



Ethnography

by Andrew Matzner

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Since the early twentieth century, ethnographic research has focused on all manner of cultural practices, yet social scientists generally ignored or marginalized homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism. With a few exceptions, when the topic of sexuality did appear in studies, it was typically framed through models of deviance and described with stigmatizing language.

However, beginning in the 1960s increasing numbers of ethnographers began conducting research on glbtq issues based on the premise that studies of diverse sexualities are crucial to understanding human behavior and culture.

A Definition

Utilized most commonly in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, ethnography is a type of qualitative research method whose purpose is not only to describe, but also to interpret cultural practices and beliefs.

The ethnographer gathers data about a culture by living in it for an extended period of time and engaging in participant observation, that is, taking part in daily life while also maintaining the position of a researcher. Other data collection methods used in ethnography include interviewing, gathering life histories, videotaping, and distributing surveys.

Besides referring to a particular methodology, the term "ethnography" is also used to describe the final written results of ethnographic research.

Ethnography is a powerful research tool because of its ability to generate what Clifford Geertz calls "thick descriptions" of a culture. Moreover, by privileging the interconnections between "insider" information and "outsider" analytical and theoretical frameworks, ethnography effectively explicates how cultural realities are both representationally constructed and materially lived.

Early Studies

In the 1920s and 1930s, University of Chicago sociology students of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess conducted ethnographic studies in metropolitan areas of the United States. Many explored the "underbelly" of city life, including hobos, gangs, slum areas, and saloons. Although it was not the prime concern of their research, the students did provide information about homosexual behavior in their writings. Such urban ethnography continued after World War II, as did the inclusion of details about homosexual behavior.

While historically, most sociologists focused their research on the United States, anthropologists have mainly examined non-Western cultures. Most early ethnographers showed little interest in gender/sexual diversity. However, there were some who made reference, albeit brief, to such topics in their writing, as well as a small number of researchers who directly examined such issues.

For example, Bronislaw Malinowski, who is generally considered to be the father of ethnography in anthropology and whose long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands between 1915 and 1918 became a model for later anthropologists, documented various forms of sexuality among his subjects.

Margaret Mead, in her work on Samoan sexuality, published in 1928, also discusses homosexual relationships. And, reflecting long-standing anthropological fascination with the Native American "berdache," George Devereux in 1937 and Walter Hill in 1940 produced studies of intermediate gender roles among the Mojave and Navaho, respectively, while Ruth Landes in 1947 investigated the presence of "passive homosexuals" as both leaders and initiates in Afro-Brazilian possession religions.

In *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, published in 1951, Clellan Ford and Frank Beach collected and collated ethnographic information from the massive Human Relations Area Files database. In the chapter on homosexuality, they discuss the number of societies in which same-sex practices are present, and the levels of acceptance in each. While valuable for documenting the existence of homosexuality in other cultures--and hence making a statement about the culturally relativistic nature of anti-homosexual attitudes in the United States--*Patterns of Sexual Behavior* was more quantitative than qualitative.

Responding to the continued lack of ethnographic attention paid to homosexuality, David Sonenschein challenged the scholarly community with his essay, "Homosexuality as a Subject of Anthropological Inquiry" (1966). Yet prejudicial attitudes within the social sciences, particularly in anthropology, meant that graduate students and university professors interested in conducting glbtq-focused research generally received little support from their departments.

Pioneers and Seminal Works

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, articles based on ethnographic research were increasingly published in academic journals, covering subjects such as "female *berdache*" (Schaeffer 1965), transgendered prostitutes in Oman (Wikan 1977), and Kenyan "female husbands" (Oboler 1980).

During this same period sociologists John Gagnon and William Simon carried out revolutionary studies that explored how North American homosexuals functioned in everyday life in their communities. They also edited collections of articles about gay and lesbian life based on ethnographic field methods. This type of sociological research was significant because it avoided pathologizing homosexuality and de-emphasized questions of etiology.

Ethnographic research done by sociologists in the 1960s influenced anthropologists in the 1970s who were interested in conducting studies of glbtq communities in North America. One of the first book-length ethnographies on gay and transgender life was published in 1972 by Esther Newton. Based on fieldwork done in 1968, *Mother Camp* was an exploration of the world of female impersonators that took a cultural, rather than pathological, perspective.

