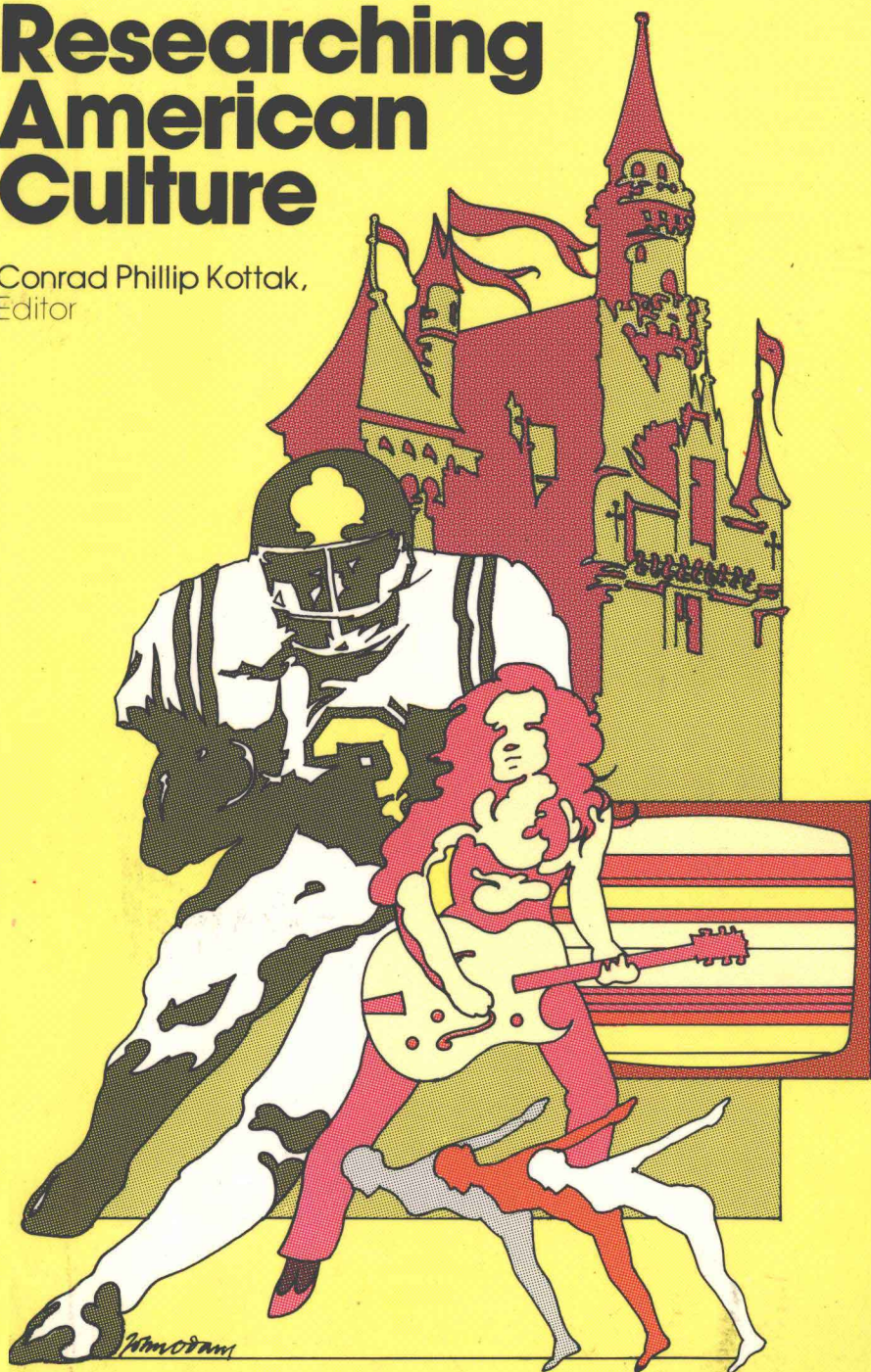


A GUIDE FOR STUDENT ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Researching American Culture

