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FIELD NOTES

Personal History Ethnography in Environmental Anthropology: A Methodological Case Study



ELEANOR SHOREMAN-OUIMET

ABSTRACT

The study of the relationship between humans and the local environment is in part a study of motivation. Understanding its basis requires researching the cultural norms, values, and beliefs that underlie cultural perspectives on the environment. This paper presents the collection of personal histories as one methodological approach to accessing the basis for motivation and environmental knowledge on individual and community levels. It examines the integration of personal histories into environmental anthropological research and ends with a discussion of the author's own collection of personal histories in the Mississippi Delta and the ways in which this methodology enhanced community analysis.

PERSONAL HISTORY METHOD IN ENVIRONMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

[A]ffective content can be verified...by looking for patterns in the stories told by particular groups of people. And affective content can be most revealing. (Walker 2006: 219)

Personal histories allow us to observe the unities, discontinuities, and rhythms of community life by reconstructing and interpreting meaningful features and critical episodes in a person's life (Cortazzi 1993). It puts events, behaviors, feelings, and thoughts in a holistic context such that the representation of these features in a written form is neither inflated nor underappreciated due to an over specificity of focus. In short, by looking at an entire life, we see the significance and role of

particular elements with more clarity than if we asked questions solely about these elements, alone. In this way, personal history writing is a type of 'thick description' (Geertz 1975:7)--it presents a plethora of ethnographic matter from which may be extrapolated generalizations in our search for underlying meanings (Shaw 1980).

As the field of environmental anthropology repeatedly seeks to demonstrate, the search for sustainable culture, a conserving community and/or the root of environmentalist mentality is a culturally specific, personal affair that has as much to do with a person's historical, social and cultural surroundings as it does with their environment (Milton 1996, 2002; Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015; Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2016). Discovering the motivation behind environmental behavior requires

cultural knowledge beyond an understanding of resource use--it requires understanding human relationships with the environment and what, if anything, has inspired community level, ideological change in the past (Shoreman and Haenn 2009). In this way, the personal history method can help us to construct a cultural character based on the facts, feelings, commonalities, and disagreements that underlie local level conservation.

My own research, detailed below, has taken place amongst farmers in the Mississippi Delta. The work was motivated by the desire to understand what was prompting some of the country's most conservative and reputedly 'anti-environmentalist' farmers to adopt conservation practices on their land. The personal history method provided a deep understanding of how people were raised to think about the land, government, and outsiders. It eased the discussion of sensitive topics like race and wealth by making them part of a history instead of isolated topics and in so doing enabled me to gather information on the cultural sentiments that played a part in shaping Delta actions and decisions. In my own opinion, however, the most significant result of this methodology was the way that, when combined, the individual personal histories created a mosaic of common motivations, histories, and sentiments that connected the past to contemporary actions and decisions.

THE COLLECTION AND WRITING OF PERSONAL HISTORIES

Personal histories document far more than the life story of an individual - they recount the nature of a time period, the culture, and any applicable global events or international tensions. As such, they require extensive historical, as well as traditional ethnographic research. In the Mississippi Delta, the process illustrated how individuals were taught to handle problems and potential threats against their land and their rights as landowners. Not surprisingly, these early lessons informed their actions on the ground and their decisions to take preemptive action

(conservation) to prevent outside regulators from curtailing their production.

Establishing trust served as the most important aspect of maintaining comfort for those who shared their stories. Throughout my time in the Delta, my main method of recruitment was word of mouth. The majority of my contacts were people who approached me at community meetings or whose friends recommended I speak with them. Being introduced to farmers by their acquaintances helped reassure people that others were comfortable sharing their stories and that I could be trusted not to share their personal information. The majority of the people with whom I spoke were second or third generation farmers and community members between 35 and 65. In total, I conducted approximately 200 formal and an even greater number of informal interviews with Delta residents.

