

A-LEVEL

ANTHROPOLOGY

ANTH4 Practising Anthropology: Methods and Investigations
Report on the Examination

2110
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ANTH 4

General comments

It was clear from the responses given that many students had invested a lot of time, effort and resources into carrying out their personal investigations. As a result, there has been a general improvement in the quality of answers across the paper. There was some inconsistency, however, in the quality of students' responses, meaning that there are a few issues that should still be borne in mind.

- Some topics of the personal investigations and methods used risked falling outside of the boundaries of the discipline of anthropology. While anthropology is a broad area of study, it remains primarily focused on humankind and has certain methods that are particular to it. For example, investigations on human-animal relations should be exploring the dynamic with the focus on the human rather than the animal element. In terms of methods, diachronic studies of a historical nature should go beyond simply applying anthropological concepts to history and should be able to make comparison between the subject matter investigated by the student and evidence taken from other ethnographies, ie making cross-cultural comparisons. Studies about objects or museum artefacts should consider cross-cultural contexts and ethnographic evidence, rather than relying simply on description. Resultantly, it was clear that in some cases topics for the personal investigation required more careful consideration. The best topics tended to be ones where the student had actually participated for a length of time in a group and had not just relied on interviews with a few people, and where explicit comparison was made between the student's findings and other anthropological literature in terms of ethnography and/or theory.
- Ethical issues remain a concern and it was pleasing to read that some students had obtained formal consent in a written form, even though this is not explicitly required. Stronger students carrying out research in public and online situations utilised a range of strategies for obtaining consent, such as having someone make an announcement about their presence and what they would be doing before the event occurred, or approaching individuals after an observation to obtain consent to use their data. Informed consent remains important and students should be encouraged to carry out investigations where this can be obtained.
- Teachers should also discourage the kind of project where the student might come into contact with illegal activities. In some cases this cannot be predicted but an investigation should not be chosen if there is a likelihood of the student coming into contact with illegal activities. The constraints of the law should also be taken into account, eg students under the age of 18 are unlikely to be allowed access to a tattooist's studio.
- A small number of students are the sole candidate for a school or college. If these are private candidates, it should be borne in mind that the chances of completing a successful investigation are substantially reduced without the support of someone trained in anthropology. At the very least, it would be necessary to consult literature on anthropological research methods.
- Examples of good practice from this year include: studying the experiences of an individual, eg migration; observing a religious community; exploring variations in behaviour across different cultural settings, eg language use; observing practices at an allotment; attending a new activity, eg a dieting group; online research, such as social media, virtual reality sites; school or college; clothing or appearance in terms of identity, students' use of space; public/social space; ethnic identity/cultural practices.

Positive features

Section A

- Students were well versed in methodology and the vast majority were able to make at least some relevant points for all of the questions.
- Some answers were very detailed and made explicit links to examples taken from ethnographic studies in order to illustrate their points.
- The best answers showed a very clear understanding of the specific anthropological concepts and/or methods behind the questions and were able to relate detailed, relevant ethnographic examples to these to support their responses.

Section B

- The best answers made detailed reference to their personal investigation, using specific examples from the investigation to make their points, such that the examiner could gain a real sense of what the investigation was about.
- The best answers were also able to draw comparisons between the findings of their investigation and the writings of other anthropologists, while making these succinct and relevant so as not to stray from the question set.
- A variety of interesting topics were chosen for the personal investigation.
- There was a heightened awareness of the need for informed consent and whether this was obtained or not, and a discussion was often presented as to its importance.

Key issues

Section A

- Many answers did not refer to ethnographic studies and were kept at the general level.
- A number of students were either unaware of the anthropological concepts and/or methods behind the questions or did not make the connection, eg between 'reflect' and 'reflexivity'.

Section B

- A few students did not fill in the title and aims of their personal investigation in the answer booklet.
- Sometimes the title and aims were abbreviated so much so that it was hard for the examiner to see how the answers related to the personal investigation.
- There was often not enough specific detail from the personal investigation. Students need to keep in mind that the examiner will not know exactly what they have done and therefore they need to provide specific detail from the investigation in order for the examiner to assess the quality of the answer. Generic answers that could be about any investigation will only earn a limited number of marks.
- Students did not make full use of opportunities to compare their findings with the writings of other anthropologists.
- Some students spent too much time discussing anthropological concepts without relating them to their own investigations.

