

Introduction to Ethnomusicology: Understanding Ethnomusicology vis-à-vis Psychology and Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Ethnomusicology is a branch of study that focuses on, the study of music across the world from a social and cultural perspective. While musicology delves into scholarly research of music alone, ethnomusicology combines social and cultural elements with the scholarship of music/music-making. Music has embraced an interdisciplinary hermeneutic and, a new wave of global musicking has brought Indian music to the forefront. This article explores Ethnomusicology from the eyes of a Carnatic musician and attempts to explain where ethnomusicology (as a social science) fits in the context of psychology and anthropology.

Key Words: Ethnomusicology, social science, psychology, anthropology, musicology, humanities, methodologies, music education, collinear ties, generalisations.

Introduction:

“The ethnomusicologist is, in effect, sciencing about music.”¹ The debate about ethnomusicology being a science or a social science is ongoing. The importance of human interactions and cultural conventions in ethnomusicology plays a greater role than just empirical evidence and statistical data.

This brings us to an important aspect of how various disciplines can be categorized as sciences, social sciences, humanities and applied sciences.²

Sciences that are also referred to as hard sciences are essentially based on empirical data. Subjects like physics, biology and chemistry broadly fall under this category. Social sciences, on the other hand, are based on probabilities and statistical data that can be applied depending on the relevance of the subject and data.

Geography, sociology and media studies are broadly some of the disciplines that fall under this category. The term “Soft Sciences” is usually attributed to humanities because it is qualitative in nature and the validity of information can be ascertained based on how well an argument is presented.

Languages, fine arts, performing arts, are some such subjects that fall under the category of soft sciences. Applied sciences, as the name suggests, is a construct based on the above three

¹ Alan. P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 25

² Koen DePryck, *Knowledge, Evolution and Paradox: The Ontology of Language* (State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 26, 27

divisions where one of the disciplines is chosen to be applied practically.

Methodologies in Psychology:

Psychology can be defined as the scientific study of human behaviours. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines psychology as follows:

“Psychology is the study of mind and behaviour that embraces all aspects of human experience.”³

Although psychology is characterised as a hard science, the fluidity of the subject allows it to tend towards soft science. Before moving on to establish or understand the methodologies in psychology, it is important to understand what a “methodology” is.

Methodology can be defined a set or sequence of events performed to complete a certain task or activity. It is an interesting point of note that not all activities require a methodological approach. Human activity can be divided into two categories: -

- Imitative Activity - Copying of another's/one's own activity or events; activities that are repetitive by nature
Ex: Assembly line activity
- Productive Activity - This kind of activity strives towards generating different or better results whether the activity is same or different.

Quite evidently, it is this kind of activity (productive) that requires a methodological approach.⁴ This establishes a good base for us to understand the application of methodologies in psychology.

As pointed out in the earlier paragraph, psychology tends towards soft sciences; but what makes it distinctly different from history, fine arts and business is the element of scientific observation.⁵

The research methodology, although seemingly straightforward, is quite intricate at every level. It can be broadly thought of as a four-step process, as given below: -

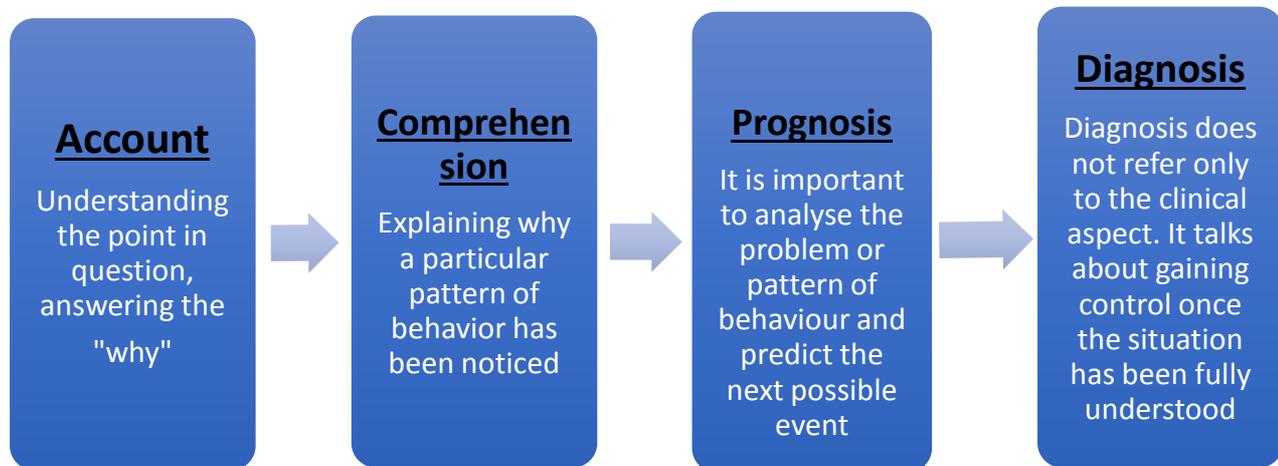
1. Account – Understanding the point in question, answering the ‘why’
2. Comprehension – Explaining why a particular pattern of behaviour has been noticed
3. Prognosis – It is important to analyse the problem or pattern of behaviour and predict the next possible event.

