

ANTH 3346: Auto/Native Ethnography

Project Guidelines

Components:

- Project Proposal (graded)
- Field Notes Submissions (ungraded)
- 2 Consultations with professor
- Fieldwork Progress Report (graded)
- Final Project Submission (graded)

Description:

An autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore their personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Native ethnography refers to an ethnography written by a cultural insider (as opposed to the traditional anthropological paradigm where an outsider studies a foreign culture).

Students in this course will carry out an auto- or native ethnographic project. In order to do this, students must choose and propose an appropriate topic, conduct participant observation and/or ethnographic interviews throughout the semester, write and submit fieldnotes continuously throughout the semester, submit a fieldwork progress report at mid-term, and synthesize the research experience in a final project. Specific instructions for how to carry out the various stages of this project are below.

In this assignment you are welcome to conduct an autoethnography focused on your own experiences, a native ethnography focusing on the experiences of a group/culture in which you are already a member, or a combination of the two. Although autoethnography does not always include participant observation due to its' focus on self-reflection and memory, for the purposes of this course, students who choose to carry out an autoethnography must still conduct participant observation.

Project Timeline:

Assignment	Deadline
Choose a topic	ASAP during weeks 1 and 2
Proposal	Monday, 2/4, 5 pm
1 st Consultation	Schedule after Proposal submission
Fieldnotes 1	Friday, 2/22
Fieldnotes 2	Friday, 3/1
Fieldnotes 3	Friday, 3/8
Fieldwork Progress Report	Friday, 3/22, 5 pm
2 nd Consultation	Schedule after Fieldwork Progress Report submission
Fieldnotes 5	Friday, 3/29

Fieldnotes 6	Friday, 4/5
Fieldnotes 7	Friday, 4/12
Optional 3 rd Consultation	Schedule as needed
Fieldnotes 8	Friday, 4/19
Final Project Presentation	Week 14 (4/29, 5/1, 5/3)
Final Project Submission	Monday 5/6, 5 pm
Overflow Presentations (TBD)	Exam Period – Monday 5/13 8a-11a

Choosing a Topic/Field Site

Your topic/field site must:

- Be related to a cultural practice/space/identity/etc. that you possess or a group in which you are already a member (the idea here is to flip the ethnographic script to better understand an aspect of YOUR identity, not to examine the life of an “other”)
- Be related to at least one core course concept. Analysis must address the main themes of the course: culture, diversity, power, and inequality in the U.S.
- Be broad enough to provide enough material for a semester-long project, but also narrow enough to be manageable for a project of this size/duration.
- Be something that you have safe, convenient access to throughout the semester. To complete this project you must carry out a total of 8-16 hours of observation on at least 8 occasions. If you choose a topic in a location that is difficult to access, this will be a difficult project for you to complete. (Thus, field sites close to campus, work, or home may be your best options.)
- Grant you permission to carry out your work, in the event that the space is not 100% public. We will discuss this in greater detail in class and in consultations if this concern is relevant to you.
- Not present risk to yourself or the participants by virtue of your engaging in the research. In other words, for the purposes of this assignment, students should not work with any vulnerable populations, should not ask questions about potentially stigmatizing or illegal activities. In general, project should pose no risk of endangerment or harm to the community/culture/group/location under study. The professor reserves the right to determine what subjects are appropriate for students to pursue.

Students should start thinking about the topic they would like to pursue as soon as possible during weeks 1 and 2 in order to submit the proposal on Monday, 2/5. Some examples of viable topics are:

- Being a member of a fraternity or sorority
- Being a member of a sports team or frequent user of a gym/exercise facility/class
- Being a member of a student organization or special interest club
- Being an international student at SMU
- Being a Starbucks barista (or other profession/work position)
- Participating in an online or virtual community/message board/social network

Submitting Field Notes:

For this assignment, students will be asked to conduct eight (8) sessions of ethnographic research. For most of you, this will mean eight sessions of participant observation, lasting

between 1 and 2 hours each. Each of these sessions should produce at least 2 pages of field notes (see guidance on how to write field notes below). Field notes from these observation sessions will be submitted on a weekly basis. Some of you may opt to replace one or two sessions of participant observation with ethnographic interview(s) with key informants. In this instance, please submit your interview notes as one of your fieldnotes submissions.

The Proposal:

2-3 pages typed, 12 pt Times New Roman, single-spaced, normal margins

****Due Feb 4th, 5 pm****

Students must submit a detailed proposal outlining the **topic and research question(s), project methodology, relevant course themes/concepts to be addressed, and the proposed final project format**. Proposals must be discussed with and approved by the professor during an **in-person consultation meeting** prior to the proposal submission deadline.

