

SUGGESTIONS FOR ETHNOGRAPHIES

For basic information on what “ethnographies” are all about, see “Background to Ethnography” (below). In order to do an ethnography, you need to have a basic question or topic in mind, from which you will devise a research strategy of interviews, surveys, and/or participant observation, and library research. The suggestions below are meant to help you do this.

Suggestions for research topics:

Research on cultural differences between ethnic groups (see professor for more information).

Organizations: service clubs, fan clubs, hobby clubs, churches, fraternities or sororities, convents, political clubs

Why do these organizations exist? What do they do? How are they changing? Study the difference between different colleges (do participant observation and interviews at other place, esp. if you know someone there).

Events: Conventions, concerts, festivals, sports events, pro wrestling, or anything that looks unique or unusual from your area.

Activities or Hobbies: Homeschooling, sports (e.g. hunting as rite-of-passage), video gaming or internet chatting, fan groups related to popular culture or other activities, unique religious services such as “healing services” or youth or seeker services. Ask around on campus, or see what is going on in the South Bend area.

Workers: Interview service staff at restaurants or hotels, ask them about observations of different people. Volunteer at an organization, and use your experience and the people you meet to write a paper. Example: Contact an assistance organization. Find out about their lives and cultures. See if any other of the categories on this page fits your situation. Ask around on campus or check the newspaper.

Groups of people: immigrants, minorities, other subcultures such as gangs, goths, geeks, jocks, yuppies, South Bend “drum circles” and communities, etc. How do they express their identity? What are other group's perceptions of them? What adjustments do they make to fit into their environment?

Cultural Change Interview senior citizens, long-time residents of neighborhoods, store owners, farmers...

Contact older graduates of your school. Ask them how life has changed since they were kids. For example:

Ask them about school rules, dress codes, favorite hangouts, and other things that interest you. How do they feel their lives have turned out? What would they do differently?

In a neighborhood where there is no major development under way, talk to the “mom and pop” grocery storeowners. For example: How has business changed since the big supermarkets came in? What do people get in these small stores that is missing from the larger supermarkets? Make sure to relate all these changes to wider cultural changes and issues discussed in class.

Folklore Analyze local stories that reveal cultural values. See me for an additional handout that discusses this.

Cultural Productions, such as museums, media productions. What values are they promoting? What is their interpretation of history?

Issues, such as political or social issues. Is racism a concern on campus? What are people's religious practices and beliefs? What differences are there in gender roles or beliefs about gender roles?

Places: Street ethnography, malls, cities, communities, neighborhoods, trailer parks. How have they changed? How do people get along? Is there crime? Pick a neighborhood or street to study! Pay particular attention to what, if anything, the people who live there have in common with each other. Or focus on a specific question such as the concept of “trailer park trash.” Where does this concept come from and what does it mean? Is there any reality to it?

Possible general questions for groups of people:

Do they socialize with each other, either through block parties, garage sales, or neighborhood associations?

Pay attention to differences in landscaping, home décor, and the use of indoor and outdoor space. For example:

Where do families congregate for socializing?

Pick an office, shop, bowling alley, or softball diamond and explore the lives of those who play or work together. Do they see each other outside of these work/play situations? Do a study of “corporate culture” (exemplified in “Dilbert” comic strips).

Family Culture: Do a comparison of families, and discuss reasons for differences, focusing on cultural, not psychological, reasons

For more ideas, read the local newspaper for announcements about clubs, meetings, events, etc. that might make an interesting ethnographic study. Are there international or other kinds of clubs there where you can meet people for interviews and go to an event or two?

Things to ask about (if relevant or appropriate to your particular topic):

Ask open-ended questions to give the informant as much freedom as possible to express themselves.

Opening question such as “Why do you do this? Why do you belong to this” are good. Their responses will stimulate other follow-up questions. "Why do they do it?" "What does it mean?" "What values do they represent?" "How is it (they) changing?" are all questions, among many others that could be kept in mind during this process.

Cultural Anthropology Paper Guidelines

Research: One key requirement is to include both fieldwork and library research. You are required to go out and talk to someone (do interviews), witness or participate in an activity, or both. A paper done using only library research is not acceptable (unless I grant you an exception beforehand). For the library research, find out what has been written on your topic by others. See me if you think library research (or field research) is not relevant to your topic.