³ American Psychological Association website -
<http://www.apa.org/support/about/apa/psychology.aspx#answer>

⁴ Alexander M. Novikov and Dmitry A. Novikov, *Research Methodology: From Philosophy of Science to Research Design* (CRC Press, U.S.A, 2013), p. 1

⁵ Dennis Coon and John Mitterer, *Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behaviour* (Cengage Publishers, 2010), p. 1

4. Diagnosis – The term ‘diagnosis’ does not refer only to the clinical aspect. It talks about gaining control once the situation has been fully under



This four-step process eventually leads to building theories or establishing if a hypothesis is correct or incorrect. Once again, the above diagram illustrates how psychology is an analysis of activity rather than the process. Human behaviour has many facets which implies that social conditions and cultural contexts play a very a crucial role in psychology. This raises an important question: are the concepts of psychology pervasive across all cultures?

As we go on to explore this discipline, it is interesting to note that there are different strands that emerge from a discipline like psychology. Some of the most explored strands are: -

- Cultural,
- Developmental,
- Educational,
- Gender,
- Health,
- Medical,
- Social,
- Personality,
- Biopsychology,
- Music.
- Community and
- Cognitive⁶

Methodologies in Social Anthropology:

Human experience is a very integral part of any social science, and so is anthropology. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines social anthropology as “the study of the social structure of non-literate societies”.

⁶ Dennis Coon and John Mitterer, *Introduction to Psychology*, p. 2

In “The Social Anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown”, the definition of anthropology is given as follows: “I conceive of social anthropology as the theoretical natural science of human society, that is, the investigation of social phenomena by methods essentially similar to those used in the physical and biological sciences. I am quite willing to call the subject, ‘comparative sociology’, if anyone wishes so”⁷

Evidently, an important aspect in social anthropology is what is referred to as ‘social structure’. In this context, Kuper suggests that ‘Social structures as just as real as individual organisms’⁸ which reiterates the importance of said structures in anthropology as opposed to merely the study of individuals.

The study of social anthropology is deductive in nature. It is more often than not based on logical conclusions that, in turn, are based on a set of facts or data. Qualitative research was the primary angle of exploration in anthropology. During the last twenty years, the importance of quantitative data has increased considerably.⁹

The methodologies in social anthropology can broadly be divided into two branches: Humanistic and Scientific. The humanistic approach tries to understand the social life, setting and culture of the people. There is an element of empathy involved in this kind of approach.

It not only elaborates on the respondent’s lives, it is also a reflection of the researcher and his experiences and encounters thereof.

In the scientific approach, the sole aim of the research is to discover descriptive and all-pervasive laws of the society and how humans must function within the same.

There are two aspects or what are popularly referred to as visions, in social anthropology:

1. Humanistic approach – This approach is qualitative in nature and involves open-ended interviews as a major tool in the research process. Empathy is a great attribute in this approach.
2. Scientific approach – It is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The use of statistical tools to obtain empirical data is a rather familiar feature in this approach.

Observation plays an important role in this methodology. Although broadly the methodology does not vary all that much, subjects in humanities such as sociology, anthropology and so on rely heavily on participant observation.¹⁰

⁷ Adam Kuper (ed.), *The Social Anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown* (Routledge publishers, London, 1977), p. 26

⁸ J. Clyde Mitchell, ‘On Quantification in Social Anthropology’ in A. L. Epstein (ed.), *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (Pergamon press, England, 2011), p. 18

⁹ Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Routledge Publishers, 2009), p. 366, 367

¹⁰ Jonathan McCollum and David G. Hebert, ‘Foundations of Historical Ethnomusicology in Jonathan McCollum and David G. Hebert (ed.), *Theory and Method in Historical Ethnomusicology* (Lexington Books, London, 2014), p. 1

Methodologies in Ethnomusicology

Music, when studied based on its socio-cultural context, can be termed ethnomusicology. Bruno Nettl terms ethnomusicology as the music of non-literate societies.

