

UNIVERSITY OF WALES, LAMPETER
Department of Archaeology and Anthropology
MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Module: Research Methods: Ethnography and Fieldwork (compulsory)
Module Code: MARCH7120

Module Description
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Theory and Function of the Methodology Module

The MA course is titled 'Cultural Astronomy and Astrology'. Therefore we obviously need to look at culture. We did this in the Introductory module by introducing theories of culture, but this module encourages you to take a 'hands-on' approach in order to examine an aspect of contemporary culture. This means looking at other people, groups and ideas in a cultural context but we have to develop a framework/language for doing this. This language, or vocabulary, is intended to help you communicate both with academics and with the world as a whole in a different style.

This module is designed to teach research qualitative methods. By this we mean research methods which are designed to shed light on the quality of human experience, rather than quantification, which is the focus of much traditional research. As you'll see, some quantification in this module is perfectly acceptable but, if you do follow a quantitative route, the most you'll be doing is working out percentages based on small samples and your figures will be 'indicative' (suggesting further discussion) rather than 'definitive'.

The final assessment task of this module is a work of independent research focussing on any aspect of astrology/astronomy or cosmology in culture. The emphasis is on qualitative research, which is designed to reveal the individual meaning of a belief or experience. The individual classes in this module will introduce various approaches from researchers who are working either in astrology or fields which may illustrate possible approaches to the subject matter.

One of the central themes of the research methods we introduce is the relationship between the researcher and the researched, a relationship which can be understood through analysis of the researcher's own social, political, metaphysical and ideological affiliation. You can take a variety of approaches to this issue. Your final research project can devote a great deal of energy to reflecting on your own position. Or you can decide that your own position has nothing to do with the process or outcome of your research. But, either way, you will need to show awareness of this issue.

Because the MA is strongly influenced by phenomenological assumptions (which will be introduced later), it is often necessary to place ourselves in the cultural context. Culture is not 'out there' independent of us. This means learning to recognise our own cultural positions/assumptions/biases/prejudices so that we can 'bracket' off our personal positions and begin to hear more clearly what other people are saying. The reason for this is that we can then most effectively communicate with other people. The purpose of this module is therefore to learn a new language so that, as scholars we are in a better position to teach and learn, understand both others and ourselves.

You need a word about the background so what follows is a potted history of sociology and anthropology. Sociology – the study of society – began in the early 19th century as an attempt to identify mathematical laws which govern human society. It was partly 'scientific' but also had

political goals: the desire to transform society by wiping out established privilege. It was primarily concerned with western society – with ‘us’. The principle underlying nineteenth-century sociology, established by Auguste Comte, was the attempt to establish the mathematical laws which regulate society, as set out in his *System of Positive Polity*.¹ Later in the century Herbert Spencer set out the statistical principles by which this might be done.²

Anthropology – the study of ‘man’ – began in the late 19th century as an attempt to find out about the origins of western society by studying non-western societies which were supposedly at an earlier stage of development. For example, it was considered that hunter-gatherer societies in Africa, the Americas and Australia, were at a stage similar to that which western societies supposedly passed through in the stone age. (There was also an additional political agenda: the need for colonial administrators to understand the people for whom they were responsible, and hence to administer more efficiently.) However, the practice of anthropology went through several crises as a result of the recognition that the researcher was removed from the researched, and could therefore never properly understand them: if one was to understand a ‘native’ ritual, surely one needed to participate in it, but could one truly participate without actually believing it. From this problem there has developed discussion of the ‘insider-outsider’ dichotomy, and ‘reflexivity’, the process by which one can understand one’s own role in the research process, along with the related question, ‘can natives study themselves?’ The ‘insider-outsider’ dichotomy provides a framework according to which we can all identify ourselves either as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ in relation to particular groups: we are inside some, outside others – and in some cases we may be on the edge. One goal of this module (which it shares, of course, with the other modules) is for students to become ‘insider’ academics. A key component of the methodology we teach is that, in order to understand any phenomena, whether a belief system or form of behaviour, we should do so without judging it, in order to understand it better. For this to happen, though, we have to be aware of our own preconceptions and biases. Reflexivity – the ability to reflect upon one’s own preconceived positions and attitudes – is a core skill that is central to this module.

The distinctions between sociology and anthropology have tended to blur as anthropologists have begun to study western societies looking at football supporters, for example, as tribal groups.

In the wake of radical developments in history in the 1970s - oral history - the idea that one can study the anthropology of “us” has developed. The term **ethnography** is often used instead of **anthropology**

The range of possible areas to research is wide. Some students are temperamentally drawn to the use of interviews, others to questionnaires, some may wish to reflect on their own positions, others to leave themselves out of the research, some may investigate professionals or practitioners, others, members of the public.

