

There is a Method to this Madness

For some time there has been much discussion among the students and the faculty of the Folklore Institute as to whether folklore is best considered as a division of the social sciences or of the humanities. This problem was emphasized in Dr. Dorson's address to the Folklore Club, and in the last Folklore Institute Newsletter in which he reported on the conference "Social Science and Folklore" sponsored by the Social Science Research Council.

I feel that folklore can best be treated scientifically. Folklore is an aspect of culture that can lead one to an understanding of other aspects of culture and Man, the culture-bearing animal. In order to further our understanding of Man and Culture it is often best to adopt the scientific method, i.e. we must set ourselves a problem, clearly define and delimit those phenomena we feel relate to the problem, formulate hypotheses, test them as much as possible, establish theories or formulate new hypotheses. Undoubtedly the folklorist will encounter problems that do not confront the chemist or physicist in their laboratory situation. Nevertheless, the folklorist should be expected to approximate this method as closely as possible. Does this mean that the folklorist must be expert statistics, psychological testing, computer programming, and matrix algebra? I feel that the tools of the folklorist depend upon the type of problem that he formulates.

Folklore has been described by some folklorists as basically "humanistic and impressionistic". However, there is nothing inherently humanistic and impressionistic about the materials of folklore. I believe that many of these "impressions" are no more than potential hypotheses. As such, they should be closely analyzed so that they rest upon objective criteria and may be tested empirically. There is nothing to be gained by labeling sloppy science as good humanism. If one is concerned with gaining knowledge and communicating this knowledge to others, where the problem permits, one must base observations upon objective criteria, hypothesize rationally and test empirically.

Alan Merriam, in his book The Anthropology of Music, states that the "content of the two fields (the social sciences and the humanities) is of a sharply different order." It may be the contents of the social sciences that make them "social" but it is not what makes them "science". Science is an approach, and it is the utilization of this approach that will define a field of study as "scientific". The humanities employ a method predicated upon a totally different base. As Oscar Lewis has noted, the humanities utilize "insight, empathy, intuition, and the element of art." Undoubtedly, some problems will call for the use of such a method, but the problems that are being formulated by folklorists today can best be pursued using the scientific method.

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