Ethnographic Research Methods

Instructor: Lauren Deal
Pronouns: She/Her/Hers
Department of Anthropology
Brown University

Land Acknowledgement
Recognizing Anthropology’s role in the settler colonial project and the on-going occupation of Indigenous lands, it is important that we acknowledge that this course and all of our endeavors at Brown occur on the traditional lands of the Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Pokanoket peoples. May the knowledge we gain here be in service of justice.

Course Description and Objectives
In this course, Ethnographic Research Methods, we will learn about how anthropologists and ethnographers conceptualize, conduct, and analyze their research. This course is guided by the premise that ethnographic research is a two-fold endeavor; it is both a way of knowing and a way of representing people and their practices. We will consider what kinds of questions can anthropology ask, and how does ethnographic research serve to answer them? We will look at the types of research practices that we use to generate and collect data, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. We will practice analyzing data sets, looking for emergent patterns that are theoretically and contextually grounded. We will look at examples of ethnographic representations, including ethnographic writing, drawing, photography, audio, and video, to understand how the relationship between analysis and representation. Finally, we will discuss the ethics of ethnographic research, particularly in relationship to Anthropology’s history as a colonial discipline and the development of these methods in service of rendering Indigenous peoples knowable to the West.

Specifically, as a result of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain the aims and scope of ethnographic research to both lay and professional audiences.
- Deconstruct ethnographic writing to identify what questions the author asked, what data they used to answer their question, and how it is anthropological.
- Demonstrate understanding of the ethical considerations involved in conducting ethnographic research on and with human beings.
• Write an ethnographic research question and design a research proposal outlining what type of data they would need to answer it and what research activities they would conduct to collect that data.
• Analyze ethnographic data and interpret trends therein.
• Produce an original ethnographic work.

Diversity and Inclusion Statement
It is my intention that this class be a productive and collaborative environment for all students. Anthropology as a discipline seeks to understand and respect human diversity in all of its complexities and on its own terms. I strive to bring that approach to the classroom and to foster an environment in which we all seek to first and foremost understand the perspectives of our classmates and colleagues. Anthropology also trains us to pay attention to the ways that power differentials across many scales and contexts shape human interaction. In this vein, I ask all of us to reflect upon our own positionally in the classroom, to examine our various privileges, and to make space for one another. Anthropology has historically contributed to the systems of oppression that we find ourselves still navigating today. Therefore, it is important that we all be mindful of the ways that knowledge and opinions do not exist in a vacuum but rather have concrete effects in the world. As we work through the course materials during the semester, we will agree to learn together, to make space for one another’s learning processes, and to respect the diverse racial, ethnic, national, gender, sexual, class, religious, and other identities of the people we are learning with and learning about.

Names and Pronouns
If you go by a different name or gender pronoun that the one that appears on the official course roster, please inform me. Students are expected to refer to their classmates by their stated names and pronouns.

Accessibility and Accommodations
Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you have a disability or other conditions that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

Writing support and Plagiarism
Plagiarism and academic dishonesty will not tolerated under any circumstances. If you are unclear on how to cite information, please contact me and I will direct you to library resources. If you are unclear or struggling with a writing assignment, please come and talk to me in office hours so we can discuss how to approach the assignment. Finally, I
encourage you to use the resources available to you at the Writing Center for your written work. Request an appointment here.

Extensions, Late Assignments, Absences, Etc.
I understand that this course is but one part of students lives and that occasionally external factors may cause a student to miss class or require more time on an assignment. I ask that in this case, the student come to office hours so that we might together come up with an alternative time line or go over missed work. While I am willing to be flexible, if a pattern develops in which it becomes clear that you will not be able to meet the demands of the course we will have to consider options including withdrawing and/or not passing. It is always better to talk to me first than to get to that point.

Basic Needs
Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean’s office for support. Furthermore, please notify me if you are comfortable in doing so, and I will assist in facilitating this support to the best of my ability.