You may decide how best to do your research, but I suggest that you first conduct a thorough literature search on your chosen topic. Review what has been published (books, periodicals, newspapers, Internet) and gather basic information on your topic. **Look for these books and articles (e.g. First Search, Wilson Search) on the library databases.** Use interlibrary loan (through Worldcat) to find books not at our library (which means you can't wait until the last minute!) These should be your first sources of information. Use Internet search engines only to look for additional materials or ethnographic information if appropriate for your topic. This literature may help give you questions and issues for your interviews and it may help you figure out which specific topics or issues you are interested in. Remember to integrate your research with topics and issues from class, especially focusing on the idea of culture. Attempt a cultural analysis of the topic you have chosen.

When writing the paper up: First of all, utilize what you have learned in your writing classes! How do you write a good paper? Pick an appropriate topic, do research, organize and structure the paper well (use subheadings in the paper), and make sure you edit the paper through at least two drafts. Structure the paper well, both as a whole (introduction, main body, conclusion, etc.) and within each paragraph (topic sentence, sentences that follow each other logically). **Cite your references in the text of the paper**, using a recognized method. The standard anthropology style is the author/date method in parentheses in the text (Chicago Manual of Style), not foot or endnotes, but I will permit others. Put any lists of interview questions or other supplementary information in an appendix to the paper, if appropriate. Also, make sure you combine information from the course with your own research and analysis. Look through course readings to see what topics relate to your paper. Show that you can think analytically, logically, and creatively. Make sure you are not plagiarizing, since this will hurt your grade for the entire class and can even result in class failure. A skillful blending of various sources into a well-argued interesting essay is a major part of a good paper.

Structuring the paper: There are several ways to structure or organize your paper. One way is below.

I. Introduction- What are you interested in and why? What is the question, issue, group, event, etc. that you studied? Introduce it to the reader. What is the background?

II. Research: How did you do the research? (Participant/observation, interviews, surveys, etc?) Add details, complications, etc. Have you found anything written about your topic before? (Library research!) What did you find? What information did you get?

III. Analysis and interpretation of the information: What does it mean? Did you have a thesis, and did what you find confirm or contradict your thesis? What others have written on the topic? What does your information reveal about the culture of what you studied? What topics in the text or brought up in class does your project relate to? Tie material into the course as much as possible.

IV. Conclusion Sum up the paper and your analysis.

The paper is worth 25% of your final grade, and will be graded using the following scale:

1. Organization: the extent to which the paper moves from section to section and paragraph to paragraph logically and coherently, with an introduction and conclusion that describes and sums up the paper clearly. Can the reader follow your paper easily? (3 points)
2. Spelling, grammar and citations (3 points)
3. Methodology (How did you do your research?) and use of course material (7 points)
4. Originality: How well did you summarize the information? What was the quality of your analysis and interpretation? (7 points)

BACKGROUND TO ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography employs both science and art. Its scientific method is participant observation. Its art is the meaningful description of peoples and cultures. The reader of ethnography should learn something new about a people, a culture, a subculture, or situation. The ethnographer should not only learn about, but experience that which s/he studies. It is the ethnographic experience that changes perspective because the ethnographer has to *live* what s/he studies.

The art of ethnography makes the exotic familiar and then puts the common place in a new light. In order to execute this artistic effort, the ethnographer has to maintain the objectivity of an outsider while participating as an insider.

Consider an ethnography of a MacDonald's restaurant. Imagine that your audience is someone who has been shut out of everyday life for the last fifty years. How would you describe this setting to such a person in a way s/he will understand? How would you explain it so the person could know how to act appropriately and get what s/he needs—for example, know how to order a hamburger? This is the task of ethnography.

Possible ethnographic subjects surround us. One way to do ethnography is through intensive interviews with the natives of a culture or subculture. Interviews with one or several fortune tellers could supply material for an ethnography about the subculture of psychics.

Another possible approach is to be an ethnographer of something in which you already participate. Reflexively analyze what you do, how you experience the situation, and explain the reasons for objective and observable results. Then, check your observations by asking other participants about the setting or situation. For example, you might work in a restaurant as a cook. Objectively examine what goes on around you. Ask cooks in other restaurants about their experience. Talk to other personnel (waiters, waitresses, etc.) in other restaurants.

The ethnographic experience takes us out of ourselves. It forces us to see through the eyes of others. If it does not do this, it is not ethnography.

The ethnographic project will help loosen the ties of Euroamerican ethnocentrism even if what you study is part of that dominant culture. The ethnographic experience causes you to question cultural assumptions from the outsider's point of view.