

cultural anthropology thesis research

Navigating the Depths: A Comprehensive Guide to Cultural Anthropology Thesis Research

cultural anthropology thesis research is a multifaceted and deeply rewarding endeavor, offering students the opportunity to explore the intricate tapestry of human societies and their diverse expressions. Embarking on this academic journey requires a robust understanding of research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and ethical considerations. This article will serve as your comprehensive guide, demystifying the process from initial idea generation to the final presentation of your findings. We'll delve into crafting compelling research questions, selecting appropriate ethnographic methods, analyzing complex data, and ultimately, contributing a unique piece of scholarship to the field of cultural anthropology. Prepare to navigate the exciting world of fieldwork, participant observation, and the profound insights that emerge from studying humanity in its myriad forms.

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Understanding the Scope of Cultural Anthropology Thesis Research

Cultural anthropology thesis research is not merely an academic exercise; it's an invitation to

become an explorer of human experience. It involves the systematic study of human cultures, both past and present, with a focus on understanding the shared beliefs, practices, values, and social structures that shape human behavior. The scope is vast, encompassing everything from kinship systems and economic practices to religious rituals and political organization. Your thesis will likely focus on a specific cultural group, a particular social phenomenon, or a theoretical debate within the discipline. The goal is to move beyond superficial observations and delve into the underlying meanings and logics that drive cultural practices, seeking to understand why people do what they do and how they make sense of their world.

The power of cultural anthropology lies in its ability to challenge our own assumptions and broaden our perspectives. By studying cultures different from our own, we gain a deeper understanding of the relativity of our own cultural norms and the incredible diversity of human ingenuity. A thesis in this field allows you to contribute original research, providing new insights into a particular community, a cultural trend, or a theoretical concept. It's an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills, hone your analytical abilities, and become a more informed and empathetic global citizen.

Laying the Foundation: Choosing Your Research Topic and Question

The journey of cultural anthropology thesis research begins with a spark – an idea, a curiosity, a nagging question about the human condition. This is arguably the most crucial stage, as a well-defined topic and a focused research question will be your compass throughout the entire process. Think about what genuinely fascinates you. Is it the role of food in social identity? The impact of technology on traditional communities? The evolution of gender roles? The exploration of subcultures? The possibilities are endless, and the best topics often emerge from your own lived experiences, your academic coursework, or your engagement with contemporary social issues.

Once you have a broad area of interest, the next step is to narrow it down. A broad topic like "religion" is too vast for a thesis. Instead, you might focus on "the role of syncretism in religious practices of a specific Afro-Caribbean community" or "the impact of Pentecostalism on traditional healing practices in a rural Mexican village." This narrowing process involves extensive reading of existing literature. What has already been studied? Where are the gaps in knowledge? What questions remain unanswered? Your research question should be specific, answerable, and significant. It should drive your entire research design and guide your data collection and analysis. A good research question is like a well-crafted key, designed to unlock a specific door of understanding within the complex architecture of human culture.

From Broad Interest to Specific Inquiry

Developing a specific research question requires a process of iterative refinement. Start with a general inquiry and gradually make it more precise. For instance, if you're interested in "youth culture," you might refine it to "How do online social media platforms influence the formation of identity among adolescent girls in urban India?" This transition from a general interest to a focused question is vital for ensuring the feasibility and depth of your thesis. Consider the availability of resources, access to participants, and the time constraints you have. A question that is too ambitious

might be impossible to answer comprehensively within the scope of a thesis.

Identifying a Gap in Existing Literature

A significant part of choosing a research topic involves understanding the current academic conversation. What have scholars already said about your area of interest? What are the dominant theories? What research methodologies have been employed? Your thesis should aim to contribute something new to this discourse. This might involve examining a previously under-researched group, applying a new theoretical lens to an existing problem, or investigating a phenomenon that has emerged more recently. Identifying a gap allows your research to have a clear purpose and a defined contribution to the field.