According to the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), “all ethnomusicologists share a coherent foundation in the following approaches and methods”:

1. Taking a global approach to music.
2. Understanding music as a social practice
3. Engaging in ethnographic fieldwork.¹¹
- 4.

This view is strongly supported by Kolinski where he suggests that the approach towards a field of study like ethnomusicology plays a greater role as compared to the geographic location. He also emphasises the importance of understanding the dynamics of the society and its application to Western art music.¹²

In the same tenor, Merriam believes that there is a need for establishing ethnomusicological methods that are all pervasive.¹³

One of the approaches to the study of ethnomusicology is, laying equal emphasis on both the musical structure as well as the cultural context. According to Merriam, there are six aspects in the study of music culture other than the music itself; instruments, lyrics, native typology, musical classification, role and status of musicians, interdependency of music and culture and the creative process in music.¹⁴

Mantle Hood however believes that language is an integral part of culture and advocates that long-term exposure to a particular society or group of people and their musical style, results in an outsider becoming a native musician or an equivalent.¹⁵

In the same light, Bruno Nettl makes an interesting observation, “The field of ethnomusicology has a core of subject matter – the music of non-literate cultures, the music of advanced oriental societies, the folk music of Western and oriental civilizations – which is generally accepted as its field of competence, and that disagreements exist only in defining the outer limits of the field and in determining emphasis and approach. Ethnomusicology is in fact, as well as theory, the field, which pursues knowledge of the world’s music; with emphasis on that music outside the researcher’s own culture, from a descriptive and comparative viewpoint. Field work and laboratory analysis, structure of music and cultural background, broad comparison and the narrower specialization associated

¹¹ Society for Ethnomusicology website -<http://www.ethnomusicology.org/?page=WhatisEthnomusicol>

¹² Mieczyslaw Kolinski, ‘Ethnomusicology, its Problems and Methods’, *Ethnomusicology Newsletter* 10 (1957), p. 1-7

¹³ Alan. P. Merriam, ‘The use of music in the study of a problem in acculturation’, *American Anthropology* – 8 (1955), p. 34

¹⁴ Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (Collier-Macmillan Publishers, 1964), p. 10

¹⁵ Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, p. 11

with developing bimusicality, synchronic and diachronic study – are all relevant and important”¹⁶

Ethnomusicological research can be divided into two categories, fieldwork and desk work.¹⁷ Evidently, fieldwork is that aspect of research where the researcher goes to the intended ‘field’ and gathers the necessary raw material in terms of interviews, recordings and souvenirs. As simple as it may seem, the fieldwork involved in ethnomusicology is complex and more often than not, quite intricate.

The concept of ‘field’ with respect to this subject is an interesting one. One would imagine this ‘field’ to be geographically organised, with a specific cultural genealogy in place, which in fact is not the case. That is the thing about culture. It is complicated.

These social hubs are scattered and not easily penetrable. Also, ethnomusicology being a relatively new discipline, does not offer literature to guide the researcher. In such scenarios, it becomes important for the researcher to identify with the nativity of the ‘field’.

The researcher’s knowledge in the musical and cultural front plays a greater role because, more often than not, physically recording information becomes difficult and strenuous. Constant contact with the respondents improves ethnomusicological enquiry manifold.

On the other hand, the researcher can create field conditions by bringing the native artists or respondents to the recording facility and interacting with them at a more personal level. This enables focused interaction as the respondent dedicates enough time for dialogue.¹⁸

The other side of the coin is desk work, which involves recording observations, assimilation of data, drawing up logical conclusions and validating the hypothesis.

Principally, the methodologies are malleable. The orientation is what plays an important role while following a methodology for researching or understanding an ever-evolving discipline like ethnomusicology.

Collinearities and Common Denominators:

It is imperative to reiterate that hard sciences use empirical methodologies while humanities or soft sciences use interpretative methodologies. An interesting point of thought would be the different kinds of approaches that a psychologist, anthropologist and an ethnomusicologist would espouse in order to answer the same research question.

One of the important methodologies that features in all the three disciplines is that of meta-analysis. It is essentially the combination of the results of various studies that have given rise to the next set of research questions. Knowledge of previous studies in the same discipline is mandatory to understand the grey areas that have not been addressed. This concept of meta-

¹⁶ Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, p. 11

¹⁷ Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, p. 40

¹⁸ Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, p. 45

analysis enables one to view the big picture and helps in formulating hypotheses or drawing conclusions, which would otherwise be omitted in a small-scale research activity.

