

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Key questions applying theories, concepts
and issues in Cultural Anthropology

1. ETHNOGRAPHY

The Challenges of the Participant Observer

A closer look at Mead, Freeman, Lee

Subjectivity means drawing conclusions based on your own personal experiences and way of looking at things. This can be connected to a person's cultural and personal perspectives, feelings and beliefs.

Objectivity means drawing conclusions based on facts and data that is not influenced by personal perspectives, prejudices or emotions.

Reflexivity is the practice of reflecting on your own world view, biases, and the impact on the culture that you are studying.

Margaret Mead studied Samoan adolescent girls during the 1920s. She found that they were less stressed than American adolescent girls. She surmised after living with this culture and studying them through participant observation that they had much more sexual freedom than American girls did. She concluded that sex roles are determined by culture not biology.

However, in the 1960s, **Derek Freeman** began studying Samoan culture and he found something quite different. He writes that Mead was wrong and that actually the Samoans were quite sexually conservative. He thought Mead had been tricked by the Samoans.

In 2009, **Paul Shankman** published a book re-examining both studies. He found that both researchers had been correct. He proposes that because Mead was in Samoa in the 1920s before they were affected by colonization or the West, the practices were likely fairly free compared to the quite strict code in America around the 1920s. He also found that when Freeman was conducting his study – America was much more free in terms of sexuality and by comparison the Samoans had become more strict after being influenced by colonization, WWII and commercialization (Westernization). Samoa had in fact changed quite a bit between the time periods. Mead and Freeman were also born and raised in different generations and experienced different standards of sexual norms.



SAMOAN ADOLESCENTS 1902



SAMOAN ADOLESCENTS 1925

Margaret Mead is in the center



SAMOAN CHOIR 1960

MEAD & FREEMAN



- Why or how did Mead and Freeman come to such different conclusions?
- What do all three studies suggest about personality development in a culture?

In “Eating Christmas in the Kalahari”

Richard Borshay Lee uses ethnographic techniques. He decides to take part in the Christmas ox custom, which is participant observation – “direct, firsthand observation of behaviour”. And then through his key informants, such as Hakekgose & Tomazo, Lee discovers new aspects of the !Kung’s community life. Although the anthropologist was engaged in the daily life of the Bushmen’s culture, he still was somewhat of an alien to this society.

After Lee decided to participate in the Christmas “custom of slaughtering an ox”, the Bushmen one by one started to complain, once they saw “the ox chosen by /ontah” Lee. They called it a bag of bones not worth eating. While the Christmas ox custom “suited” the anthropologist’s purposes, the reaction he got from the !Kung Bushmen people didn’t match his expectations. Lee was insulted by their reaction, his outlook was founded on his own culture, where people are supposed to appreciate other people’s hard work and generosity. He was hoping to be praised for his gift. Instead no one seemed very impressed at all.

Through conversation with cultural consultants, Lee uses the emic approach of looking at how people think and discovers the “native viewpoint”. In the !Kung Bushmen society, your hard work is appreciated but behind closed doors and is not easily shown to you. Their control mechanism and belief is, that even though.

a job is well done, it will do a person more harm than good to praise them for it. Praise will boost his ego and “for someday his pride will make him to kill somebody”. The groups’ survival was based on their awareness of their environment and evaluations of how individuals think and act in a society. In order to keep everyone in the culture in check, they make sure no one gets too big an ego.

Lee does come to understand this once he asks someone, why didn’t they like my gift ox? He finds out that they did appreciate it, but that it is not their way to express that to a person. In fact the person would also normally bad mouth his own hunt as well. This new information helped him to realize he was looking at things from his own perspective and expectations.

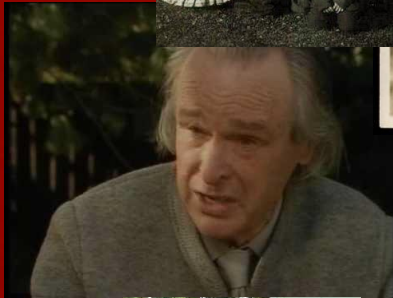
The way he got this new information – by asking – seemed so simple and straight forward, but it wasn’t always that obvious to those studying others.

RICHARD B LEE



- What cultural values are the !Kung showing in this story Christmas in the Kalahari?
- What does Lee's experience teach us about participant observation?
- What can we learn about cultural assumptions and subjectivity here?

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION CHALLENGES



1. How is subjectivity a challenge for an ethnographer?
2. How can an ethnographer include objective aspects to his research?
3. Why is it important to use reflexivity?
4. Which theorists value reflexivity?