Theoretical Frameworks: Guiding Your Anthropological Inquiry

Theoretical frameworks are the lenses through which cultural anthropologists interpret the world. They provide a conceptual structure for understanding and explaining cultural phenomena. Without a theoretical framework, your research risks being a mere collection of observations without deeper meaning or explanatory power. Think of them as the underlying blueprints that help you organize your ideas, analyze your data, and draw meaningful conclusions. Choosing the right theoretical framework can significantly shape the direction and outcomes of your cultural anthropology thesis research.

Different theoretical perspectives offer distinct ways of understanding culture. For example, structural functionalism might focus on how different cultural institutions contribute to the stability of a society, while symbolic anthropology might explore the meanings embedded in cultural symbols and rituals. Feminist anthropology critiques patriarchal structures and their impact on gender relations, while post-colonial theory examines the legacies of colonialism and their influence on contemporary cultures. Your choice of theoretical framework should align with your research question and the specific cultural phenomena you are investigating. It's not about adopting a single theory rigidly, but rather about using theoretical insights to inform your analysis and to generate new theoretical understandings.

Key Theoretical Perspectives in Cultural Anthropology

The field of cultural anthropology is rich with diverse theoretical traditions, each offering unique insights into the human experience. Understanding these perspectives will equip you to critically engage with existing scholarship and to develop your own analytical approach. Some of the most influential include:

- **Cultural Relativism:** The principle that an individual's beliefs and activities should be understood in terms of their own culture. This is a foundational concept, emphasizing the importance of avoiding ethnocentrism.

- **Structuralism:** Associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss, this approach views culture as a system of underlying structures and binary oppositions that organize thought and social life.
- **Symbolic Anthropology:** This perspective, championed by Clifford Geertz, focuses on the interpretation of cultural symbols and their role in creating shared meaning and understanding within a society.
- **Marxist Anthropology:** Applying Marxist principles, this framework analyzes how economic relations, class struggle, and power dynamics shape cultural practices and social organization.
- **Feminist Anthropology:** This critical approach examines how gender shapes cultural experiences, social structures, and power relations, often challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations.
- **Postmodern and Post-structuralist Approaches:** These diverse perspectives often question grand narratives, highlight the fluidity of identity and meaning, and emphasize the role of discourse in shaping reality.

Applying Theory to Your Research

Once you've identified potential theoretical frameworks, the next step is to critically assess how they can illuminate your specific research topic. Don't just pick a theory because it sounds interesting; consider its relevance and applicability to the cultural context you are studying and the questions you are asking. You might find that a single theory provides a solid foundation, or you may choose to synthesize insights from multiple theoretical perspectives to create a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis. The goal is to use theory as a tool to deepen your understanding, not as a rigid dogma.

Research Methodologies: The Toolkit of the Cultural Anthropologist

Cultural anthropology thesis research relies heavily on qualitative methodologies, with ethnography being the cornerstone of the discipline. Ethnography is an immersive approach that involves living within a community, observing their daily lives, and engaging with them to gain an in-depth understanding of their culture. It's about getting "down in the trenches" of human experience and experiencing the world from the perspective of those you are studying. This hands-on approach allows for the collection of rich, nuanced data that quantitative methods often miss.

Beyond participant observation, cultural anthropologists employ a variety of research techniques. Interviews, whether structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, are essential for gathering individual perspectives, narratives, and life histories. Surveys can be used to gather demographic information or gauge opinions across a larger sample, though they are typically used in conjunction with other qualitative methods in cultural anthropology. Document analysis, examining written records, photographs, or media, can provide valuable contextual information. The selection of

methodologies will depend on your research question, the cultural context, and the practical constraints of your fieldwork.

Participant Observation: The Immersive Experience

Participant observation is the hallmark of ethnographic research. It involves becoming an active participant in the daily life of the community you are studying, while simultaneously observing and documenting their behaviors, interactions, and social dynamics. This requires a delicate balance: you need to build rapport and trust with your informants to gain authentic insights, but you also need to maintain an analytical distance to observe objectively. It's about becoming a fly on the wall, but one that occasionally joins the dance. The insights gained from participant observation are often the most profound and can reveal cultural patterns that are not readily apparent through other methods.

