

# **Introduction to *Food Culture:* *Anthropology, Linguistics,* *and Food Studies***

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## **Introduction, Research Design and Ethics**

This volume, the second in the set *Research Methods for Anthropological Studies of Food and Nutrition*, begins with a discussion of the volume followed by a chapter on research ethics by Sharon Devine and John Brett. Their chapter will be reproduced in all three volumes because ethics must be understood by all researchers, and a consideration of the ethics of methods used to collect, analyze, store, and publish must be an essential and initial element of the planning of any project. In their chapter they expand the idea of research ethics beyond publication and permissions to include the ethics of study design, recruitment, enrollment, and obtaining informed consent. They present a brief history of the research problems that led to the current ethics regulation requirements as well as a primer on the principles that guide ethical research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. They conclude with two short case studies highlighting application of these ethical principles in hypothetical food studies.

## **Volume and Section Overviews: Volume Two, Sections IV through VI**

### *Section IV: Sociocultural Anthropology*

Section IV examines sociocultural anthropology methods to understand how they work within a food and nutrition framework. This section captures many of the perspectives and approaches within an anthropological framework but is

not explicitly biocultural in orientation. Topics include interviewing techniques, body image studies, direct observation, visual anthropology, participant-observation, focus groups, life histories, and use of food ethnography in sociocultural classroom settings. Geraldine Moreno-Black introduces the section with an overview of methods typically used in sociocultural studies, an analysis of best-case examples from previously published studies and manuals, a discussion of the commonalities between these methods and those used by biocultural researchers, and an overview of research design with a focus on developing research questions within appropriate theoretical frameworks. Her chapter introduces the reader to a broader history of how anthropologists have used food to study human relations and understand patterns of behavior within and between cultures, and how the study of human systems has relied on analysis of food production, distribution, and use.

Anthropological studies using sociocultural methods are what most lay people think of when they hear about our field of study: it is the Radcliff-Browns and the Margaret Meads who come to mind—intrepid researchers who venture deep into the “bush” alone to find out how other peoples live and think. Many students might be told that the first anthropologist to explicitly study food was Audrey Richards, who used a biocultural model to understand food and nutrition among the Bemba of Sub-Saharan Africa. She was primarily a social anthropologist, however, and most of her methods for understanding food production and use were drawn from social and cultural anthropology. Many others studied food during the early days of anthropology, but for most of these researchers the study of food was part of a broad descriptive agenda of early ethnography rather than something to be studied as a focal point. The remaining chapters in Section IV document the authors’ use of specific methods to study food use as a central element in the construction and daily functioning of social systems, rather than as a result of social organization. Ramona Lee Pérez uses what she terms “kitchen table ethnography” to elucidate life histories of food use among women in Mexico and the U.S. borderlands. She is particularly interested in how researchers can use verbal interactions to elicit life stories and how the investigator must prepare for a truly reflexive and effective interview experience that is respectful of the people interviewed.

Nicole Taylor and Mimi Nichter have contributed a chapter on body image studies that provides a comprehensive overview of techniques used to understand how body image can be included in anthropological studies. Beginning with an overview of which disciplines have examined body image and where and how they have done so, the authors move into a discussion of specific methods used by anthropologists and other researchers. They provide examples of studies that can be accessed for further information about the topic, cover issues of confidentiality and ethics, and discuss a number of case studies. Readers will find that

their chapter and Pérez's together provide an excellent background to thinking through research about difficult topics in a one-to-one setting.

The next chapter, by Helen Vallianatos, explores methods in visual anthropology, a topic briefly touched upon by Taylor and Nichter. Vallianatos presents an in-depth history of the technique as used by anthropologists, but references how visual methods can be used by food studies in general. She also chronicles the history of visual techniques, from recording and analysis to more recent collaborative work with study populations and individuals. She discusses visual methods in film, photography, drawing and newer digital and multimedia tools, supplying case studies of each, and references particularly effective examples of research. Most importantly she covers the ethics of image collection—currently a hot topic in anthropology and media of all sorts—and finishes with a step-by-step outline of how to think through a visual project from initial research query to final written report.