Conrad Phillip Kottak,
Editor



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To G. Harvey Summ

Preface

I thank many people who, since 1977, have contributed to the organization and running of Anthropology 412 ("The Anthropology of Contemporary American Culture") and directly or indirectly to this book. Thanks first to Lebriz Tosuner-Fikes, whose idea it was to prepare a field research guidebook for undergraduates working on American culture. Tosuner-Fikes's experience as a 412 teaching assistant in the fall, 1978, term convinced her that college students needed to be reminded of terms and ideas that they had forgotten since introductory anthropology. She also thought that explicit instructions about all phases of planning and carrying out research would reduce the difficulties encountered by her students. Tosuner-Fikes drafted a grant proposal to the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT), which, once awarded under my direction, has supported preparation of this volume. Thanks therefore are also due to CRLT. This CRLT Faculty Development grant permitted Tosuner-Fikes to prepare a guide, which is included as a chapter of this volume, during the summer of 1979. Thanks also to the Office of the Dean of the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and the Department of Anthropology for stipends that helped cover preparation.

The graduate students who worked with me during the fall, 1979, term met with Lebriz Tosuner-Fikes and me to decide on a format. I gratefully acknowledge their advice and assistance, particularly in contacting the students whose papers are reproduced here. These 412 colleagues are Louise Berndt, Susan Gregg, William Meltzer, Linda Place, Lynne Robins, and Gale Thompson. I also thank 412 teaching assistants from past semesters who have made indirect contributions to the course and this volume. They include Jay Fikes, Philip Guddemi, Ellen Hoffman, William Kelleher, and Jeffrey Resnick.

A slightly shorter and different version of this book was originally published as a special issue (vol. 6, no. 1, 1980) of *Michigan Discussions*

in *Anthropology*, the biannually published journal of the University of Michigan Department of Anthropology. All royalties for the current book have been assigned to the journal, to support future creative issues.

This book is designed for use in varied courses requiring research on aspects of contemporary American culture. These courses will include anthropology of contemporary American culture, introductory cultural anthropology, and field techniques. We anticipate that the book may also be useful in certain courses offered by sociology, American culture, and English departments.

I wish also to thank those who have helped me with the organization and preparation of this book, including Shafica Ahmed, Linda Kraker, Francine Markowitz, Mary Steedly, and the editorial staff of *Michigan Discussions in Anthropology*. Thanks also to the University of Michigan Press staff for its excellent cooperation.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my uncle, G. Harvey Summ, who, more than anyone else, encouraged my interest in using anthropological techniques and perspectives to study my own society. His enthusiasm helped me decide to offer the course out of which this volume developed. The essay reprinted here from my textbook, *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity* (2nd ed., Random House), was my initial foray into American culture, and it was written at Harvey Summ's house. Thanks, Harvey, for years of intellectual stimulation.

Conrad Phillip Kottak

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Introduction

Conrad Phillip Kottak

This book is designed for use in undergraduate courses on the anthropological study of contemporary North American culture and in other courses, including introductory cultural anthropology, that require original field research on some aspect of the student's own society. The book grew out of a course offered each fall at the University of Michigan, Anthropology 412 (now 320), "The Anthropology of Contemporary American Culture." First offered during the fall, 1977 term, the course reflected my own developing interest in contemporary society, particularly in mass or "pop" culture. The course was also a response to the student enthusiasm that was evident whenever I used American examples to illustrate principles being taught in introductory anthropology. An original field research project was the main course assignment.

This book's aims are multiple. One objective is to show the value of anthropology in studying contemporary society. Another is to guide students in original research. Fifteen student papers have been included to illustrate actual student research accomplishments. This introduction and Part 1 (essays 1 and 2) review basic anthropological terms and procedures and offer detailed guidance for planning, carrying out, and writing up results of research projects. The introduction discusses anthropology's value for studying the contemporary United States and summarizes some organizing ideas, themes, and perspectives, while essays 1 and 2 guide the student from project planning through write-up of the completed research. The essays in Part 2 (3 through 10), mainly written by professionals, illustrate several anthropological methods useful in analyzing the contemporary mass media. Other research strategies, techniques, and subjects are examined in Parts 3 and 4, which contain most of the fifteen student research papers chosen for inclusion in this book.