Interviews: Gathering Voices and Perspectives

Interviews are crucial for capturing the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals within a culture. They allow you to hear directly from people about their beliefs, values, histories, and interpretations of their own lives and communities. The type of interview you conduct will depend on your research goals. Structured interviews involve a set list of questions, useful for gathering comparable data. Semi-structured interviews offer more flexibility, allowing for follow-up questions and deeper exploration of emergent themes. Unstructured interviews are more conversational, akin to in-depth discussions, and are ideal for building rapport and uncovering unexpected insights. Each interview is an opportunity to collect a unique story, a piece of the larger cultural mosaic.

Other Data Collection Methods

While participant observation and interviews are central, a comprehensive research design often incorporates other data collection methods. These can include:

- **Surveys:** Useful for collecting quantifiable data on demographics, attitudes, or practices from a larger group.
- **Focus Groups:** Facilitate discussions among small groups to explore shared opinions, beliefs, and attitudes on specific topics.
- **Genealogies:** Essential for understanding kinship structures and social relationships in many societies.
- **Life Histories:** Detailed narratives of individuals' lives, providing rich biographical and cultural context.
- **Archival and Document Analysis:** Examining historical records, newspapers, letters, or other written materials to understand past practices and beliefs.

- **Visual Anthropology:** Utilizing photography, video, or other visual media to document cultural practices and environments.

Ethical Considerations in Cultural Anthropology Research

Ethical conduct is paramount in cultural anthropology thesis research. The well-being and dignity of the people you study must always be your top priority. Engaging in research without careful consideration of ethical implications can cause harm, exploit individuals, and damage the reputation of both the researcher and the field. It's not just about following rules; it's about cultivating a deep sense of responsibility and respect for the communities you engage with. Informed consent, confidentiality, and avoiding harm are the cornerstones of ethical anthropological practice.

Before you even set foot in the field, you must obtain ethical approval from your institution's review board. This involves clearly outlining your research plan, your methods, and how you will protect your participants. Throughout your fieldwork, you must continually be mindful of your impact. This includes ensuring that participants understand the purpose of your research, what their participation entails, and that they have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Building trust and maintaining transparency are not just good research practices; they are ethical imperatives.

Informed Consent: The Cornerstone of Ethical Research

Informed consent is the process by which potential research participants voluntarily agree to participate in your study after being fully informed about its purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw. This is not a one-time event but an ongoing dialogue. You must ensure that participants understand what they are consenting to, especially if there are language barriers or cultural differences in understanding consent. The consent process should be tailored to the specific cultural context, using language and methods that are accessible and comprehensible to all involved.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Protecting Your Informants

Protecting the privacy of your participants is a critical ethical responsibility. Confidentiality means that you will keep their identities and any information that could identify them private. Anonymity goes a step further, meaning that even you will not know their identities. In most anthropological fieldwork, true anonymity is difficult to achieve due to the close relationships developed. Therefore, a strong commitment to confidentiality is essential. This involves using pseudonyms for individuals and places in your written work, storing data securely, and being mindful of what information you share and with whom. Your informants are not research subjects to be exposed, but individuals whose trust you have earned and must safeguard.

Avoiding Harm and Exploitation

The principle of "do no harm" is fundamental. This means taking all reasonable steps to prevent physical, psychological, or social harm to your participants. This can be complex in ethnographic research, as simply observing and reporting can sometimes have unintended consequences. You must be sensitive to power dynamics and avoid exploiting your position as a researcher. This includes not offering payment for participation in a way that could be coercive, not misrepresenting your research purpose, and being mindful of the potential impact of your research findings on the community.

Conducting Fieldwork: Immersion and Observation

Fieldwork is the heart and soul of cultural anthropology thesis research. It's where theory meets reality, where abstract concepts are brought to life through direct experience. This is the phase where you immerse yourself in the daily life of the community you are studying, becoming a student of their culture. It's a period of intense learning, adaptation, and sometimes, profound personal growth. The success of your thesis often hinges on the quality and depth of your fieldwork.

