



Undergraduate Ethnographic Research

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By Abigail Adams, PhD, and Amanda Poole, PhD,
Anthropology



One of the primary skills of an anthropologist is to critically observe and analyze the actions and interactions of human groups – a skill known as ethnography. Ethnography also translates well to a Liberal Studies environment because it teaches mindfulness, critical thinking, self-awareness, and cultural relativity. By recording, analyzing, and writing about humans who are culturally both similar to and different from the observer, students learn about human diversity while challenging their assumptions about “just the way things are.” Students also develop a better appreciation for the anthropological data and findings presented in class once they have gone through the process of collecting and analyzing similar data. For these reasons we regularly incorporate an ethnographic research project into our sections of Contemporary Anthropology (ANTH 110) and Cultural Anthropology (ANTH 211). These courses fulfill the Social Science Liberal Studies Requirement at IUP and both are included in the category of “Global and Multicultural Awareness” in the liberal studies program (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, n.d.). These are not traditional lab courses, but instead enroll 20 to 50 students per section and engage the students in a wide range of academic mediums including discussion, lecture, and outside reading.

Why Ethnographic Research?

The ethnographic projects are designed for early career undergraduate students to complete during a single semester. For many students this is their first experience with independent research. The project is introduced early in the semester and this introduction includes a robust discussion of the ethics of research focusing on human subjects. Students are introduced to the statement of ethics issued by the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 2012) and within the classroom, students are informed about “vulnerable populations” as established by federal regulations which include populations such as children, prisoners, the mentally ill, and the uninsured. Students are asked to think about why these particular categories of people have been identified as vulnerable and, as

neophyte researchers, they are instructed to avoid these populations. Most students do not submit their research protocol for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and the instructor submits a class-wide list of project descriptions to the IRB under the exception extended to classroom research.

The goal of the ethnographic project is to support students as they learn to develop, organize, and complete an ethnographic research project and present it systematically in a paper. The final product includes a critical review of past research on the subject, an effective application of theories to the issue, appropriate collection of ethnographic data, clear and accurate presentation of results, and discussion of the anthropological and practical implications of the research findings. Students are encouraged to compose their

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own cultural question that they develop under the guidance of the instructor, usually focusing on a population that is already accessible to the student because of the time that is required to gain access to and the trust of a population or sub-culture. Students are also tutored to identify a topic that they care about so

that they can connect on multiple levels to the research process. Once students have developed a research statement, they create their research instrument which is a list of approximately 20 open-ended questions that they will use as a guide for their face-to-face, in-depth interviews with their participants. For example, students have conducted ethnographies on a group of local car enthusiasts, recycling on the IUP campus, women in “nerd” culture, ritual behaviors in sport competitions, and the emerging practice of “vaping” among college students.

Student Autonomy

Students who have difficulty identifying a self-generated research question are provided with two optional research templates; one which investigates the origins and meanings of a family ritual (i.e., why we eat nine fish on Christmas Eve) and one which asks students to analyze the gender division of labor in a household. Students contact individuals primarily through purposeful sampling, meaning they choose a participant because of their recognized cultural knowledge. Students sit with each participant, use their questions as a guide, and make an audio recording of the interview. Recording the interview and then transcribing it is the most accurate and efficient way to get rich,

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ethnographic data. From these series of interviews, typically three to six, students select interesting quotes directly from the interviews, analyze what their participants have said, and identify themes of meaning. Students are not simply collecting information, they are taking the data and "pulling back the layers" of their interviews to try expose deeper cultural meanings and beliefs about human behavior.

This high-impact classroom experience allows students to experience the nitty-gritty of anthropological practice. In student's reflections on the experience, one student wrote "*Anthro project really expanded my knowledge of field*" and another responded, "*As time consuming as ethnographies are, I love that you give us the chance to experience the process.*" Ethnographic investigation helps students develop both research and writing skills that they can apply throughout their university career and beyond. These skills also meet the HIPs characteristics outlined by AAC&U including: "writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum" and "produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines" (AAC&U, n.d.). From these projects, several of our students have gone on to present their individual research formally at local, regional, and national conferences, all with IRB approval, of course.

Under the guidance of a faculty mentor, the anthropology department's ethnographic project supports students as they plan, develop, and complete a significant piece of original scholarship – culminating in a major research paper that pulls together what they have learned and demonstrating the analytical, creative, and communication skills they have honed during the course. The goals of the project are to meet the HIPs writing skills as outlined by AAC&U while allowing students to engage their community through empirical observation and pattern identification and also engaging the ethics of ethnographic research.

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Edited by Marie Webb, PhD Candidate in English, CTE Special Projects Coordinator and Stephanie Taylor-Davis PhD, RD, LDN, Director of CTE