Newton's classic text stood largely alone until the end of the decade, at which point glbtq-oriented book-length ethnographies slowly began to emerge. These included studies of lesbian communities (Wolf 1979) and gay bar life (Read 1980) in the United States, and Gilbert Herdt's research on "ritualized homosexuality" among the Sambia in Papua New Guinea (1981).

Books that focused on alternative genders and sexualities began appearing even more regularly from the mid-1980s. Some of these ground-breaking texts included studies of two-spirited people among Native Americans (Williams 1986), a support group for male-to-female transsexuals in the United States (Bolin 1988), and the *hijra* of India (Nanda 1990). Several important edited volumes also appeared in the 1980s, including *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia* (Herdt 1984) and *The Many Faces of Homosexuality* (Blackwood 1986).

A New Era

The 1990s saw a dramatic increase of theoretically sophisticated research on issues of sexual and gender diversity as gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender studies began to be taken more seriously in the academy. Several important ethnographic studies of gay and lesbian communities in the United States were published during the first half of the 1990s, including works by Weston (1991), Newton (1993), and Kennedy and Davis (1993).

Moreover, grant monies from public health agencies and non-governmental organizations increasingly became available for research relating to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This allowed researchers to pursue studies of sexual subcultures to an extent that had not been possible before in the social sciences.

In the late 1990s transgenderism emerged as a significant research topic, with long-term research projects carried out by ethnographers in countries such as Brazil (Kulick 1998), the Philippines (Johnson 1997), Tonga (Besnier 1997), and among Native Americans (Lang 1998). Recently, more attention has also focused on lesbianism and female-to-male transgenderism, subjects that were often ignored in the past (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999).

In addition, two landmark volumes co-edited by Ellen Lewin and William Leap were published that explore the history, politics, and debates surrounding gay and lesbian ethnography, and the complex issues of positionality and authority that affect gay and lesbian ethnographers.

Methodological Considerations

A number of sensitive questions face ethnographers who conduct research on glbtq topics, as well as those who themselves identify as glbtq. For example, what are the implications and effects of being "out" in the research setting? How does one's sexuality and gender identity impact how one conducts fieldwork?

In the past, ethnographers have typically remained silent in their written ethnographies about their own identities. But in recent years reflexive reporting, in which researchers offer personal (sometimes intimate) information in their finished texts, has become popular in the social sciences. Accordingly, glbtq ethnographers have recognized the importance of allowing readers to understand how the sexual and gendered aspects of the researcher's identity can influence how a research topic--whether glbtq-focused or not--is approached, and how being out may shape personal relationships that are formed in the field.

Questions of identity inevitably lead to questions of privilege. Does being glbtq-identified permit a researcher greater access to certain research populations? For instance, does being an out lesbian allow a researcher to gain a greater measure of trust among lesbian informants than would otherwise be possible? This in turn leads to a consideration of the ethical implications of pursuing sexual relations with one's informants.

A final controversial issue concerns the use of Western labels to refer to indigenous terms. That is, how applicable are English words such as *homosexual*, *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transvestite*, and *queer* to people in non-English speaking cultures? After all, such words have their own context-bound histories. Thus, the ethnographer must make the decision when writing up fieldwork whether to use native terms or English glosses.

Indeed, whose interpretation of reality will become privileged in the final written ethnographic product? Should a group of people be labeled and conceptualized as *homosexual* or *transgendered* even if they themselves do not self-identify as such?

For example, some Thai *kathoey* view themselves as "women" (*phuying*), but are typically described by

Western social scientists as "drag queens," "transsexuals," or "transgendered homosexuals." How to reconcile the tensions between such insider and outsider views is a major challenge for today's ethnographer.

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About the Author

Andrew Matzner is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Roanoke, Virginia. He is also adjunct faculty in Women's Studies at Hollins University. He is the author of *O Au No Keia: Voices from Hawaii's Mahu and Transgender Communities* (2001) and co-author (with LeeRay Costa) of *Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth* (2007).