I began interviews by asking individuals to tell me where they were born and how they got where they are today. A typical response would be, "Well, if you want to know me, you need to know my daddy (or granddaddy) first." The story thus starts further back in time--to the first owner of this land--and proceeds through the years until today. If people had trouble knowing where to go, I would use prompt questions such as, 'what types of things did you learn how to do from your parents?' It was a rare occasion, though, that people needed prompting. Typically, the only speaking I did was in the form of clarifying questions along the way. The interview excerpt presented in the following section was recorded in my interview notes, which evolved into a sort of short-hand that enabled me to grasp the interviewee's language as well as their specific sentiments. These notes were typed to a computer file following each meeting to assure that the people and places were fresh in my mind when I recorded our encounter.

Despite my interest in agriculture and conservation, I kept my focus on the subject's life and used their stories as the base from which to conduct historical and archival research for information

related to land and environment. This subsequently helped me to gather relevant historical data, draw comparisons between individual stories and accounts, environmental history, social history, and current statistics on land use and resource management. Particularly interesting were the ways in which personal histories were either supported or refuted by historical documents. Such continuities and/or inconsistencies illustrated biases, conflicts and/or trends among community members and during the writing stage provided a more interesting way to present a regional history--through the words and experiences of the farmers themselves, rather than strictly from texts alone.

For instance, most historians agree that the mechanization of agriculture displaced landless farm labor in the South and instigated a large exodus of black and low income workers from Southern plantations. However, many landowners tell a different story. In my own research, as well as that of Walker (2006), landowners told the history of mechanization as a response to the departure of sharecroppers for better opportunities--a result that was at times described as betrayal on the part of sharecroppers. One landowner laments:

You just can't find good labor anymore, around here...The old ones never asked for anything, even when they needed it, and we'd help them. Now they can find more places to spend money. For decent help today you really need to pay over minimum wage and there are still only a few producers that will do that...

Ironically, the landowners aren't the only group to express nostalgia for a time when farmers were dependent upon human labor. Lottie Burnes, an elderly black woman and the daughter of a sharecropper, remembered with fondness the productivity of farm workers:

Nowadays you gotta have help to make it grow. Make a yard, make the cotton. The airplane sprays every week, making it grow. But the way we did it,

God did it, made it grow and we waited on him. We planted in time for it to make and it would make a great big Southern bole. And now they go and pick it with a picker and they leave half of it in the fields...they leave bales on the ground. They do this when they pick beans, corn...



FIGURE 1. Abandoned Antebellum plantation home.



FIGURE 2. Abandoned sharecropper shack.

Though community oriented, personal histories must also incorporate the nuances of personality, passions, and the idiosyncrasies that separate the subject from their peers. These elements must be assimilated along with the individual's life work and experiences so as to ultimately reflect the life and times of a complete person. But to be a 'writable' text, as well, this work must be constructed without preconceived

interpretative guidelines--an author cannot dictate a reader's course, but rather provide flexible raw material, a text of worked but reworkable goods.

According to Watson and Watson (1983:1), one of the major shortcomings of writings on a life history is the authors' tendency, "where interest in the individual's narrative is primary," not to interpret the information at all and to allow the material to simply "speak for itself." The ethnographic information compiled by the personal history method should come from interviews, diaries, and texts, and be assimilated with an ethnographer's experience with their subjects. Yet, in addition to these standard topics, the work should strive towards the status of a writable text. The objective is for the work to exist both for, and independently, of its subject. This biographic ethnography should thus be written as a piece of descriptive narrative.

The following personal history is included to demonstrate the way in which the words of the subject and the experience of the author can be combined to simultaneously offer the reader enough insight to understand the life of the individual, and enough real time context so they too can share the room with the subject and experience the person as an animate culmination of this history--as opposed to a series of disparate facts. To this end, personal histories recorded during this research convey not just the subject words, but the sights, sounds, smells and incidentals of the interviews as well. In addition to these, the interviewer's own instantaneous reactions and interpretations that underlie lingering impressions are provided as tools for the reader, so they may understand how listening to and being with the subject firsthand shaped the interviewer's understanding. The goal is for the reader to partake in the discourse and to develop his/her own perceptions of the words exchanged in the midst of the moment of recollection and retelling.

