

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
SEMINAR SOCIAL CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
ANTH486-010

GUIDE FOR ETHNOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography builds on description, analysis and interpretation of data gathered in fieldwork. Ethnographic description is by no means the straight forward unproblematic task it is thought to be in the social sciences. Test this. Select any building on campus or the food court of Trabant and write a description without using any terms of appraisal. It is very difficult to do. For example, you could say that the food court is a 'place' to eat and I would say what you mean by the term place. Is eating the only activity that occurs in the food court? Description in ethnography is a complex effect, achieved through writing and dependent upon the *strategic choice and construction of available detail*. The presentation of interpretation and analysis is inseparably bound up with the systematic and vivid representation of a world that seems total and real to the reader.

Perhaps the hardest notion to grasp is that the purpose of ethnography is not solely to describe, in the sense of deriving generalizations for behavior. The purpose is to provide a coherent representation of human action, that is, to draw a conclusion through interpretation based on certain descriptive facts. Thus, interpretation depends on the selection and presentation of certain facts.

The first selection of facts/data happens in fieldwork – what you see while you are there or what the “people” let you see or what seems important to them or based on your own quirky self. A second selection comes when some record from fieldwork provides evidence for some interpretation.

The ethnography you will write entails the close study of a local culture through fieldwork which requires many hours at the site – observing and talking with members of culture, taking notes, interviewing and perhaps participating in the culture's activities. The objective of this work is to produce a written account of *how people of this culture generate and interpret social behavior and how they use language to make and share meaning*

PART I WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY

THINK ABOUT SUCH QUESTIONS:

Why are you doing THIS PARTICULAR study?

Is there a need for it?

Is there a problem you are addressing?

What position am I going to take?

Why would you want to read this ethnography?

Do I want to be more distant (third person) or do I want to be more involved (first person)?

QUESTIONS FOR THE FIRST PART OF YOUR ETHNOGRAPHY

What is the problem?

What is the need?

Why is there a need for such a study?

What's been done in the general area you are studying?

What's been left out?

What's missing right now that won't allow us to get a clear picture of what you are doing?

What is your study doing better, doing more?

What is your contribution to the discussion?

What information will be included in your study?

QUESTIONS FOR SECOND PART OF YOUR ETHNOGRAPHY

What approach (methods) did you use for your study?

How are you going to do what you are proposing to do? What's your over-all design for research?

Is your approach influenced by other people you have read? Who? Why?

How did you select your participants?

Why did you use these specific participants?

What methods are you – an interview, notes, papers you collected, number of participants' their age and gender, general background?

Why are you using these methods?

What makes them work better than other methods?

How do you fit into the picture? What do you bring to the study? What are your goals?

What are your experiences relative to your research?

How does your world view influence your study in general, the way you ask questions, who you selected as participants?

TOPIC FOR THIRD PART OF YOUR ETHNOGRAPHY

WHAT HAVE YOU DISCOVERED WHEN YOU DID YOUR FIELDWORK? WHAT IS YOUR STRATEGY FOR DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA?

This will be the longest part of your ethnography. Here you present your findings, engage in “thick description” (data embedded in context), analysis/interpret the data you collected. Go through your data (field notes, ethnographic log, transcriptions of interviews, and your notes on interviews or any other form of information). Find out if there is any pattern that comes up again and again and identify discrepancies that are important to note. Make sure that 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. (See section on Arguments). You can structure your study around the following:

- Thematic units
- People you interviewed
- Places you went for interviews
- Distinct Cultural practices within the group you studied
- Any other structure that makes sense in the context of your research.
- Review forms of essay writing.

FOURTH SECTION OR CONCLUSION: PULLING IT TOGETHER

In your final section (conclusion) you can indicate what your study tried to contribute to the discussion and what still needs to be done.

- Discuss how your line of argument needs further discussion
- Discuss parts of your research questions that remain unanswered
- Discuss the next questions to be asked
- Discuss the implications of your main findings for later research

ARGUMENTS

Ethnography is composed of arguments. Ethnographic arguments consist of claims (conclusions, assertions, propositions, explanations and interpretations) about people’s behavior (or about a culture or society) and the meanings people ascribe to their behavior. Your data constitutes (grounds, facts) evidence for or against your claims i.e., if these data, then these claims.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ARGUMENT

In its most simplified form an argument begins with a claim, an assertion or something said about something, followed by evidence or reasons in support of that claim. Evidence gives credibility to that claim. It lends truth to the claim. The form begins with

data. If these data, then these claims. The strength of the claim is then supported by evidence in the form of analysis and interpretation.

FORMAT OF ARGUMENT

The first part of the argument is the claim – an assertion of something – followed by reasons which come from your interpretation/analysis. An argument looks like this:

Claim:

1. Reason
2. Reason
3. Reason.

Your first reason is the strongest of the three or four reasons you might have.

Once you have mapped out your argument, assess the reasoning: Ask yourself the following questions to help you identify weaknesses in your argument:

- Is there an alternative explanation that is possible or probable?
- Is the evidence/reason presented sufficient

Evidence refers to the support given a claim; the support is in the form of data or information or some other form of proof

- What assumptions so the reasons rest on? An assumption is what one takes for granted to be true but which may in fact not be true.