Another overlapping approach is that of naturalistic observation¹⁹ where, behavioural patterns are observed from a distance, without interfering with the natural setting. This usually applies to the study of animal behaviour but we must remember that man is a social animal with even more complex patterns of behaviour. It is important to understand that casual impressions do not qualify as naturalistic observations.

The study of the behavioural patterns must be so systematic that the findings must serve as a base for behavioural generalisations. The importance of observation in ethnomusicology cannot be over-emphasised. It is the key component required to understand the culture and social structure based on which the musical culture is further studied or contemplated.

Further, the study of genealogical structure paves way for many new enquiries and answers. This aspect is debatable because not all research questions require a genealogical structure to be established. That said, most ethnomusicological questions require a firm understanding of the roots in the process of music making. Socio-cultural background is usually the premise on which ethnomusicological research is based. The same can be said about psychology and anthropology.

Finally the method of correlation is one that overlaps in all the three disciplines. Any research study involves independent variables and dependent variables. Correlation examines the relationship between these independent variables and ascertains how closely they are associated. In Correlation, variables can be directly proportional, inversely proportional or not have any association at all. Although correlation features as a prominent methodological approach in psychology, its significance in anthropology and ethnomusicology cannot be ruled out.

Conclusion:

Ethnomusicology is an amalgamation of many different streams and the discipline itself is young and still evolving. When a question of methodology is put forth, it is natural to assume that the methodology for musicology is applicable in all dimensions to that of ethnomusicology. In this context, Merriam suggests “In view of the dual nature of the content of ethnomusicology, it is not surprising to find that definitions of the field, as well as more general discussions of its proper boundaries, have differed widely and have tended to take polar extremes depending upon the emphasis desired by the individual scholar”.²⁰

Although there might be some components that are repetitive and universal, ethnomusicology is now gaining a better platform in the world of research. New methodologies are being evolved and continuous improvements are being made to existing approaches to uphold the sanctity of the discipline.

¹⁹ David Elmes, Barry Kantowitz, Henry Roediger, *Research Methods in Psychology* (Cengage Publishers, 2011), p. 13

²⁰ Alan. P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, p. 5

Despite formalizing methodologies and approaches for different disciplines, the fundamental components of research such as data analysis and interpretation, use of statistical tools to draw conclusions and participant observation serve as the bases for any research study.

It should also be understood that every written work ever published or subject based literature cannot be carefully scrutinized during the research study. Important as it might seem, gaining an interdisciplinary perspective is a task in itself and the final goal should be realistic and attainable.

The history of music education is an important topic with implications for other fields in musicology. Due to a complex history of disciplinary divisions, scholars in such fields as historical musicology and ethnomusicology are often unaware of important scholarship in the field of music education history.²¹

Jennifer Post in one of her works suggests, “The term ethnomusicologist was once used to identify academically trained professionals who predominantly engaged in ethnographic research and taught college and university classes. Today, ethnomusicologists work both inside and outside of the academy; and many are involved in applied work in arts organization, libraries and museums..... What is understood as ethnographic fieldwork was once in a domain claimed largely by anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and folklorists, but it too has also grown to encompass a broader range of meanings”²²

Evidently, the role of an ethnomusicologist is still taking shape and with changes in the role, there are bound to be changes in the research methodologies. Timothy Rice in *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* says “Although ethnomusicologists may focus, in a particular study, on a single musical performance, piece, repertory, genre, instrument, event, or performer, they almost always situate these items within the life of a society or group of individuals. Ethnomusicological research privileges the study of music as a social expression that is, as a performance that emerges from, and is conducted by individuals acting in groups united by social relationships and shared cultural knowledge.

Those relationships and that knowledge may depend on a common language and heritage, territory, government, economic system, or other institutions, or they may depend on voluntary associations based on shared activities, interests, affinities, values and, beliefs”²³

Institutions that encourage these forms of knowledge must support such relatively new academic disciplines. Universal regulations must be formulated to maintain the homogeneity of the discipline. In the long run, this will create a conducive environment for research to flourish. As John Blacking eloquently put it:

Ethnomusicology can be influential in the world if it can help to find ways of using the performing arts to enlighten the materially powerful, increase the power of the politically

²¹ Jonathan McCollum and David G. Hebert (ed.), *Theory and Method in Historical Ethnomusicology*, p. 372

²² Jennifer. C. Post (ed.), *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader* (Routledge Publishers, 2006), p. 2

²³ Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 27

weak, enrich the emotional experience of all and ensure the maintenance of the peaceful, co-operative relationships that make for good living as much as successful musical performance.²⁴

Ethnomusicology will eventually open up to greater challenges, solutions, pathways, and engage with old, new and contemporary music, musical structures and music making.

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²⁴Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 120