The initial period of fieldwork can be disorienting. You are entering a new social and cultural landscape, navigating unfamiliar customs, languages, and social cues. Building rapport and trust with community members is paramount. This often involves spending time in public spaces, participating in local activities, and demonstrating genuine interest and respect. As you become more integrated, you will begin to observe patterns, understand social dynamics, and gather rich, detailed data through your various research methods. Fieldwork is a marathon, not a sprint, requiring patience, resilience, and a keen observational eye.

Building Rapport and Trust

Trust is the currency of fieldwork. Without it, your access to authentic information will be severely limited. Building rapport involves demonstrating respect for the local culture, showing genuine curiosity, and being willing to learn. This might mean participating in community events, sharing meals with families, or simply spending time listening to people's stories. It's about showing that you are not just an observer, but someone who values their community and their perspectives. Small gestures of kindness and a sincere desire to understand can go a long way in forging strong, trusting relationships.

Navigating Cultural Differences

Cultural differences are inevitable and are often the very reason you are conducting your research. However, navigating these differences requires sensitivity and an open mind. What seems normal or logical in your own culture might be interpreted very differently in another. Be prepared for misunderstandings, and when they occur, approach them with humility and a willingness to learn.

Ask clarifying questions, observe how others react, and be open to adjusting your own behavior and assumptions. The ability to adapt and learn from these differences is a key skill for any successful ethnographer.

Documenting Your Experiences: Field Notes

Your field notes are the raw material of your thesis. They are meticulously detailed records of your observations, interactions, conversations, and reflections. Good field notes are descriptive, analytical, and comprehensive. They should capture not only what happened but also your interpretations, questions, and feelings. It's crucial to take notes regularly, ideally immediately after an observation or interaction, while your memory is fresh. These notes will be invaluable during the data analysis phase, serving as the foundation for your arguments and insights.

Data Analysis: Making Sense of Your Findings

Once your fieldwork is complete, you'll be faced with a mountain of data – interview transcripts, field notes, recordings, and perhaps survey results. The next crucial step in cultural anthropology thesis research is data analysis, the process of systematically examining this information to identify patterns, themes, and insights that will form the basis of your thesis. This is where you move from description to interpretation, from raw data to scholarly argument. It's like piecing together a complex puzzle, where each observation and interview is a unique shape that needs to fit into a larger picture.

Qualitative data analysis in anthropology is an iterative and often inductive process. You'll be looking for recurring themes, unexpected connections, and variations in perspectives. This often involves coding your data – categorizing segments of text or observations based on emerging themes. You'll be constantly comparing and contrasting different pieces of data, looking for similarities and differences, and developing a deeper understanding of the cultural logic you are uncovering. The goal is to identify overarching patterns that answer your research question and contribute to the existing body of anthropological knowledge.

Thematic Analysis: Identifying Recurring Patterns

Thematic analysis is a common approach to qualitative data analysis. It involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within your data. This process typically begins with familiarizing yourself with the data, then generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and finally, naming and reporting on your findings. You might find themes related to social organization, belief systems, economic practices, or symbolic meanings, depending on your research topic. The key is to move beyond simply listing observations to explaining the underlying structures and meanings that connect them.

Coding and Categorization

Coding is the process of assigning labels or tags to segments of your data that represent specific concepts, ideas, or observations. These codes can be descriptive (e.g., "greeting rituals") or interpretive (e.g., "expressions of solidarity"). As you code, you will begin to see patterns emerge. You can then group similar codes into broader categories or themes. This systematic process helps to organize your data, identify key concepts, and ensure that your analysis is grounded in the actual data you collected. Think of coding as creating an index for your research, making it easier to navigate and retrieve relevant information.

Triangulation: Enhancing Reliability and Validity

Triangulation is a technique used to increase the reliability and validity of your research findings by using multiple sources of data, methods, or theoretical perspectives. For example, if you observe a particular practice during participant observation, you would then seek to confirm or elaborate on this observation through interviews with different individuals or by consulting relevant documents. By cross-referencing information from various sources, you can gain a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the phenomenon you are studying, reducing the likelihood of bias or misinterpretation.

