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BRIEF REPORT



The Benefits of Using Cultural Domain Analysis in Applied Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Cultural domain analysis (CDA) is a suite of methods and analytical techniques that allow researchers to rapidly and reliably understand the ways in which people conceptualize their world. Consisting of various approaches, including free lists, pile sorts, and related interview techniques, CDA is an effective means of systematically identifying shared knowledge. This article briefly reviews the strengths of this approach, and highlights examples of CDA within applied anthropological research.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Practicing anthropologists often need to describe “culture” in a manner that is both efficient and accurate. This article briefly outlines the methods that comprise “cultural domain analysis.” These mixed-method approaches have been used effectively in a range of applied research, including in environmental, medical, business, and other related contexts, some of which are reviewed here.

KEYWORDS

cultural domain analysis;
cultural models; methods;
applied anthropology

Cultural domain analysis (CDA) is rooted in cognitive anthropology and ethnoscience (it was even called “applied ethnographic semantics” in the 1960s) and is set of methods for understanding the classificatory schemes people use to conceptualize their world (D’Andrade 1995; Goodenough 1957). Its strength is its ability to obtain an insider’s understanding of a cultural domain which is verifiable, replicable, transparent, and easy to disseminate. CDA is particularly effective for applied anthropologists who want to operationalize culture as shared knowledge, in a systematic way that can be understood by researchers and by the people in the community where the research takes place.

Among its many practical uses, CDA is helpful for identifying foundational cultural understandings early on in the research process, or for confirming ethnographic understandings later in a project. CDA can track differences in cultural knowledge across sites, between cultural sub-

groups, and through time. It is used in marketing research, where it is sometimes called “concept mapping” or “brand mapping,” and in user experience (UX) studies to produce new products and more effective marketing strategies (e.g., Bibeau et al. 2012). Public health researchers use CDA to develop culturally-relevant health interventions and it is also used in communications (e.g., Singer et al. 2011) and conservation research (e.g., Kempton, Boster, and Hartley 1995).

For example, in a project funded by the National Marine Fishery Service, Johnson, Griffith, and Murray (1987) used free listing, pile sorts, and sentence completion tasks (Weller and Romney 1988) in the study of recreational fishers’ perceptions to develop protocols aimed at promoting the targeting of underutilized species. The CDA findings were used to develop a marketing campaign to change behaviors. A series of follow up studies found the campaign to be effective in actually changing fishers’ consumption of

formerly undesirable fish species (e.g., amberjack). In international development, Schuster et al. (2019) was interested in the fit between literature-based program design and community norms in relation to gender and empowerment in the West Bank. Using CDA, they collected data on consensus concerning community priorities and identified key features that could help target and refine international development projects.

Operationally, CDA typically starts with describing a cultural domain, such as cataloging physical, observable things—plants, colors, animals, symptoms of illness—or conceptual things—occupations, roles, emotions, foods, life-style, etc. An efficient way to get the contents of a domain is with free listing, although content can be gathered in many ways, such as through text analysis. Free listing is an interview technique that maximizes the amount of information obtained from each respondent, so that samples as small as 20 people can give reliable information about culturally salient topics (Weller et al. 2018). To explore the content and relationship between items within a domain, similarity data can be obtained from people through pile sorting. Items collected through free listing or other means are put on index cards which informants sort into piles according to their similarity, i.e., “things that go together.” Images (particularly useful with nonliterate populations) can also be used. Results from these simple tasks provide a rapid representation of a shared cultural reality, and how concepts in a domain are related to one another (see Bernard 2017).

Applied anthropology projects may be different from more theoretical research since they involve input and collaboration from multiple stakeholders, collaborators, and clients. Cultural domain analysis can help convey complex and nuanced ideas about culture by identifying culturally salient themes, and showing how ideas mesh together. The methods can be quick, simple, transparent, and reliable (Dengah et al. 2020; Handwerker 2001). Ethnographic data collection and analysis encompasses a wide range of methods, but for applied anthropologists working with short timelines, CDA offers a valuable set of tools.

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Alexandra Brewis is a Regents Professor and President’s Professor at Arizona State University, where she teaches anthropology and global health.

Jeffrey C. Johnson is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Florida. He is interested in how social networks influence human behavior and cognition. He is currently an associate editor for the *Journal of Social Structure* and the journal *Social Networks*. He is the author of *Selecting Ethnographic Informants*, Sage, 1990 and is co-author (with Borgatti, Everett, and Agneessens) of the books *Analyzing Social Networks*, Sage, 2024 and *Analyzing Social Networks in R*, Sage 2023.

Christopher McCarty is a Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida. McCarty’s research focuses on social network analysis, particularly the analysis of personal networks. His current research crosses several applications of personal networks in healthcare as well as research on collaboration networks within and between universities.

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Jeffrey G. Snodgrass is a cultural and psychological anthropologist who examines how ritual and play identities and processes contribute to health and well-being, including in situations of social and environmental precarity. This topic is the focus of his recent book, *The Avatar Faculty: Ecstatic Transformations in Religion and Video Games* (University of California Press, 2023). He also specializes in research methods and mixes qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis in his ethnographic studies. You can read more about this approach in *Systematic Methods for Analyzing Culture: A Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2021).

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Susan C. Weller has worked as a Medical Anthropologist for over 40 years on medical school faculties and is currently a Professor in the School of Public and Population Health at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas. She is author of *Systematic Data Collection* (Weller & Romney 1988) and the Cultural Consensus Model (Romney, Weller, Batchelder 1986; Romney, Batchelder, Weller 1987; Weller 2007).

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