ANTH 370
Ethnographic Field Techniques
(Method)
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Course Goals and Organization

The purpose of this course is to help students practice and develop the skills necessary to anthropology’s signature ethnographic methods, participant observation and in-depth interviewing. Traditionally, the cultural anthropologist has been thrown into his or her first field situation to sink or swim. The premise of this course, however, is that pre-field training and practice can be valuable preparation and can accelerate the progression from novice to expert performance.

Ethnography is a form of communication comprising three elements, an author, a subject, and a reader or audience. Reading an ethnographic book or article, we see the three as quite distinct. The ethnographic author goes someplace, writes about the cultural community there, and we read about it. But the complexity of the ethnographic process—of which the book or article is just the final product—results from the distinctive ways that the three blend together. For example, at times the author becomes the subject—the ethnographer includes him or herself as part of the ethnographic reality being reported on. The subject person or community being written about is also partly a co-author as well as very often a reader. And at times the ethnographer is also the reader, as when fieldnotes are being produced for later use in writing up.

This course will focus on the production of fieldnotes, which is the part of the process closest to the techniques and methods of data collection. Over the semester, participants in the course will continually engage in limited individual data collection exercises, produce fieldnotes, and join in a seminar style discussion about the results with the rest of the class. Each student will be expected to report on his or her problems and successes in using the techniques under study.

Unlike formal, quantitative methods, ethnographic field research techniques draw heavily on ordinary social skills that we use constantly in everyday life to learn about—and also disclose ourselves to—others. But clearly the ethnographic situation is a special kind of social terrain, as the large body of tragicomic “fieldwork stories” in the anthropological literature attests. In these stories the bumbling neophyte ethnographer, relying on his or her own cultural categories, fails to see what is in plain sight and doesn’t really hear that is being said. The lesson is that we are all novices when we encounter an unfamiliar culture, and special efforts are necessary to deconstruct and unlearn some of our intuitive, culture-specific interaction skills and categories of knowledge.
Projects, Requirements, and Evaluation

Ethnography is a time consuming activity, and this course will require considerable sustained effort throughout the semester. The class will meet twice a week in an informal seminar setting. Guests, including anthropology faculty members and graduate students recently returned from field studies, will be invited to discuss ethnographic problems and solutions. In at least one meeting per week students will be expected to discuss their own on-going ethnographic exercises, documented by fieldnotes.

Students who register for more than three credits will be expected to carry out a substantial, coherent project for the course. Students registered for three credits will pursue more limited practice exercises each week, organized around shared theme. The theme this semester will be an ethnography of the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. The student will choose a specific research site, such as one of the libraries or a dormitory, as well as a focused activity such as eating, using computer labs, and so on, that interests him or her. The goal of this team project will be ethnographic research that will be useful to the development of university policies and practices.

Grades for the course will be based on the extent and quality of participation in the exercises and class discussions.

Required Text


Tentative Plan of Work

Week:          Problem:
1.            Introduction/writing fieldnotes
2.            Identifying a Research Question
3.            Making Contact
4.            Permissions: Human Subjects Issues
5.            Describing Contexts and Settings
6.            Interviews: Structured and Semistructured
7.            Interviews: Open
8.            Life Histories
9. Surveys
10. Participant Observation
11. Stories / Episodes
12. Natural Conversation
13. Quotes
14. Visual Documentation
15. Visual Analysis: Landscape and Built Environment
16. Policy Implications