The proposal should answer the following questions:

1. What is the topic you aim to study? What is the group/field site? What makes this topic interesting to you (interesting enough to pursue a semester-long project about it)? What is your personal connection to this topic/community (in what way are you carrying out an auto- or native ethnography)?
 - In this section you should outline a few (3-5) guiding research questions. These may be refined later.
2. What are some potential links between this topic and the course material? What understanding do you hope to gain of the course themes (culture, diversity, and power in the U.S. and beyond) by examining this topic through an ethnographic project? What do you hope to learn by carrying out this project?
3. How, specifically, do you plan to carry out the research component of the project? Where will you go, when, and why? What will you observe? Will you conduct interviews? Who will you talk to and why? What questions will you ask, and why? What events will you attend/participate in? Do you have ready access to this group/site?
4. What are the main challenges you think you might encounter in carrying out the project? Are there any significant ethical concerns that need to be taken into consideration? Does your research pose any risk to the site/group/participants involved? Will you need to inform others of your activities, or will your research take place exclusively in public spaces?
5. What is the proposed final format for the project? If you choose Option 3 (the creative option), please explain what the final product will look like.

Your proposal will be evaluated based on the feasibility of your project and the depth of your answers to the above questions. You and the professor should have a crystal clear picture of exactly what the project is and how you aim to complete it after reviewing your proposal.

Fieldwork Progress Report:

12 pt Times New Roman, single-spaced, normal margins

****Due March 22nd, 5 pm****

The Fieldwork Progress Report Assignment should consist of the following in one clean Microsoft Word document:

1. A 2-page progress report reflecting on the following:
 - a. Re-state your research questions and describe how you have refined/revise them, if relevant.
 - b. What have you learned so far about the topic of study?
 - c. What have you learned so far about participant observation/interviewing? Benefits/drawbacks of the methods you have used?
 - d. What successes have you had so far? How do you plan to apply what you've learned from these successes as you continue your project?
 - e. What challenges have you faced? How do you plan to address them?
 - f. Thinking ahead to your final project, what are some preliminary findings/analyses that you might include in your final project? In other words, have you found any answers to your research questions yet?
 - g. Do you feel like you have any gaps in your data– if so, what are they, and what do you plan to do next to address these gaps?
 - h. What questions do you have for the professor before moving forward with the next phase of the project?
2. At least four sets of expanded, proof-read field notes from at least four periods of observation (this should consist of a minimum of 4 pages single-spaced). Each set should be labeled with a number (1-4) and the date, time, location, and duration of the observation/interview.

The Progress Report should be proof-read and written in clear language, but as it is a reflective assignment you may choose to use informal language where relevant.

After submitting the Fieldwork Progress Report, please write to the professor to schedule your second in-person consultation.

The Final Project:

****Due May 6th, 5 pm****

Students will produce a final project based on their (auto)ethnographic observations. Your final project for this course may take a few different forms.

- Option 1: 12-15 page paper** (this could be in the form of a formal analytical paper, or could incorporate a creative writing piece a la Miner's Nacirema article)
- Option 2: 20 minute (detailed) oral presentation (with visual aids/hand-outs)
- Option 3: Other (educational video, online exhibit, blog series, other approved creative project) with a poster presentation of topic**

*Students who choose options 1 or 3 will be expected to give a short (5-minute) oral presentation of their project during the last week of class.

All final projects should include, in some way, the following elements:

1. Detailed description of the topic, field site, group, etc.
2. Discussion of the methodology used, including benefits and challenges
3. Discussion of the most interesting observations/learnings. This may include ethnographic anecdotes or quotes from interviewees.
4. Analysis of findings – what does your data mean? What is going on here? What did you learn from the data? What explains the things you observed?
5. Discussion of course concepts - How can the application of course concepts help us to understand what you observed/learned? (For some examples of how to do this, see the Sample Field Notes Write-up on Canvas.)
6. Questions for further research.

In order to produce the Final Project, students are welcome (and encouraged) to use what they wrote in their progress reports, but the final project must go beyond just what was included in the progress report. For example, merely copying the same discussion of methodological challenges will not suffice. In the final project, students should also include new reflections on the fieldwork that was completed after the progress report was submitted.

