

DOING ETHNOGRAPHY
Methodist University
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Dr. Vida Bajc [pronounced *VEE-dah bytes*]
Office T116
910-630-7089
vbajc@methodist.edu

Course Description

This is a hands-on learning experience of how to do ethnographic work, with some examples from other ethnographers of what to do and how to do it along the way. Your colleagues in class will be your best teachers of what counts as good ethnography and your opportunity to comment on their work your best chance to learn how to do (and not to do) your fieldwork.

Course Requirements

There are four assignments, with each amounting to 25% of your grade. Read carefully through the syllabus for details.

- a) Multiple Field Exercises
- b) Feedback on your Colleagues' Field Exercises
- c) Discussion of Sample Ethnographies
- d) Final Project

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: Introduction to the Course

You will need to choose your site during the first week of classes. Sorry. Also, get yourself a handy notepad, a fine pen, a voice recorder, a camera, and a handbag in which all of these can be quickly reached. The biggest nightmare is to lose your notepad. The second in line of disasters in fieldwork is to discover on the site that your voice recorder is not working.

PART I: BASICS OF HOW TO DO ETHNOGRAPHY

It is customary to begin methodological training by reading discussions and reflections on the nature and merits of a particular methodological approach. We will do it differently. We will start with a series of basic exercises that need minimal conceptual introduction. The idea is to help you grasp that there is a reason for why there exist no ready-made sets of instructions and tools that can be learned and then uniformly applied at each fieldsite. The reason is actually quite simple, ethnography is a craft which is learned through trial and error and honed to the interests, talents, skills, and approaches of each individual scholar.

WEEK 2: Documenting Conversations and Interview Data

Go to your site and find yourself a number of spots where you can sit or stand unobtrusively for a couple of hours. Move from one spot to another, listening carefully to what is going on. Take notes of what you HEAR around you.

Then ask three people for a short interview, one for each of the following:

- a) **Structured Interview**
Prepare ten specific questions that you want that person to answer.
- b) **Semi-structured Interview**
Prepare three broad questions that you want that person to address.
- c) **Open-ended Interview**
Start the conversation with one good question which a question that is broad enough and stimulating enough to get that person to talk for about 15 minutes.

Make sure you voice record each of your interviews.

Transcribe your interviews and bring them and the notes class in multiple copies for discussion and feedback from your peers.

WEEK 3: Documenting Observations

Take notes of what you SEE ONLY. You will notice that this requires very different sensibilities from those used in recording conversations and interviews. Note the aesthetics of the environment. Follow the movement in space. Pay attention to individual interactions. Draw sketches of group dynamics. Make a chart of the setting.

Make multiple copies of your documentation for class discussion and feedback from your colleagues.

WEEK 4: Gathering Other Sources of Data

A good ethnographer will make use of any and every evidence which may be relevant to the topic studied. Find newspaper coverage, maps, media releases, statistical reports, photographs, archival documents, brochures, postcards, advertisements, and any other material about your site. Photographs, maps, and postcards in particular but also other such materials are snippets of the becoming of life which freeze in time the on-going process of living and then become its representations. They are rich with meaning and so valuable to your understanding of what is going on at your fieldsite.

Make multiple photocopies of what you collected and bring to class for discussion and feedback.

WEEK 5: Documenting Participant Observations

By now, you have become noticed at your site and you should be able to join in on the life lived in that setting. As you begin to think what people think and feel what people feel, your ability to see and hear will sharpen. So will your urge to record everything. What is relevant data will become clear only later. Record as much as you can in the greatest detail possible. Take notes, record, ask, observe, collect, take notes, take notes, take notes. Try to balance between detail and exhaustion.

Make multiple copies of your data and bring to class for feedback.

PART II: LEARNING FROM OTHER ETHNOGRAPHERS

Up to this point, we have been learning from each other. Now it is time to immerse ourselves into the thinking and the doing of trained ethnographers. Read carefully and imaginatively by placing yourself now in the shoes of the ethnographer, then in the shoes of the people studied.

WEEK 6: Early Anthropologists

The roots of ethnography are in colonial settings where anthropologists studied small, bounded communities of non-western peoples.

Stocking, George. 1992. "The Ethnographers Magic: Fieldwork in British Anthropology from Tyler to Malinowski." In *The Ethnographers Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology*. University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 12-59.

