

## Ethnography & Ethnology

In the field, anthropologists “step out” of their familiar perspective in order to investigate unfamiliar phenomena. This allows the anthropologist to make objective or detached observations. For this assignment, you will make the familiar strange by “stepping out” to adopt an outsider’s perspective of a familiar routine in order to discover the many levels of behaviors and beliefs that make people act and think the way they do. You will also be applying ethnology by conducting a mini cross-cultural study.

Stepping Out: Consider this parody of preparing breakfast as an example of making the familiar unfamiliar:

Every morning, the reigning patriarch, as if in from the hunt, shouts from the kitchen, “How many people would like a poached egg?” Women and children take turns saying yes or no.

In the meantime, the women talk among themselves and designate one among them the toastmaker. As the eggs near readiness, the reigning patriarch calls out to the designated toast maker, “The eggs are about ready. Is there enough toast?”

“Yes,” comes the deferential reply. “The last two pieces are about to pop up.” The reigning patriarch then proudly enters, bearing a plate of poached eggs before him. Throughout the course of the meal, the women and children, including the designated toastmaker, perform the obligatory ritual praise song, saying, “These sure are great eggs, Dad.”<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, the author has made the familiar unfamiliar and in the process uncovered power and gender relationships. The father is the leader while the women take on roles as helpers and praise singers. By employing parody, the author allows the reader to see it as an outsider may describe the activity.

Anthropologists also employ subjectivity in their attempt to understand other cultures. For instance, an anthropologist and his wife were studying the Ilongot of the Philippines, who sever heads as a ritual of grief and revenge over a deceased relative. It was not until the anthropologist’s wife died in an accident during fieldwork that he began to understand the complex emotions involved in the Ilongot’s headhunting.

[N]othing in my own experience equipped me even to imagine the anger possible in bereavement until after [his wife’s] death in 1981. Only then was I in a position to grasp the force of what the Ilongot had repeatedly told me about grief, rage, and headhunting.<sup>2</sup>

Anthropologists use both the objective and subjective self to understand cultures through listening to and questioning our assumptions, views, and interpretations.

<sup>1</sup> In, *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by B. Stone Sunstein and C. Chiseri-Strater, pp. 8. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 9

### The Assignment:

Pair up with one student in the class. Decide on some activity to study. Some suggestions include a sporting event, the grocery store, a restaurant, family interaction, the workplace, a church, a library, the mall, etc. You may want to focus on one activity, such as meal preparation for a family, pre-game activity for a football game, getting ready for work or school, or interaction at the office water cooler. It is up to you.

Once you and your partner have chosen an activity, you must make your observations independent of one another. This can be done a number of ways. For instance, if you decide to make your observations at a restaurant, you could go to the same restaurant at different times of the day or go to two different restaurants--it depends on what question you ask, e.g., How does patron behavior differ at Shari’s Restaurant at 1:00am and 10:00am Sunday morning?

After completing your observations, you will write an ethnographic report that includes an ethnology (cross-cultural comparison).

**DO NOT MAKE YOUR OBSERVATIONS TOGETHER.** The only reason you need a partner is so you can complete your ethnology (cross-cultural comparison). Determine a date that you want to exchange your ethnographies. Make sure you give yourselves enough time to write your cross-cultural comparison. You will not include your partner's ethnography as they will be submitting their own report.

**Writing the Ethnography:** Organize your ethnography using the following subheadings:

- I. Introduction
- II. Methodology
- III. Data Presentation & Analysis
- IV. Ethnology
- V. Conclusion

- Write a 1500-2000 word essay; there are questions included below that can help you get started.
- single-space
- spell and grammar check
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In your ethnography, you want to engage in what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description.” Thick description does more than simply describe something; it provides context to make the description meaningful. It is this process that helps anthropologists get to the native’s perspective. Think about a wink. Depending on the context, a wink can mean several different things: a come-on, a shared secret, etc. Thick description requires that you examine the interconnection of the things you observe.

**Information to help you get started** (adapted from Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater)

**Collecting data:**

Conduct your fieldwork at a time that is convenient for you. I recommend a minimum of an hour for observation. Keep careful field notes, describing in detail the place, people, and behaviors you observe. Also record your subjective responses and feelings and how they affect your data. Ask yourself,

- What surprised me? (to track your assumptions)
- What intrigues me? (to track your positions)
- What disturbed me? (to track your tensions)

Don’t worry about analyzing your data as you collect it. You will formulate hypotheses about what is important in the subculture you are studying after your fieldwork is complete. This does not mean that if an idea occurs to you while you are making your observations that you shouldn’t write it down, but it is easy to get caught up in the analysis and miss activities. Keep as detailed of notes as possible – you can never go back and observe the exact same thing again.