The chapter that follows is a biocultural review of another form of seeing—that of direct observation in anthropological studies. The authors, Barbara Piperata and Darna Dufour, focus on applying these methods in biocultural or nutritional anthropology research. Echoing themes discussed by Ramona Lee Pérez, they emphasize the importance of “being there” when observing study groups. They provide an analysis of the essential literature, a thorough discussion of several examples of direct observation studies, and then outline how a biocultural anthropologist can best use these methods, either with other structured data collection methods or to help construct accurate and effective data instruments, including qualitative/quantitative mixed-methods questionnaires. Relying on examples from their own extensive research, they also discuss how careful observation of activities and mindful listening can lead the investigator into new areas of research that strengthen the outcomes of their studies.

Moving back into the sociocultural realm, the rest of this section focuses on classic methods and ends with a discussion on using ethnographic techniques in the classroom. Heather Paxson contributes a robust examination of participant observation and interviewing techniques that complements and extends the earlier discussions about related methods. She first discusses the history and theory behind participant observation, continues with a description of how to “do” this method, and explains how it differs from and augments other forms of observational studies. She also tackles the difficulty of doing actual “participant” observation, given the observer status of the researcher, and provides examples of how she used “inquisitive fieldwork” to study cheesemakers and their worlds even though she could not directly make cheese with them. Finishing with a section on how to arrange and analyze interviews, she ends with a point-by-point outline of how to conduct such a project from initial interesting idea to final write-up and ethics considerations.

Ramona L. Pérez follows with another key sociocultural method, one that is often used by researchers in other disciplines: the focus group. Her chapter con-

tains information about where focus groups are appropriate, how to use them to gather data prior to designing a comprehensive study, when (and when not) to use a group, and how to manage the groups during research. She backs this with examples from her own research and includes a discussion about the history of the method and its limitations, finishing with a detailed examination of how to begin such work. The two classic methods of participant observation and focus groups are standard in anthropology, and Paxson's and Pérez's chapters provide an updated view of how to use them in food research.

In the section's final chapter, Carole Counihan describes how these ethnographic methods can be incorporated into classroom work and teaching protocols. Counihan illustrates this with the example of her course on foodways, which is offered as a methods course. The class guides students through all phases of a fieldwork project, from initial idea through research design, IRB review, data-gathering and analysis, write-up, and oral presentation, and is designed to ensure that all students master research methods. In combination with the other chapters in this section, this final chapter presents a 'soup to nuts' finale on the conceptualization, implementation, analysis and reporting of a sociocultural foodways project.

### *Section V: Linguistics and Food Talk*

Linguistic Anthropology offers many methods for examining food-related behavior, including the language of food, food and cognition, recipes, and other food-related discourse. This section explores the range of methods available, how anthropologists have used them, and how they overlap with Food Studies frameworks. It is a natural successor to the previous section on sociocultural anthropology, since linguistic data collection often relies on similar methods and the two subdisciplines share theoretical understandings. Specific chapters cover the essentials of a linguistic analysis: cultural domain analysis—especially the use of free lists and pile sorts—historical sources, food talk, and food texts. The section begins with an overview by Kathleen Riley and Jillian Cavanaugh that provides a four-field approach to linguistic anthropology, giving examples of how anthropologists of all subdisciplines have studied food use through language and the connections between food and language use. They approach this as “an emergent field, joined both by the materiality of language and food as experienced via the body, but also by the symbolic properties and potentials of both.” More importantly they explain the solid theoretical grounding for anthropologists' and others' reading of semiotic texts of all sorts—from the written or spoken words to material culture remains—in order to make sense of human communications about food.

From theory, Riley and Cavanaugh move to an overview of methods used to explore the semiotics of food, paying particular attention to how field notes created during research—a form of meta-text—can also be understood as a food text

of importance. They discuss the standard anthropological toolkit in relation to data collection for linguistic studies (participant observation, detailed field notes, photographs, interviews, focus groups, audio-recording, and video-recording) and elucidate how they can be “used to investigate what people say when engaged in food-related activities, and how food is made meaningful through discourse and interaction.” After discussing the chapters in Section V, they conclude with a list of key texts for understanding methods in the semiotics of food. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this chapter is the authors’ explanation of how the standard toolkit can be used for linguistic studies and provide further tools for “thinking through” the design and implementation of a research project.