A Note On Your Research Project

This is a training module, designed to teach you research skills and philosophical perspectives which you can apply as you wish in the rest of the MA. In your research all findings can be used, and there are no right or wrong answers. In terms of the module as a training course, it’s the

1 Comte, August, *System of Positive Polity*, 4 Vols., trans. John Henry Bridges, Paris 1851 - 4, London: Longmans, 1875.

2 Spencer, Herbert, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3 Vols., London: Williams and Norgate, 1876 - 96.

process which is important, rather than your findings (even though your findings may then feed into the wider scholarly literature). If you favour a quantitative approach, you will not be looking for large samples or statistically significant results. As a general rule, if you do interviews, five may be enough. It is harder to identify a suitable number for questionnaires, for it depends on the questionnaire (whether it contains only tick boxes, or asks for written answers). These issues should become clear as you embark on the module and can be discussed with your teacher.

This process requires being critical of published sources and studies: do these accord with what people really think, or not?

Then, as scholars we are in a better position to teach and learn, understand both others and ourselves.

What should you do? You should:

- Conduct some original research
- Examine any aspect of the contemporary culture of astronomy, cosmology or astrology
- Using interviews and/or questionnaires, i.e., 'fieldwork'.

Throughout the whole process of conducting research, processing your information and writing up, be as self-aware as possible about what you are doing, what issues are being raised by what you do, how that relates to course reading. You have the chance not just to do something, but also to reflect on the process of doing it. This is self-consciously knitting together theory and practice: acknowledging problems or celebrating success; articulating not just your research findings but also what went into them.

You are demonstrating that you have not only conducted original research, but that you have related what you have done to the wider body of academic knowledge.

You will also build up a database of contemporary practices and attitudes that will add to our overall fund of knowledge of what people really do and think about their relationship with the cosmos.

Whatever question you formulate, try to relate it to some previous literature or research.

Research Proposal Forum

Under the General Information page at the top of the module, we will create a forum area on which you may post suggestions for your research topic. The plan is that you can all benefit from feedback from the tutors. Don't be shy. You can be as specific or as vague as you like, and as unformed or final as you wish.

Pointers on essay writing

When you come to write up your project you **MUST** include methodological discussion - i.e., a full rationale, with references, for the method of inquiry you choose. In other words, if you conduct interviews you **MUST** include some discussion of the kind of interview you use, and perhaps the methods possible strengths or weaknesses, and advantages in terms of your project, together with references.

Your study **MUST** refer back to previous, similar work. If, as is likely in this new subject area, there is no previous research in precisely the same area, then look for work in parallel areas; if you are looking at how astrologers work, for example, consider work on how psychotherapists work.

You can then match your own findings back to previous work and take the whole debate on: academic study is a collective process.

You may talk to insider, outsiders, amateurs, professionals, astronomers, astrologers, members of the public, believers, non-believers, disbelievers, scientists, evangelicals, young people, old people, take a large sample or a small one. You may distribute questionnaires in person, by e mail or on the web. You can interview face-to-face or by e mail.

But please do **not** use other students on the course.

The Reflexive Journal

Some students find it useful to keep a 'reflexive journal'. This is a personal account of your research process, both events and feelings ('Fifty copies of my questionnaire were returned. I was very happy and mused on the fact that a confident personality helps generate data'). This is the kind of documentation which is useful if your final essay takes a reflexive character, and from which you can quote – if it is appropriate.

A Note on Reading

Each topic includes some suggested reading. Further bibliographies are supplied. Please approach the reading with discrimination; there may be areas where you wish to read more, and others where you choose, or need, to read less. Use your initiative as 'autonomous' learners in order to investigate additional pertinent academic material.

You should find that there is less reading than in the other required module, the 'Introduction'. That's because the balance in this module is more towards method than information (and the understanding and analysis of that information). However, you will need to use your initiative to pursue reading in the general area of your research project.

The qualitative research methodologies which we are learning and using in this module have evolved from sociology and anthropology, were directed towards the study of beliefs, and hence have in many instances been refined by sociologists and anthropologists of religion. Cultural Astronomy and Astrology being a new discipline, there exists almost no comparable literature in this area, certainly none which deals with questions of behaviour and belief with the same subtlety as that in the study of religions. This will change with time, as research in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology generates new material.

Weekly Forum

For the weekly forum discussion we will post a published article on research into the subject area, and invite comments. These articles may include examples of bad practice as well as good, so are not necessarily to be imitated. But they will represent examples of work in the subject area.

Dates for this Module

This module will include 8 weeks of course work beginning Monday 5 May to Monday 23 June. We can then give you until Monday 21 July to complete and write up your research project. There will be a short, 1500 word essay, due on 16 June.