Writing and Presenting Your Cultural Anthropology Thesis

The culmination of your cultural anthropology thesis research is the written document itself. This is your opportunity to present your findings, analysis, and arguments to the academic community. A well-written thesis is clear, concise, compelling, and ethically sound. It should demonstrate your mastery of anthropological theory and methodology, your ability to conduct rigorous research, and your capacity to contribute original insights to the field. Think of your thesis as a narrative that tells the story of your research journey and the discoveries you've made.

The structure of your thesis will typically follow a standard academic format, including an introduction that outlines your research question and significance, a literature review that situates your work within existing scholarship, a detailed description of your methodology, a presentation and analysis of your findings, and a conclusion that summarizes your main arguments and discusses their implications. Throughout the writing process, remember to maintain a scholarly tone, cite your sources meticulously, and adhere to the ethical guidelines you established at the outset of your research.

Structuring Your Thesis: A Logical Flow

A clear and logical structure is essential for making your thesis accessible and persuasive. While specific requirements may vary by institution, a common structure for a cultural anthropology thesis

includes:

- **Introduction:** Introduce your research topic, its significance, and your central research question.
- **Literature Review:** Survey existing scholarship relevant to your topic, identifying gaps and positioning your research within the field.
- **Methodology:** Detail your research design, including your theoretical framework, fieldwork setting, and data collection and analysis methods.
- **Findings/Analysis:** Present and analyze your empirical data, using your chosen theoretical framework to interpret your observations and interviews. This is often broken down into thematic chapters.
- **Discussion:** Synthesize your findings, relate them back to your research question and the literature, and discuss their broader implications.
- **Conclusion:** Summarize your main arguments, reiterate your contributions, and suggest avenues for future research.
- **Bibliography and Appendices:** List all cited sources and include any supplementary materials (e.g., interview guides, consent forms).

Crafting a Compelling Narrative

While a thesis is an academic document, it should also be engaging. Use vivid descriptions, compelling anecdotes, and clear explanations to draw your reader into your research. Your analysis should be supported by evidence from your fieldwork, presented in a way that illustrates your points effectively. Avoid jargon where possible, or explain it clearly. The goal is to tell a story of cultural discovery that is both intellectually rigorous and captivating.

Citing Sources and Avoiding Plagiarism

Academic integrity is non-negotiable. Proper citation of all sources is crucial to acknowledge the work of others and to avoid plagiarism. Whether you are quoting directly, paraphrasing, or summarizing an idea, you must give credit to the original author. Familiarize yourself with the citation style required by your department (e.g., Chicago, APA) and apply it consistently throughout your thesis. Plagiarism can have severe academic consequences, so meticulous attention to detail in your citations is essential.

Common Challenges and Strategies for Success

Embarking on cultural anthropology thesis research is an ambitious undertaking, and it's natural to encounter challenges along the way. Recognizing these potential hurdles and developing effective strategies for overcoming them can significantly increase your chances of success. From the emotional toll of fieldwork to the complexities of data analysis, preparation and a resilient mindset are key.

One of the most common challenges is researcher fatigue or burnout, especially during extended fieldwork. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance, seeking support from peers and supervisors, and remembering your passion for the research can help. Another significant challenge can be unexpected obstacles during fieldwork, such as lack of access to communities, political instability, or interpersonal conflicts. Flexibility, adaptability, and a willingness to revise your research plan are crucial. Finally, the sheer volume of data and the analytical process can feel overwhelming. Breaking down the analysis into smaller, manageable steps and seeking guidance from experienced researchers can make the process more approachable.

Overcoming Fieldwork Challenges

Fieldwork, while immensely rewarding, can present unique difficulties. These might include:

- **Culture Shock:** The disorientation and anxiety that can accompany immersion in an unfamiliar culture. Strategies include education about the culture beforehand, self-care, and open communication with trusted individuals.
- **Building and Maintaining Rapport:** Initial trust can be difficult to earn, and maintaining it requires ongoing effort. Consistency, transparency, and genuine respect are vital.
- **Logistical Issues:** Navigating transportation, accommodation, communication, and health concerns in a new environment requires planning and resourcefulness.
- **Ethical Dilemmas:** Unexpected situations may arise that require careful ethical consideration and adherence to your approved research protocol.