A course that uses familiar cultural material to illustrate new techniques permits students to concentrate on learning methods and perspectives without also having to remember details of foreign ethnography. The contributions to this book by both students and professionals illustrate the course goal of teaching a variety of anthropological techniques, rather than any single approach. Among the research paradigms and analytic methods included are: emic and etic research strategies, structuralism, symbolic analysis, neo-Freudian analysis, componential

analysis, sociolinguistic methods, content analysis, observation of public behavior, interviewing, and quantitative research design. This nondoc-trinaire inclusion of multiple anthropological approaches is, I believe, one of this volume's unique features.

Another is its inclusion of a large number of original student research papers as the essays in Parts 3 and 4. These provide, quoting one of the anonymous prepublication reviews of this manuscript,

excellent examples of how serious students can carry out interesting projects among friends, family, and co-workers, which yield useful insight into their own lives. They demonstrate the essential wisdom of paying close attention to narrowly defined problems which have larger contexts. They also, and perhaps most important, can demonstrate to students a standard of excellence for their own work.

After reading each paper several times, I am very impressed with college students' work and ability. Note that there were several student papers of similar quality that I could not include, either because of space limitations, or because the general subject matter was already represented. Very minor copy editing has been done on most of the student papers, mostly to correct spelling and punctuation, and to make reference style consistent. Unfortunately, because student contributors are now dispersed or have lost their list of references, we have been forced to include a few incomplete citations in the references. (The reference and bibliography style used in this volume follows conventions of the *American Anthropologist*, the main professional journal of our discipline.)

Another major course goal illustrated by the student essays is to help students think about their culture in new ways, to expose and call into question covert cultural biases and ethnocentric assumptions, to convert students from being simply natives into being native anthropologists. The job of the native anthropologist, discussed more fully in essay 3, is to use the detachment and cross-cultural perspective that training in anthropology provides in describing and analyzing familiar behavior. All anthropologists bring to whatever culture they study certain assumptions and biases acquired in their culture of origin. However, proper training increases introspection, objectivity, and cultural awareness, thus reducing the bias that one culture's ethnographer brings to the study of another. Native anthropologists attempt to combine an observer's impartiality with lifelong cultural expertise. As natives, they can draw on their knowledge of the native language, and their skills and understanding acquired during

years of enculturation and formal study. As anthropologists, they can question native beliefs and categories and watch for regularities in behavior that natives are unaware of and might even deny if they were pointed out. Resulting explanations are often *etic* (phrased in observers' categories) rather than *emic* (acceptable to natives).

A more open, questioning, comparative, relativistic outlook permits the anthropologist, paraphrasing a tenet of Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1966, 1967) structuralism, to delve beneath the conscious mind to discover the deeper structure of cultural behavior. Or, as Marvin Harris (1974) would have it, the scientifically trained student of culture can penetrate the "social dreamwork," the maze of sometimes contradictory, often inconsistent, frequently obscuring (and also, often enlightening) statements that natives make to describe, interpret, and explain their behavior. Thus, many of the contributors to this collection have rethought the American cultural category "trivia," viewing the phenomena so labeled as worthy of serious study, revealing pervasive cultural themes. Manifestations of "pop culture" that influence millions of lives, through conscious and unconscious enculturation, are certainly not trivial. Having been trained to be skeptical about (and thus to be attentive to, and to carefully examine) native categories, descriptions, and interpretations, anthropologists may examine the functions, meanings, and general cultural relevance of many cultural products, including those that natives view as "trivial" or as too obvious to require comment.

