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Short Take 13: Ethnographic Sampling¹

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For many cultural anthropologists, the term "ethnographic sampling" is an oxymoron. When we talk about sampling, we usually mean a probability sample that represents a population. Can an ethnography establish what is typical? Is it even reasonable to ask this question, given the constraints under which ethnographers must work? In this column we try to answer these questions.

Werner was reminded of the problem of ethnographic sampling on rereading Clyde Kluckhohn's (1944) book *Navajo Witchcraft*. What a remarkable ethnographer Clyde Kluckhohn was! He collected his first Navajo witchcraft stories (in English) in 1923 when he was 19 years old.² Almost every year thereafter, until the publication of his book in 1944, he spent some time in the field collecting stories. From 1932 on, he collected stories systematically (Kluckhohn 1944:15).

Kluckhohn described his sample of stories in great detail.³ Unfortunately, his description was entirely in prose, with even large numbers (>10) written out in words (Kluckhohn 1944:16). We summarize his prose in the following tables. Table 1 shows what Kluckhohn told us about 132 formal interviews he had with 93 different consultants.

Kluckhohn adds that he took notes in the presence of his informants. The notes ranged from two pages to 99. The asterisked numbers are questionable or are our conjectures. In what are labeled "passive" interviews, witchcraft was not the main topic but it came up in the course of the interview. The 28 interviews in this column ("25 plus two or three others," Kluckhohn 1944:15-16) are based on consistent or comprehensive questioning. He conducted these to arrive at "statistically sound generalizations" (Kluckhohn 1944:16). We have no explanation for Kluckhohn's report of 113 informants in the age column.

Table 2 summarizes 81 informal interviews. Since the total number of interviews is not given explicitly, we presume that Kluckhohn conducted exactly 81 informal interviews

with 81 consultants.

Kluckhohn's impression was that members of this sample were generally poorer than the people represented in the formal interview sample characterized in Table 1. (Kluckhohn 1944:17). He gives no information about the extent of his notes with these informal interviews.

Kluckhohn also describes "conversations," or what we call "casual interviews." He had 115 such conversational encounters with a total of 102 consultants.⁴

Of the 102 informants in Table 3, 21 participated in formal interviews. That is, they are among the 93 consultants in Table 1. Notes were recorded from a half an hour

to a full day after casual interviews, and range from a few lines to 10 pages. The 73 interviews in Navajo were "direct," presumably without interpreters (Kluckhohn 1944:16). The remainder were in English. Whether these consists of 29 individuals or 42 interviews is not clear.

Reading Kluckhohn's introduction to *Navajo Witchcraft*, one is struck by the apparent comprehensiveness of his sampling and by his effort to arrive at "statistically sound generalizations." Once his prose is tabulated, however, his sampling looks incomplete. For example, we don't know the gender of the consultants who participated in the informal interviews, or whether Kluckhohn used an interpreter for some of the informal interviews conducted in Navajo. And we know nothing about the consultants who participated in Kluckhohn's casual interviews.

We can further check Kluckhohn's sample by looking at the geographic distribution of his interviews. He again describes the facts in prose and in great detail listing locations in which he conducted interviews. He presents no maps to show the geographical

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Table 1. 132 formal interviews with 93 consultants

132 93	gender		economic status		age range 15-90		occupation		interview type		language	
	men	67	rich	3	60 plus	42	Med. Men	38	passive	27	Navajo	88
women	26	moderate	*86	50 plus	71	other	*55	consistent/ comprehensive	28	interpreter	88	
		poor	4	other				other	*38	English	5	
	93		93		113		93		93		93	

Table 2. 81 informal interviews with 81 consultants

*81 81	gender		economic status		age range 8-70+		occupation		interview type		language	
	men	?	poorer	81	50 plus	31	Med. Men	12	passive	?	Navajo	?
women	?			50 minus	50	other	59	consistent	?	interpreter	?	
								compreh.	?	English	?	
	81		81		81		81		81		81	

Table 3. 115 conversations with 102 consultants

115 102	gender		economic status		age range 15-90		occupation		interview type		language	
	men								passive		Navajo	73
women								consistent		interpreter	?	
								compreh.		English	29	
	102		102		102		102		102		102	

distribution of his interviews; the following maps are interpretations of his prose.

The Hopi Reservation is completely contained within Navajo Country. The Jicarilla Apache Reservation is to the east of the northeastern end of the reservation. The small black circles indicate at least one interview in that location (Kluckhohn gives no figures). The larger black circles in the Ramah, NM and Two Wells, NM areas (the latter not named on the map) represent 38 interviews, plus 8 from the “check” group (the 28 or so formal interviews based on consistent and comprehensive questioning). In addition, 23 of the 81 informal interviews came from these two areas. The geographical distribution of the casual interviews cannot be determined from Kluckhohn’s text.