**Writing:**

Once you have completed your observations, it is time to begin writing your ethnography. Before you begin writing, ask yourself the following (these questions can help you get started in organizing your data before you begin writing; YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SPECIFICALLY ANSWER ALL OF THESE QUESTIONS—THEY ARE JUST TO HELP YOU GET STARTED):

- What’s going on here? (asks descriptive questions of your data)
- Where’s the culture? (what is the language, place description, rituals, behaviors, artifacts, etc.)
- What’s the story? (what is the story of the culture and what is the story of how you did your research)
- Who is my audience?
- What do I want them to get out of this?
- What do I want to get out of this?
- What position am I going to take?

- Do I want to be scientific/distanced or do I want to be more narrative/involved. The scientific approach generally reads more formally than a narrative approach and is usually written in the 3<sup>d</sup> person. The narrative approach is more personal and written in the 1<sup>st</sup> person. Whichever approach you take, you need to do two things: 1) make sure that your readers understand what you are doing and 2) do justice to the information about the group you studied.

Here are a few tips to help you write the various parts (**AS BEFORE, THESE ARE SUGGESTIONS ONLY—YOU ARE NOT REQUIRED TO ADDRESS EACH POINT**):

*Introduction:* This should be a lead-in to your case study. It should act as the frame for the picture you will be presenting. It should discuss the goals of the study and the questions you tried to answer. One to two paragraphs should be long enough.

Think about questions such as:

- Why did you choose this subculture to study?
- What information will be included in your study?
- How are you going to present your study? (basically a road map to your ethnography)
- What's missing right now that won't allow us to get a clear picture of what you are doing? (e.g., you couldn't observe the entire event)

*Methodology:* How did you conduct your study? Some other points to consider:

- How did you select the specific place for your study?
- How do you fit into the picture?
- What do you bring to the study?
- What are your goals?
- What are your experiences?
- How does your worldview influence the study in general?

*Data Presentation & Analysis:* This will be the longest part of your ethnography. Here you present your findings, engage in thick description, analyze/interpret the data you collected. Go through your data, find out if there is any pattern, major points that come up again and again, discrepancies that are important to note. What cultural values and norms are inferred or displayed by the behaviors? Think about the function of the various traits you've observed. Make sure you explain why you chose the information you are presenting and why you leave out other aspects that you also explored but are not telling us about. Similar to any other paper, you need to support and develop your main points by using specific examples from your data collection. You can structure your study around:

- thematic units (section headings)
- times you did your study
- artifacts important for your study
- distinct cultural practices within the group you studied

*Cross-Cultural Comparison (Ethnology):* This section should be minimum 4-5 paragraphs comparing the subculture you studied with that of your partner. Note the similarities and differences and propose hypotheses (explanations) for the similarities and differences.

*Conclusion:* In your final section you can indicate what research still needs to be done:

- discuss how your line of argument needs further discussion (it doesn't end right here);
- discuss the parts of your question that remain unanswered;
- discuss the next question to be answered;
- discuss the implications of your main findings for later discussions

This assignment has been approved by the Human Subject Review Board at Cascadia Community College  
The American Anthropological Association's statement of ethics in research can be found at  
<http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm>.

### **Course Outcomes**

The following highlighted course outcomes are met by this assignment:

A. Illustrate their communication skills by:

- i. Using fundamental cultural anthropology terms and concepts in proper context (2.c, 2.d, 4.b)
- ii. Developing or improving both verbal and written communication skills (2.c, 2.d, 4)
- iii. Clearly expressing thoughts about human culture and adaptive processes (2.c, 2.d, 4.b)
- iv. Successfully completing team work both in- and out-of-class (2.c, 2.d, 3)

B. Demonstrate their critical thinking and problem solving skills by:

- i. Recognizing key elements of human culture (2.a, 2.c)
- ii. Analyzing culture at various levels (individual, community, national) and from an anthropological perspective (1.a, 1.b)
- iii. Explaining anthropological theory and its application to human culture (1.a, 1.b)
- iv. Assessing the interaction between culture, biology and the environment (1.a, 1.b)
- v. Identifying cultural traits and determining their function within their cultural context (1.a, 1.b)

C. Illustrate their level of cultural literacy by:

- i. Demonstrating the ability to be culturally relative (1.a, 1.c, 2.a, 2.b)
- ii. Interrelating personal experience and societal forces within the context of cultural anthropology (1.a, 1.b)
- iii. Demonstrating an understanding of why human cultures vary (1.a, 1.b)
- iv. Demonstrating respect for the diversity of human culture (1)

D. Show their level of information literacy by:

- i. Using and evaluating a variety of internet resources (2, 4.c)
- ii. Assessing anthropological information in general and scholarly resources (1.a, 2.a, 4.b, 4.c)
- iii. Using appropriate citation standards for anthropology (4.b, 4.c)
- iv. Exploring how anthropological knowledge is gained by practicing a few of cultural anthropology's methodologies, e.g., real-world observation (2.a, 2.c, 2.d)