Selections in this book illustrate that many of the very same anthropological techniques that were developed in and for small-scale non-literate societies can be applied to our own behavior today. American society is not just for sociologists, economists, and political scientists. Indeed, anthropology contributes a distinctive comparative and relativistic perspective. We have seen that anthropology helps students to become more objective about the supposed "naturalness" of their own customs, to become less ethnocentric, and to be more skeptical about certain beliefs and practices that are rarely questioned. Many students are initially extremely defensive about aspects of the American world view. I have found that the goal of objectivity is most difficult to reach when discussing certain pervasive values and beliefs. For example, students are reluctant to examine, to rethink, and to evaluate the common American belief that our living standard (diet, health, physical fitness, convenience, educational system, opportunity) is "the highest (or best) the world has ever known." And even after the energy crisis and years of ecological awareness, many students still hold onto the American core value (cf.

Arensberg and Niehoff 1975; Hsu 1975) that new resources can always be discovered or invented when current supplies are exhausted (“the frontier mentality,” as articulated by the introduction to “Star Trek”—“space, the final frontier”).

Among the earliest questions considered in a course on the anthropology of the United States are: Is there an American culture? What is it? When did it begin and how has it lasted? How has it changed? What are the key values and shared beliefs that we hold? Are they mutually consistent? Are certain beliefs we hold about ourselves better seen as cultural myths than as reflections of reality? One useful organizing theme is unity and diversity in American culture. In the essays in this volume, unity is explored in such common enculturators as public schools; national myths, symbols, and holidays; the nation-state; and, particularly, the mass media, which have had such a powerful and widespread impact on today’s college students (and indeed on anyone who has grown up in the United States after 1940). This volume also covers expressions of social and cultural diversity, including those based on socioeconomic class, occupation, educational level, region, gender, age, ethnic group, race, family background, and urban, suburban, or rural residence.

Student Research Projects

This book attempts to prepare students for doing original research through specific guidance in project construction and execution (essays 1 and 2), illustration of many anthropological techniques, and inclusion of several actual student research papers. Prior to the field project, students in my course on American culture write a few short essays using anthropological methods to describe and analyze familiar phenomena. This is good practice for the larger project that follows. Three such essays (essays 5, 8, and 9) have been included.

The matter of what kinds of student research projects should be planned and approved poses a dilemma for anyone who wishes to instruct students in original research. If a large number of students is involved, it is hardly fair to unleash hordes of young and inexperienced scholars on a relatively small community to do ethnographic interviewing. At the University of Michigan we have tried to trouble our host community (Ann Arbor) as little as possible, for example, by discouraging students from studying the same places and groups. To safeguard the community and to promote good research, each student is required to submit a brief prospectus of the intended field project early in the

semester. Teachers scrutinize these abstracts, discourage duplication of effort (with a file of previous years' projects), and discuss potential problems. Proper instruction in research procedures and in the ethics of social inquiry (reviewed by Tosuner-Fikes in essay 1) requires regular meetings between students and teaching staff. A student-teacher ratio of no more than twenty to one permits careful project supervision.

In deciding which projects to approve, instructors will be guided by enrollment in their class and the size of their community. In Ann Arbor, given large classes and a relatively small community, students are told to avoid projects involving interviews with strangers. Instead, they are advised to choose one of three kinds of research topics: (1) analysis of an aspect of the mass media, (2) study of behavior in a public place (without interviewing), or (3) study of a group to which the student already belongs. By encouraging students to focus on these areas, we are able to control the problem of students' bothering strangers. Thus, although interviewing, questionnaire construction, and sampling are discussed in essay 1, most of the student papers included in this volume emphasize the less intrusive types of research enumerated above. At small colleges, where classes have fewer students and interviewing is a possibility, teachers might want to assign this volume along with James Spradley's book *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979).