Required Materials

Evaluation
Participation (20%)
Attendance and active participation in discussion are essential to the success of the course and will be evaluated as part of the final grade. Students are expected to attend all class sessions and to have thoughtfully engaged with the readings. Students should come prepared with specific passages of the texts and questions that they wish to discuss. If there are parts of the readings that are confusing or intriguing, share those passages with the class. If you make a connection between something you’ve read for class and something happening in the news or your own life, bring those observations as well. If you are struggling to find ways to participate, please come speak to me during office hours so that we can discuss your concerns and brainstorm ways for you to join the conversation.
Article Analysis (20%) Due Week 4.
I will assign three ethnographic articles for this assignment. I encourage you to read all three. Choose one and write a 3 page paper analyzing the article to reveal the ethnographic questions the author seeks to answer and the data they used to answer them. Students will need to work backward from a finished ethnographic product to try to understand the process through which it came to be. They will need to identify the major parts of an article: 1) the argument; 2) the literature review; and 3) the ethnographic discussion. Once they have done so, they will then make a case for what question they think the author was trying to answer and what evidence they used to do so.

Ethnographic Research Assignment (60%) - Four parts, each 15%
Students will receive feedback from the professor at each stage of this project to help them as they move on to the next step

Write a 1-2 page research proposal. Due Week 6 (15%)
Design a mini ethnographic research project to be carried out on campus* asking and answering a question about the social and cultural life of Brown. The purpose of this assignment is not to probe the deeper meanings of life and human nature, but rather to 1) put into practice the particular approach to research that defines anthropology and 2) to get a sense of how the theory and method we are learning about can be applied to understanding everyday life. This skill set can be useful for many professional fields, including international affairs, business and marketing, journalism, user experience research and design, etc.

Think about what types of questions an anthropologist might ask about college life. Make sure that the scale of your question is manageable both for this assignment and for your ethnographic site. For example, you might, for some reason, be interested to know if college students’ academic success would improve overtime if they listened to the Spice Girls every morning for an academic year. However, this type of cause and effect research question is not a typical anthropological question, nor will you have the time to carry out this research over a full academic year. A better anthropological question might be, Do college students listen to music when they study? If so, why? This question is answerable using anthropological methods such as ethnographic interviews and participant observation. It might also tell us something interesting about the role of music in the cultural life of Brown students.

Next, think about what kind of information you would need to answer your research questions. What would you need to observe? Where would go to conduct your observation? What activities or interactions will you be looking for? Why? Who would
you need to talk to? What types of questions would you ask? What materials or documents you would need to look at? What would you be looking for? What ethical considerations should you account for? How will you account for them?

Please use the research proposals provided as guides for your proposal. Your proposal should include 1) a clearly stated research question or questions; 2) clearly articulated methods for data collection including research sites, research populations, and methods; 3) a discussion of what you expect to find and how you will determine if you’ve answer your questions.

Write at least 2 pages of field notes. Due Week 9 (15%)
Conduct an ethnographic observation and take field notes. Spend at least one hour conducting your observation. Write detailed notes on what you observe. Pay attention to what you observe vs. what you deduce about those observations. How do you know what you know?

Please use the sample field note provided as guides in your writing. Field notes should include a description of where you were, when and how long you were there, who and what you saw, and how you evaluated the interactions you observed. In other words, how you know what you saw. Your positionally is essential to your observations, you should not speak as “a voice from no where” but rather have a clear presence in your writing.

Conduct and interview and write a 2-3 page summary. Due Week 11 (15%)
Conduct an ethnographic interview and take notes. You may use your phone or other recording device to create an audio recording of the interview, if and only if your interviewee consents. Using what you have learned from your observations, think about what questions you might want to ask. Come prepared with a set of guiding questions, but practice letting your interviewee steer the conversation based on their understanding of and interest in the topic. Write detailed notes not only on their answers, but also on what you observe in their behavior during the interview. Are there questions that excited them? Questions that fell flat? What can you learn from their intonation or body language? Following your interview, write a 2-3 page summary of your interview. Make sure to include detailed information about how you arrive at your conclusions.

