RESEARCHING FOOD HABITS
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD AND NUTRITION
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Edited by Helen Macbeth and Jeremy MacClancy
RESEARCHING FOOD HABITS

Methods and Problems

Edited by
Helen Macbeth and Jeremy MacClancy
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This book is about research techniques. It is a ‘how-to-do-it’ book for the new researcher or student who intends to undertake research in the ‘anthropology of food’. The phrase, the anthropology of food, has become an accepted abbreviation for the study of anthropological perspectives on food, diet and nutrition. It has immediately to be said, however, that there are many aspects of anthropology and many ways to be interested in the topic of human food. Researchers who wish to gain a holistic understanding of almost any topic regarding human food, frequently feel virtually obliged to use a variety of research methods. They feel this sense of obligation for two main reasons: (1) because the anthropology of food encompasses so many perspectives, and (2) because these perspectives often interrelate in a significant manner. Within this book, the relevance and history of a variety of academic approaches to the anthropology of food are discussed and both their diversity and their modes of interaction are emphasised. Up until the publication of this book, these different approaches, and therefore any information on appropriate research methods, were only to be found under different, separate disciplinary classifications in any library. For all these reasons, members of the International Commission on the Anthropology of Food (ICAF) thought it worthwhile to edit a book which brought together into one volume a cross-disciplinary selection of relevant research methods.

An immediate question at this initial stage has to be: ‘Who does what? Which kind of food anthropologist tends to follow, conventionally, which kind of approach and how, at the simplest level, do these approaches overlap?’ Nutritionists, human biologists and biological anthropologists study food items and their chemical constituents in order to understand the biochemical effects of these foods on human physiology, health, behaviour, survival and fertility. Yet, they also need to know whether any food items under consideration are consumed by the people they are studying and in what quantities. A broad range of human attitudes to those food items has an overwhelming effect on whether the items will be consumed, in what form, to what extent and whether they are even available and affordable. These attitudes in turn vary with social, cultural and economic patterns and situations, which are studied by social scientists, especially by social anthropologists, social psychologists and market
economists, and yet they should not be ignored by the biologists. At the same
time, those concerned with the social significance of different consumption
patterns should bear in mind that the food and drink items do have nutritive
significance. They should also recognise the value of their information to the
nutritionists and dieticians, and vice versa.

Recognition of this multiplicity of interconnecting perspectives is essential
for students and researchers working on the anthropology of food. However,
it is hard to find guidance on how to pursue cross-disciplinary research when
academic guidance traditionally comes only from each specialism separately.
One aim of this volume is to aid new researchers in their choice of which
methods can best answer cross-disciplinary questions. There are currently no
research methods that should be considered specific only to the anthropology
of food, and many anthropologists of food have had to adapt methods from
other disciplines. In the twenty-first century we are still on a relatively new
journey in finding out how to coordinate multidisciplinary research, but in this
volume diverse approaches are introduced, although because of space some
perspectives have not been covered. The contributors are specialists from very
different sub-disciplines within anthropology, and so, inevitably, there is only
tenuous linkage between some chapters. The objective of the editors has not
been to integrate these into some one anthropological approach, which does
not and cannot exist, but to place at the disposal of the prospective researcher
a range of methods in adjacent chapters. Researcher-readers are invited to
‘pick and mix’ in order to put together, for their own specific purposes, novel
cross-disciplinary conjunctions of the established methods.

The difference between ‘quantitative data’ and ‘qualitative data’ should be
explained at the outset. Quantitative data are data that can be enumerated.
This is obvious for measurements, whether of units consumed, of chemical
constituents, of calories contained, of biomedical characteristics or of the
number of consumers themselves. However, a numerical approach can also be
used when non-numerical information is converted to numbers. This can, for
example, be when the intensity of response or feeling is recorded on a numer-
ical scale or when non-numerical information is coded into numbers, usually
ordinal numbers, either by a respondent choosing options or by a researcher
entering data on to a computer. In contrast, qualitative data are information
that has not been converted into numbers. The data are descriptive and sensi-
tive to much subtler levels of variation than can be reduced to numbers. A far
richer insight is gained from conversations, open-ended interviews and par-
ticipant observation than can be constrained into data appropriate for numer-
ical analysis. However, qualitative data are harder to analyse or compare
objectively and there is often a greater element of a researcher’s subjective
conclusions in the results.

It is incorrect to assume that the division between numerate and non-numer-
ate analysis corresponds to a division between social and biological sciences.
It is true that most social anthropologists are primarily concerned with qualita-
tive data, and so are not generally required to have the basic grounding in
statistics that is necessary for those in other social sciences, such as social psy-
chology, economics and sociology. It is also true, however, that while a great
deal of biological research is based on statistical material, not all is. In review-
ing the methods described in this book the new researcher should note where
the contributors recommend a more qualitative or a more quantitative
approach, or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The editors are most grateful to the contributors, without whose work and
willingness to cooperate this book would not have been possible. ICAF(UK)
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together. Finally, we are grateful to Jennifer Jay for assistance with the index
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H.M.M. and J.V.M.
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**INTRODUCTION**

HOW TO DO ANTHROPOLOGIES OF FOOD

*Jeremy MacClancy and Helen Macbeth*

Anthropology is a broad school. It always has been. During its emergence in the nineteenth century the umbrella term ‘anthropology’ sheltered a surprisingly wide range of subjects: from the measuring of people’s skulls to see if they were of the criminal types to those campaigning against the evils of slavery. So long as any particular approach embraced the study of humans as social beings it could fit in within the broad rubric of ‘anthropology’ (from the Greek *anthropos*, human). In this sense anthropology is not so much a discipline, more a loose collection of several different disciplines. Even today the term embraces both laboratory-based molecular geneticists and the most abstracted of social theorists, both those interested in the effect of biological variables within human populations and those researching social dimensions of cognitive processes. In the United States the term has an even broader scope, at times encompassing archaeologists and linguists as well. The leading historian of the subject, George Stocking (2001), has gone so far as to call it the ‘boundless discipline’.

Anthropology may indeed be boundless but it has a very dynamic boundlessness. The various disciplines usually grouped within anthropology have come together and moved apart more than once over the course of its history. In particular the physical and the social sides underwent a radical separation from the late-1920s on: the intellectual abuses committed in those times by certain racist anthropologists, especially in Nazi Germany, put many off studying almost any form of physical anthropology for a long period. At much the same time many social anthropologists were keen to establish their own academic distinctiveness and independence (MacClancy 1986, 1995). Despite the exemplary antiracist campaigning of some physical anthropologists who destroyed the scientific credibility of the concept of ‘race’, it still took several decades for an expanded physical anthropology to regain popularity. By then its leading practitioners had renamed the subject ‘biological anthropology’,...