In this way, personal histories help turn community analyses into literature with its focus being the life of the subject, and its target being the reader. As Barthes

concludes, it is language that speaks in literature, in all its swarming 'plurality', not the author himself. If there is any place where this seething multiplicity of the text is momentarily focused, it is not the author but the reader (Eagleton 1983:138).

However, from the context of environmental anthropology, the objective is also to convey first and foremost the relationship between the subject and their sociocultural and biophysical surroundings. Unlike some personal histories--where the details may be equally influential to the impression gained from the interviewer and reader--from an environmental anthropological standpoint, there may be quite a lot of items discussed that are less relevant to the overarching theme.

Thus, the interviewer must take on the task of highlighting those aspects of the conversation that speak most directly to the environment, or pertain to the subject's perceptions, experiences, or politics regarding the land. In the following case, for example, the early move towards water conservation by the subject's father was particularly surprising given the rice farming community's environmental history of intensive water use. The excerpt and analysis highlights these details, as well as those that speak to the personal values and beliefs regarding the value of preemptive action towards the environment and/or the factors that limit such action. Details that are less relevant to the relationship between the subject and the land, are still, however, often helpful in assembling a thorough community profile during the course of the ethnographic project, and thus these sentiments are not retained but are summarized by interviewer.

PERSONAL HISTORIES IN THE DELTA: A NARRATIVE EXCERPT

Howard Horton, along with his brothers and father, own and run their family farm. Howard and his brothers always worked for his dad but recently made it a loose partnership between all of them so it would be easy it break up if necessary. This works

because they realized a long time ago that they can make more money if they farm together and “really, it’s all about the bottom line,” says Howard. “We have always worked together but divided up the tasks so not to step on each other’s toes. I am the rice farmer.”

I met Howard at their shop and after walking me through it, he brought me to his own shop in Skene that he bought and set up a while ago so he could have his own space. Inside, he stores an old ‘55 Morris Minor and has built a woodworking shop. “This place is for diversion. When you work with your family, sometimes you just need a place to get away – away from siblings, work, and home.” The shop was tidy and quite clean. We sat near a woodstove in a far corner.

Howard’s father, Michael, was a cadet flight instructor during WWII whose own father had very little. He came home to farm and even still at 87, Howard says, his father has always been ahead. The Hortons started farming rice in 1955. Michael Horton was one of the first since the first rice started in the Delta around 1953. They installed their first wells in the middle 1950s and they are still using some of them to this day, although some have suffered cracks and have had to be rebuilt. Michael Horton was a pioneer of land leveling. According to Howard, around 1978, a man by the name of Dr. Hughes Williams came to the area and talked some farmers into straight leveling their fields. His father immediately recognized how much more they would be able to produce and the amount of water and fuel that land leveling might save. Michael Horton subsequently asked a guy at Mississippi State University to write a computer program that would design fields and determine how much dirt it would take in different places to level the ground.

The Hortons started moving dirt in 1980. In 1981, their last crooked levees (also known as contour levees) were replaced with straight levees. Thanks to straight levees, they have spent significantly less on water, planting, harvesting, pesticides etc. and even time as everything takes about half as long as

it does on crooked leveed fields. The Hortons are now working on going back and either reworking some land to improve the level or leveling some pastureland. Harry couldn’t emphasize enough just how much water contour levees required and how the precision leveling has changed the way rice farming is done in the U.S. He explained that it was actually his family who first started using the water outlets that you now see everywhere in precision grade fields. The outlets with slats stacked on top of each other that can be added or removed to hold or release water.



