Ethnography: a Study of a Subculture

What is an ethnography? “Ethno” refers to a human culture, while “graphy” signifies a written text. For this project, select a group or culture that you would like to learn about and write about. Ideally, you will choose a group that is new to you so you can approach it as someone who has lots of questions about it. If this is not possible, you may adopt the participant-observer stance with a group you are already a part of, but bear in mind that it will be more difficult to see the group with fresh eyes. In addition to your observations of the group, find two or more cultural informants in the group to interview. Reflect on your assumptions or biases about this group before you begin observing them. As you spend time with the group, continue to reflect on how your ideas about it are changing, deepening, and causing you to see the group and your presence in it differently.

Why do ethnography? Anthropologists, sociologists and other qualitative researchers look at groups of people that are often ignored, marginalized, or misunderstood in our culture. They endeavor to see the inner workings of these groups with fresh eyes in order to validate their realities; thus, they look at the group’s values, social practices, and motivations. This assignment will enhance crucial skills that good writers need to have: the close observation of details; open, honest reflection; probing analysis; and writing that is focused, articulate, and rich in metaphor. The process of doing ethnography expands your world, inviting you to shed biases, to critique your existing assumptions, and to grow beyond your comfortable, familiar daily reality.

The overall objective of this project is to study a subculture—its patterns, rituals, behavior, values, status hierarchy among individuals, gestures, body language, clothing, vernacular speech, and so on—in order to understand it closely. You will also discover how your assumptions and stereotypes have influenced your view of the world. This study is intended to help you approach the subculture with an open, inquiring mind so that you will enhance your powers of observation and ability to empathize with those who are different from you.

How does one do ethnography? As we have seen in our reading of Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” ethnographers look for paradoxes and patterns; they consider their work a journey into undiscovered territory. They write detailed field notes about what they are observing and keep reflecting on what they are seeing until a pattern starts to emerge, until they see the hidden story that perhaps not even the participants are fully aware of. Ethnographers keep probing until they feel they have arrived at their unique vision of what it is they are studying. You want to look for “what doesn’t add up,” what seems paradoxical, odd, or contradictory. Keep asking questions about your subject (“What does it MEAN?” “Why are people acting this way?” “What’s behind this?” “Why do people care about this?”) until you feel you understand the subculture fully.

Suggestions for Possible Subcultures
Ideally, choose one you are unfamiliar with, so you can approach it with fresh eyes. Give some careful thought to the choosing of your group; it’s best if you already have some
questions about what makes it “tick.” Your group must not be engaging in any unlawful activities.

Tattoo/body piercing shop
Hot yoga (Bikram)
Car races
A church, synagogue, mosque, or religious youth group
A sorority or fraternity
A particular sport or team
A retirement home
Clubs on campus
A workplace
A particular cultural scene, such as the campus basketball courts, climbing wall, a street fair, and so on

Checklist of Specific Areas to Study (use this as a checklist)

- Devote enough time to the project so that you can do multiple observations of your group.
- Listen to the language and observe the gestures (body language) and appearance of the people in your subgroup.
- Observe relationships, status hierarchies, rivalries, and affiliations between people. How does power operate? Who appears to hold power and who actually holds it?
- Watch for patterns or repetition in activities, language, and rituals.
- What is the “real” content of what you are observing in your subgroup? Just as Geertz saw meaning far beyond the mere outward activity of the cockfights, so should you, too, ask “what is this group or activity really about?”
- What is the value system of the group members? What is meaningful and important to them and why? How do you know this?
- What is not seen or perhaps deliberately hidden and why? What is tacitly understood, but not talked about? What are markers of the group’s allegiance or values? What is it to be part of the “inner circle”?
- What feels new, foreign, unfamiliar, or unclear to you?
- Use subheadings as a way of structuring your observation, interviews, and writing.
- Write out your interview questions ahead of time, but be prepared to let your cultural informant steer the way in the interview.
- Take lots of detailed notes both during and after the interview and observations.