Readers will note, however, that some of the student projects included here did use interviewing of strangers. This kind of project was allowed if the proposal seemed particularly interesting, promising, and if the topic was not overly sensitive. For example, Suzanne Faber took advantage of her employment as a cocktail waitress at a local bar to investigate the relationship between income, tipping, and alcohol consumption. She asked 100 customers to indicate the level of their income on the back of their check, without telling them that she would try to correlate that information with the amount they drank and tipped. Although Faber used her workplace as a fieldwork site, her project did not strictly qualify as a study of a group to which the student already belonged. But her ingenious methods of collecting data, and the possibility of interesting conclusions, made her project well worth encouraging. Like Faber, Gail Magliano used her work experience, in an Ann Arbor financial institution, in her study of the expression of the American cultural value of right-handedness in local banks. Her project combined various techniques: observation of behavior in a public place, informal interviewing, perusal of company advertising, and study of a group to which she belonged.

Terrence O'Brien made use of a kinship tie in order to study a funeral home in suburban Detroit; he combined formal and informal interviewing with observation of behavior in a public place. He was able to correlate certain aspects of funerals with socioeconomic class and discovered regularities in Americans' reactions to death and funerals. Eric McClafferty's analysis of rituals of status elevation and reversal drew on his former membership in the high school swim team being analyzed, as well as on observation and talks with current team members.

Kenneth Schlesinger, in his research on racquetball players' reactions to lost points, observed public behavior, as did Mary Jo Larson when she studied talk by males and females in university classrooms.

Tina Van de Graaf and Francine Chinni used a tape recorder in their research on gender terminology among members of a local sorority. This student project was the only one based on formal interviewing of members of a group to which the researchers did not belong.

The student papers in Part 3, which are based mainly on observation of public behavior and study of groups with which the student was already affiliated, are preceded by three professional papers (essays 11 through 13) that make use of related techniques in similar microethnographic settings. Part 4 includes student research papers based on content analysis of the mass media. It begins with a professional paper, Maxine Margolis's demonstration of the far-reaching applications of a contemporary ideology, "Blaming the Victim," to females in the United States. The student papers by Rentz, Hesselstine, and Hill also demonstrate aspects of discrimination based on gender and race in our society. Patricia Rentz's quantitative analysis of the advertising and story content of eight "women's magazines" demonstrates that advertising and stories carry conflicting messages, the former telling women to remain in traditional roles, the latter emphasizing the contemporary woman's extradomestic life. Rentz's findings led to her identification of certain psychological conflicts that women experience because of this contradiction in the mass media's tacit enculturation. In a related study, Patricia Hesselstine watched every minute of commercial television for a twenty-hour period and charted the occupations of television women, as well as their authority and effectiveness (including commercials about superwomen who can "bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never, never, never let you forget you're a man"). Today's feminist consciousness leads us to believe, perhaps, that TV is showing fewer home-oriented women, and more women working for cash. But Hesselstine's detailed analysis says no: 83 percent of the women were homebodies.

Focusing on four daytime soap operas, Christina Hill finds unrealistic portrayal of blacks; she compares actual black residential patterns, employment histories, and occupations with those of the soaps' black characters and concludes that daytime viewers are being deluded into the belief that blacks can easily succeed in today's America, given achievement motivation. Hill contends that this belief diverts viewers' attention from social problems and reaffirms Americans' traditional and erroneous ideas that the poor are poor because they are lazy and that anyone who wants to work can find a job—beliefs that express core values of individualism and individual achievement.

The final student essay, by Fermin Diez, stands alone. It is a foreigner's reaction to the popularity of sports, particularly football and baseball, in the contemporary United States. Diez's research drew on his own participant-observation as an outsider confronting American culture, on the anthropology and sports literature, on the presentation of sports in the mass media (particularly television), and on informal conversations with Americans. Diez's essay relates the American preoccupation with sports to the American value system, as both are perceived by an outsider.

Thus, the essays offer glimpses of many expressions of unity and diversity in American society. This book is intended as a guide to anthropological research methods, interpretations, and explanations and as a sampler of what serious undergraduates can accomplish when they do research in their own society. It certainly does not purport to be a complete and comprehensive anthropological treatment of contemporary American culture. It offers encouragement and illustration rather than the final word.