Riley and Cavanaugh follow their introduction with an in-depth chapter about “food talk,” which they define as “how language and food meaningfully co-occur within specific sociocultural contexts.” In this chapter they detail how to plan and execute studies using participant observation, contextualized interviews and focus groups, and audio/video-recording and transcription, as well as how to examine documents. They divide such studies into research-elicited data, such as interviews and focus groups, and free-living or naturally occurring use of language about food. Particularly valuable is their discussion of the ethnography of communication, a topic that cuts across multiple subdisciplines of anthropology and food studies. They also comprehensively cover how to analyze talk during mealtimes and how language socialization channels food use. They conclude with a discussion of the future of food talk research and a list of resources.

In the next chapter, Ariela Zycherman explores methods in cultural domain analysis (CDA), focusing on free lists and pile sorts. She begins with a discussion about CDA and how it can be used in food research, from elucidating how people organize types of foods to understanding how they link food types and food meanings. She is particularly interested in how cultures link foods to social structures (situations, social categories, etc.) and how that affects how food is used. From there, she explains methods for identifying food domains, focusing on pile sorts and free listing. Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of CDA is its capacity to get at the emic understanding of how people think about, classify, and use food substances, as well as the relatively low cost (and ease of analysis) of such approaches. They provide a means to quickly identify areas of cultural knowledge that may require greater investigation, or to identify obvious culturally determined connections that would otherwise be obscure. Zycherman concludes with a section on “thinking through” how to do CDA, along with examples of good research practice.

The next chapter in this section is also written by Kathleen Riley, this time tackling a topic often feared by students and established researchers alike: text analysis. She points out that for many in academia, the “text” has expanded from words and speech to all manners of communicative discourse, both intentional (speech, writing, visual media) and incidental (gestural, placement, gustatory,

tactile, etc.). Adding to this confusion is the expansion of the readership as well as who might be considered a creator of texts. Finally, these methods have increasingly been used to analyze metatexts, defined as cultural analysis of textual discourse, which adds another layer of complexity. Riley thoroughly discusses the history and theory of text analysis, also explaining current examples of such research and descriptions of the actual methods (how to collect code and analyze data). She concludes with a list of available resources and tools—digital and otherwise—for examining texts.

Next, Ken Albala describes how to use primary historical sources to study food use in the past. Although this may seem to require a more established, conventional set of methods, Albala points out that history and anthropology overlap in many areas, particularly in the need to explore the context of an historical document. Words on a page are not immutable symbols that indicate meaning, but like all other systems of meaning are negotiated and contextualized by their time and place, as well as by how the author(s) chose to convey meaning. After discussing different types of historical documents, Albala provides the reader with a roadmap on how to think through the study of a document to best understand how it represents its time and place and contributes to our knowledge of food. Together these five chapters provide the reader with a brief but very comprehensive overview of how a study about food and food use can incorporate cultural analysis of text of all sorts to better understand the emic worlds of the peoples being studied.

### *Section VI: Food Studies*

This last section of broadly sociocultural methods travels somewhat outside of traditional anthropology to embrace other disciplines' research about food. The recent popularity of food studies, broadly (and contentiously) defined as cross- or interdisciplinary examinations of food culture, often utilizes anthropological methods in conjunction with theory and methods from other areas of academic study. Rather than being simply an example of "anthropology-lite," food studies are more accurately thought of as the wilder shores of research, a potentially rocky harbor where dragons congregate to eat the unwary, poorly prepared student researcher. Like the last sentence, food studies practitioners sometimes mix metaphors and methods blithely, taking an "Oooh, look! Something Shiny!" approach to research theory and design. Aiming to dispel these bugbears and dragons, this section emphasizes how anthropologists and students can best use established methods to conduct viable research in fields broadly labeled "food studies" with the goal of describing how such methods contribute to strong research projects, independent of disciplinary labeling.

