



Structured Interviewing II: Cultural Domain Analysis

Cultural Domain Analysis

Cultural domain analysis is the study of how people in a group think about lists of things that somehow go together. These can be lists of physical, observable things—plants, colors, animals, symptoms of illness—or conceptual things—occupations, roles, emotions. The goal is to understand how people in different cultures (or subcultures) interpret the content of domains differently (Borgatti 1993/1994).

The spectrum of colors, for example, has a single physical reality that you can see on a machine. Some peoples across the world, however—Xhosa, Navajo, *Ñähñu*—identify the colors across the physical spectrum of green and blue with a single gloss. In *Ñähñu*, for example, the word is *nk'ami* and in Navajo it's *dootl'izh*. Linguists who study this phenomenon call this color “grue” (see, for example, Branstetter 1977, Kim 1985, and Davies et al. 1994).

This does *not* mean that people who have a word for grue fail to *see* the difference between things that are the color of grass and things that are the color of a clear sky. They just *label* chunks of the physical spectrum of colors differently than we do and use adjectival modifiers of grue to express color differences within the blue-green spectrum. In Navajo, turquoise is *yáago dootl'izh*, or “sky grue,” and green is *tádlidgo dootl'izh*, or “water skum grue” (Oswald Werner, personal communication). If this seems exotic to you, get a chart of, say, 100 lipstick colors or house paint colors and ask people at your university to name the colors. On average, women will probably recog-

nize (and name) more colors than men will; and art majors of both sexes will name more colors than, say, engineering majors will.

This concern for understanding cultural differences in how people cut the natural world goes a long way back in anthropology. Lewis Henry Morgan (1997 [1870]) studied systems of kinship nomenclature. His work made clear that if someone says, “This is my sister,” you can’t assume that they have the same mother and father. Lots of different people can be called “sister,” depending on the kinship system.

In his work with the Murray Islanders (in the Torres Straits between Australia and Papua New Guinea) and then later with the Todas of southern India, W.H.R. Rivers developed the genealogical method—those ego-centered graphs for organizing kinship data that we take for granted today—as a way to elicit accurately and systematically the inventory of kin terms in a language (Rivers 1906, 1910, 1968 [1914]; and see Rivers’s work in Volume VI of Haddon 1901–1935).

Anthropologists also noticed very early that, although kinship systems *could* be unique to each culture—which would mean that each system required a separate set of rules—they simply weren’t. Alfred Kroeber showed in 1909 that just eight features were needed to distinguish kinship terms in any system: (1) whether the speaker and the kin referred to were of the same or different generations; (2) the relative age of people who are of the same generation—older or younger brother, for example; (3) whether the person referred to is a collateral or a lineal relative; (4) whether the person referred to is an affinal or consanguineal relative; (5) whether the relative is male or female; (6) whether the speaker is male or female; (7) whether the person who links the speaker and the relative is male or female; and (8) whether the person who links the speaker and the relative is alive or dead.

Now, if you first choose whether to use or not use any of those eight features and then choose among the two alternatives to each feature, you can concoct $3^8 = 6,561$ kinds of kinship systems. But, while there are some rare exceptions (the bilineal Yakö of Nigeria, the ambilineal Gilbert Islanders), most of the world’s kinship systems are of one those familiar types you studied in Anthropology 101—the Hawaiian, Sudanese, Omaha, Eskimo, Crow, and Iroquois types. Early anthropologists found it pretty interesting that the world’s real kinship systems comprised just a tiny set of the possibilities. Ever since the work of Morgan and Kroeber and Rivers, a small, hardy band of anthropologists has tried to determine if these systems are associated with particular political, economic, or environmental conditions (Leach 1945; Alexander 1976; Lehman 1992; Houseman and White 1998; Kronenfeld 2004).

This interest in classifying kinship systems led to methods for discovering sets of terms in other domains, like kinds of foods, things to do on the week-

end, kinds of crime, bad names for ethnic groups, dirty words, names for illnesses, etc. Note that none of these is about people's preferences. Asking people to tell you "which animals do you think make good pets" is very different from asking them to "list animals that people here keep as pets" (Borgatti 1999:117).

We usually ask people about their preferences because we want to predict those preferences. If we ask people which of two political candidates they favor in an election, for example, we might also ask them about their income, their ethnicity, their age, and so on. Then we look for packages of variables about the people that predict their preference for a candidate. Or we might do the same thing to predict why people prefer certain brands of cars, or why they have this or that position on controversial issues. In cultural domain analysis, however, we're interested in the items that comprise the domain—the illnesses, the edible plants, the jobs that women and men do, etc.

In other words, we're interested in things external to the people we interview and *how those things are related to each other* in people's minds (Spradley 1979; Borgatti 1999). For example, things can be *kinds of* other things: an orange is a kind of fruit, and a Valencia is a kind of orange. Cultural domain analysis involves, among other things, the building of folk taxonomies from data that informants supply about what goes with what. I'll show you how to build folk taxonomies in chapter 18 when we get to methods for analyzing qualitative data. Here, I want to focus on methods for collecting lists and similarities among the items in a list—that is, the contents of a domain and people's ideas about what goes with what. These methods include *free lists*, *sentence frames*, *triad tests*, *pile sorts*, *paired comparisons*, *rankings*, and *rating scales*. The last of these, rating scales, is a major field of measurement all by itself and so it gets its own chapter, right after this one.

Two things make structured interviewing methods very productive. First, they are fun to administer and fun for people to do. Second, *Anthropac* software (Borgatti 1992a, 1992b) makes it easy to collect and analyze data using these techniques.

Free Listing

Free listing is a deceptively simple, but powerful technique. In free listing, you ask informants to "list all the X you know about" or "what kinds of X are there?" where X might be movie stars, brands of computers, kinds of motor vehicles, etc.

The object is to get informants to list as many items as they can in a domain, so you need to probe and not just settle for whatever people say. Brewer et al.