



Human, Social and Political Sciences
(specifically, Social Anthropology)

Task

Ready for fieldwork? Study the social life of your family/friends

1. Getting to know social anthropology and fieldwork

Firstly, what is social anthropology and what can you get out of it?

Here is [a video](#) from one of the lecturers in the Cambridge department of Social Anthropology, Dr Andrew Sanchez. He explains why he believes that anthropology is important and what you might get out of it. This was filmed when he was working at LSE but the information applies to Cambridge too.

The way that anthropologists answer questions is by doing 'ethnography'. This basically means writing about culture. [This helpful article](#) explains further.

For this task, we ask you to conduct some 'participant observation' with people you are already spending time with, such as your friends or family. [Read this](#) to understand a bit more about what participant observation involves.

2. IMPORTANT: ethical considerations

Please ask if your friends/family are happy to be involved in your project, tell them a bit about what you are doing, how you are recording what they say or do and how you will be presenting the information. Every social researcher does this before starting research and it is an important step.

When conducting participant observation, you might hear things that are very personal, that you disagree with or that you think might affect that person when you present your research. All social researchers must think carefully about these ethical dilemmas each time they conduct fieldwork. Many social researchers 'anonymise' their participants by changing their names and identifying details when they present their research. You can ask your family/friends if they want you to do this too.

For more information, read [this handy document](#) that covers many ethical considerations involved in fieldwork.

3. Decide on your focus and do your fieldwork

Social anthropologists tend to study different areas of social life. You might want to pick a specific topic to focus on which you think is relevant to your family/friends. Here are some steps to help you:

- First: decide when and where you want to do the fieldwork (e.g. with your parents at breakfast for three mornings). You can spend as little or as long on this as you like, but make the 'boundaries' of your fieldwork clear.
- Second: get permission from your participants.
- Third: listen to and watch your participants – is there a topic or topics that keep coming up? (e.g. healthy eating/the pandemic/work)
- Fourth: Decide on one of these topics to focus on and ask your participants to talk more about what they think about it (try not to ask leading questions but let your participants take the lead). Remember to watch what they DO as well as what they SAY.
- Fifth: Make lots of notes and look at the information you have gathered. Does what you have observed tell you anything interesting?

For inspiration, take a look at the description of these ethnographies which looked at culture based on fieldwork in different places and with different people, like you are doing:

- Nancy Scheper-Hughes went to a shantytown in Brazil and wrote about womens' attitudes to the common deaths of their young children:
<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520075375/death-without-weeping>.
- Seth Holmes accompanied Mexican migrants across the border to the US and then joined them on the farms they worked in and on their visits to clinics and hospitals. He wrote about the inequality and violence they suffered:
<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520275140/fresh-fruit-broken-bodies>.
- Insa Koch spent time on a council estate in the UK to look at how her participants experience democracy, politics and the state:
<https://www.waterstones.com/book/personalizing-the-state/insa-lee-koch//9780198807513>.

4. Getting sociological

Now have a think about any issues, concerns or debates which were brought up (or even avoided) by your participants during your fieldwork – how might these connect to wider issues?

Do avoid making moral judgements about your participants – instead try to pick up on a theme which seems relevant to your friends and family. This could be a certain type of inequality in society (in terms of race, gender, class) or social movements (such as Black Lives Matter or School Strike for Climate).

Watch [this short video](#) from Professor of Sociology at Cambridge, Dr Mónica Moreno Figueroa, for some ideas on what you might want to pick up on.

Head of the Sociology Department, Dr Manali Desai, also brings up some ways in which sociological concerns can be connected with 'everyday' concerns in [this short video](#).

E.g. if the topic of healthy food kept coming up, how might this fit into debates about the health of food and 'class'? Are there online articles you can find making this link?

E.g. if different attitudes to the pandemic kept coming up, how can you find out about different reactions to the pandemic from different groups of people? E.g. some people protesting against lockdown and some people being angry about protestors? Can you find examples online from these different 'voices'?

5. Getting political

Where is your theme/focus discussed in the media? Newspapers/websites/podcasts/music? Is there any 'political' angle to the media consumed? Does that media tend to support a political party or take a certain 'political' stance, such as rejecting party politics altogether?

Remember that politics can mean more than 'party' politics.

6. Presenting your research

We would love you to present your research in a fun and compelling way. Can you make a short video? Can you include quotes from your fieldwork or involve your research participants? Can you make a short powerpoint presentation which includes your findings?

In presenting your work, try and answer the following questions:

- Where did your fieldwork take place and who was it with?
- What did you see/hear/taste/smell/do during your fieldwork?
- Did you have any ethical considerations?
- What did you notice as a topic or theme that kept coming up? Why did you think this was important to focus on?
- Are there any good examples, stories or quotes from your fieldwork to give us?
- What did you learn from this exercise?

Other things to consider:

- Where there any 'rules' or patterns in the interactions you saw?
- What do you think a complete outsider to your society and culture might think of what they saw/heard in your fieldwork?
- What influence did your presence have on what you perceived, do you think?

[Here](#) and [here](#) are two short anthropological films as examples to inspire you: and. There is no pressure to watch all of these but watching clips of the conversations within might inspire you.

Extra things to watch, read and listen which might be of interest:

'What's the point of social science in a pandemic?' – Podcast from the LSE with Professor of Anthropology, Laura Bear. <https://soundcloud.com/lsepodcasts/whats-the-point-of-social-science-in-a-pandemic?in=lsepodcasts/sets/lse-iq-podcast-intelligent>

Some ideas of what you can do with anthropology (and other social sciences), beyond academia, from the American Anthropological Association. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1Cm3MgpQ14>.

Guardian article asking 'What is the difference between anthropologists, tourists and explorers?' <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/nov/23/explorers-anthropologists-tourists-benedict-allen>