FIGURE 3. Straight leveed rice field, Mississippi Delta.



FIGURE 4. Rice field with water outlets.

My dad started with 40 acres and two mules, and he didn't inherit anything. His dad had to run a grocery store and for the last 20 years of his life was my father's bookkeeper. Dad was just really good with money. The real credit, of course, goes to the good Lord. He's the one responsible. He's the one who blessed us.

Michael was very methodical--it's actually hard for him to see us put in less effort or spend more money... He taught us that it's important to take care of what you've got and don't take or buy more than you need. Agriculture is really the backbone of these small communities--it's the heartbeat. We have the most fertile soil in the country and we are lucky to have strength in our soil. Good farmers pay attention to stuff

they put in their soil and what they do to it, while others can only think to put out as much as possible and proceed to put nothing back into the land. The most important thing a farmer can do is to put back what you take out. But just like in my father's day we are losing soil. I hope the government can help and implement some program to encourage soil conservation or help implement some way of making sure its done.

The life history approach (see Table 1) not only encouraged farmers and Delta residents to let down their guard about the range of topics they would discuss, but it also enabled me to gather information on the cultural sentiments that play a large part in shaping Delta actions and decisions. Without hearing all sides of this scenario, the irony of

TABLE 1. Personal History Interview Template.

<p>Begin with broad, open-ended questions. In most instances, the story must begin prior to the interviewee's birth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about your childhood? • What brought your family to the region? • What did you learn from your parents? • How did you come to farm in the Delta? <p>GOAL: These broad questions are meant to instigate a story and encourage the interviewee to walk you through their family's local history. Keep questions broad and to a minimum. Let the story unfold, allow the interviewee to diverge on to tangents – these are often the most fruitful moments in personal histories.</p>
<p>Take short-hand notes to keep details fresh in your mind.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid tape recorders as this is personal information and, in this case, occasionally touched upon issues of environmental abuse, race, and class that many farmers were sensitive to speak about in the presence of a recording device. • Try to take note of phrasing, language, voice and tone so that you accurately transcribe the emotional as well as historical content. <p>GOAL: Be an active listener so you can support the conversation, asking prompt questions along the way. Transcribe notes as soon as possible to accurately record content, tone, and language.</p>
<p>Conduct archival research at local libraries, town halls, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the personal histories, including names, places, events discussed to help guide you. • Compare and contrast what you are told to archival sources and documents. <p>GOAL: Take note of when community members have different accounts of specific events, which in itself is of interest. Comparing these to public records and writings often sheds a revealing light on individual narratives and the sentiments interviewees or their families held during specific events in the past.</p> <p>GOAL: Be able to integrate personal histories into the larger social and environmental history of a region; as well as be able to compare accounts contemporary practices with current information on land use and resource management strategies.</p>
<p>Ethnographic writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewers should be comfortable to insert their own perceptions during these interviews—sights, sounds, atmosphere, reactions. <p>GOAL: Allow the reader of these personal histories to imagine the retelling and form their own depiction of the people and places described, as well as the emotions shared or expressed in course of conversation.</p>

conservation among some of the country's most renowned "anti-environmentalists" would have remained only that, an irony. Instead, because of personal histories, stories, and monologues about values and beliefs, the relationships between these elements, cultural history, and community conservation became abundantly clear.

CONCLUSION

The study of the relationship between humans and the environment and the ways in which humans use, abuse, or protect the environment is in part a study of motivation. Understanding the basis for motivation requires not just understanding individual or community sentiment towards the environment but researching the cultural norms, values, and beliefs that underlie and foster cultural perspectives in the first place. It is however the determination of where, when, and how these cultural norms, values, beliefs get developed, taught and inculcated that remain one of environmental anthropology's greatest challenges. Here we have seen how the collection of life histories can help anthropologists access the basis for motivation and understand how environmental knowledge and sentiments develop on the individual and community level.

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