Section A

Question 01

Most students identified that this question was asking them about reflexivity. However, a substantial minority did not seem to be aware of the method and instead provided general benefits anthropologists could bring through their work. Such responses omitted to consider the impact that reflection has on the process of collecting ethnographic data, ie enabling the anthropologist to make adjustments while still in the field, which was relevant to the question. Nonetheless, some marks were there to be obtained for making connections between the findings of anthropologists' research and possible practical applications of the same, eg benefiting the participating community. Stronger answers identified that there are methodological benefits to reflexivity that result in a more honest and transparent ethnography. The best answers were able to incorporate ethnographic examples to illustrate instances of the points made, eg Malinowski's keeping of a diary separate to his field notes on the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia in an attempt to remove subjectivity from his research.

Question 02

Most students made the connection between oral histories and life histories, realising that the latter is a form of the former and giving this as an example. In considering limitations of oral histories, some confused the reliability of their transmission with the reliability of their storage. A number of students expressed the view that anthropologists would find it hard to document them accurately as they are just spoken. However, more successful answers added that anthropologists can use audio recorders to preserve the narratives. Generally the question was answered well, although many students limited their performance by not relating the limitations that they gave to ethnographic examples. Others used ethnography well. For instance, some recalled that Chagnon was lied to by the Yanomami about the names of their ancestors owing to a cultural taboo about reciting the names of the dead. These students used this material successfully to support the claim that oral testimony is not always reliable.

Question 03

This question proved to be challenging for some, although a number of students managed to produce very strong responses. The stronger responses made use of specific and detailed ethnographic examples to support their arguments. Some students made excellent use of the ethical guidelines of anthropological bodies to structure their answers. However, too little use was made of the guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA) of 2011 compared to a relative overuse of those of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Some students interpreted the guideline that any potential harms or benefits of the proposed study should be communicated to potential informants (AAA) to mean that fieldwork must deliver tangible benefits to the people being studied, but obviously the reality is more nuanced than this. The best responses presented a more balanced argument, considering both sides of the debate, supporting their points with ethnography, and considering what exactly might constitute a benefit, both to anthropologists and to informants. Generally, the length of answers was appropriate for a 20-mark question. Some excellent ethnographic examples were used, such as the issue of gift-exchange indicating mutual benefit but also the drawbacks of this method, eg Shostak gifting tobacco to Nisa and Chagnon giving manufactured goods to the Yanomami, affecting potentially the quality of the data and the nature of the culture respectively.

Section B

Question 04

Students responded to this question confidently. They had a clear grasp of the practical problems affecting their research. Those who explained the potential impact of the practical problem on their study (ie why it was a problem) gained more marks than those simply identifying the practical problem. The higher performing students tended to give a very detailed description of the practical problem they experienced and how they overcame it with specific reference to their investigation, thinking about the problem's potential impact. Alternatively, they were able to identify in ethnography where a similar problem had occurred and could compare their own experience to this ethnographic example, eg students facing a partial language barrier might have referred to Freeman's criticisms of Mead's linguistic abilities in relation to her research among the Samoans.

Question 05

Many students had a clear understanding of what was meant by objectivity, so were able to structure their responses accordingly. The largest challenge students faced here was producing something more than a generic answer. Some responses made so negligible a mention of any detail from their personal investigations that it would have been hard from their answers to this question alone to tell if they had carried out any research. A generic answer will prevent a student from reaching the higher mark bands, which are dependent on references being made to the personal investigation. The best answers to this question tended to manage to bring in both specific examples from their personal investigation and also ethnographic examples with which to compare these. For example, Malinowski's diary and field notes occurred again, where students had used a similar, or indeed opposite, strategy to attempt to ensure as much objectivity or open subjectivity as possible. Stronger answers also engaged with the debate about the extent to which it is possible to be truly objective, some advocating reflexivity, claiming subjectivity is inevitable.

Question 06

This was a question that most students were able to tackle confidently, but once again the level of detail given about the students' conclusions and the evidence on which they were based were key to determining a student's performance. Those who could explain why certain conclusions were arrived at based on their own data performed more strongly at this part of the question. Some limited their performance by omitting to address the second part of the question, which asked them to make recommendations for future research. Clearly these needed to be contextualised in relation to the students' findings and also any limitations to their study. Students who were able to make very strong connections between their own empirical data and the conclusions drawn tended to perform better. Some of these students also enhanced their performance by making succinct and relevant connections to the ethnographic writings of other anthropologists to point to similarities or differences they experienced, considering the cross-cultural, comparative nature of the discipline. The involvement of ethnography should be done carefully, however, since one or two students brought in other anthropologists' work to the exclusion of their own, having the effect of almost removing any detail about their own investigation from the answer, which is to be avoided.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

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UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion