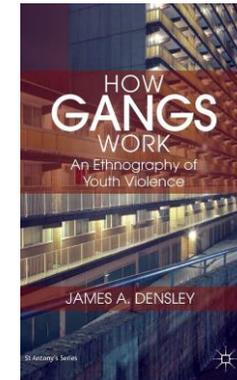
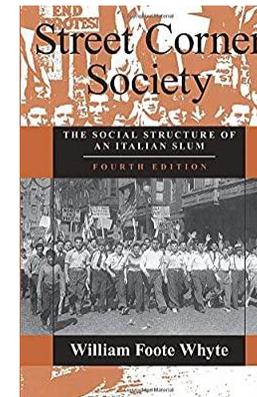
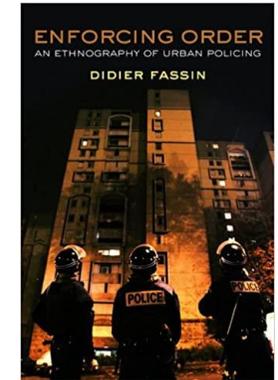
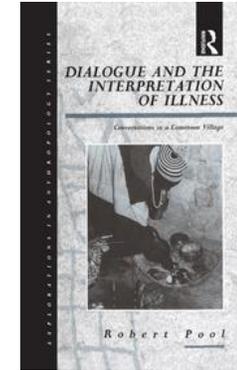
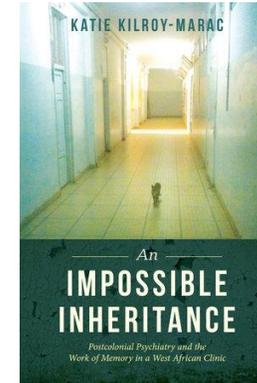
- **Power & politics**
  - Re-emergence of politics and power in cultural/historical analysis of social phenomena (Edward Said and Michel Foucault)
  - Social phenomena as effects of external power structures (e.g. political and economic institutions at the national and international level)
  - Analysis of local situations with reference to relevant external institutional/political structures
  - Engagement & participatory theory approaches – co-production of knowledge
- **Increasingly critical perspective**
  - Influenced by the rise of new perspectives such as critical theory, neo-Marxist ideology, feminist theory & intersectionality
- **Dissolving oppositions**
  - Decolonisation of ethnography as we decolonise global health
  - **Characterised by a lack of consensus**
  - Dissolving conceptual oppositions (Sahlins 1993)



*‘An eclectic methodological choice which privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced’ (Falzon, 2009)*

# Examples of the fieldsite in ethnography

- Community or ethnic group
- Work place or institutions e.g. clinic, police
- Culture or social group e.g. gangs, football fans
- Multi-sited ethnography
  - Study of social phenomena that cannot be accounted for by focusing on single site
  - follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space and time
  - involved in spatially dispersed fieldwork in two or more places
  - e.g. refugees & international migration, pharmaceuticals
- Un-sited ethnography
  - concept of 'un-sited field'
  - Across space, place
  - e.g. Facebook users, digital ethnography





## The stages of ethnographic method

- Negotiating entry – the Gatekeeper, Key Actors, Key Informants
- Introductory period –routines, roles, relationships (vital)
- Participant observation

# What is Participant Observation: Subjectivity & Reflexivity



Researcher is part of the research in ethnography



- Data and their interpretation inevitably shaped by individual researcher
  - centrality of personal relationships
  - selection of data to record
- PO data result from interaction between researcher and researched
- Explore subjectivity
  - don't pretend objectivity
  - be aware of biases and how one interacts
- Initial findings are about oneself and social conditions that gave one one's culture

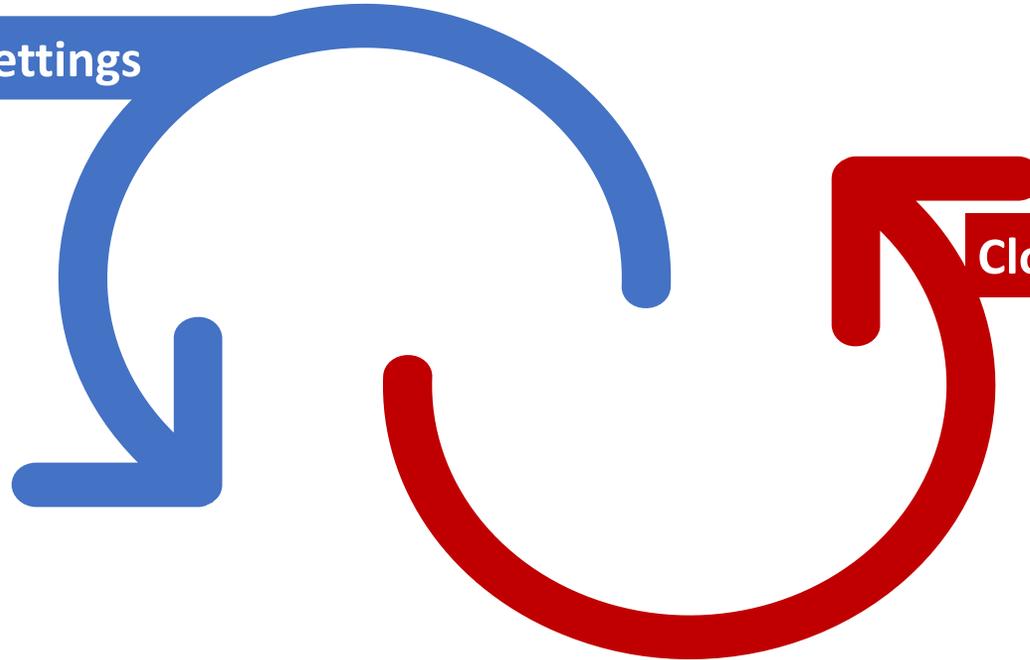
# Types of Participant Observation

## Open (or public) settings

- No formal barriers to entry
- E.g. a community of people living in a certain neighbourhood
- Gaining initial access to open groups is not too difficult
- But it may be harder to become immersed in a less clearly defined group.

## Closed (or private) settings

- Harder to access.
- E.g. a business, a school, or a cult.
- Boundaries are clearly defined
- The ethnographer can become fully immersed in the setting
- Gaining access can be difficult
- May have to negotiate their way in or acquire some role in the organization.



# Types of Participant Observation

## Overt ethnography

- Most ethnography is **overt**.
- The ethnographer openly states intentions and acknowledges their role as a researcher to the members of the group being studied
- Typically preferred for ethical reasons, as participants can provide informed consent
- But people may behave differently with the awareness that they are being studied.

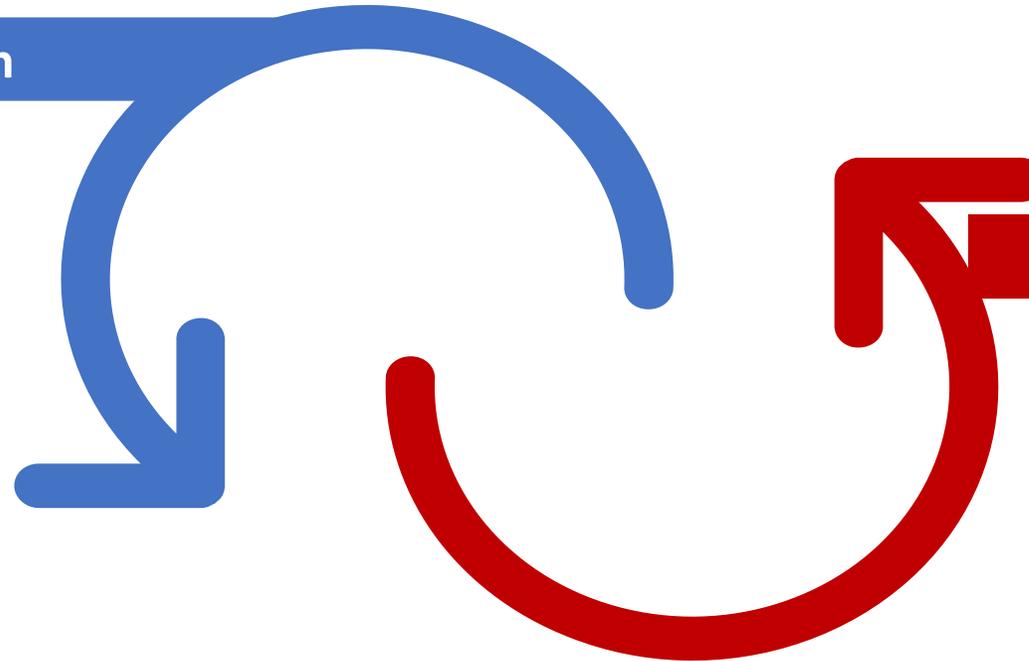
## Covert ethnography

- This means that the researcher does not tell participants about their research, and comes up with some other pretence for being there.
- Covert ethnography allows access to environments where the group would not welcome a researcher
- But hiding the researcher's role can be considered deceptive and thus unethical
- Covert ethnography increasingly rare

# Types of Participant Observation

## Active observation

- Involves trying to fully integrate, carrying out tasks and participating in activities like any other member of the community
- May encourage the group to feel more comfortable with the ethnographer's presence
- But runs the risk of disrupting the regular functioning of the community



## Passive observation

- Ethnographer stands back from the activities of others, behaving as a more distant observer and not involving themselves in the community's activities
- Allows more space for careful observation and note-taking
- But group members may behave unnaturally due to feeling they are being observed by an outsider.