Thus 32%, or 69 interviews came from the Ramah/Two Wells area—Kluckhohn’s home turf. His statement about the geographical distribution is confusing: “The western Navaho territory is much less well represented than the eastern. The north is scarcely represented at all” (Kluckhohn 1944:17). The map tells a different story. The north is reasonably well represented while the west is scarcely represented at all. But “west” may refer to the locations of Tuba City, Kayenta, and Navajo Mountain where he may have conducted more interviews than in the north. Exact figures would help.⁵

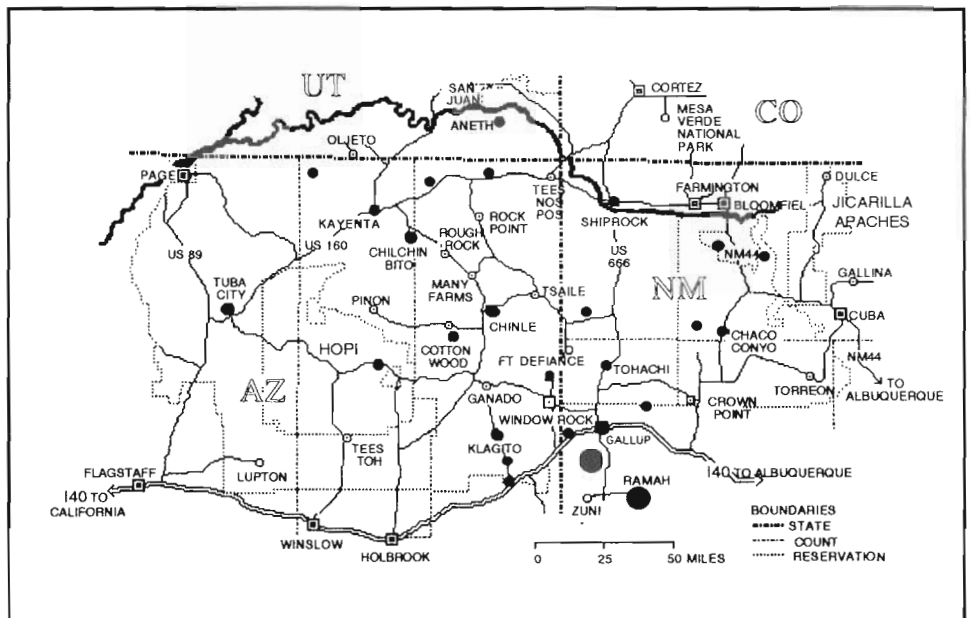
The major lesson we learn from Kluckhohn’s sampling is that tabulation of data about interviews—the age, gender, occupation, and economic status of the consultant, the location of the interview, and so on—helps make ethnography more systematic and more useful. Malinowski had recognized this before Kluckhohn was a student: “The method of reducing information, if possible, into charts or synoptic tables ought to be extended to the study of practically all aspects of native life” (Malinowski 1961:14; orig. 1922). Kluckhohn would have done better had he followed Malinowski’s advice.

Can we make “statistically sound generalizations” from Kluckhohn’s sample of interviews? The answer is obvious: we cannot. Only a random sample can capture (with a known probability of error) a distribution of traits similar to the distribution of the traits in the population from which the sample was taken, and there is certainly nothing random about Kluckhohn’s sample: he interviewed those he could. Do we reject Kluckhohn’s work as unscientific? Not at all. For while

Figure 1a. The Location of the Navajo Reservation within the United States of America.



Figure 1b. The Navajo Reservation in the Four Corners Area.



Kluckhohn’s sample of consultants was not statistically representative, Kluckhohn covered the waterfront. He established the range of witchcraft phenomena among the Navajo.

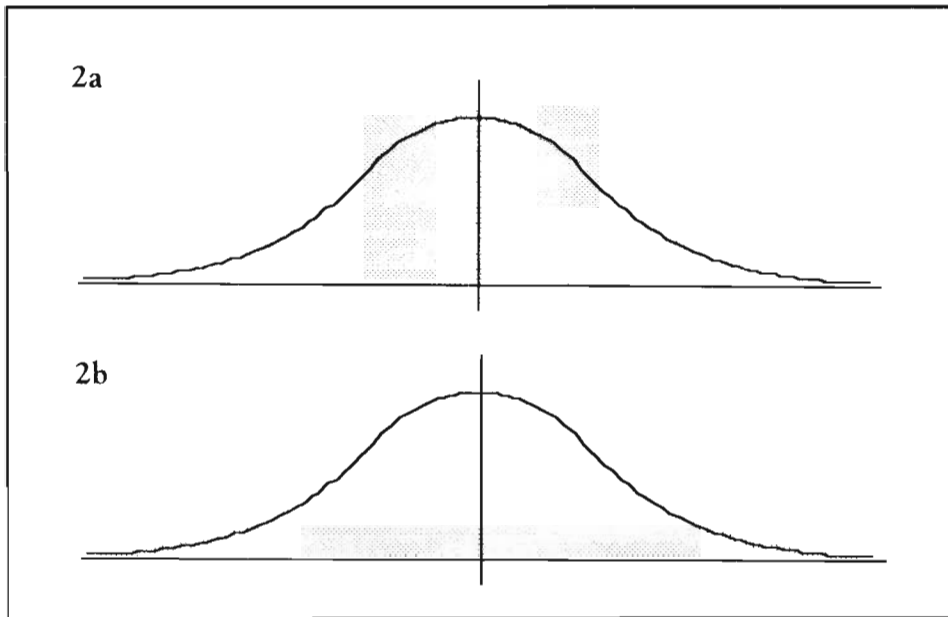
That’s what good ethnographic sampling is about — establishing the range of phenomena, not establishing the proportions of traits in a population at large. Figure 2 represents the difference between the goals of a probability sample and an ethnographic sample.