WEEK 7: Urban Ethnographies

Sociologists, in turn, have been largely focused on small groups of people in urban environments in the West.

Anderson, Elijah. 2000. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. Norton.

WEEK 8: Ethnographies of Globalization

Globalization of social processes and individual lives complicates the work of ethnographers. But some have taken up the challenge and followed their subjects and objects of study as they moved from site to site around the globe.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 2007. *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money and Power in the Contemporary World*. University of California Press.

WEEK 9: Ethnographies of Individual Inner Transformation

Ethnographers listen and observe the dynamics associated with people interacting with each other. How can we hear and see what goes on inside the person?

Csordas, Thomas. 1994. *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. University of California Press.

WEEK 10: Historical Ethnography

Ethnography has been most effectively applied to the study of the present. But every present has its past. How can ethnographic approach articulate processes, formations, and happenings that took place in the past but the effects of which are lived in the present?

Glaeser, Andreas. 2010. *Political Epistemics. The Secret Police, the Opposition and the End of East German Socialism*. University of Chicago Press. Ch 5, 6, 7, 8.

WEEK 11: Event Ethnographies

Events can be cyclical or they can be a one-time happening but their chief characteristic is that now you see them, then you don't. The challenge is to capture, in processual terms, the moment-to-moment happening as it is unfolding in front of the ethnographer's eyes.

Bajc, Vida. [DRAFT] *Christian Pilgrimage in Jerusalem: Performing Social Realities*. Ch 1, 3, 5, 7.

PART III: REFLECTIONS ON YOUR OWN WORK

All along, you have been (re)thinking your choice of site, your data collection techniques, and the potential theoretical relevance of your research...

WEEK 12: From Casual Interest to Intuition to Research Problem to Research Topic

Yes, it is time to go back to the field. Return with a revised and reorganized draft. Make multiple copies to share in class. Make use of the following text as needed:

Emerson, Robert, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.

PART IV: MAKING THEORETICAL SENSE OF YOUR DATA

In their most basic – and also most valuable - terms, ethnographies are rich, insightful, and detailed documentations of social life in particular settings. As the most important sociological and anthropological methodology, however, ethnographies also offer huge theoretical potentials, most of which, I would argue, still remain unexplored. For the sake of making it easier for you to grasp the academic debates about how to theorize through ethnography, we will approach this issue through what is referred to as deductive, inductive and, what Charles Sanders Peirce called abductive reasoning.

WEEK 13: Ethnographies Driven by Theory

These follow the so-called deductive reasoning. You have a particular theory or theoretical perspective that you are interested in expanding, validating or disproving through ethnographic evidence. You select your site strategically to speak to your analytical agenda. You articulate your theoretical framework and in your analysis refer to the data to support your theoretical narrative.

Burawoy, Michael. 1998. The Extended Case Method. *Sociological Theory*, 16(1): 4-33.

WEEK 14: Building Theory from Data

You have collected your data, immersed yourself into the details, uncovered what relates to what, and organized your notes into themes. Now it is time to lift those themes to a new analytical level. You create a theoretical narrative which explains the data. This would follow the logic of inductive reasoning.

Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss. 1976. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York, Aldine.

WEEK 15: Theory Building through Abductive Reasoning

Most theoretically informed ethnographies make use of deductive as well as inductive techniques, that is, they work closely with their empirical evidence to build theories from their data but they also use their existing theoretical knowledge to explain the data. They move interchangeably between their data and the existing theoretical knowledge to construct their own theoretical narrative.

But try this:

For the moment, forget everything you learned in this class. Now take a new, fresh look at your data. Because you have been reading ethnographies of others you have now had some distance from your data. Immerse yourself back in your data, but this time with an analytical distance. Be an analytical observer of what is on the paper. Is there anything in that data that jumps at you as particularly surprising? Do you have an insight on what is happening? Can you come up with an educated guess about what might be going on?

Bajc, Vida. 2012. "Abductive Ethnography of Practice in Highly Uncertain Conditions." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 642(1): 72 – 85.

WEEK 16: Have we finally learned how to do Ethnography?

Bring in multiple copies of the final draft of your project.

Read the following available on line:

Statements on Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibility. Adopted by the Council of the American Anthropological Association. <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm>