

LAS POSITAS COLLEGE
ANTH 3 - Social/Cultural Anthropology

Ethnography Term Project
"Understanding Ethnography: A Hands-on Approach"

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(with sincere thanks to Dr. Lucia Tanassi)

The best way to learn anything is by doing it; the it, in this case, is ethnography. Ethnography is a technique dependent upon personal observations and practical experiences, and yours are as valid as anyone else's. It is both the process and the end product. Your task as an ethnographer is to formulate a research question, design a plan of investigation, perform adequate fieldwork including interviews and participant observation, propose a possible explanation for the original problem, and then describe it all to the rest of us in a written text called an ethnography.

Ordinarily, ethnographic research takes a long time; anthropologists can spend their entire careers living periodically among one group of people or another and never truly arrive at understanding. The best you can hope for is an honest and transparent process. While professional ethnography can take from several months to several years, all the phases of your research and subsequent write-up will have to fit into the 17 weeks available to us. You will need to get an early start and remain focused throughout the term in order to meet all of the deadlines.

Selecting a Topic

The number one rule for choosing a topic of research is this: make it interesting -- to yourself, above all! Choose something that has meaning for you. You'll be working on it all term, so try to pick a topic that you won't lose interest in. Choose something with which you are not familiar, if possible, so that you can use the experience to stretch your mind a bit; don't study your own culture or religion. Stay away from projects that happen in your own natural environment, since it will be hard to maintain a scientific sort of distance from your subject. Avoid projects that rely upon a friend, lover or family member for assistance; the demands of this project are consistent, while personal relationships often are not. Try to keep the focus of your inquiries on adults, since children are not capable of the informed consent required for this project. Don't make the mistake of thinking that any one topic will be "easier" than another; ethnographic research is always complex.

It is important to note that your research must be completely unhidden; you must inform all of your subjects of your work and purpose. Observing strangers and then writing about them without their knowledge is inappropriate and unethical. You will see firsthand just how difficult it is to stick to this fundamental principle; many an ethnographer has wished for a hidden camera to capture the "truth" about whomever he or she is studying. The only truth you should hide, in most cases, is the identity of your informants. You must protect their right to privacy and refrain from discussing anyone who does not wish to participate in your investigations.

Ethnography relies heavily upon the technique of participant observation. This means that you are expected to participate in the community you study, in the hopes that you may get a sense of how insiders think. Do not choose people or practices that make it difficult for you to be non-judgmental, or that put your safety at risk. This assignment is not to be used as a reason for dangerous or illegal activities. All of your research must be safe, honest, legal, transparent and ethical.

Ethnography generally demands face-to-face interaction between the ethnographer and her subjects. If, however, you are physically or logistically unable to perform on-site research, you may consider doing a virtual ethnography in an online community or culture. That choice in no way frees you from the requirements set forth above; the anonymity that we have all come to take for granted in online environments will not be available to you.

Ethnography demands an inquisitive personality. You must be able to ask serious and sometimes personal questions, and you must listen carefully to the answers. You'll need to take extensive notes on all of your observations and interviews; you may even want to tape or video record events for your own reference later on. You must inform your subjects that you are recording them and obtain their permission to do so; be aware of the fact that this may indeed influence their behavior. Don't try to do too much; bear in mind the goal of the project -- to produce about 10 pages worth of ethnography. It's easy to overreach.

When you approach people about your research, you must state your purpose clearly ("I'm doing research for a term paper. May I include you?"). You must always obtain permission to do research, even if you are working within

your own community. You must also protect the identity of your informants unless they give you permission to do otherwise; you may provide them with my voicemail or email if you require a personal reference.

There are an infinite number of topics available for research. It's a good idea to discuss your idea with me briefly before or after class -- before you submit your proposal. This way we can avoid your expending energy on an inappropriate topic and having to re-write the proposal; it must be approved by me before you can begin fieldwork.

Semi-random Sample Topics

Work -- Look into the lives of Silicon Valley survivors, employed or otherwise.

Religion -- Study a religious community of your choice -- but not your own!

Medicine -- Study a community of medical practitioners (alternative or orthodox).

Kinship -- Study the marriage and descent customs of a community of your choice.

Food -- Study aspects of "ethnic" food communities (Asian, Mexican, Fast Food, etc.).

Athletics -- Study a college team, a gym, a group of fans, skater culture, etc.

Family Businesses -- Get to know a family running a restaurant, hotel, etc.

Art -- Work with an artist's colony or collective; look into the politics of personal expression.