A random sample (Figure 2a) establishes what is typical in a social system (population). In an ethnographic sample (Figure 2b) we usually have no idea what is typical. We work with key consultants, often experts, on topics like witchcraft, hunting, manioc planting, etc. Not knowing where to start, we start anywhere, often close to

our entry point. We develop our network of contacts from there and the resulting contact tree (see Short Take 1 in CAM 1[1] and Short Take 6 in CAM 3[1]) is anything but random. We cover as much variation as we can of the phenomena in which we’re interested and, while we then cannot say what is typical, we can say with some authority what range of traits does occur.

We can never claim that we’ve discovered all the variation within a social system, but a contact tree can show, for example, that we have concentrated in our interviewing too heavily on one type of consultant at the expense of the other. We may have too many rural consultants or too few urban ones, too many women or too few, too many weavers, or too few. The goal is to maximize variation.

Figure 2. What You Learn From a Random Sample (2a) and from an Ethnographic Sample (2b).



To sum up, here are some pointers on how to maximize coverage of phenomena in an ethnographic sample of interviews:

- (1) Use tables and maps to see how well you've covered demographic and geographic parameters of interest.
- (2) Use contact trees to show how well you've networked through a population and to what extent the same types of people, with similar views, may be overrepresented. Starting a contact tree early allows you to exert some control over your contact network.
- (3) When three or more consultants agree on a fact within a homogeneous social system it is time to move on to another group that views things somewhat differently (D'Andrade 1989).⁶ Had Kluckhohn checked (with tables) to see if his consultants were converging on consensus about certain items, he could have maximized his sampling effort and covered much more ground.
- (4) Look for divergences of opinion and practices as well as for convergence. This will help you cover, as much as possible, the entire range of phenomena. Kluckhohn does not tell us about the controversies concerning witchcraft among the Navajo. Instead he gives us a homogenized picture of Navajo witchcraft as if it were as an internally consistent system. In all likelihood, this consistency is his only. In any human society there coexist multiple views. In any controversial field (like witchcraft)

within a culture there will be strong disagreements concerning facts and conceptions.

Because we can never interview everyone, sampling is inevitable. It is also inevitable that ethnographic samples can only under the rarest of circumstances, and following great effort, be probabilistic. The strength of ethnography lies in examining in depth the range of variation of traits. Ethnography and a sample survey, based on a probabilistic sample, are thus complementary.

In order to do ethnographic sampling well, however, an ethnographer must learn another culture systematically and not casually. Naroll (1962) found that, when it came to the quality control of ethnographic data, he could not tell amateurs from professional ethnographers. We think this is due to unsystematic, uncontrolled casual learning of cultures by amateurs and professional ethnographers alike.

Proper control of the ethnographic sample, and focusing on the range of variation of cultural traits is a safeguard against superficial understanding of another culture. To understand a foreign culture we need to know not only what they believe or do, but also what they argue about.

Notes

1. We have greatly benefited from comments on an earlier draft by Thomas Schweizer.
2. We consider this fact of Kluckhohn's life a sound argument in support of ethnographic

field schools for undergraduates — if such schools need any defense at all.

3. If readers know of similarly thorough descriptions of an ethnographic sample, we would appreciate if they would let us know.
4. In addition, Kluckhohn mentions 16 interviews with non-Navajo traders and 87 pages of field notes from other ethnographers.
5. Collecting data over so wide an area as Kluckhohn did in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s was a very difficult undertaking. There were virtually no paved roads on the reservation until after World War II. Just the trip from Ramah to Kayenta by car may have taken a couple of days with sand and mud impeding progress. Even the famous Route 66 between Albuquerque, NM and Grants, NM was not fully paved until after the war (William Y. Adams, personal communication).
6. Similar ideas about consultant consensus that may help restricting sample size are also expressed by Romney et al. (1986) and Weller and Romney (1988:77) "The important point to observe is that small samples can yield extremely reliable data." For details consult the literature on consensus theory listed, for example, in Weller and Romney (1988).

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