The Analytical Grind

Analyzing qualitative data can feel like sifting through an endless stream of information. The key is to be systematic and patient. Break down your analysis into manageable tasks. Use qualitative data analysis software if available, but don't let it replace your own critical thinking. Regularly discuss your emerging themes and interpretations with your supervisor and peers. Seeing your data from different perspectives can help you overcome analytical blocks and refine your arguments. Remember that this is a process of discovery, and it takes time and sustained effort.

Seeking Support and Maintaining Motivation

You are not alone on this journey. Your thesis supervisor is your primary guide and resource. Schedule regular meetings, come prepared with specific questions, and be open to their feedback. Connect with your peers in your anthropology program. Sharing experiences, challenges, and insights with fellow students can provide invaluable support and camaraderie. Remember why you started this research in the first place. Revisit your initial passion and the intellectual questions that drove you. Celebrate small victories along the way to maintain motivation. The successful completion of your cultural anthropology thesis research is a significant accomplishment, a testament to your dedication and intellectual curiosity.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Cultural Anthropology Thesis Research

Q: What are the essential steps involved in starting cultural anthropology thesis research?

A: The essential steps typically involve identifying a research topic and question, conducting a comprehensive literature review, developing a theoretical framework, designing a research methodology, obtaining ethical approval, and planning for fieldwork. Early engagement with your thesis advisor is also crucial.

Q: How do I choose a research topic that is both interesting and feasible for a thesis?

A: To choose an interesting and feasible topic, reflect on your passions and curiosities within anthropology. Read widely in areas that intrigue you and look for gaps in existing research. Discuss potential ideas with your advisor, considering the availability of resources, access to a research site, and the timeline for completion.

Q: What is the role of theoretical frameworks in cultural anthropology thesis research?

A: Theoretical frameworks provide the conceptual lenses through which cultural phenomena are understood and interpreted. They guide your research questions, inform your data collection and analysis, and help you to make sense of your findings within the broader context of anthropological theory.

Q: What are the most common research methods used in cultural anthropology theses?

A: The most common methods include ethnography, which involves participant observation and in-depth interviews. Other methods may include surveys, focus groups, archival research, and genealogical studies, often used in conjunction with ethnographic fieldwork.

Q: How important is fieldwork for a cultural anthropology thesis?

A: Fieldwork is often considered the cornerstone of cultural anthropology thesis research. It provides the primary data and deep, contextualized understanding of a culture that is essential for developing original insights and arguments.

Q: What are the key ethical considerations I must address in my cultural anthropology thesis research?

A: Key ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, avoiding harm and exploitation, and respecting the cultural norms and sensitivities of the community being studied. Institutional ethical review is also mandatory.

Q: How should I approach data analysis for my qualitative cultural anthropology thesis?

A: Qualitative data analysis typically involves thematic analysis, coding, and categorization. This iterative process aims to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within your data, often comparing and contrasting different pieces of information to build a comprehensive understanding.

Q: What are some common challenges students face when writing their cultural anthropology thesis?

A: Common challenges include culture shock during fieldwork, difficulties in building rapport, managing large volumes of qualitative data, overcoming writer's block, and ensuring ethical compliance throughout the research process. Seeking support from advisors and peers is vital.

Q: How can I ensure my cultural anthropology thesis makes a significant contribution to the field?

A: To make a significant contribution, your thesis should address a novel research question, fill a gap in existing literature, offer a new theoretical perspective, or provide rich, detailed ethnographic data on an under-examined group or phenomenon. Originality and rigorous analysis are key.

Q: What advice do you have for managing the writing process of a cultural anthropology thesis?

A: Break down the writing process into smaller, manageable sections. Set realistic deadlines, schedule regular writing times, and seek feedback from your advisor and peers early and often. Focus on crafting a clear narrative that showcases your research and analysis effectively.

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