Corporate Culture -- Try doing ethnography on the job.

Politics -- Volunteer at a local political organization; be honest about your motives!

Language -- Study language use among bilinguals, ESL students, academics, etc.

Fan Clubs, Culture Clubs -- In person or online.

DISCLAIMER

Las Positas College and this instructor are not responsible for any damages you may incur to your own or anyone else's person or property. If there is any chance that a research topic may involve activities that cause you to be KILLED, INJURED or ARRESTED, pick another topic.

Assignment Schedule

ALL ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE TYPED (EXCEPT FIELDNOTES) and SUBMITTED ON TIME!

Week of 9/12 -- Proposal due (2 page minimum, plus at least one page of references)

****Go to the course website (www.laurenhasten.com/anth3.htm) for a grading rubric to attach to your submission!****
Your proposal should clearly state (1) the community, culture or subculture you wish to study, (2) the specific aspect(s) you wish to research, and (3) an explanation of why you think this topic is interesting. (4) Try to formulate a specific question within your topic; if your community is composed of unemployed Silicon Valley workers, think about narrowing your focus down to a single issue such as medical coverage, for example. You also need to (5) begin to outline your strategies for investigating the problem. What kinds of anthropological methods do you intend to use? Finally, you must (6) include a preliminary annotated bibliography on a separate page with at least 4 published references. List the books or articles using an APA Style list of references (see the website for details); (7) follow each listing with a brief annotation (a few sentences describing the source). (5 points)

Week of 10/24 -- Sample Field Notes due (5 hour minimum)

****Go to the course website (www.laurenhasten.com/anth3.htm) for a grading rubric to attach to your submission!****
At this point in the term I will collect a sample of your fieldnotes representing at least 5 different one-hour interviews with 5 different people. Start your fieldwork as soon as your proposal has been approved. Be safe and polite, and be honest about your motivations. If potential informants refuse to talk to you, thank them for their time and move on. It's a bad idea to attempt to interview informants while they are at work or engaged in the actions you are studying; it is always best to introduce yourself first and then set up a second meeting for your interview. Avoid giving people formal questionnaires to respond to; try to have conversations that flow naturally. Take thorough notes on all observations and interviews; always obtain prior and clear permission for recording. Be ethical! See www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm for guidelines. Hint: You will probably find that you will need to do more reading than planned in order to write your paper later on, so begin reading what you have right away! (10 points)

Week of 11/14 -- Outline + 3 pages due

****Go to the course website (www.laurenhasten.com/anth3.htm) for a grading rubric to attach to your submission!****
Submit a formal outline for your paper, as extensive and complete as possible. You must also begin writing your paper so that you may submit a draft of any three consecutive pages. This is my opportunity to see where you are headed and make sure you are on track; if you fail to complete this part of the assignment, I cannot guarantee that your final paper will be accepted. (5 points)

Week of 12/12 -- Ethnography due (10 page minimum, plus a separate List of References)

****Go to the course website (www.laurenhasten.com/anth3.htm) for a grading rubric to attach to your submission!****

Your paper must be in my hands on the last day of class -- NO EXCEPTIONS. It must be at least 10 typewritten pages long, excluding any charts, diagrams, photos, and the list of references. Use one inch margins all around, 1.5 line spacing and a simple 12 point font. Indent or leave a space between paragraphs. Use APA Style in-text notes. (See the online syllabus and assignment for details.) Be forewarned: Plagiarism in any form will result in a grade of F for the entire project, as well as the further actions stated on the course syllabus.

Your paper should begin with and be organized around a clearly stated central thesis. It should discuss (1) the topic and why it is of interest to you, (2) the specific question you set out to ask or the problem you wish to address, (3) the approach and/or analysis of other writers and researchers who have come before you (scholarship does not exist in a vacuum!), (4) your research methods and procedures, (5) any ethical or methodological issues you have encountered, (6) the findings you have made, (7) any questions that your research may have raised, and (8) the conclusions you have come to with regard to your central questions or thesis. You must also include (9) at least three APA Style in-text notes from three different published references and (10) an APA Style list of references, all of which must be from published books or periodicals.

In general, the focus of ethnography is on its subjects; the paper should be about your informants and interviews. Ten pages may sound like a lot at the start, but by the time you are writing up your research you will be wondering how to keep it that short. Keep autobiographical statements to a minimum; use historical and background information minimally and in context where it comes up, rather than devoting sections of the paper to it. Try to maintain a culturally relative and nonjudgmental stance; simply tell the reader what you learned about or from the people you studied.

(15 points)