Interviewing Members of the Group
Bear in mind first of all that your questions need to be respectful, tactful, and non-intrusive. Your cultural informant is doing you a great favor by being willing to devote time to the interview, and you must return the courtesy by ensuring that your questions do not make him or her uncomfortable. If you sense that a group member is indeed feeling uncomfortable, anxious, or just plain annoyed, move on to other questions that are not likely to provoke these feelings. Often, you will learn the most by allowing your
informant simply to speak about what he or she finds important. Let the informant lead the way. Above all, your interview should be guided by the highest ethical awareness and respect for the individual.

**IMPORTANT:** Be sure to answer these questions in your analysis and write-up (either throughout your paper or in your conclusion):

- What does this subculture “say” about our larger American culture?
- What does it “say” about the needs, values, or qualities of human nature?
- Look for connections between the various aspects of your analysis: as Geertz says, “connect—and connect—and connect.”
- Is there a central part, event, or experience in this subculture that exemplifies or sums up the whole? (Here you are thinking along metonymic lines just as Geertz did when he singled out the cockfight as the starting point from which to “read” Balinese culture.)
- Create or seek out a metaphor to describe and analyze what you are seeing.
- Self-reflection: the interplay of subjectivity and “scene” you are investigating; how is what you are seeing mediated through your own value system, gender and sexuality, race, cultural assumptions, class, experiences, and so on? What does this scene tell you about yourself, in addition to what you are seeing there? To what extent have you begun to revise your initial hunches, biases, and assumptions concerning what this scene and its people are all about?

**Your Write-Up**
The format of ethnographic writing is flexible, but use the kind of close analysis, attention to detail, and probing questions that Geertz does in “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” As you analyze your notes, let a pattern of meaning emerge: the “what it is.” **Watch out for this pitfall:** Be sure each paragraph not only describes features of your subgroup, but also analyzes it, draws conclusions, and answers the “so what?” question. Your goal is to communicate vividly for someone who does not know this group.

You may wish to divide your write-up into several subheadings or to follow Geertz’s pattern of opening scenario (how he gained entrance), key defining event, ritual or image (the cockfight), Geertz’s exploration of paradoxical elements embedded in the ritual and in the culture, detailed analysis (the gambling protocol), followed by his conclusion where he links what he has found in Bali to the primary themes in all human art (“to cross conceptual wires”). In any event, approach both your fieldwork and your write-up in the spirit of Geertz.

**Evaluation**
Papers will be evaluated on the thoroughness of your observation (see the checklist above), level of detail in the write-up, and your ability to really dig for the possible meanings behind what you have observed. Don’t be afraid to speculate what you have discovered; creativity and risk-taking is part of engaging, provocative analysis.

Richard G. Mitchell, Jr.’s questions to guide an ethnography:
• What is the setting of the action? When and how does action take place?
• What is going on? What is the overall activity being studied, the relatively long-term behavior about which participants organize themselves? What specific acts comprise this activity?
• How are members stratified? Who is ostensibly in charge? Does being in charge vary by activity? How is membership achieved and maintained?
• What do actors pay attention to? What is important, preoccupying, critical?
• What do they pointedly ignore that other persons might pay attention to?
• What symbols do actors invoke to understand their worlds, the participants and processes within them, and the objects and events they encounter? What names do they attach to objects, events, persons, roles, settings, equipment?
• What practices, skills and methods of operation do actors employ?
• Which theories, motives, excuses, justifications or other explanations do actors use in accounting for their participation? How do they explain to each other, not to outside investigators, what they do and why they do it?
• What goals do actors seek? When, from their perspective, is an act well or poorly done? How do they judge action—by what standards, developed and applied by whom? What are the group’s tacit understandings?
• What rewards do various actors gain from their participation?

(Mitchell 1991 qtd. in Handbook of Ethnography, Sage Publications, 2001)

(Adapted from Dr. Kroll’s ethnography assignment.)