The seven chapters in this section were written by anthropologists, historians, and folklorists, and each author displays a fearless willingness to describe and discuss methods that either are relatively new and untested, or are established but

used in new ways or in combination with methods from other disciplines. There are a few texts that describe methods in food studies, including *Food Studies* (Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch, 2009), *Food: the Key Concepts* (Warren Belasco, 2008), and *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (edited by John T. Edge, 2013). However, because food studies is interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary, the methods used are often derived from other established academic traditions. One question that anthropologists must ask, therefore, is how far afield we can effectively travel in search of the means to conduct “food studies,” or how we can use established anthropological methods in order to produce effective interdisciplinary work in food. These chapters endeavor to answer these questions. Given that scholars from other disciplines utilize anthropological methods, this section is designed to provide them (as well as other anthropologists) with examples of how to use these methods effectively.

Amy Trubek begins the section with a chapter that examines food studies methods in general, and how anthropologists have used anthropological and other methods to design food-related research. In addition to discussing the chapters that follow, she points out that food studies scholars use methods and theories from various disciplines, and that many researchers in health and environmental fields are increasingly incorporating mixed methods into their own research about food use. Additionally, research in food studies is often driven by issues and problems rather than research question or design; as Trubek points out: “food studies scholarship tends to focus on ‘an issue’ or ‘a problem’ within the larger system and therefore the researcher needs to adopt a holistic approach. The discipline of anthropology has always been interested in problems that emerge from the field and also has adopted holism as an axiom.” This acknowledges that the central question shifts from “what methods are best used given the theory that underlies my research question?” to “what is the core problem or issue, and what methods can I use to better understand its processes, functions, and solutions?” It would be too simplistic to assert that the first is deductive and the second inductive, but these two approaches do demonstrate different ways to think through and implement research. A similar fluidity is shown by the remaining authors in this section, who bravely outline how they have implemented some rather revolutionary methods and combinations of methods in their own research.

Lucy Long takes just such an “issues” approach in her chapter, which explores how food meanings can be studied using a variety of methods from anthropology, folklore, and linguistics. She separates what food “means” into two broad categories—meaning as symbol or reference, and meaning as signifier. In the first, food stands for something else or represents a relationship between cultural categories, and in the second, food has personal or cultural meanings that are emotionally or intellectually important. Of course these categories are fluid and can overlap, so the methods and theories needed to understand how they work within human systems are necessarily flexible and wide-ranging.

Similarly, William Woys Weaver takes on another difficult and rather nebulous issue: food and “place.” He provides examples from his own research in Pennsylvania as well as discussion of other work that studies how place and foodways are connected historically, geographically, and ideationally. Central to this question is the appropriate establishment of boundaries in both place and time. Also essential is knowing the right questions to ask to understand how something as seemingly insubstantial as a sense of place can inform food use, and how food can help to create culture from location.

Rachel Black tackles yet another difficult issue, that of food and the senses, and describes how one can study such connections and use them to teach about food, culture, and perception. Sensory anthropology requires ethnographers to use their senses just as surely as they query how others experience their world through sensory input. The differing senses—sight, taste, smell, touch, hearing—all play important roles in food production, processing, and use, so exploring how people operate within their sensory worlds can reveal much about their culture and food systems. Black concludes with examples from her research and teaching that demonstrate how sensory input can be used to explore various meanings in food and consumption.

In the following chapter, Catherine Tucker explores food commodity chains or value chains, defined as “the set of processes and linkages that connect disparate activities and relationships, and build value that culminates in a final product.” This farm- (and even “before-the-farm-”) to-table approach traces all of the processes, materials, and human connections that a food item requires, up to—and beyond—ingestion. She points out the special challenges of following a chain in a globalized world and outlines methods used to bridge space, time, and language barriers to understand how our food arrives on our plates.

Finally, Andrea Wiley and Janet Chrzan describe many of these methods in their chapter on the study of single foods. Such an issue—a single food item—ranges across time, meaning, and space. One of the most critical elements in writing about a single food, they contend, is choosing an approach and following it thoroughly. Studies of single foods can be inductive (stemming from a description of the food and its relation to other areas of cultural life) or deductive (starting with an issue and then following how the food relates to the problem). These approaches are not exclusive, and when they interact can provide a “thick description” of food use and culture. Such an agenda allows for a four-field methodology but can lead to an overload of information. The authors discuss how they covered their own single food studies—of milk and alcohol—using an explicitly biocultural perspective to link cultural actions to biological and health outcomes. In many ways, the study of single foods illustrates the plethora of theoretical and methodological approaches available to food studies because it allows for interdisciplinary research across cultures, time, and space.