Produce an ethnographic work based on your analysis. Due during finals (15%)
Analyze the data collected during your observations (We will practice doing this together in class). What did you learn? Do the things you observe answer the questions you set out to answer? How so? Or, why not? What, if any, ethical or methodological
dilemmas did you encounter? Use any of the readings from the course to inform your analysis

Produce an ethnographic work based on your analysis. You may choose the format of your ethnography based on the types of ethnographic works we have seen in class (e.g. cartoon, podcast, etc.). If you choose to write a paper, it should be 4-5 pages. If you choose to do something other than a paper, you should include a short one page explanation of your work. Either way, your analysis should have a clear central argument. This argument should be appropriate in scale and scope to what you’ve been able to observe and deduce. It should use the data from your observations to support the argument. It should make connections to the themes and readings from the course.

You will turn in a 1 page proposal for this project and discuss it with me in office hours by week 12. This will not be graded, but will provide valuable feedback for your final project.

Calendar

Week 1: The Aims and Scope of Anthropological Research
  - Introduction
  - Cult of Franz Boas

Week 2: Anthropology, Power, and the Other

Week 3: Refusal, Representation, and Ethics

Week 4: Research Design: Asking Anthropological Questions
• Research Proposal Samples

Article Analysis Due
Ethnographic Article Selections: 7 of 12
Week 5: Conducting Research: Observing

- Fieldnote Samples

Week 6: Conducting Research: Asking

  - Introduction

Research Proposal Due

Week 7: Conducting Research: Doing


Week 8: Digital and Virtual Ethnography


  • “Why ethnographic methods and why virtual worlds?”, 6-8
  • “Participant Observation in Virtual Worlds”, 65-91
  • “Other Data Collection Methods for Virtual Worlds Research”, 113-126


Week 9: Analysis


Field notes due
**Week 10: Ethnographic Writing**


**Week 11: Alternative Ethnographies 1: Comics**

- Dragone, Francesco. 2017. *The Making of Lissa*. (We will watch this ethnographic making-of film in class)

*Interview Analysis Due*

**Week 12: Alternative Ethnographies: Audio and Visual Anthropology**

  - Also watch some of Chan’s videos on Youtube. [https://youtu.be/XgZtQitm-nM](https://youtu.be/XgZtQitm-nM)
- “Fiori Berhane on the Mediterranean Sea as A Nowhere Space” A Correction Podcast. [https://www.acorrectionpodcast.com/phonyeconomy/j5rn8h24ayjhhm92qhnxtcb6teyJ2w](https://www.acorrectionpodcast.com/phonyeconomy/j5rn8h24ayjhhm92qhnxtcb6teyJ2w)
• Readings on Ethics from the Society of Visual Anthropology https://societyforvisualanthropology.org/about/ethics/

Final Project Proposal Due

Week 13: Blogs, Op Eds, Poetry, Fiction

Weeks 14 & 15: Bringing it all together: Land of Open Graves
  • Check out the Undocumented Migrant Project's Instagram https://www.instagram.com/hostileterrain94/?hl=en

Ethnographic Work Due

*Addendum
The above syllabus is designed for a face-to-face classroom where the possibility of observing life “on campus” does not post an over-whelming health risk to students, faculty, staff, and the larger community. Unfortunately, we are not currently living under those conditions as a result of the COVID-19 public health crisis. Therefore, I am including here a list of additional resources that can be used to adapt this syllabus to a hybrid or virtual model. In my adaptation, I would encourage students to use the tools learned in this class to document their own experiences as college students during a pandemic. Much has been written about them, but this course presents and opportunity to flip the script and let these students tell their own stories.