- Level of participation must be flexible
- Access to the community might depend upon engaging in certain activities, or there might be certain practices in which outsiders cannot participate.

# Fieldwork methods: sampling

- Concerned with nature of phenomenon (what? why? how?), not quantity or distribution (how many?)
  - but important to understand diversity
- Gate-keepers, key actors, key informants
  - In practice choice of key informants often two-way
  - Initially often:
    - ‘professional stranger-handlers’ (Agar)
    - Deviants
    - Opportunists
- Vital to have introductory period as need to identify roles, responsibilities, context first
- Inevitably much opportunist sampling
- Useful to establish preliminary sampling frame: main social groupings, divisions of year/events, settings
  - sometimes initial census or household survey useful
- Sampling based on research questions (as with other qualitative methods)

# Fieldwork methods for ethnography

- Unstructured observation
- Live in study site for extended time
- Learn local language and dialect
- Participate in wide range of daily activities
- Use everyday conversation as interview technique
- Informally observe while participating
- Record observations in fieldnotes
- Foreground participant classifications
- Continually reflect on experiences and data
- Constantly looking for patterns & connections
- Use both explicit and tacit information in analysis

Can combine with other qualitative methods while in the field such as:

- Interviewing
- Autobiographical interviewing
  - Surveys
- Participatory methods

# Fieldnotes & writing ethnography

- The goal of a written ethnography is to provide a rich, authoritative account of the social setting in which you were embedded
- Ethnography tends to take a less impersonal approach than other research methods
  - Due to the embedded nature of the work, an ethnography often necessarily involves discussion of personal experiences and feelings
- Example of personal reflection in an ethnography
  - *'During the second week, I became frustrated with my lack of progress in gaining the confidence of more than just my initial informants. The staff appeared to distrust me as an outsider'*
- Ethnography is not limited to making observations; it also attempts to explain the phenomena observed in a structured, narrative way
  - For this, you may draw on theory, direct experience and intuitions,
  - May contradict the assumptions that you brought into the research BUT this is the point of this new perspective
- Example of analysis in an ethnography
  - *'Despite the claims of Griffiths (2019), my own observations indicate that health care workers do not always develop any particular bond with one another in response to the stresses of their work. There are several possible reasons for this discrepancy: It may be that the layout of this particular clinic discourages such bond-forming interaction, or that my own presence was disruptive...'*

# Strengths & limitations of ethnography

## Strengths

- Direct access to culture & practices of the group so actions can be understood in social contexts
- Useful to understand firsthand behaviour & interactions of people within particular context
- Reported behaviour can be verified by observed behaviour – increased validity
- Greater understanding of how life is experienced (embodied knowledge)
- Development of trusting relationships (long-term rapport & shared experiences)
- Open & flexible inductive process to provide a rich narrative account of a specific culture
- Continually open to change over long period (witness & explore the unexpected, continually testing/confirming behaviours)

## Limitations

- Standard ethnography is time-consuming as requires long-term (at least few weeks but more often months/can be years) immersion
- Can run the risk of researcher bias as it involves subjective interpretation
- It can be difficult to maintain the necessary distance to analyse a group that you are embedded in
- Good ethnography requires skilled researchers
- Private behaviours may still be difficult to observe
- Difficult to replicate as involves the subjectivity of the particular researcher

# Rapid ethnographic approaches

- Core elements include
  - Limiting or constraining research focus and scope
  - Using key informants as primary data sources
  - Capturing rich data through
    - Multiple observers
    - Interactive observation techniques
    - Collaborative data analysis
- Often used as part of multi-disciplinary research programmes
  - To inform intervention design or service delivery
  - To inform survey design
  - To explain processes
  - To contextualise findings/differences
- Commonly used in healthcare settings
  - Can be combined with process mapping and journey modeling to understand health systems
- Can be combined with multi-sited ethnography
- Links closely with Rapid Participatory approaches (see Robert Chambers) and visual approaches such as PhotoVoice
- BUT may not capture dynamics of change or social processes – captures moments in time & context



# Ethics of ethnography: balancing risks & benefits

## Consent

- Initial introductions and how role is disclosed to group members
- BUT continual process balancing immersion & rapport with disclosure
- Fully informed consent may undermine strength of Participation Observation

## Confidentiality

- Reciprocating gossip as route to confirming truth
- BUT maintain confidentiality of sources

## Intervention & integrity

- Recognising power imbalances
- Identifying risk & minimising harms of your role
- BUT research NOT intervention

# Further reading: Ethnographies for maternal & newborn health