About Participant Observation and Writing Fieldnotes:

Ethnographers engage in participant observation in order to gain insight into cultural practices and phenomena. These insights develop over time and through repeated analysis of many aspects of our fieldsites. To facilitate this process, ethnographers must learn how to take useful and reliable notes regarding the details of life in their research contexts. These fieldnotes will constitute a major part of the data on which later conclusions will be based. Fieldnotes should be written as soon as possible after leaving the fieldsite, immediately if possible. Even though we may not think so when we are participating and observing, we are all very likely to forget important details unless we write them down very quickly. Since this may be very time-consuming, students should plan to leave a block of time for writing just after leaving the research context. Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) have developed a list of what should be included in all fieldnotes:

1. Date, time, and place of observation
2. Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site
3. Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, taste
4. Personal responses to the act of recording fieldnotes/ personal feelings during fieldwork experiences
5. Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language
6. Questions about people or behaviors at the site for future investigation
7. Page numbers to help keep observations in order

There are 4 major parts of fieldnotes, which should be kept distinct from one another in some way when we are writing them:

1. Jottings are the brief words or phrases written down while at the fieldsite or in a situation about which more complete notes will be written later. Usually recorded in a small notebook, jottings are intended to help us remember things we want to include when we write the full-fledged notes. While not all research situations are appropriate for writing jottings all the time, they do help a great deal when sitting down to write afterwards.
2. Description of everything we can remember about the occasion you are writing about - a meal, a ritual, a meeting, a sequence of events, etc. While it is useful to focus primarily on things you did or observed which relate to the guiding question, some amount of general information is also helpful. This information might help in writing a general description of the site later, but it may also help to link related phenomena to one another or to point our useful research directions later.
3. Analysis of what you learned in the setting regarding your research questions and other related points. What themes can you begin to identify regarding your guiding question? Can you begin to draw preliminary connections or potential conclusions based on what you learned? What questions do you have to help focus your observation on subsequent visits? Sometimes, your analysis of fieldnotes may spur the development of a new research question, or a new direction for your project. Welcome these changes – this is a mark of good field work!
4. Reflection on what you learned of a personal nature. What was it like for you to be doing this research? What felt comfortable for you about being in this site and what felt uncomfortable? In what ways did you connect with informants, and in what ways didn't you? While this is extremely important information, be especially careful to separate it from analysis.

About Ethnographic Interviewing:

Selecting an Informant

Your role is to learn from this person, to be taught by him or her. Remember that informants are human beings with problems, concerns, and interests. Also keep in mind that you may not always share the same interpretation/point of view as your informants, even though you are a “native” ethnographer. Listen carefully during these times of disagreement – they are often some of the most revealing moments of field work.

Preparing for the Interview

Successfully interviewing informants depends on a cluster of skills. These include: asking questions, listening instead of talking, taking a passive rather than an assertive role, expressing verbal interest in the other person, and showing interest by appropriate eye contact and other nonverbal means.

When preparing your interview, think about the kinds of ethnographic questions you will use. There should be a mix of descriptive and structural questions. Descriptive questions are broad and general, allowing people to describe their experiences, their daily activities, and objects

and people in their lives. Structural questions are more specific and explore responses offered to descriptive questions. They allow you to find out how informants have organized their knowledge. You should plan to bring a list of questions to your interview for reference, but the interview should flow like a conversation rather than a question and answer session.

Conducting the Interview

It is best to think of the ethnographic interview as friendly conversation, in which your informant is teaching you about their perspective on the topic at hand. A few minutes of easygoing talk interspersed here and there throughout the interview will help with developing and maintaining rapport. Here are a few other tips:

- Expressing Interest. Use both verbal cues and nonverbal cues to let the informant know that you are interested in what he or she is saying, and want him/her to continue.
- Expressing Ignorance. Even if you have already heard what the informant is telling you, try to make sure that you show interest and that you would like to know more.
- Avoid repetition. Make sure that the questions you are asking are not redundant.
- Taking turns. Even though you really want to know more about the person you are interviewing, try to make sure that you engage your informant in a two-way conversation. Turn taking helps keep the encounter balanced.
- Repeat the informant's answer to make sure that you understood well; do not try to make your own interpretation or paraphrase what has been said.
- Above all, be respectful of your informant's knowledge and experience.

Ethical Principles

When conducting ethnographic research, there are ethical principles that you should keep in mind. For example, be sure to safeguard your informant's rights, interests and sensitivities. Communicate the aims of the interview as well as possible to the informant. Your informant should have the right to remain anonymous and speak "off record." Above all, remember that an ethnographer must never do any harm to her/his participants or their community. It is also a good practice to invite your participants to review your work when it is completed. As such, you are welcome to invite your participants to your final presentations at the end of the semester.